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# Luis Martín-Cabrera and Daniel Naomi Voionmaa



## CLASS CONFLICT, STATE OF EXCEPTION AND RADICAL JUSTICE IN *MACHUCA* BY ANDRÉS WOOD<sup>1</sup>

If we are not afraid to adopt a revolutionary stance – if, indeed, we wish to be radical in our quest for change – then we must get to the root of our oppression.

- Q1 After all, radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root’. (Davis, 1984) 11. The  
philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is  
Q2 to *change* it. (Marx [edited by Engels], *Theses on Feuerbach*)

### Introduction

In this essay we will explore a series of theoretical and political problems through the reading of the film *Machuca*, directed in 2004 by Andrés Wood. The aim of our analysis is to tackle these questions in light of the success and the debates promoted by the film in Chile and abroad. Some of the questions that we want to explore in and through *Machuca* include, but are not limited to, the persistence of class antagonisms, the extension and deepening of the ‘state of exception’ before and after the arrival of democracy in Chile, and the need for a different velocity and a different memory in order to undertake the search for what we loosely call ‘radical justice’. Through the essay we will attempt to develop these concepts bearing in mind that, while our reflection refers primarily to the present conditions in Chile,<sup>2</sup> it may also be translated to other regions of the world dominated by neoliberal policies.

*Machuca* is framed around the last days of the UP (*Unidad Popular*) government of Salvador Allende in 1973. The film tells the story of a social experiment: Father McEnroe, a liberal *padre* and the principal of an English School, invites children from the surrounding *poblaciones* (shantytowns) to attend classes together with the rich kids from the wealthy neighbourhoods. This social experiment, based on a real one, is in many ways a metaphor of the socialist policies of Allende’s government. The new situation in the school allows Gonzalo Infante, a shy boy from Santiago’s upper classes, to meet Pedro Machuca, a streetwise boy from the shantytowns across the river.

Despite their social differences, they form a bond of friendship and experience each other’s life: Pedro becomes acquainted with Gonzalo’s wealthy lifestyle and troubled family, whereas Gonzalo meets Pedro’s drunken father, his uncle and his charming cousin Silvana. However, their friendship (and the relationship with Silvana) breaks into pieces and this process parallels that of the end of Allende’s socialist regime

with the military coup of 11 September. At the end of the movie, the military brutally represses the inhabitants of Pedro's shantytown, and kills Silvana. Gonzalo escapes thanks to his upper-class appearance but he has contemplated the whole scene, and he has, therefore, become a witness of state-sponsored violence against the poor.

50 From its inception, *Machuca* gained the attention of the Chilean critics for its 'excellent technical qualities' ('calidad cinematográfica'), but it also provoked a fresh debate on the legacy of the *Unidad Popular* and, most importantly, on whether or not the social injustices of the time persist in contemporary Chilean society. The comments and reactions encountered on the covers of several magazines and commented on in editorials and reports went well beyond the normal movie reviews. Ranging from  
55 pseudo-intellectual comments like '*Machuca* is the return of the repressed' to more emotional ones like the multiple testimonies by 'real Machucas', the film caught the attention of the media and the general public unlike any previous films in Chile.

60 One of the most revealing exchanges was the one published in the section 'Cartas al Director' ('Letters to the Editor') of *El Mercurio*, the main Chilean newspaper (close to the conservative sectors of society). During a considerably long period of time, the newspaper published the thoughts and comments of various readers. The range of different positions went from absolute opposition to the film for being a false account of the period to praise for the objectivity displayed by *Machuca*'s story. Accordingly,  
65 those who opposed the film criticized the Fondart (the government agency that financed part of the film), whereas those in favour thanked the government agency 'for giving us the possibility to watch this movie'.

However, what is most relevant in these letters is observing the current validity of the social and political problems from the time of Allende's government as no one in  
70 this exchange declared the facts portrayed in *Machuca* as something pertaining exclusively to the past. For instance, the beginning of a letter published on 19 August 2004 states: 'Regarding *Machuca* and the debate concerning the need to mix "apples with pears" [an expression used in the film by Gonzalo Infante's mother that implies the combination and mixing of elements which are profoundly different], I do not support  
75 the idea of integrating "poor kids" in "rich kids" schools.' The letter continues by explaining why, based on current social conditions, this is not appropriate. What is most striking here – particularly in this letter although the same can be said about most of the other letters regardless of the writers' political stand – is not that 'the problem remains the same thirty years later', or that the social conditions – poverty, class  
80 divisions – have even worsened (not only during the dictatorship but also some of them during the new democracy), but the blindness of a society regimented around neoliberal principles. In other words: the extreme difficulty to *see* what the movie brings about as well as to *see* the political strategies deployed by a movie that, in our opinion, demands a redefinition of the meaning of justice.

