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# Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State by Marilena Chauí (Review)

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# Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State by Marilena Chauí (Review)

## **Abstract**

Selections of the work authored by the renowned Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí are the material found in this volume. The book is part of a Palgrave Macmillan series that proposes to divulge the work of scholars from different parts of the world, assembled by interest, relevance, and the degree to which they are representative of the overall academic production of the scholars in question. Marilena Chauí is one of Brazil's most highly regarded Brazilian thinkers of modern times and the selection presented in this volume is both historically relevant and representative of the author's work. Under the theme "Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture and the State," the organizers combined a number of Chauí's texts, not organized chronologically, but by how they relate to the overarching theme. The volume is also timely—given Brazil's prominence in the continent—and a good title not only for those interested in critical theory and political philosophy, but also for Brazilianists, or those more generally interested in Brazil's development over the past decades.

## **Keywords**

Marilena Chauí, Spinoza, power, resistance, Brazil, culture, political philosophy, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, foundational myth, Mercia Santana Flannery

## **Disciplines**

Latin American History | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Literature | Latin American Studies | Portuguese Literature

## **Comments**

This is a review of *Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State* by Marilena Chauí.

los libros de texto escolares. *Everyday Reading* está articulado alrededor de tres revoluciones: la de independencia, las guerras civiles y el advenimiento de la educación pública en Argentina y Uruguay. Estas son revoluciones culturales que vienen de la mano de la imprenta en el siglo XIX latinoamericano. Analizar estas revoluciones a través de la cultura impresa y las prácticas de consumo es el emprendimiento más relevante para el estudio del período que lleva a cabo el libro de Acree.

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CHAUÍ, MARILENA. *Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture, and the State*. Trans. Maite Conde. New York: Macmillan, 2011. xx + 256 pp.

Selections of the work authored by the renowned Brazilian philosopher Mari- lena Chauí are the material found in this volume. The book is part of a Palgrave Macmillan series that proposes to divulge the work of scholars from different parts of the world, assembled by interest, relevance, and the degree to which they are representative of the overall academic production of the scholars in question. Mar- ilena Chauí is one of Brazil's most highly regarded Brazilian thinkers of modern times and the selection presented in this volume is both historically relevant and representative of the author's work. Under the theme "Between Conformity and Resistance: Essays on Politics, Culture and the State," the organizers combined a number of Chauí's texts, not organized chronologically, but by how they relate to the overarching theme. The volume is also timely—given Brazil's prominence in the continent—and a good title not only for those interested in critical theory and political philosophy, but also for Brazilianists, or those more generally interested in Brazil's development over the past decades.

Chauí keenly observes Brazil and the consequences of the development of a country that emerges now, after decades of a military dictatorship that helped to shape its culture, artistic production and even religious practices. Religion, author- itarianism, popular culture, and education are a few of the areas examined by Chauí, as she methodically weaves in Spinoza and other philosophers' thoughts, didactically explaining their ideas and applying them to the Brazilian case. The volume presents ten chapters, which are comprised of several writings from Chauí's books and articles previously published in Portuguese. Maite Conde's translation does justice to Chauí's work, and an approving nod goes to its careful decision to leave some expressions in Portuguese.

In the first chapter, "The Engaged Intellectual: A Figure Facing Extinction?,"

Chauí discusses (or questions?) the relationship between political engagement and autonomy. Commenting on the interference of political and economic spheres in the work of modern intellectuals—even in indirectly eliminating the status quo that propelled the intellectuals of other generations to oppose the society in which they acted—Chauí decries the “silence of the intellectual” as a “symptom of something that is more profound,” namely, “the absence of a way of thinking that is capable of exposing and interpreting contemporary contradictions” (26). A crucial question proposed by Chauí is how rational autonomy can prevail after the interference (which she metaphorically refers to as the “devouring”) and involvement of the technological industry in arts and culture.

The second chapter, “On the Present and on Politics,” discusses the notion that we live through a time of “oblivion in politics” (39). Chauí goes on to show how the organization of modern societies and the changes afforded by a culture that is gradually losing the notion of public space is contributing to the modern perceptions of politics. She attributes the current lack of interest for “things political” to: 1) the decline of public space; 2) the end of the sphere of public opinion; 3) the end of public spaces and public debates of government and its programs; 4) the ideology of competence; and 5) the role of mass media. Starting with a citation from the goddess Athena to the Greeks announcing the birth of politics, Chauí discusses how the establishment of politics foresaw its ability to remain apart from other spheres of life, such as “the personal sphere of the economy and personal will, warfare, and the sphere of the sacred or of knowledge” or “the mystical body of the leader as a father” (41). As we read Chauí’s ideas, we cannot help but notice a certain nostalgia for another time, when politics was dissociated from the cult of the politician and when intellectuals were engaged in criticism of society, even if (or perhaps *because*) they struggled to survive in it. Chauí does not withhold any words against neoliberalism and the culture of oblivion that it has helped to create.

