CHAPTER FIVE

PENTECOSTALISM AS A CULTURAL CRITIQUE

We are the light in this corrupt ‘world’, brothers [and sisters]. We used to be outsiders, marginal in society, and now we are sitting here as princes. (Quoted from a sermon in the EPC)

I only talk about spiritual matters, not about politics or other ‘worldly’ things. I don't even like to read the newspapers! I don't want to know anything about what goes on in the ‘world’. (Quoted from a sermon in the EPC)

Politics is bad, very bad. The Lord is true, but politics won't do you any good at all, nothing, nothing! I don't understand politics; I don't understand. I don't understand politics! I don't understand the things of the ‘world’! I know that things happen, but we are with the Lord; the best news is found in the word of the Lord. (Claudio, unskilled worker in his mid-forties from the EPC)

This Sunday God cured me; I was feeling sick, but I then I felt that a power came upon me, and I started feeling better. I don't go to the doctors; I don't trust any doctor. The Lord is the doctor of all doctors. (Silvia, widow in her seventies from the EPC)

Teresa: How are you doing, brother Martin?
ML: I am fine!
Teresa: Don't you mean that you are fine, thanks to the Lord?
ML: Eeh, yeah, of course!
Teresa: Good!
(Conversation between the author and an old woman from the EPC)

In much of the existing literature, the appeal of Pentecostalism to poor Latin Americans has, in part, been explained in terms of the movement’s contestatory cultural character. Scholars have pointed out how spiritual egalitarianism, active lay participation in services and certain organisational aspects of Pentecostal churches not only provide a marked contrast to the traditional Catholic differentiation between producers and consumers of religious products, but also reverse the whole structure of classist societies (e.g. Lalive d’Epinay 1968; Willems 1967; Rolim 1979; David Martin 1990, 1996, 2001; Cleary & Sepúlveda 1997). In many Pentecostal churches, any saved man can, regardless of income, level of education and other kinds of social status, occupy
leadership positions or may even become a pastor. And though they do not occupy formal positions, except as leaders of female groups (the *dorcas*), Pentecostal women enjoy spiritual authority and are encouraged to preach on the street, pray for the sick, and give testimonies in the churches (see chapter 9, see also Drogus 1997; Cleary & Sepúlveda 1997; Freston 2006).

Such arguments certainly ring true in the case of the EPC, where a majority of the congregants who hold official positions are persons with little formal education and low-status jobs. Besides, the high level of lay participation in ritual life clearly contrasts with the Catholic ritual division of labour. However, the Pentecostal symbolic inversion of Chilean public space is far too complex and multifaceted to be aptly captured by a narrow focus on organisational principles and the priesthood of all believers. In this and in later chapters I intend to push the analysis of the contestatory cultural character of traditional Chilean Pentecostalism a few steps further by demonstrating how congregants from the EPC are engaged in everyday subtle symbolic struggles over categorisations and definitions of social reality. Focus in this chapter is on the ways in which these struggles are fought in the domains of style, everyday linguistic–semantic practice, healing, and discourses on politics. I show theological understandings of human powerlessness and total dependence upon God inform Pentecostal discourses and practices, through which congregants redefine their own position and agency in the social world. Such redefinitions represent a critique of different aspects of Chilean society such as Catholicism, popular culture, national politics, and the public health system, but also more generally of a secular modernist hegemony. In subsequent chapters I explore how a Pentecostal re-enchanted world ordering is constituted and unfolded through ritual practice and the ritualisation of everyday life (chapter 7 and 8), gender politics (chapter 9), and eschatological readings of world history (chapter 11).

*Pentecostal Inversive Practices*

For some time, anthropologists and other scholars have been arguing that a proper conceptualisation of resistance should not be confined to open, conscious confrontation and mobilisation aiming at overall structural political transformations but include less organised and subtle tactics of everyday life through which people defy dominant ideologies and discourses (Willis 1977; Comaroff 1985; Scott 1985, 1990;