85 Andrés Wood seems to be conscious of this difficulty of *seeing* the events of 11 September 1973 and its consequences in the present. For, in a very deliberate fashion, the last shot of the film shows the gaze of Gonzalo over *Machuca*'s shantytown from the other side of a soccer field (figure 1). It is our contention that this soccer field is populated by all the spectres of the dead during the dictatorship and, as such, it marks  
90 the transformation of Chile into a democracy haunted by its own violent past. This, for sure, is to suggest that the field separating Pedro and Gonzalo (and their impossible friendship) is a metaphor of class conflict during the time of Allende, but more

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**FIGURE 1** The final scene: Gonzalo stands on one side of the soccer field and looks at the opposite side where Pedro's shantytown was. © 2004, Andres Wood Producciones S.A.

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importantly it calls attention to the fact that this conflict is affecting the present, it is a manifestation of the perpetuation of the 'state of exception', as the hidden matrix of Chilean society. Thus, the image of the soccer field works as a point of disarticulation and distortion, representing a different trajectory and a different velocity that could open the present of Chile to a 'radical notion of justice'.

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We read all of these elements (class conflict, state of exception, radical injustice, and the haunting by the violent past) that Machuca puts forth as symptoms of an 'uncomfortable memory', a 'disturbed memory', a 'memory in distress'. Jean Franco is right when she points out that 'history and memory have never been so important or contested, for amnesia is more than ever the condition of modern society' (2002: 17). However, more often than not cultural discourses deal with memory in a very abstract manner. Rather than considering memory a social construction subjected to power pressures like any other discourse, it seems as if memory was deployed in an empty and aseptic space. At best memory is related to the nation-state and a collective subject, at worst it is just a form of reactive nostalgia.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Patricio Aylwin – the first democratically elected president of Chile after Pinochet – made the following remarks in a recent colloquium on the question of memory:

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Regarding the terms and problems proposed by this encounter, I am among those who think that in order to build a future free of the errors and horrors of the past it is indispensable to remember this past and to reflect on it so that it never happens again. (Aylwin Azócar, 2004: 41, our translation)

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In spite of sharing this ethical imperative of preventing State violence from happening again, we think that the matter is more complex. We believe that the question is not how much to remember or to remember in general so that State terror never happens again. After a decade of official attempts to silence the past dictatorship in Chile, the

State has changed its strategy to one of controlling the representation of the past (the creation of the Valech commission in 2004 – which attempted to provide a list of all those who were tortured during the dictatorship, although it failed to provide the names of the torturers – is one among many examples). In sum, the government is willing to exercise its memory, but only to keep doing business as usual, that is, to keep preventing the emergence of its own uncomfortable memory. The ‘never again’ in the future is only possible if memory questions not only the *past* but also the *present*: the political logic developed during the dictatorship goes hand in hand with the economic logic that the neo-democracy adopted.

In this sense, our reading of *Machuca* is an attempt to articulate a different conception of memory, one that interpellates and dislocates the present in the name of a concept of radical justice yet-to-come. This conception of memory echoes the struggle of activists groups such as HIJOS (the daughters and sons of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina). As they put it:

We don’t want an abstract and comfortable memory, but a memory in action, active and for the whole society. We depart from the present, because remembering, the reconstruction of memory, is a living task that cannot be separated from the present and its problems. It is from the present that one remembers and forgets. Otherwise, we run the risk of turning memory into a cadaver, into a dry object. If we do that, we will fix memory in an unquestionable past, unable to create a relationship with the present. In other words, we risk denying history as a process of social construction. Memory is an interpellation to the committed social being as an agent of his or her own becoming. (Quoted in Brodsky, 2005: 220, our translation)

Along the same lines as this articulation of memory, we would like to argue that the story of *Machuca* is not just a story from the past as past, but rather an ‘uncomfortable memory’ that disturbs the present by bringing forward the perpetuation of class conflicts and the state of exception.

### Class conflict

The question of class is displayed in *Machuca* from the outset. The first shot of the film shows the hands of Gonzalo Infante – the upper class child – buttoning his shirt, putting his tie on and donning the school jacket; dressing, in sum, like a little bourgeois (figure 2). The scene is filmed from bottom up, and the spectator sees only Gonzalo’s face reflected on a mirror through a close-up when he is finally completely dressed in the school uniform. The visual logic of the scene is important because it shows that class (the tie, the uniform, the suit) is one of the defining elements of Gonzalo’s identity. The reflection on the mirror is a mechanism of self-identification of crucial importance, because the film is structured as a truncated coming-of-age story. As we shall analyse later, Gonzalo’s friendship with Pedro Machuca interrupts this bourgeois process of self identification, but the *coup d’état* brings both Gonzalo and Pedro back again to the insulated contemplation of their respective classes.



**FIGURE 2** Gonzalo dresses up for school. © 2004, Andres Wood Producciones S.A.

However, the film does not dwell on an essentialist notion of class to begin with because the spectator has also witnessed the ‘artificial’ construction of this identity throughout all the process of dressing (you are not a bourgeois by nature, you have to dress up like one). Rather than positing class as a sealed and closed identity, *Machuca* exposes class as a social relation that acquires its meaning through conflict and social interaction. The film translates this philosophical tenet by contrasting sequences and shots in which class signifiers are made evident. For instance, the close-up of Gonzalo’s delicate hands buttoning his shirt contrasts with the ensuing close up of his maid’s cracked and calloused hands and humble clothing as she prepares breakfast for the family.

