

◆ 5

The Gravitation of Narratives of National Identity on Human Rights: The Case of Chile

Hernán Vidal

One of the richest areas of inquiry on Human Rights in the Humanities involves research on how societies produce symbolic-analogical systems that may gravitate on the protection or violation of Human Rights. Symbolic-metaphoric systems not only give an account of immediate environments, the cosmos, and their evolving relationships as objective realities. These systems also create the social sensibilities by means of which we attribute a poetic meaning to life and the value of human beings. It may be argued this statement makes sense in a very broad, general sense. The problem is how to make it operational for research purposes. In the following discussion I want to demonstrate a *modus operandi* restricting my approach to a specific symbolic-metaphoric system—the narratives of national identity, in particular the one constructed in Chile since the last decades of the 19th century. I will begin providing a few theoretical elements; this will be followed by a most schematic description of the Chilean conception of contemporary national history; at the end I will discuss the ethical dilemmas arising from an analysis of narratives of national identity from the perspective of Human Rights.

The Anthropology of Narratives of National Identity

National identities are based on more or less loosely coherent narratives composed of myths, legends, anecdotes, icons, masterworks of national literature, and real historical events of notoriety. These narratives compose a poetic system that define “*a unique historical we*” (O’Donnell) by profiling the special experience of a human collective residing in a territory presided by a State.

The “unique historical we” is the mythical core of the modern nation-State, myth in the sense that all implementations of policy will be evaluated and judged to be legitimate according to these utopian principles. The

fundament is that all members of the national collective are considered equal before the law. Two other myths emerge from this foundation—the notions of *citizenship* and *the popular (lo popular)*. Citizenship implies that all members of the “unique historical we” have free access to all the rights, privileges, protections, and must carry all the obligations prescribed by the law. The popular implies that all defenseless, dispossessed, and aggrieved members of the “unique historical we,” whatever their racial, ethnic origin or social status have a right to full solidarity, and spiritual and material aid according to the resources available to the State, and the law. There is ambivalence in this nationalism.

The legal commitments nation-States must honor have to be confronted with the anthropological reality that all known societies, in order to maintain and renovate their different infrastructures, must inevitably function by means of the systematic material and spiritual dispossession of major portions of their populations. In fact, civilizations should be understood as the bureaucratic administration of scarcity for the majorities, and plenty for a commanding minority, the ruling elite. Systematic scarcity is ideologically justified and implemented through virtual or outright violence to the effect that the human potentials and power of oligarchic minorities are expanded to the fullest extent possible within the material and spiritual development of their civilization. In the way scarcity is administered lies the potential violation of Human Rights as defined by the United Nations.

The production/administration of systemic scarcity is highly contradictory in that while it aims at maintaining/renovating the national infrastructure, simultaneously it generates discontent and strife among the population. While governmental violence may be the social control instrument of last resort, it is not the most efficient. Effective domination self-defeats if it has to expose its raw edges. Social hegemony is best maintained as a virtual, ideological power, psychologically induced as a latent, unconscious, symbolic-analogical dimension that designs and frames the everyday life parameters of permissible social conflict while securing spontaneous allegiance to the institutional established order. Narratives of national identity are part of this formal/informal educational/ideological process.

Narratives of national identity have a fatalistic inertia in that no matter how violent social conflict may be or may have been, there will have to be a moment of *reconciliation*. People eventually must find ways to live together. Catastrophic migrations leading to State disintegration are either inconceivable or a worse evil. In this re-accommodation conflicting parties must voluntarily abandon many of the vindications leading to conflict. In the generational flow perhaps many of the pending issues will be forgotten, yet at the same time they will in fact continue to influence on-going political behavior. Jean-Paul Sartre called *bad faith* this contradictory process of selective, conscious forgetting in order to preserve indispensable

relationships. Bad faith is related to the notion of *taboo* when spiritual and political leaders anathematize and isolate those individuals and groups who want to raise again consciousness of that which was forgotten in bad faith. Narratives of national identity may be understood as a prolonged bad faith/taboo counterpoint. Undoubtedly here we find the most important conditioning factors that may desensitize individuals into committing violations of Human Rights unquestioningly, and national populations into accepting them without protest.

