

BOOK REVIEW

Michelle Bonner, *Tough on Crime: The Rise of Punitive Populism in Latin America* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019)

by J. Patrice McSherry*

TOUGH ON CRIME IS A COMPELLING STUDY THAT LINKS THE PRACTICES of the neoliberal mass media to the rise of punitive populism—tough-on-crime policies and law-and-order political frameworks—in Latin America. Punitive populism offers simple solutions to complicated problems, appealing to people’s emotional desire for revenge, punishment, and order (p. 48). Based on extensive research in Chile and Argentina, and drawing on her command of several literatures, political scientist Michelle Bonner offers a complex and persuasive argument that explains the connections among neoliberalism, democratization, media control, and pro-police, repressive “solutions” to the perception, and reality, of citizen insecurity. She argues that media systems contribute to the dominance of either democratic or authoritarian ideas in society and shows that neoliberal restructuring has limited media democratization in her two case studies.

Bonner’s hypothesis is that “the neoliberal reform of media policies (most notably privatization and especially deregulation) and the resulting everyday communicational practices used by journalists, in interaction with state and civil society actors, are central to explaining the rise of punitive populism” (p. 7). Using her detailed case studies, she shows that punitive populism is about politics and power, not crime control or rational measures based on criminology evidence. She defines neoliberalism (p. 8) and shows throughout the book how privatization and deregulation have shaped the practices of mass media in both Argentina and Chile, reducing “watchdog

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journalism” and investigative articles and privileging dramatic crime stories, victim accounts, and police action. Crime, she shows, provides an easy and low-cost source of media stories that attract mass attention. With the rise in sensational stories of violence, crime, and police repression, fear of crime increases in society—often despite low crime statistics—which favors tough-on-crime leaders who promise to wield an iron fist, free up the police, and increase draconian sentences even for petty crimes and misdemeanors. “The way ideas are constructed and reinforced in the mass media is important to the boundaries of policing in democracy and the resonance (or not) of punitive populist rhetoric and polices,” she argues (p. 12).

Moreover, the pressures of neoliberalism push journalists to write more stories in a shorter time, draw on fewer sources (minimizing the voices of critical and human rights perspectives), and accept the viewpoints of powerful government and economic figures or entities in society. The ideal role of the media in democracy—to include a broad spectrum of voices, both state and non-state, and to hold powerful sectors to account—is thus undermined. In fact, in Chile the militarized police called Carabineros have developed a large and sophisticated communications branch that operates autonomously from civilian government, manages journalists, issues public relations materials, and shapes news stories to present the police in the best possible light (pp. 91, 109).

One of the strengths of the book is its interrogation of the concept of insecurity. Bonner argues that neoliberal policies have contributed greatly to citizen anxieties, or their sense of insecurity, in Latin America. Neoliberal measures have reduced or eliminated the state’s role in providing social services such as health care, pensions, and education, have caused cuts in subsidies and a subsequent rise in prices for basic necessities, and have increased the precariousness of jobs and income; as a result, inequality has risen. She posits that there is no necessary link between insecurity and crime, and that in fact there is a stronger correlation between insecurity and socioeconomic issues (pp. 33–35 and Table 1.3 on p. 36). As Bonner notes, “The challenge with these broader socioeconomic definitions of insecurity is that the solutions they imply are in direct opposition to neoliberal economic policies.... Thus the very definition of insecurity and its appropriate solutions is highly politicized and shaped in part by one’s preferred economic model” (p. 36). The media and polling agencies, however, usually frame citizen anxiety or insecurity as fear of crime, and “the solution” is usually more police or harsher laws.

Bonner methodically shows why statistics on crime, insecurity, and police violence are subjective and open to varying interpretations and are,

ultimately, less than reliable. The limitations of crime reporting mean that media interpretations and selective use of sources are extremely important and can structure the perception of crime in society. That is, the media play a key role in creating hegemonic perspectives and common-sense understandings. Fear of crime is sometimes completely unaligned with the actual number of homicides or other serious crimes. In Chile, for example, homicides and victimization rates are low, on a par with those of Canada. Yet the perception of insecurity in Chile is 42.2 percent, greater than that of Canada or even Honduras, with one of the highest homicide rates in the world (pp. 33, 48). The book links these erroneous perceptions with the functioning of Chile's neoliberal media. Bonner shows that a few big Chilean media companies—with near-monopoly control of media in Chile due to repression and privatization under the Pinochet dictatorship—shape the consumption and perception of news via television and newspapers.