The meaning of this small visual contrast broadens in the next scene when the kids from the shantytowns arrive at the upper class school of Gonzalo. In this scene, class difference is made obvious not only through the clothing (rich students wearing the school uniform vs. students wearing humble clothing) but also through active racialization, language and class identification. When father McEnroe, the school’s principal, asks the rich boys whether they know the students from the shantytowns, they all remain silent except for one, who identifies one of the poor kids as the son of the lady who washes his family’s clothes. The otherwise invisible class conflict (the conflict between Capital and labour) is made visible in this and the ensuing sequences not through a sociology of the classes – the sum of its quantitative and qualitative differences – but through their conflictive relationship. Daniel Bensaïd has rightly insisted on the fact that Marx’s theory of class is inextricably linked to the relational category of conflict and the changing ground of the class struggle. In his own words:

The notion of class in Marx is reducible neither to an attribute of which the individual units comprising it are the bearers, nor to the sum of these units. *It is something else: a relational totality, not a mere sum...* His approach precludes

treating class as a person or as a unified, conscious subject, on the model of the rational subject of classical psychology. *Class exists only in a conflictual relationship with other classes.* (Bensaïd, 2002: 100, emphasis added)

230 In fact, the arrival of the shanty-town boys at the school make this previously existing  
conflictive relation of class more visible. The relationship was there, but the social  
division of spaces within the city, the school system and Chilean society made contact,  
beyond that of servers and servants mentioned by one of the rich kids, impossible or  
socially irrelevant. Hence, the first encounters between the two groups of children are  
235 mediated by violence. This violence is socially caused; it reproduces the broader social  
conflict in a more straightforward manner, because – among other things – children  
and adolescents do not have the same mechanisms of repression as adults. For instance,  
in one of the fights, one of the rich kids tells Pedro Machuca: ‘we’re gonna show you  
how we do things here in Vitacura’ (an upper class neighbourhood in Santiago de  
240 Chile). This statement uttered within the walls of the school obviously echoes the  
broader context of class oppression and antagonism that has fostered Chilean society  
since its inception.

The presentation of the conflict in these binary terms has been criticized as too  
simplistic. However, we know since the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* that  
245 ‘our epoch . . . is distinguished by the fact that it has simplified class conflict. Society as  
a whole is tending to split into two great encampments, into two great classes directly  
and mutually opposed – bourgeoisie and proletariat’ (Marx, 1996a: 2). Although one  
could argue that things have changed a great deal since the publication of *The Communist  
Manifesto*, we believe that one thing remains valid: this binary opposition does not  
250 exhaust the question of class but it gives access to the conflict, it determinates the social  
field without over-determining it.

In 1973 Chilean society was certainly determined by these class antagonisms and,  
most importantly, these antagonisms seem to be the condition of possibility of the  
current democratic order. According to Tomás Moulián, the transition to democracy  
255 in Chile can best be described through the metaphor of an ‘iron cage’, because politics  
as disagreement over goals and rationalities has been substituted by the politics of  
consensus (1997: 38). Moulián elaborates further, stating that the politics of consensus  
represents a superior stage in the process of oblivion. This is because it implies not only  
the forgetting of the dictatorship past but also the ongoing marginalization of the  
260 conflict that lay at the origin of the dictatorship (1997: 37). In this manner, we may be  
facing a symptomatic paradox: Marx and Engels’s dictum becomes a truth of such  
relevance that it disappears, it becomes invisible. Or, in other words, as Álvaro Cuadra  
explains, using Barthes’s category of ex-nomination, which is built upon presentism  
and amnesia: ‘It is indisputable that the notion of class has become obsolescent,  
265 however we should ask ourselves if this obsolescence is not just another more  
developed and sophisticated form of ex-nomination. In a blue world, the blue is not  
conceivable; in a world where market criteria are the basic cultural pattern, the  
concept of class is unsustainable’ (2003: 26).

Against the grain of this invisibility of the notion of class, *Machuca* makes visible the  
270 perpetuation of class conflict as the basis of the present democratic order in Chile  
through the constant juxtaposition of visual markers of class (clothing, housing, access  
to commodities, etc.) and through the experiment of the school and its tragic



consequences. These images are obviously redirected to the present; they constitute a visual memory of the conflict that interrupts the ‘normality’ of Chile’s democracy (the comments above quoted from newspapers are evidence of this disruptive visual quality).

275 However, the film does not reproduce either a simple war logic – rich vs. poor; oppressor vs. oppressed – or a nostalgic gaze towards the socialist experiment of the *Unidad Popular*. *Machuca* shows how class conflict determines the relationship between the students in the school, but it also narrates the story of Pedro Machuca and Gonzalo Infante against these class determinations. Furthermore, the bond of friendship that  
280 they form together with Silvana – Machuca’s cousin – may be interpreted as a class alliance, and therefore as a means of coming to terms with class antagonisms. As we have mentioned previously, for a brief period of time coinciding with the government of Salvador Allende, the three of them are able to share their experiences, to learn about each other and to experiment with their nascent sexualities.