In the contemporary world economic system, Third World oligarchies open for their international partners the opportunity to exploit natural resources and/or the cheapest labor force possible. They may do so both because their international liaisons benefit their personal interests and/or because the particular terms of their liaisons may be the only vehicles available for energizing/expanding the national economy and improving the quality of life of an ever increasing population. Thus the nation-State becomes the guarantor of international investment.

Given that the transnational oligarchies control the linkages of the national economies to the world system, in all cases Third World nations enter into a dependency relationship. *Dependency* can be defined as a situation in which the dynamics of a nation's economic, social, political, and ideological change do not respond to internally defined needs but to the direct/indirect impositions of external powers that incorporate that nation into their sphere of economic, diplomatic and military influence/intervention. Whatever capacity a nation-State may have in fulfilling its commitment to the implementation of Human Rights will proceed within the confines of dependency.

Myth and Taboo in Chilean History

The myth that propelled Chilean politics as of the 1940s depicted the country as an exceptionally stable, democratic political culture in comparison to other Latin American countries, and especially in comparison to immediate neighbors, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru. This image may well be referred to as the *myth of historical exceptionality*. This myth had a functional role in the inauguration of the Welfare State and the national policies of industrialization to surmount the world wide economic depression initiated in 1929. Industrialization required a social compact by means of which class conflict would be reduced to a minimum and all classes would coalesce consensually to enjoy the material and spiritual profits of modernization. Historical exceptionality was highlighted in comparison to the continuous political turmoil and violence in the neighboring countries and throughout Latin America. In the high schools,

the 19th century, a period of constant civil wars and dictatorial political control by a conservative oligarchy, was taught fusing and confusing the notions of harshly induced institutional stability with democracy. At least three generations were nurtured within this worldview.

The myth of democratic exceptionalism had such gravitation that it obscured political reality for the Popular Unity government of President Salvador Allende when in 1970 it set about to engineer a transition to socialism within constitutional, consensual, democratic channels. The transition revolved around the steadfast supposition that the opposition would play by constitutional rules, the armed forces would strictly abide by the Constitution, the skeptic middle classes would be swayed in favor of the government by the prosperity ignited by an upsurge in economic productivity. None of this happened (Bitar). Before Allende's accession to power the French political scientist Alain Joxe published a remarkable book (*Las fuerzas armadas en el sistema político chileno* [1970]) warning politicians of the Left against such a mythical view, calling attention to the consistently conservative, pro-capitalist role of the armed forces in Chilean history. Even worse, the Allende government failed to foresee and prepare for foreign intervention, as it was eventually unleashed by the Nixon administration and the CIA.

After the coup d'état of September 11, 1973, and for seventeen years, the military regime took harsh measures to destroy the organizational capabilities of the Left in the underground and the military cadre infiltrated into Chile as of 1978. Military security used summary illegal executions, disappearances, massive torture, espionage, and intimidation. In fact, for 17 years Chile experienced an armed conflict whose extreme violence should have been contained according to the Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols. Yet in a remarkable taboo configuration the military regime, the Communist Party that supported and financed an important guerrilla outfit trained in Cuba, and the Catholic Church refused to recognize the existence of an armed conflict in Chile (Vidal).

The importance of taboos as a central structural configuration in the narrative of Chilean history can be gauged by considering the military intervention and dictatorship between 1924 and 1931. During the period the military systematically applied the methods used in 1973–1990—summary executions, disappearances, massive torture, espionage, and intimidation against anarchists, communists, criminals, and homosexuals. The period 1924–1931 is one of the least researched periods of Chilean history and rarely taught in high schools. This is most remarkable taking into account that the forging of the myth of Chilean democratic exceptionalism began shortly thereafter.

The military intervened in 1924–1931 because the services they provided in conserving the established oligarchic order in no way compared to their meager salaries, retirement pensions, and equipment renovation.

They were frequently called upon to violently put down workers revolts ignited by the miserable salaries and living conditions typical of a liberal, agricultural, and mining export economy. There were huge massacres of workers at the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. The military regime inaugurated in 1973 played a similar role. The neoliberal economic policies enforced as of 1976 could not have been consensually established in a democratic regime. But understanding the persistence of State violence via the military requires a regression to the war waged by Chile against Peru and Bolivia in 1874–1884. The war itself enhanced the myth of Chilean historical exceptionalism by endowing the national identity with a strong epic sentiment. Yet the war's outcome became another taboo. Spoils of the war were the territories of Antofagasta and Tarapaca, rich in deposits of nitrate, which made Chile a key player in international agriculture and the explosives industries. Nevertheless, in a complex legerdemain involving bribing of important Chilean political leaders, nitrate fields became property of British concerns. Most profits flowed abroad.

