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For seventeen years beginning in 1973, women living in the shantytowns surrounding Santiago, Chile, resisted the oppressive dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Pooling their meager stores to feed neighbors, blackening the windows of their flimsy shacks to meet surreptitiously after curfew, spraying graffiti on buildings, writing screed, dodging soldiers’ bullets, and marching defiantly against the coup, these poor women ultimately helped restore democracy to their nation—and, in the process, they transformed themselves and their communities.

Through her extensive qualitative research, including interviews with women who endured shantytown life and careful use of an array of visual materials, Jacqueline Adams takes us inside those women’s worlds, shedding light on everything from the meanings embedded in arpilleras to the organization of food cooperatives. Hers is a work appropriate for its target undergraduate audience, including introductory classes and those in visual sociology and gender—Surviving Dictatorship also will be relevant to diverse graduate courses and to scholars of repression and resistance as well.

The arpilleras were sewn scenes from shantytown life, or richly symbolic representations of that life, that were secreted out of Chile (Adams reveals how) during the Pinochet years and sold abroad, the funds going to the individuals and groups that created them. Often that money was the makers’ only source of income. The level of craft in the arpilleras appears far from exceptional, but their use as tools to convey the tortured lives of the women (and occasional man) who created them is deeply moving. So, too, are the photos of shantytown life under oppression and the reproductions of leaflets, pages from pamphlets, and other works of art presented here, totaling nearly 150.

In the captions of the various images, Adams frequently identifies subtle details that convey the hardships of shantytown life under Pinochet. There are the two adolescent boys sharing a bed on a cold winter’s night, a piece of corrugated steel roofing for a comforter and a small fire burning dangerously close to their mattress as the only source of heat. In several other of her interpretations Adams points out that the furniture in photos is rough-hewn, and in one she notes that a woman’s gaze when being handed change is likely so intent because “every penny matters” (p. 119). Shantytown life was a challenge at every turn, its harshness made all the worse by the inequalities created by the regime’s neo-liberal policies.

The images convey the hard lives of women who found every day a struggle to feed and clothe themselves and their families. An unintended consequence of the dictatorship was the rending of the traditionally gendered fabric of Chilean life. Due to gender norms, never before had working-class women been responsible for—or even allowed to—provide for their families. But union members (generally male) were summarily fired following Pinochet’s coup, husbands were imprisoned or became one of the thousands who disappeared and have never been accounted for, and the national unemployment rate remained above 15.7 percent for years at a time, soaring to more than 80 percent in the shantytowns. So there was little choice for women but to become breadwinners.

While the short-term effects of this gender role reversal made women’s lives more challenging by compelling them to engage in an economy they had never been a part of and were shockingly ill-equipped for, shantytown women eventually found themselves coming together in groups that nurtured their self-esteem, embozled them as activists, and—through the arpilleras and other means—gave them outlets for the fear and rage that gripped their lives, and enough...
money to get by. In 1990 democracy returned to Chile, thanks in part to the shantytown women’s tenacity and creativity.

Adams carefully presents quotations from her conversations with 170 research participants, pausing after each quote first to reiterate participants’ key words, then to step back one analytical level and interpret what was said. To that extent her book is a model ethnography, and further interpretive insights come from her frequently lengthy image captions.

However, the image-interview connections that Adams make are almost all too subtle, and one lags for explicit bridge building between the two data sources. This point is one that visual sociologists need to grapple with theoretically, and Adams’s book is, admittedly, not the place for that conversation to proceed. Visual sociologists are of two minds when it comes to treating images as data. Traditionalists advocate interpreting images as they would verbal materials and integrating image and, for example, quotation interpretations within the text. In contrast, post-modernists essentially adopt a “reader-response” approach in which captions are truncated and readers are left to decide for themselves the meaning that emerges from an image, since no interpretations appear in the text, either.

The former approach strikes me as sociologically appropriate and methodologically scientific. Like interview quotations (or, for that matter, quantitative survey results), readers may debate whether an author’s interpretation of an image is a fair one or of adequate quality, but is it not incumbent on scholars to interpret our data for our audience? Adams seems torn in this regard, since she effectively obscures the image-text relationship in her too-subtle use of common interpretive points in both the captions and the main text with no clear linkages between the two. But, again, this debate is a theoretical one that needs to occur elsewhere.

As happens with a work of this length, other frustrations emerge as well. The most glaring is the lack of “analysis”: the author’s comparison of her interpretations with other authors’ relevant findings, typically at the end of a section or a chapter. Adams includes more than 300 footnotes, but almost none are analytical beyond the odd superficial comparison. Of less importance are several repetitions within the text, including at least one quotation that is used twice without acknowledging the redundancy.

But that latter shortcoming in particular is minor, and none of the others undermine the emotionally moving, sociologically relevant heart of this book. While its subject matter is decades old, Surviving Dictatorship never comes across as dated. Harsh repression seems to always be in fashion somewhere—as does, fortunately, courageous resistance to it. Heightening the book’s currency, in marginal inserts scattered throughout the work, Adams points readers to websites that make clear the relevancy of her findings for understanding uprisings like Arab Spring.

This book may seem an odd choice for introductory and social problems courses, but instructors of such gateway classes will find a lot of grist for their teaching mill if they are not inclined to use textbooks, and in many ways this work is an exemplary piece of visual sociology that would also inform courses in gender studies in valuable ways.


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Beyond Methodological Nationalism, edited by Anna Amelina et alia, provides critiques of the nation-state concept when used as the sole unit of analysis to investigate social phenomena that have a transnational or cross-border existence. The twelve chapters in the volume give various reasons the nation-state is an inadequate and thus an inappropriate unit from which to analyze social phenomena that span beyond the confines of the nation, or that are affected by conditions beyond its territory. Consequently, much investigation of transnational/cross-border phenomena has remained problematic: undeveloped