285 Yet the film, far from portraying this interclass friendship in an idyllic fashion with nostalgic undertones, captures all of the complexity and the paradoxical nature both of the friendship and of the experience of Allende’s government. This complexity is best exemplified through the mediation of two commodities: a bike and a pair of sneakers. The bike and the Adidas sneakers, which belong to Gonzalo, are  
290 commodities and symbolize money and class membership. But they also stand symbolically for ownership of the means of production, capital and its circulation. The sneakers are a gift brought from Argentina by the lover of Gonzalo’s mother and, therefore, its presence suggests access to a transnational market and the circulation of capital. The bike, on the other hand, serves both Gonzalo and Machuca  
295 as a means of transportation from the shantytown to the wealthy neighbourhood of Gonzalo.

In addition to being signs of capital and class membership, both the sneakers and the bike are *instruments of velocity*. Velocity, as Paul Virilio has shown, is inextricably  
300 linked to wealth and power (: 15–16). Therefore, the presence of the bike and the sneakers is crucial to understanding the class relation between Machuca and Gonzalo on the one hand, and the projection of another velocity into the present on the other. At the beginning of the film, Pedro did not have access to the bike (the velocity of the bourgeoisie and its means of production are barred for him), but through his friendship with Gonzalo he is able to ride the bike for a brief period of time. However, it is  
305 important to note that the scene in which Gonzalo lends his bike to Pedro takes place in Pedro’s shantytown. Pedro Machuca, in fact, has to ask Gonzalo for his permission to ride the bike. The rich kid ‘allows’ the poor kid to ride the bike within the perimeter of the shantytown and for a moment both of them share a velocity and a trajectory (figure 3). It is our contention that this scene changes the mapping of  
310 ‘dromopolitics’ and ‘dromoeconomy’ by allowing Pedro Machuca to take part in a different trajectory—power—speed milieu that echoes the core of the *Unidad Popular* project.

315 At this point, it is worth remembering that the main feature of the ‘via chilena al socialismo’ (the Chilean way to socialism) was the peaceful takeover of the means of production and the progressive transformation of the economy within the parameters of parliamentary democracy. As such, we want to suggest that Machuca’s temporary ride echoes Allende’s attempt to give hegemonic velocity to the working class, that

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**FIGURE 3** Pedro and Gonzalo enter the shantytown, sharing the bike. © 2004, Andres Wood Producciones S.A.

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is to say, the velocity – like the bike – that ‘belonged’ to the bourgeoisie. Along the same lines as the project of Allende, the end of Machuca’s ride parallels the *coup d’état* of Augusto Pinochet. More concretely, the bond of friendship between Gonzalo, Pedro and Silvana begins to break apart when Gonzalo’s mother insults and beats Silvana in a demonstration by the Chilean conservative parties and groups (Partido Nacional, the fascist ‘Patria y libertad’). After this incident, Pedro and Silvana try to ride the bike once again without Gonzalo’s consent, but this time Gonzalo runs after them shouting ‘rotos, culiados’ (an insult used to refer to poor people). The spell is broken. Without the consent of the upper class Pedro’s ride becomes a theft.

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It is important to underline, nonetheless, that the end of the bond of friendship is primarily due to the social polarization brought about by the *coup d’état*. The violent intervention of the army in Machuca’s shantytown destroys precisely the affective link that sustained the class alliance between Gonzalo, Silvana and Machuca, and therefore the possibility of embracing another speed and trajectory. In this way, both the film and our reading of it separate the concept of the class struggle from the military-destructive speed of the *coup d’état*. In other words, there is a difference between stating the unavoidable conflictive relation between classes, and transforming this conflict into a polarized and military-like conflict. Against the grain of this assumption, we believe that the collective trajectory of Gonzalo, Silvana and Pedro, and their bond of friendship, connect Allende’s period to our days. If today’s free-market order in Chile demands Machuca’s disappearance (the absolute velocity of capital acquires ubiquity and instantaneity and thus erases the possibility of memory and of a future) the film opens up the possibility of *another speed*. Perhaps this is the speed of solidarity that will allow us to ‘des-spectralize’ Machuca and to drastically modify the ‘trajectory’ of class struggle.

## State of exception

One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents  
 Q1 treat it as a historical norm. (Benjamin, 1997:)

365 We want to relate the ‘state of exception’ to the ‘class struggle’ in order to avoid any  
 kind of rigid economic determinism (a.k.a. *paleomarxism*). Marx was certainly right in  
 pointing out that the ‘legal relationships as well as types of states are to be understood  
 370 neither on their own terms nor in terms of the general development of the human  
 intellect, (because) they are rather rooted in the material relations of life’ (Marx,  
 1996b: 159). However, if one considers the ‘state of exception’ as a mere  
 superstructure, that is to say, as a projection of the ‘material relations of life’, it is  
 impossible to account for the violence that authorized the torture and extermination of  
 375 thousands of political dissidents during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. As for our  
 purposes in this essay, it is likewise impossible to understand the occupation and  
 extermination of the inhabitants of Machuca’s shantytown without something other  
 than the economic interests of the Chilean upper classes. Thus, as we understand it, the  
 state of exception is rooted in the economic structure of capitalism – and as such it  
 exists and functions before, during and after the dictatorship – but it also possesses an  
 380 ethical dimension that transgresses the epistemological limits of an explanation based  
 on economic or class conflict.