In the third chapter, “Religious Fundamentalism: The Return of Political Theology,” Chauí presents her musings on how religion has adapted to “the vagaries of time” despite “mass culture” and the “culture industry” (57). Neoliberalism is again brought to bear as one of the forces contributing to the elimination of the public space in favor of the private, since it consists of the belief in “stopping the use of public funds to finance indirect wages” (63). In addition, “there is no sense of continuity in contemporary experience,” which contributes to enhancing the need for a “transcendent experience.” It is against this background, according to Chauí, that the modern acceptance of religious fundamentalism takes place. The author seconds Schmitt in the assumption that “modern politics is secularized theology” (76).

In the fourth chapter, “Power and Freedom: Politics in Spinoza,” Chauí presents a careful outline of Spinoza’s thoughts as she exposes the nature of politics

and its implications for a modern understanding of its role. Subdivided into three sections—"necessity and freedom," "Conatus: right is power," and "politics"—the chapter presents the theological–metaphysical tradition, according to which freedom and necessity are opposed, and bases her ensuing discussion of power, religion, and politics upon these definitions. This chapter is as rich in its details of Spinozan thought as it is deserving of a criticism on the organization of the volume. Yes, the material is relevant, for it is a central part of Chauí's background as a philosopher; however, it might have been more effectively placed at the beginning of the volume. It would be relevant to establish this chapter as the backdrop to the volume's subsequent discussions.

The fifth chapter, "Brazil: The Foundational Myth," presents an intriguing discussion that, at the very least, helps to make sense of some characteristics imputed to Brazil since the very first known account of its existence by Pero Vaz de Caminha. Chauí starts with the description of the myth of Brazil as a paradise, echoed in today's proverbial saying "Deus é brasileiro," or on the reference to Brazil as a "land blessed by God." Chauí's account takes us as far back as the Phoenicians, for whom a land "where spring and youth reign eternal" was *Braaz*, whereas Medieval Irish monks called it *Hy Brazil* (114–15). After a discussion of the sacralization of history, Chauí comments on the implications of the myth for the understanding of Brazil by its people, and its impact on the political sphere. But the author challenges us: "How was slavery possible in paradise?" she asks as a foundation upon which to construct the explanation of the Brazilian political and economic context.

In chapter six, "Authoritarian Thought: The Integralist Imaginary," one of Chauí's main points is the importation of ideas and how "when transplanted to Brazil they become false and a grotesque ornament" (143). The author criticizes those members of the Brazilian intelligentsia who presented themselves as "original thinkers" (144), but through "lexical change" only allowed the European theoretical form to take shape in Brazil.

In chapter seven, "Ethics and Violence in Brazil: A Difficult Democracy," Chauí starts discussing the contemporary outcry for a "return to ethics," which the author questions, since such a return would imply that it "is something that is acquired, possessed, lost" rather than something that is "conscious, free" and reached through "intersubjective action" (155). Hand in hand with the myth of Brazil as paradise is the myth of "Brazil's non-violence," inhabited by a cordial people, or as Chauí puts it, "incapable of ethnic, religious, or social discrimination." Of course, the discussion of such a myth in modern days—when violence in the slums of Rio or accounts of shootings and killings in a public school make the headlines—causes one to wonder whether it is indeed a prevailing thought.

In chapter eight, "Popular Culture and Authoritarianism," Chauí leaves no

stone unturned, starting with the assertion that “Brazil is an authoritarian society,” despite its “appearance of fluidity” (169). As Chauí shows, Brazil’s rigidly hierarchical structure, its *machismo*, allied with how even the notion of “citizenship” is conceived are a few of the marks of this authoritarianism. As the author shows, this can only be the case in a society that sees citizenship as a privilege, whose laws are the means to maintaining privilege, and where “neither the idea nor the practice of political representation exists” (175).

In chapter nine, “Notes on Popular Culture,” Chauí weaves together religion and politics in her discussion of popular culture. Two subsections, “popular culture and alienation” and “popular culture and religion,” are Chauí’s most salient manifestations of Marxism in the volume. In the second subsection, Chauí comments on the appeal of mass religion, particularly for the alienated masses. This is exemplified with the mention of Protestantism, as it “continues to be modern,” and how this points to the fact that “the poor cannot tolerate the idea of their misery being rational” (206).

Chapter ten, “Winds of Progress: The Administered University,” closes the volume with an argument that echoes the first chapter. Here Chauí comments on the progress experienced by Brazil and its impact on the role of education, seen for a long time as a vehicle for “social promotion” (216), but now reduced to “small ghettos of self-referentiality, internally fragmented by political divisions and personal disagreements” (217).

Chauí is praised for being a philosopher whose work interacts with other forms of expression, perhaps atypical to the formality of her science. This book is a good example of her style, in addition to presenting discussions that, spanning thirty years of her work, are still contemporary and relevant to those interested in political philosophy, critical theory, or more generally, in Brazil.

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ROMERO TOBAR, LEONARDO. *La Lira de Ébano: escritos sobre el Romanticismo español*. Málaga, Sp.: Universidad de Málaga, 2010. 352 pp.

Professor Romero Tobar is a distinguished scholar of Spanish Peninsular Literature, well known in academic circles for his significant contributions to Hispanic literary criticism, and in particular, to the field of Romantic studies. The reviewed volume is a collection of twenty interpretive essays in Spanish, eighteen of which were published as articles between 1983 and 2006, and two, presented as conference