

OTHER NATIONS

What Good Old Days?

THE SOURCE: “The Lost Community? Public Housing and Social Capital in Santiago de Chile, 1985–2001” by Manuel Tironi, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Dec. 2009.

SOME MIGHT CALL IT A MIRACLE: In just two decades, Chile has nearly eliminated the slums and shantytowns that were once home to more than a fifth of the population of Santiago, its capital city. (Sturdier housing no doubt kept the death toll down in the February earthquake.)

From 1992 to 2002, the country’s housing stock increased by more than a million units—three-quarters of which were built with government assistance. But not everyone is happy. Critics charge that the new units—typically located in massive, impersonal complexes on the city’s outskirts—have destroyed a sense of solidarity once prevalent in the shantytowns.

Nonsense, says Manuel Tironi, a sociologist at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago. Less than half the respondents to a 1985 survey of low-income families reported having good relations with those who lived

next door. In 2001, among residents of *villas* (newly constructed public-housing buildings), nearly two-thirds had good things to say about their neighbors. Moreover, the data from 1985 indicated that 13.6 percent of people had bad relations with neighbors, but only three percent of *villa* residents reported such ill feeling in 2001.

The data on community participation tell an interesting tale. Poor

heads of household in 1985 were slightly more likely than *villa* residents in 2001 to be involved with a community organization (31 compared to 26 percent). But Tironi says this is statistical noise—both figures are within the expected range for low-income Chileans. However, the *villa* residents who were involved in one organization were much more likely to be involved in a second and even a third group than the shantytowners had been. In particular, Tironi saw a lot of overlap between neighborhood association and trade group membership among the *villa* residents. This sort of “participation intensity” may actually make groups more successful, he speculates, by enabling them to reach consensus more easily and trust each other more.

Tironi cautions that it’s a mistake to see the fluctuations in community participation as the direct result of the style of housing people occupy. Community participation rates in the 1980s weren’t low because people’s accommodations were poor but because the regime of Augusto Pinochet “severely punished” participation in social organizations. Social scientists, Tironi writes, need to get over “their nostalgia for a mythical community shaped by trust.”

EXCERPT

The Letdown of 1989

Just as we [in Czechoslovakia] were all embarking on this wildest of roller coaster rides, news arrived from across the Atlantic that history had just ended. We had reached, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, “the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” . . . The “end of history” thesis may have proclaimed the final victory for everything we had believed in for some time, and yet it left us a little puzzled and more than a little frustrated. It was like arriving at the greatest of parties only to learn that the guests had just left.

—MICHAEL ZANTOVSKY, chair of the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Security Committee of the Czech senate and former ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States, in *World Affairs* (Jan.–Feb. 2010)