This ethical dimension of the state of exception is, for instance, ironically  
 emphasized when Gonzalo’s father directly addresses the socialist experience in Chile.  
 After having a fancy dinner at a restaurant, Gonzalo and his family are driving back  
 385 home; his father, Patricio Infante, comments about the possibility of asking to be  
 transferred to Italy, to the FAO, in Rome, and jokingly proposes that they all go to Italy  
 to live. He remarks: ‘It wouldn’t be hard [to get the transfer to Rome], they would  
 understand. Knowing how the situation is here. I mean, I’m not implying it’s so bad,  
 but there we would be better off, I would be earning dollars.’ And after a brief pause  
 390 he adds: ‘For Chile, socialism is the best, but not for us.’ Gonzalo’s mother laughs.  
 ‘Not yet’, he mutters in response, but these last words have another *real* meaning: here  
 exceptionality displays itself at it fullest, the ‘not yet’ that would have implied a  
 possible normalization (or at least a path towards the construction of a society not  
 based on a state of exception *and* a capitalist system) becomes a ‘never’. The apparent  
 395 paradox is that Patricio Infante is a supporter of Allende’s government. We know,  
 however, that this is not such a paradox but just another manifestation of class conflict,  
 articulated from the bourgeoisie’s perspective with an ‘ethical touch’ that is not far  
 from betrayal. This becomes another characteristic of the state of exception: given the  
 particular dysfunctioning of the law, betrayal is naturalized.<sup>4</sup>

400 In fact, according to Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception rests on the  
 progressive confusion between the application and transgression of the law that lies  
 at the basis of sovereign power (be it the king or the State):<sup>5</sup> ‘One of the paradoxes of  
 the state of exception lies in the fact that in the state of exception, it is impossible to  
 405 distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a  
 rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder’ (Agamben, 1998: 57).<sup>6</sup>  
 The state of exception creates, then, these blurred zones that materialize in a political

order where the exception becomes the norm, a no-man's land in between structure and superstructure, crime and law, life and death.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly relevant for our purposes because the progressive installation of the 'state of exception' authorizes the extermination of this 'life that is not worth living'.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the 'state of  
 410 exception' is 'the determination of a threshold beyond which life ceases to have any juridical value and can, therefore, be killed without the commission of a homicide' (1998: 139). The connection that can be established with biopolitics *in* and *through* the state of exception becomes evident.<sup>9</sup>

The events that Gonzalo Infante witnessed on the other side of the river are  
 415 embedded in this logic of the 'state of exception'; a logic that implies the paradox of the suspension of legality, while at the same time that very suspension implies being a part of it. This is why the life of Silvana (Machuca's cousin) and many other nameless victims can be extinguished without committing a legal crime. In fact, the other side of the river and the soccer field (where the spectres of the past are invisibly present) are  
 420 the markers of the extension of the state of exception; they are the hidden matrix of the current juridical order in Chile. Hence, the suspended gaze of Gonzalo toward the shantytown can be read as the constitutive outside, excluded through inclusion, of the new sovereign power as infinite biopower, that is to say, as power to decide over the life and death of the citizens of the republic.

It is worth clarifying that, according to Agamben, 'the State of Exception is not a dictatorship (constitutional or unconstitutional); it is a space void of right, a zone of  
 425 anomy in which all the juridical determinations – and, before all, the very distinction between public and private – are deactivated' (2003: 66). This process is, always following Agamben, global in reach and explains why totalitarian states become  
 430 democracies and vice versa almost without discontinuities. In other words, the dictatorship functions *in* a state of exception but this – the state of exception – is not limited in its expression to a dictatorship as mode of government. Thus, we can argue that the state of exception prolongs itself after the ending of Pinochet's government; as we point out above, it seems to be one of the characteristic features of neoliberalism,  
 435 which creates a zone without law and rights (where those elements are transformed into parodies of themselves).