In Argentina, in contrast, criticism of police violence has been widespread among the public, civil society actors, mass media, and political leaders. Bonner attributes this to several crucial factors: the near consensus that the state terror of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983) was aberrant and wrong and that police played a central role in the atrocities (p. 42); the recognition of the key role of human rights organizations in confronting the regime; and the rise of watchdog journalism. Chile still lacks that consensus. There is more trust in the police in society as compared to Argentina. Right-wing Chilean parties, particularly the Unión Democrática Independiente (UDI), many of whose members were functionaries of the Pinochet regime, still argue that positive changes occurred during the dictatorship, and some still celebrate the figure of Pinochet. Moreover, moderate political leaders in the 1990s had called on Chilean society to reconcile and “turn the page.” Despite this difference in the two societies, however, some Argentine public figures who have called for “the iron fist” and police violence have, paradoxically, won elections.

Unlike in Argentina, where much attention has been paid to police violence in the media and in society, in Chile police abuses have tended to be ignored. This began to change with the massive student protests in 2006 and more so in 2011. The media began covering excessive police violence and torture (p. 45), and some small alternative media outlets published critical exposés. But Bonner argues convincingly that “the market-based mass media in Chile, in combination with the proactive communications work of the Carabineros, have favored a positive image of the police and have omitted, downplayed, or legitimized their use of violence” (p. 46).

Bonner unpacks the influence of the media in terms of agenda-setting, priming (involving repetition), and framing (transmitting a perspective). She differentiates between media systems in different world regions and analyzes the impact of these differences on the presentation of news (pp. 57–64); the problem is not individual reporters but is, rather, systemic. Bonner's point is that different media systems favor different journalistic practices; neoliberal media reforms have reshaped media systems in ways that have facilitated punitive populism. Comparing Argentina and Chile, she shows that in Argentina neoliberal reforms came later. The military dictatorship had controlled and repressed the media and journalists but did not implement extensive neoliberal measures as did the Pinochet regime. With the return to electoral rule in Argentina (1983), critical voices and strong social movements were prominent actors. The leftist daily *Página/12* appeared in 1987 and published watchdog journalism, promoted human rights and democracy, and specialized in exposés of police and military violence and corruption. President Carlos Menem (1989–1999), though, launched a series of neoliberal measures that led to an influx of foreign capital and media concentration, truncating watchdog journalism (p. 70).

In Chile neoliberal restructuring began in the early years of the Pinochet regime (1973–1990) with the ascension of the Chicago Boys and their program of severe market-based austerity measures. That is, neoliberal shocks preceded redemocratization, unlike in Argentina; the sequencing was different. Moreover, in Chile there was a history of class-biased views of crime in the media. From the 1920s onward, the media had presented strikes and protests as examples of criminal public disorder. The major conservative daily *El Mercurio*, owned by the right-wing Edwards family since the nineteenth century, not only diffused hostile views of workers' movements but also, beginning in the late 1920s, openly questioned democracy (p. 76). In the 1960s *El Mercurio* became a relentless enemy of Salvador Allende and supporters of the Unidad Popular (UP), with financing from the Central Intelligence Agency. With the 1973 coup Pinochet shut down all media that had supported the UP, repressed journalists, and permitted only *El Mercurio* and one other conservative paper to operate. By 1988 *El Mercurio* owned 50% of all national newspapers and increased its ownership of regional papers from 8 to 14 (p. 80). Pinochet privatized television in 1988; the largest TV channel was owned by a Pinochet ally (p. 121). Bonner explains, "The new conservative market-based neoliberal media system, with significantly concentrated ownership, encouraged the continuation of journalistic practices from the dictatorship that favor story frames criminalizing political

opposition and the popular sectors” (p. 82). By 2002, citizen insecurity was the most reported news item on all open TV channels in Chile.

In several chapters Bonner delves deeply into the reasons journalists prefer punitive sources within neoliberal media systems; the rise of punitive-populist voices within the state; and the role of civil society organizations and individuals. Her conclusion neatly summarizes her main arguments and makes some recommendations.

As I was writing this review (October 2019), the Chilean Congress’s Lower House voted to approve a new law known as Preventive Identity Control. It authorized the Carabineros to stop and search, without cause, teenagers aged 16 and older, to put them against the wall, demand ID, and search their backpacks, supposedly for weapons and bombs. President Sebastián Piñera had wanted the operative age to be 14. The right-wing parties passed the bill with votes from key Christian Democrats. Opponents of the bill had argued, to no avail, that high school students were not the cause of street crime and that criminalizing young people and treating them as suspects was reminiscent of the dictatorship and violated international statutes such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sadly, the war on crime and punitive populism remain alive and well in Chile. Bonner has provided us with an excellent analysis of the problem and has pointed us toward possible solutions.