



A Book Should be a Weapon

By Paulina Ossa M.; translation by Kim Pettit

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In Chile, books should be classified as “weapons.” Then they wouldn’t be taxed. The national tax code determines that both local and imported books must be taxed at 19 percent of their retail price.

With logic that is incomprehensible in a democratic society, weapon imports by the Armed Forces are tax-exempt. Air and ship transport are also tax-exempt. So are television and radio production, tickets to sporting and artistic events (even the circus), mail, educational facilities, used car sales, currency exchanges in hotels, and even services provided to tourists who do not reside in Chile.

Some History

To understand this situation, it is necessary to look at history. Until the 1970s, Chile and Argentina were considered the countries with the most readers in Latin America. But today the situation is entirely different. According to a Unesco study published in 2000, fully 50 to 57 percent of Chile’s people between ages 15 to 65 are unable to understand what they read.

Now it is thought that number has increased. We have a society where the majority are “functional illiterates.” Last year, the Center for Public Studies conducted an analysis that demonstrated that 80 percent of adults have a reading comprehension

level that is insufficient to get along effectively in today’s world.

There are many reasons these dreadful reading levels. The tax on books created by ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet is one root cause. This tax took us back to the colonial era, when the Spanish empire demanded 20 percent—known as the “Quinto Real” or Royal Fifth—on all merchandise that entered the country.

Is the tax on books anachronistic? Yes, of course, it is, especially in a society that regained democracy 17 years ago. The tax on books has reduced our small national publishing houses to ashes. Chileans buy less than one book a year commercially—a statistic 5 times lower than the average in most developed countries. Publishers have mounted attacks to lower the taxes since 2004 but without success.

It Is Expensive

The hard fact is that books are too expensive for the average Chilean, which in effect is a factor in perpetuating social inequity.

According to the Chile’s National Institute of Statistics’ 2005 “Survey on Cultural Consumption and Use of Free Time,” only 14.1 percent of those surveyed in the lowest socioeconomic level had purchased a book in the past three months—a very different figure than that found in the middle

socioeconomic class, where this percentage rose to 43.1 percent, and from the highest level, where 83 percent had purchased a book in the past three months. The results are obvious: the scarcity of books for the poorest group will do nothing less than perpetuate the existing social gaps.

The lack of books is a grave matter, but an even greater concern is that television is the cheapest entertainment alternative, and therefore, in greater demand by the least educated social groups.

The Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development estimates that 80 percent of Chileans lack complete understanding of their own language and that only three hours a week are spent reading (mostly newspapers and magazines), while on average 28 hours are spent on television. One only has to do some “zapping” through the national television channels to understand this will continue to widen cultural and social differences.

But ethical considerations aside, those who really want to read can turn to used books, photocopies, and in the last resort to pirated books that are copied and sold more cheaply on the streets.

Despite this, reading levels continue as usual, that is, most Chileans do not read. This is a painful scenario for a country with one of the world’s most acclaimed poets, Pablo Neruda, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature. But he is not the only noted author: there is also Gabriela Mistral, another Nobel Prize winner, and other renowned writers such as Francisco Coloane, Gonzalo Rojas, José Donoso, Roberto Bolaño, Vicente Huidobro, Nicanor Parra and Isabel Allende.

I wonder if Chile will continue being a country of poets if we do not overcome this (relative) dimming of our culture.

I believe the matter goes beyond taxes. It has to do with the question asked by psychologist Horacio Salgado Fernández, an academician at the University of Concepción: how can one trigger genuine interest in reading in the citizenry? How can we enable Chileans, from infancy, to more keenly feel that impulse to take a book, read it and enjoy it?

Christian Books

Unfortunately Christians are not doing much to encourage literacy. Far too often, books are demonized by pastors from the pulpit. They argue that the only valid knowledge comes from the Bible and that everything else belongs to the “world.” Of course, this is not always the case, but those who recommend books in their preaching or churches that keep lending libraries on their premises are still a small minority.

Moreover, as is consistent with the 2005 figures provided by the National Institute of Statistics, books are most scarce in the thriving evangelical churches of the lowest socioeconomic levels.

In this regard, I concur with the academician at the University of Concepción: the key is to motivate Christians to read. If we encourage our youth and children to read, in 10 or 20 years we can have a generation of Christians who will “not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [their] mind[s]. Then [they] will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2) hard work?”

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