The consequences of this analysis are twofold: on the one hand it portrays the Chilean present as the result of these double transformations (the deepening of class  
 440 conflicts and its simultaneous apparent disappearance, and the extension of the state of exception as biopower), and on the other, it points to the events portrayed in the film (the end of the socialist experience, the *coup d'état*) not as the exception but rather as the normalization of the exception.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, implied in this analysis is a departure from two Chilean national myths: on the one hand, the idea that before the coup Chile had the longest democratic tradition in the  
 445 continent (in fact, the military intervened many other times before Pinochet) and on the other, the portrait of the UP experience as social chaos that needed to be brought back into the republican order. Against the grain of these two myths, *Machuca* represents the social experiment of Father McEnroe (and by extension the whole experience of the UP) and its violent dissolution as a particularly conspicuous materialization of the state  
 450 of exception and the class struggle.<sup>11</sup> Let us be clear on this: the state of exception existed before 1973; class conflict was endemic in Chilean society well before the socialist experience. What changed from 1973 onwards is the extension and intensity of

both class conflict and the state of exception to the point of making impossible an open discussion about the real implications of the events that took place in Chile that 11 September of 1973. Thus the film points towards a deepening of the class conflict in the present that has been neglected by hegemonic discourses not only during the dictatorship (when it was ‘written in blood and fire’), but also during the neo-democracy and the attempts made to either ‘forget’ what happened (the rightist discourse) or to ‘reconcile’ the country (the position of the democratic government – and the Catholic church).

#### 460 **Toward a notion of ‘radical justice’**

In this final section, we want to depart from the blindness imposed by the state of exception and the deepening of class conflicts, to reflect on the possibility of an emerging notion of ‘radical justice’ that opposes this sociopolitical ethos. In this sense, any rearticulating of justice has to begin by recognizing that the events of 11 September 1973 in Chile are the origin of radical injustice, which projects itself towards the present via the ‘restitution’ of democracy in 1990, i.e. during the post-Pinochet governments – the continuation of the state of exception – radical injustice not only persists but it also adopts more subtle means of expression and manifestation. According to Brett Levinson the crimes committed during the dictatorship are incommensurable, they have no possible measurement. There is no reparation, because neither vengeance nor amnesty is viable. In his own words:

475 With radical injustice ... no conventions exist or can exist, no table of measurement has been or can be forged. Radical injustice, that is, emerges not when a crime is committed, and not when the laws appears as insufficient and/or erroneous, but when every convention surfaces as obsolete – as pertaining to another time and place – and, therefore, every act of restitution is impossible. (2002: 214).

Thus, radical injustice is connected to melancholy, and to what is irreversibly lost and, therefore, characterizes all post-dictatorship processes in Latin America. The incommensurability of the crimes committed shows thus the magnitude of the defeat (for the left, for the social movements, etc.) and its irrevocable and melancholic outcome: restitution is no longer possible. The subject of this radical injustice – the dead, the disappeared, the victims of torture, and via them the whole society – has been exposed to the limit of the politics of representation, and here we discover another way of intelligibility: it is through this exposure to the limit (of the experience, of ourselves, of every project) that we can find common ground with the other. It is also, to some extent, through the recognition of this liminal experience that we encounter an alternative to amnesty and vengeance. Levinson argues:

495 Hence, the limit-experience ... stands as the condition of possibility for a (not *the* but *a*) new political actor, for novel political organizations after dictatorship, for forgiveness (not the victims’ forgiveness of the military but their forgiveness of themselves) and, finally, for the ‘ungluing’ of the present from the past,

a restarting of time: the beginnings of the transition process ... the limit experience for those trapped in the post-dictatorship predicament is the prerequisite for a better history; for these people, it is the prerequisite for any history whatsoever. (2002: 231)

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The recognition of these limits may work as a prerequisite for justice, but must go hand in hand (and not as a previous step) with the establishment of radical justice. By radical justice, then, we mean the exposure of the experience of the limit, thus opening up new political possibilities and new trajectories while at the same time resisting any calculable retribution or norm. If radical injustice was the result of the dictatorship and perpetuates itself after it had formally concluded, radical justice functions *from and towards* a different time and location. What is established is a relation of discontinuity among them: their 'radicalisms' differ: radical justice opens up the limit experience created by radical injustice and traverses it. In this way, radical justice 'speaks' and 'produces' meanings from 'there'. These (new) means of resistance, needless to say, do not imply that it is not necessary to judge the perpetrators of state violence or to establish compensations for the victims (on the contrary, that is the *conditio sine qua non*), but rather to insist on the fact that justice, radical justice, lies beyond the symbolic universe of the law. To put it another way, radical justice is not a single or concrete fact/object, something that can be simply established by decree. Rather, it is a process, a trajectory, a velocity that implies the active participation of various social and political sectors; something that requires the recovery of history and memory to imagine a different society without simply falling back into old utopias. As stated above, we can understand radical justice as a multiplicity of means of resistance. It is not another version of Spinozan multitude or what it wants to achieve: its political strength lies *más allá*, beyond any attempt to constitute a hegemonic legal/political force.

