

Civil Reawakening in the Post-disaster

The Re-Emergence of Housing Struggles after 2010 Earthquake in Concepción, Chile



Fig. 1: The grassroots movement *RED Construyamos* leading a protest against the conditions of the reconstruction in downtown Concepción, 2011. Photo credit: Eduardo Ampuero Cárdenas (2016).

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Abstract: On February 27, 2010, one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded struck Southern Chile. This earthquake, known as 27F by the locals, disrupting Chile’s physical and social structures. In the following months, shortcomings of the reconstruction process highlighted key structural failures in Chile’s socioeconomic fabric. This research analyzes the post-disaster as a moment of resilience by exploring how 27F brought back the struggles of past social movements. My research shows how the limitations of the reconstruction were a continuation of Chile’s 20th century housing policies. These policies facilitated a process of post-disaster gentrification in Greater Concepción. However, with the support of civil society, neighborhoods affected by 27F managed to organize and contest gentrification, just as working-class neighborhoods resisted displacement decades earlier. Furthermore, my research shows that the legacies of past social movements brought critical experience and leadership to the movement for reconstruction that followed 27F.

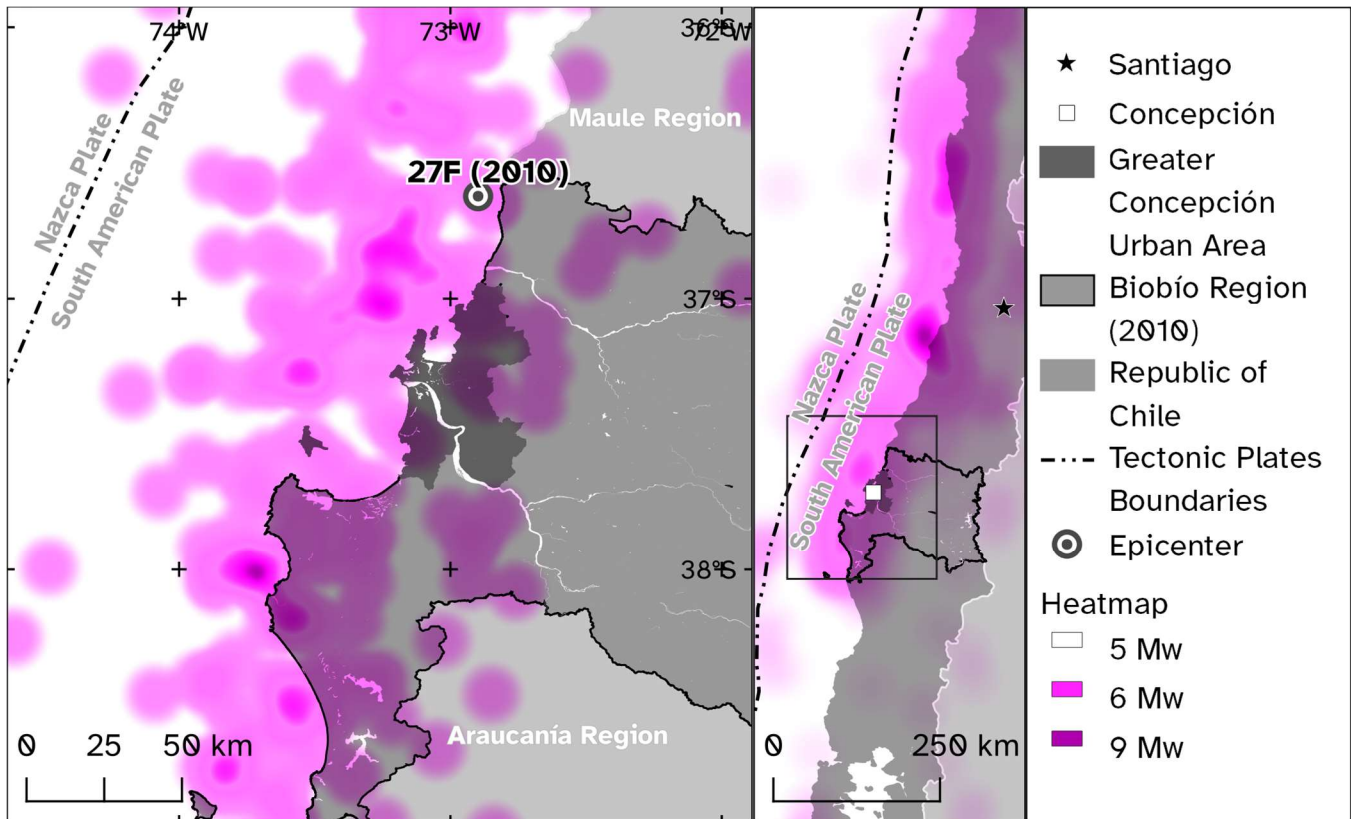


Fig. 2: A heatmap tracing frequency and intensity of earthquake above 5 Mw in the vicinity of Concepción, highlighting the epicenter of 27F. Photo credit: Image generated by author in QGIS (2023).