In the late 1880s President José Balmaceda attempted to gain control of nitrate mining. Export taxes were increased, the State regulated production schedules to maintain an acceptable level of nitrate prices, Chilean entrepreneurs were favored in the allotment of nitrate field concessions. President Balmaceda used the State income increment to finance a vast infrastructural program to promote the industrialization of Chile. In fact, then, Balmaceda planned to disengage Chile from a dependency situation.

Vast construction of roads, bridges, waterways, port facilities, expansion of coal and mineral mining operations resulted in demographic chaos. Neither cities nor construction sites had the capacity to accommodate huge population influxes. Housing was at an extreme premium; sanitary installations, medical facilities, food provisions and processing systems were grossly insufficient; entertainment venues for the masses were non-existent; public security collapsed, the police really worked for criminal gangs. Prostitution, crime, alcoholism, domestic violence, venereal disease, typhoid fever, food poisoning, tuberculosis, typhus, dysentery became rampant. In the nitrate fields this situation was worsened by the extremely low wages paid. Chile became known as “the country of the dead” in that for decades birth rates did not balance death rates (Vial). Balmaceda's nationalist experiment ended in 1891 with a civil war he lost. His industrial/infrastructural program terminated the political status quo. The massive migration of peasants to better paid jobs in the cities and construction sites severely damaged the interests of the agricultural oligarchies. The Balmaceda government implemented policies using the army and special police units in severe violations of civil and political rights. The agricultural oligarchies joined the liberal politicians and bankers associated with foreign nitrate companies. With massive financial and military support from Great Britain and Germany, the liberal army

overwhelmed Balmaceda's forces. The events leading to the civil war of 1891 and the outcome of the civil war also belong among Chilean historical taboos. After their victory those repressed by Balmaceda committed serious atrocities in revenge.

The demographic catastrophe induced by the modernization program, the outcome of the civil war of 1891, the prevalence of liberal economic policies, and then the world depression initiated in 1929 explain the persistence of military violence as an instrument in maintaining institutional stability throughout contemporary Chilean history. Chile never totally recovered from the miseries brought about by these episodes. Institutional stability has gone hand in hand with sustained violations of Human Rights. In the myth of Chilean historical exceptionality, stability has been confused with democracy. At present the myth still persists. With the end of the military regime in 1990, subsequent governments of re-democratization proclaim Chile has returned to its "democratic tradition." The military regime of 1973–1990 would seem to be an episode of perversion, not historical inertia.

Education and the Persistence of Historical Taboos: The Human Rights Dilemma

A deconstructive exercise like the one presented, geared to expose bad faith and taboo in a narrative of national identity, is obviously not the intent of a national educational system. The Chilean Ministry of Education directs educators to use the history curriculum to "identify the distinctive features of the national identities by means of a knowledge and understanding of the history of Chile;" "To value the diverse contributions and influences that shaped the national identity and the contemporary expressions of such diversity;" "[to condition Chileans] to identify themselves as heirs and participants of a common historical experience [. . .]" (*Ministerio de educación* 104). Obviously, official directives are geared to nation-building, and to secure loyalty to the nation-State by making citizens feel proud of the "unique historical we." Indirectly, then, the directives will always promote bad faith and taboo. Under no circumstance will the historical flow be taught as a sequence of serious Human Rights violations that might derange the notion of "Patria."

If it is assumed—as I do—that from a Human Rights perspective both kinds of narratives have a useful, parallel, complementary function, a few words should be spent on the relationship between narratives of national identity and the deconstructive approach of Human Rights. I will do this at the end of this essay.