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Yet, refusing the 'legal strategy' as the main path to the establishment of justice does not entail taking refuge in a political abstraction or an ethical dream: on the contrary, radical justice must be understood as an ongoing effort to restructure the State and, as such, it implies the emergence of new political actors, where 'new' simply refers to the actualization of class struggle in all of its variations. It is necessary, in other words, to acknowledge the current historical conditions ('globalization' is probably the trendiest – although problematic – name for them). If we agree with Hegel that the state, as a completed reality, 'is the ethical whole and the actualization of freedom' (1996: 244), then we have to realize that ethics is not restricted to an 'ethical idea or ethical spirit'. Rather, it has to turn the logic of the neoliberal state upside down in search of an 'ethical materiality', a multiform and concrete way to articulate (a new) political and social participation and thus to 're-found' the very basis of the State.<sup>12</sup>

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In the current Chilean situation, the establishment of a path toward radical justice would imply, as a first step, recognizing the validity of the political project interrupted in 1973. This gesture, far from being a nostalgic one or a 1960s dream, should work as an interrupting machine that attacks the very heart of the neoliberal order. As we have said previously, it is not a matter of recovering the past as past, but rather a question of recuperating the validity of the struggle for justice and equality that the government of the UP once upheld.

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In this sense, to return to *Machuca*, Gonzalo's gaze at the end of film, the very gesture of looking back, can be read as working against the triumphant discourse of a country that considers itself part of the global world, against a politics of regional alienation, and against the economic injustices imposed by this model. In our view, one of the strongest ethical claims of *Machuca* lies precisely in this double gaze connecting the past and the present over the soccer field, a space-time populated by the spectres of the *desaparecidos* that divides and connects both realities foreseeing a different future, an alternative politics, where the riding of the bike together is not only possible again but becomes a truly shared velocity project.

The metaphor of the soccer field as hinge that separates and joins is crucial, because it breaks with the orthodox Leninist idea that class struggle can only be conceptualized as a battlefield between oppressors and oppressed.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, is not to suggest that resistance and radical justice may overlook domination and exploitation, but rather to open, as the metaphor of the soccer field in *Machuca* does, the possibility of thinking the class struggle in a multifarious manner, because, as Etienne Balibar affirms:

There is *no fixed separation, even in terms of tendency, between social classes*. The idea of antagonism must be set free from the military and religious metaphor of the 'two camps' (and thus the alternative of 'civil war' versus 'consensus'). Only exceptionally does class struggle take the form of civil war . . . . But it does take on many other forms, the multiplicity of which cannot be circumscribed *a priori*, and which are no more inessential than civil war, for the obvious reason, as I have been arguing, that there is no single 'essence' of class struggle'. (1991: 179)<sup>14</sup>

However, by taking an anti-essentialist approach to class antagonism, *Machuca* does not fall into any kind of reformism within the parameters of liberalism. In other words, we are not facing another attempt to humanize capitalism via individual reparations or historical retributions. Although the film does not provide a prescriptive programme as to how to address the perpetuation of class antagonism and the extension of the state of exception (rather it leaves this task to the spectator as a collective ethos), it clearly connects the achievement of justice to the overthrowing of the current economic mode of production.

The key to this interpretation is found in another important scene that takes place midway through the movie. There is a meeting at the school so that the parents of the students may have an opportunity to discuss the experiment of mixing children of different social classes. The discussion is mainly between liberals and conservatives – all of them middle or upper middle class – those who are in favour and those who are against the 'experiment' (very much like in the contemporary debate in *El Mercurio*). The parents of the poor students are standing at the back of the room (a chapel) and listen without taking part in the discussion, until the moment when Pedro's mother dares to speak out (figure 4). For a moment we can hear the subaltern's voice, whose story is the history of primitive accumulation and of the worker's continuous separation from the means of production, the history of pure and naked exploitation. Pedro's mother says:

When I was a child I lived at a farm near San Nicolás, in the south. My father was one of the workers who took care of the cattle. If something happened

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**FIGURE 4** Machuca's mother speaks at the parents' meeting in St Patrick's School. © 2004, Andres Wood Producciones S.A.

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to an animal, we got it discounted from the provisions we got at the end of the month. It didn't matter what was the reason for the loss, my father was always the guilty one. I came to Santiago when I was 15, because I didn't want my children to always be guilty of everything. But it seems that here in the city things are the same. We are always the ones who are guilty. This is how it's meant to be. And nobody is going to blame you for maintaining the same history. I only ask myself, when are things going to be done in a different way, when are you going to dare to do something different.

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There are no ambiguities in the words of Machuca's mother; the quest for radical justice demands digging to the root of the problem, to change the economic structure that authorizes the perpetuation of exploitation in our own present as much as it does in the film. No justice – at least not radical justice – for as long as we live within the accumulation patterns of a neoliberal order, is possible.<sup>15</sup> Radical justice requires daring to do things otherwise: to write history in a different way, to identify different culprits, to open up new trajectories for the future, and thus cross the limit established by radical injustice.

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In sum, the quest for radical justice attempts to bring the historical past into the present to interrupt the reproduction of a neoliberal order predicated on the ongoing exercise of violence to preserve class privileges and the sovereign privilege of the state of exception (the legal extermination of those lives that are not worth living). It is the construction of a future from the past, the re-elaboration of history itself that will allow us to overcome the injustices engraved in society that the neoliberal politics of exclusion has only intensified, making the impossible a social norm.