Research Problem	<p>In recent decades, disaster response and reconstruction studies have shifted from a managerial approach towards a critical one in which disasters are understood as the result of sociopolitical conditions that leave citizens vulnerable to the effects of natural hazards (Blaikie et al., 1996; Lizarralde, 2021). Post-disaster moments may lead to increased levels of vulnerability for human populations, disaster capitalism (Klein 2008), and/or opportunities for civil society to mobilize, disaster citizenship (Remes 2016). Drawing on a case study of 27F, the present research builds on these approaches by examining long-term histories of state-society relations that are the conditions of post-disaster politics.</p>
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To examine the historical continuities between past efforts by civil society to secure access to housing in Southern Chile and the struggle for reconstruction after the earthquake in 2010. • To explore how past struggles for home ownership by marginalized populations that emerged since the mid-20th informed the resistance against post-disaster gentrification in the Greater Concepción area.

Theoretical Framework: This study focuses on the *Pobladores*, a group of landless factory workers in Chile who migrated from rural to urban areas. These individuals established informal settlements due to housing shortages and mobilized to obtain housing rights. However, during Pinochet's dictatorship, neoliberal policies led to displacement. This negatively impacted their ability to mitigate risks from natural hazards. The lingering effects of these policies have trapped certain segments of the population in a perpetual state of risk and reconstruction (Fuster Farfán, 2019; Gould et al., 2016). The thesis explores the manifestation of "disaster citizenship" in the post-disaster period. *Pobladores* were heavily



affected by the 27F earthquake, they actively participated in the reconstruction process and resisting displacement. Their struggle in Concepción resulted in the formation of organizations like the National Movement for a Just Reconstruction (MNRJ) and *RED Construyamos*. These groups fought for a fair reconstruction process, showcasing the lasting impact of social organizations in Chile. Overall, the study emphasizes the role of social conditions and citizen engagement in mitigating vulnerability and shaping post-disaster societies (Ampuero Cárdenas, 2016; Simon & Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2017; González-Muzzio & Sandoval, 2018; Pinaud & Mathivet, 2016).

Methodology: This research frames the reconstruction after 2010 as a housing struggle, which continues the work of *Pobladores* towards obtaining housing rights and urban inclusion. The research focuses on the Greater Concepción area in southern Chile, an extremely seismic-prone and politically active region of the country. To understand the parallels between the wider movement for land and the movement for reconstruction, I analyze grey literature, historical documents, and six semi-structured interviews with *Pobladores* and social leaders that I conducted during three months of fieldwork in Concepción. Most of the documentation was gathered from Concepción's Historical Archive and the Ministry for Housing. (Ampuero Cárdenas, 2016; Simon & Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2017).

Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the immediate aftermath of 27F, the spontaneous efforts of mutual aid evolved into a structured national movement, just as the struggles of <i>Pobladores</i> transformed into larger struggles throughout the 20th century. Hence, the struggle for reconstruction mirrors and continues past struggles for housing and urban inclusion.• After the earthquake, organized neighborhoods of Ribera Norte resisted displacement. The support of the larger social movements as well as the previous experiences of <i>Pobladores</i> resisting displacement were instrumental to this outcome. However, less organized neighborhoods are still in the reconstruction process more than a decade later.• The reconstruction movement managed to influence housing and reconstruction policies, resulting in a society where it is easier to resist post-disaster gentrification and where citizens have an active role in the future development of their built environment, demonstrating that disaster citizenship can have an impact even in environments as difficult as Chile's.
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Practical Implications	Despite a having a hazardous geography and deeply exclusionary neoliberal policies, Chileans have managed to confront the systems that allow for vulnerability to disasters. 27F revealed the limits of Chile's neoliberal project, the movement for reconstruction is not just a movement for housing but a resistance to the legacy of the dictatorship. Chileans were able to contest this legacy due to their solidarity and the experience of <i>Pobladores</i> and other movements in resisting displacement and imposed neoliberal policies, continuing a century-long struggle for housing rights for all Chileans.
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Theoretical Implications	Studying the post-disaster from a long-term focus provides a critical perspective apt to analyze the historical preconditions of post-disaster politics. This perspective highlights the processes that allow disaster capitalism to take place, as well as how disaster citizenship is intrinsically connected to multiple social struggles. As such, the post-disaster can foster a transformative movement, in which heterogeneous movements band together to dispute the structures that cause vulnerability to disaster. As society continues into the era of climate catastrophe, it is paramount to identify and build upon past and intersectional struggles in order to find a common ground to address the structures that further vulnerability. If disaster citizenship can take root in such conditions, it can thrive in less adverse scenarios as well.
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