

Silvia Borzutzky. *Vital Connections: Politics, Social Security, and Inequality in Chile*. Notre Dame, Notre Dame University Press, 2002. xv+300pp.

Borzutzky sets out to analyze an important and understudied dimension of Latin American politics: the relationship between politics and public policy, and social security specifically, in Chile. She defines the area of social security as pensions, family allowances, and health benefits (x).

Borzutzky analyzes the “connections that exist between...politics and policies” (ix), elaborating on “those critical processes which led to a change in the socioeconomic functions of the state, and consequently to a major change in the social security system. The crisis of 1924, of the mid-1960s, and of the early and late 1970s produced this kind of impact and resulted in complex processes that led to a change in the relations between the society and the state, a change in the nature of politics and in the social security policies” (ix). Her thesis is that, in Chile “comprehensive reform [has been] blocked by the self-interests cemented through the gradual clientelistic evolution of the social security system” through the postwar era. After the failed socialist experiment of Salvador Allende (1970-73), the radical privatization of social security conducted under the military regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) represented a new era. She argues that “although the reform entailed a revolution in the way of making social security, its benefits have been limited” (204), and have reinforced extant inequalities.

Borzutzky’s method is historical qualitative analysis, with an emphasis on pre-1970 policies. She dedicates five chapters to twentieth century Chilean politics and social security policy until the Socialist regime of Salvador Allende (1970-1973), one chapter to the Allende regime, one chapter to the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), and a final chapter and an epilogue to politics and social security during the post-Pinochet democratic regime (1990-).

Her thesis and analysis are intriguing and, intuitively, constitute a very plausible argument. Chile’s political trajectory is certainly conditioned by the country’s high levels of inequality. In addition, Borzutzky writes very lucidly and intelligently. Her research of qualitative sources in particular is impressive.

Despite these strengths, I am left with several questions

or concerns after reading the book. First, I am left wondering what alternative hypotheses there are, and whether they were taken into account. Second, the presentation of facts is not adequately separated from the author's arguments and opinions. Borzutzky does not draw on a lot of quantitative data – for instance, tables are not provided of budgetary allocations and spending levels of different programs, which in my mind should be basic information for an argument of this kind – and we are left to rely exclusively on her take on the issue. In the same vein, we are not given data on levels of inequality, despite its central importance in the argument. Of course, she may very well be right, but the reader should be convinced by data. We are ultimately dependent on Borzutzky's narrative.

Despite the critiques, I would certainly recommend the book to anyone who studies social security in Chile. It is an impressive historical analysis of twentieth century Chilean politics.

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