Hence we are confronted with a task that we know is impossible, but its impossibility is such only because of the persistence of an economic model and a



political discourse that stigmatizes it a priori as impossible. We need to turn this around, *dar vuelta la tortilla*. In 1990, the first democratic president after Pinochet, Patricio Aylwin, said that Chile can have ‘justicia en la medida de lo posible’, justice to the extent that it is possible. Perhaps we need to begin by debunking this conformist political statement and demand politics and justice to the extent of what is not possible or thinkable today. It is in this sense that memory and justice can be radicalized and read against the background of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. To state its urgency today does not imply a return to a romanticized praxis or an outdated theory. On the contrary, it is a theoretical necessity and an ethical imperative.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Kimberly Vinall for her invaluable help in editing our essay.
- 2 As Foucault writes in *Discipline and punish* (1997), we are interested in the past not ‘if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present’ (31).
- 3 For an example of this comfortable approach to the question of memory in Chile see, for instance, Zerán *et al.* (eds) *Encuentros con la memoria*.
- 4 This ‘illegal but legal’ situation can be also seen when Patricio and his son go ‘shopping’ to a grocery store that is closed. The owner opens when Patricio says his name, and offers him a variety of comestible goods. When they leave the store we notice that there are multiple signs hanging outside it, where we can read: ‘There’re no cigarettes’, ‘There’s no meat’, etc. This, of course, alludes to the hoarding of goods that happened during the UP years, which helped to give a stronger sensation of shortage of supplies.
- 5 In *Stato di Eccezione*, Agamben begins his analysis commenting on Carl Schmitt’s views in the *Politische Theologie* (1922). There, Schmitt gives his famous definition of the sovereign as the one who decides on the state of exception: ‘Sovereign is who decides on the State of Exception’ (Schmitt, 1996, 13). It is interesting to note that Schmitt argues that ‘in exception the norm is destroyed’ (19) and that ‘there is no norm which can be applicable during chaos’ (19). This opens the path to Walter Benjamin’s eighth thesis on the concept of history where he turns Schmitt’s logic upside down, affirming that ‘the state of exception in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ (254).
- 6 This paradox can also be phrased as follows: ‘If the suspension – total or partial – of the juridical order is what characterizes the state of exception, how is it possible that this suspension be part of legality?’ (Agamben, 2003: 33–4).
- 7 The difference between dictatorship and state of exception must be emphasized for, as Agamben explains, they are not the same thing: ‘The State of Exception is not a dictatorship (constitutional or unconstitutional); it is a space void of right, a zone of anomy in which all the juridical determinations – and, before all, the very distinction between public and private – are deactivated’ (2003: 66).
- 8 It is worth noting the religious undertones that come with the establishment of the state of exception, an aspect that can be developed more in depth in the film (the priest occupies a position *in between* the never existing rule and the exception, he attempts a third way that fails...). Let us remember that every concept used to describe the modern state relates to a secularized theological concept; the ‘state of

- exception', in particular, 'has for jurisprudence a similar meaning than miracles for Theology') (Schmitt, 1996: 43).
- 9 Perhaps, if we follow the distinction between *zoê* and *bios* as Agamben does, it would be more accurate to talk about 'zoo-politics', as Degener explains in his introduction to Virilio's *Negative horizon* (2005: 17).
- 680 10 Against Žižek's critique of the notion of biopolitics, i.e. the 'ontological trap' and the idea that by identifying 'sovereign power with biopolitics . . . [Agamben] prevents the possibility of the emergence of a political subjectivity' (198), we state that resistance itself *always finds a political way of expression*, i.e. even considering the notion of biopolitics totalizing it is possible (and a duty!) to elaborate political subjectivities –
- 685 individual and collective – that will resist and overcome the state of exception in which we live (something that Žižek does not deny).
- 11 As briefly noted in a previous footnote, the social-religious aspect must not be overlooked. The Catholic's school experience can only be understood in the context of a post-*Concilio Vaticano II* ideological environment, which had a strong impact worldwide, particularly in Latin America (*Teología de la liberación* is perhaps the most famous exponent of this socially committed attitude that the Catholic Church adopted).
- 690 12 A debate on political strategy is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is relevant to note that, regardless of the means to achieve it, Marx realized that for a revolution to be successful the proletariat needed not only to take over the state but also to transform it: 'They [the proletarians] have understood that it is their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power. But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes' (1996c: 181).
- 695 13 See Lenin's *State and revolution*.
- 700 14 We might add another layer of meaning to our argument by remembering Marx's words to Engels toward the end of his life: 'You know very well where we found our idea of class struggle; we found it in the work of French historians who talked about the race struggle' (in Foucault, 1997: 79).
- 705 15 This truism is important, as it locates the problematic of justice not only outside the realm of the juridical, but within a wholly different epistemological order. As Daniel Bensaid has shown, 'What is at stake [in Marx's works] is not a theory of justice, but a different idea of justice, which assumes the overthrow of the existing order . . . Thus, Marx does not regard capitalist exploitation as just or unjust. He merely observes that it cannot be deemed unjust from the standpoint of the capitalist mode of production, its logic and ideological values. Any judgment about justice involves a partisan stance' (2002: 134).
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