First I want to delve further into the statement I made, that indirectly narratives of national identity in the education systems promote bad faith and taboos. Obviously, ministerial authority will never state this that crudely. The key term is “indirectly promotes.” In the case of Chile the effect is achieved by the way history is deployed and implemented as a subject in the school curriculum. The Ministry of Education assigns only one year to the subject in the second year of high school. Students are around 14 at this stage, not an age of intellectual maturity. The subject is covered in 35 weeks, 3 hours per week, for a total of 105 annual hours. The material is organized in 5 units covering colonial times (16th century) to the present. Teachers are expected to present only the sequential segments of the salient events of each period, excluding personal interpretations. Then, to guarantee objectivity, teachers are asked to direct discussions on selected readings of the various existing ideological interpretations of these events.

Teachers of history interviewed indicate this segment of the curriculum is purposefully overloaded, a fact the Ministry of Education recognizes. Reducing crucial historical events to mere structural sequences in fact turns these events into icons with no depth. If these icons are then subjected to the existing interpretations, teaching history becomes a ritual of tolerance of ideological diversity, not an exercise in the search for truth as shown by the consequences of the events in terms of Human Rights. Ministerial directives recognize they are prepared to trade depth for a respectful consideration of the arguments that in the 1970s led to extreme ideological polarization and the collapse of democracy (*Ministerio de educación* 99; 100; 104).

A further consideration is that by law, schools do not have to abide by Ministry of Education directives. They are free to set up their own curriculum. Only schools for the very well-to-do can afford this independence. Certainly their curricula are not oriented to deconstruct myths to expose the violence that has served them well. Municipal schools and private schools serving the struggling working classes simply follow Ministry directives.

Finally, one must consider the self-censorship induced by the social sensibility created by the re-democratization governments after 1990. To promote national reconciliation the parties of the anti-military opposition now in government and the pro-military regime parties have engaged in the so-called “politics of consensus.” This meant that political negotiations of sensitive issues inherited from the military regime, such as Human Rights violations, would be conducted only at the highest leadership levels, without open, public discussion. This attitude has taken hold of teachers. Teachers interviewed indicated they are very cautious or avoid presenting material that might elicit a strong parental reaction, especially if they hold a job in a well-paying elite school.

From a Human Rights perspective, deconstructive narratives of history are vital to dispel obfuscations such as the ones just described.

Understanding societies as spaces prone either to violations or protection of Human Rights requires that narratives of national identity be constantly confronted with deconstructive exercises. Some fundamental corollaries result from this premise:

A) Although narratives of national identity may have a strong utopian content, from a Human Rights perspective a gnostic attitude is inevitable—Human Rights violations have occurred, are occurring right now, and will continue to occur in the future. Given the right conditions, any human being may violate Human Rights, even without knowing.

B) Egregious violations of Human Rights should not be considered isolated instances of perversion; they are part of a historical inertia that narratives of national identity want to disguise. In the background of known egregious violations of Human Rights lurk innumerable cases either unknown or censored by cultural and political authority.

C) Emotionally, students of Human Rights issues must find a balance among a gnostic stance, disgust at the atrocities directly or indirectly witnessed, and respect for national identities and governments. Human Rights activists are forced to politely interpellate State authorities and bureaucrats responsible for atrocities committed supposedly for the common good of a nation.

D) In even clearer terms, those of us who teach and research from a hermeneutic stance based on Human Rights must find a way to convey issues related to national identities without causing our students to submit to nihilistic skepticism.

Works Cited

- Bitar, Sergio. *Chile 1970–1973*. Santiago de Chile: Pehuén Editores, 1995.
- Joxe, Alain. *Las fuerzas armadas en el sistema político chileno*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1970.
- Ministerio de Educación, República de Chile. *Objetivos fundamentales y contenidos mínimos obligatorios de la educación media*, 1998.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. "Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy." *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*. Ed. David Collier. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Vial Correa, Gonzalo. *Historia de Chile*. Vol. I, Tomo I; Tomo II. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Santillana del Pacífico, 1981.
- Vidal, Hernán. *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez. El tabú del conflicto armado en Chile*. Santiago de Chile: Mosquito Comunicaciones, 1995.

Vidal, Hernán. "The Gravitation of Narratives of National Identity on Human Rights: The Case of Chile." *Human Rights in Latin American and Iberian Cultures*. Ed. Ana Forcinito, Raúl Marrero-Fente, and Kelly McDonough. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 5.1 (Fall 2009): 73–81.
http://spanport.cla.umn.edu/publications/HispanicIssues/pdfs/VIDAL_HRLAIC.pdf.
