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In For a Proper Home: Housing Rights In the Margins of Urban Chile, 1960-2010, anthropologist and historian Edward Murphy deftly explores the ways in which “certain practices and expectations of propriety have oriented the political field of housing since the mid-20th century” (p. 3) and analyzes the home’s varied social, political, and economic significance in a period of tremendous national and global change. The book combines extensive archival research on the roots of 20th century Chile’s changing political-economic and social agenda and its impact on urban planning and housing policies with participant observation among those most affected by Chile’s development plans: the low-income residents, or pobladores, living in Chile’s unrecognized, underserved, and isolated urban slums. Through an examination of the ways in which housing activists’ struggles for housing rights and legitimate homeownership both challenged and mirrored Chile’s own vision of itself as an exemplary Latin American state, For a Proper Home offers readers a compelling, nuanced account of the entangled nature of propriety, politics, and citizenship in the second half of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century.

Based on thirty months of archival and ethnographic research conducted over a twelve-year period, Murphy gives the reader an in-depth education in Chilean political, social, and economic history, while also using the oral histories he gathered to highlight the experiences of several generations of housing activists who fought for homes of their own over the course of the country’s tumultuous journey from socialism to authoritarianism to neoliberal democracy. Organized into eleven chapters and divided into four parts, the book follows a loose chronological order. However, Murphy is attuned to recurrent themes (such as the import placed on “propriety” as evidenced by traditional family structures and gender roles) that influence both state housing policies and the Chilean citizenry’s expectations for their homes, even in the midst of political change. At times, the density of the book’s long-range historical perspective overshadows Murphy’s use of his ethnographic materials. However, his careful attention to the continuities and disjunctures of the past and present serves as an example for any ethnographer seriously committed to historical analysis, as well as for any historian interested in deepening their work through ethnography.

In Part One, Murphy addresses “the urban politics of propriety” and its implications for the forms of activism that those without “proper homes” use to petition the state. He also examines the influence of 19th century ideals of urban aesthetics and organization on Chilean politicians and city planners as they sought to “propel [Santiago] and its residents into the very latest in urban design and governance” (p. 43), even as Chile’s “inequitable and often volatile economy constantly upset the ideal of urban development” (p. 44). In Part Two, Murphy examines the successive waves of housing activism and land seizures that became quotidian events in Chile in the late 1960s and early 1970s and their long-term, often less than satisfying
outcomes for their participants, who gained homes but were denied true equality. He also addresses the high hopes and unfulfilled promises of the Allende years, and the ways in which regressive forces from within and outside of Chile (most notably, from the United States) stymied and eventually destroyed Allende’s ambitious agenda for greater social and economic equality.

In Part Three, the book moves into the years of the military dictatorship, paying particular attention to the ways in which Pinochet’s regime attempted to decouple housing from politics by attending to individual, apolitical petitions for homeownership rights and ignoring the claims of politically-affiliated activist groups. Murphy also makes connections between Dictatorship-era planners’ concern with constructing orderly, well-maintained urban spaces that would show Chile to its best advantage (such as by razing the slums that border the highway leading from the international airport to Santiago’s city center) and the desire to project an image of Chile as a modern state in the late 19th century. Part Four describes the transition to democracy in Chile and the lost opportunities for collective action and political critique that paradoxically accompanied many Chileans’ successful bids for homeownership. Murphy also addresses the continued stigmatization of pobladores in Chile, as well as the painful rise of indebtedness and insecurity in poor urban neighborhoods, where work is unstable and homes, while now owned, are often poorly constructed and socially isolated. In his conclusion, Murphy asserts that, “in making their homes, pobladores have contributed to making their city and society. In doing so, they have also played a role in the extension of private property regimes, the unfolding of state power and citizenship, and the production of space in the city...their efforts to build lives of dignity continue” (p. 271).

Although For a Proper Home focuses on the evolution of low-income housing in Chile in the late 20th century, the story Murphy tells is of much broader relevance: in essence, he gives us a sorely needed analysis of the limits and possibilities of socioeconomic transformation through individual empowerment and ownership—a hallmark of neoliberal projects the world over. While the land seizures of the 1960s and ’70s were collective projects that also attended to the perceived needs and desires of proper households, the rejection of community-based political activism in favor of individual petitions for ownership during the Pinochet era effectively depoliticized housing claims. Homeownership rates continue to be included in the development indices of entities such as the World Bank and the United Nations, but Murphy’s book questions what kinds of political and social formations may be lost when ownership is gained.

For a Proper Home is an ambitious book that makes important contributions to anthropology and history, urban anthropology, political and legal anthropology, and the anthropology of Latin America. Early on, Murphy notes that by “…becoming insurgent owners, former squatters have helped to transform the state. Yet they have also been ensnared within its web” (p. 6). His tireless attention to both political ensnarement and transformation, and his use of the archives, ethnographic fieldwork, and oral history makes for a complex and engaging text, suitable for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in anthropology as well as history, urban planning, political science, and Latin American studies.
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