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Chile

A Revolutionary Experience. Chile 1970-1973

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If our land claims us

We are the ones who must raise Chile up,

So let's roll up our sleeves. Let's recover all that is ours

So that once and for all they understand~~~~~Men and women, all together.

'Cause this time it's not just about

Changing a president,

It will be the people who build

A very different Chile [1]

Chile, that vast strip of land sandwiched between the Pacific and the Andes, a world where the world ends, as described by the writer Luís Sepúlveda, illustrates with its recent history the turbulence of the short 20th century. After having experienced an attempted democratic transition to socialism (1970-1973), the country experienced the violent establishment of a civil-military dictatorship (1973-1989) that anticipated the advent of a new logic for the world: that of neoliberalism. Then, starting in 1990, a slow and partial democratisation took hold that continued to prolong numerous authoritarian legacies and a violently unequal socioeconomic system. Fifty years have passed since the coup d'état of September 11, 1973. The images of the presidential palace of La Moneda burning, the terrified looks of the prisoners in the National Stadium of Santiago and the sinister dark glasses of General Pinochet remain recorded in our retinas and in our collective memory. The Chilean people, their struggles and their resistance, have been at the heart and in the mobilisations of many solidarity organisations around the world. Today, these memories of repression, exile and struggle for the defense of human rights continue to mark our images of this country in the Southern Cone. But Chile was not only a country of tragedies: the first years of the 1970s were above all those of an extraordinary popular and (pre)revolutionary process that shook the established order.

Fighting From Memory

The Chilean road to socialism lasted barely a thousand days (from November 1970 to September 1973), but it profoundly transformed the country, its social relations, its political imaginaries, and its vision of the future. The legalist and revolutionary commitment of the Chilean left radiated throughout Latin America and once again put ideas such as the distribution of wealth and the necessary nationalisation of natural common goods at the center of the debates, proclaiming the reconquest of national sovereignty for a nation of the Third World against Yankee imperialism, claimed the right to development and democracy from a perspective of rupture with the dominant order and (re)posed the question of the place of the bourgeois State in the transition to socialism.

Starting in 1969, the parties that formed the coalition that came to be called Popular Unity proposed a strategic path that, although considered reformist by the extra-parliamentary left, claimed to be original: electoral, institutional, non-armed, but also anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and socialist. Beyond the intense debates of the time and the omnipresent figure of President Salvador Allende, the strength of the Chilean process lies in those from below, those without voice who became essential protagonists of this budding revolution, whose creative energy, certainly full of contradictions, was decapitated on September 11, 1973. To retrace the steps of the Popular Unity is to caress with your hand the history of a continuum of multiple social, worker, peasant, student and struggles of ordinary people that suddenly burst into a scenario until then monopolised by an oligarchy accustomed to reigning over Chile. The popular river that overflowed everywhere during those thousand days was the smile of the workers of the Yarur textile factory occupying their factory, it was the soundtrack of the songs of a jubilant people cheering the comrade-president in the Plaza de la Constitución, it was the contours of a popular power that confronted big capital and the sabotage of the extreme right and it was the radicalism of the Mapuche people who broke the barbed wire

fences to reclaim the land usurped from their people by colonisation. These experiments in self-organisation, although sometimes limited, are the essence of Chilean history. They mark those historical moments when everything seems possible, when humiliation, state violence and exploitation can be overthrown. They explain the joy of a people standing tall that can be admired on the glossy paper of Armindo Cardoso's photographs or in the Patricio Guzmán's documentary films. And, more than five decades later, they more than deserve to be told in the form of fragments of that broken time of a revolutionary experience that did not come to fruition. In fact, that driving force continues to wander today through the underground galleries of Chilean memory, frightening its ruling classes and tormenting the bad conscience of the leftists who adapted to the times. The stubborn past of those few months on fire will not go away.

This memory, or rather these conflicting memories, have suffered profound changes, but also various eruptions and shocks throughout the decades, with commemorations and the cultural, social and political mobilisations of the new generations. Since 2019, with the great revolt of October-November of that year that once again shook the Cordillera and directly questioned the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, the ghost of the uprisings has returned to Chile. It was also with Salvador Allende in mind that the young centre-left leader Gabriel Boric assumed the presidency in 2021 (although his social-liberal management is far from the ex-president's radicalism). And Pinochet and the ultra-right are once again gaining ground in all areas of the Andean country. Thus, fifty years after the coup d'état, looking back at Chilean revolutionary struggles is not an act of militant nostalgia or a simple historiographical exercise.

Dependency, inequality and underdevelopment

In 1970 the Chilean population barely reached nine million people, the vast majority of whom lived in conditions of great material insecurity and poverty. A country of mining capitalism par excellence, Chile possessed immense natural resources, including the largest copper reserves in the world, most of which were in the hands of US capital. This enclave economy also meant structural dependence on the world market and violent class, race and gender relations, a situation that benefited a highly concentrated commercial, port and industrial bourgeoisie and a handful of landowners who were heirs of the neocolonial order. Institutionally, the homeland of poets Vicente Huidobro, Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda had the reputation of having built a stable Republic, supposedly less prone to coups d'état by military leaders than its neighbours. This is confirmed by the fact that the Constitution remained unchanged for long periods. [2] The elites considered it an example in the South American environment, defended with patriotism by armed forces that are supposed to respect the constitutional order. It was a strong and centralist State around which a white and mestizo ruling class could cohere, while, starting in the 1930s, it allowed the partial integration of political representatives from subordinate sectors and some social advances. However it was not exempt from numerous civil and military repressions of the popular revolts that marked the 20th century.

Since the creation of the Resistance Societies at the end of the 19th century, the labour movement has been a key player on the Chilean scene. Politically, it was organised around two large parties: the Communist Party (PC), founded in 1922 and one of the most important in Latin America, and the Socialist Party (PS), founded in 1933 as a party-movement with diverse influences, including reformists, Trotskyists and Guevarists. The experience of the Popular Front (1938-1947), under the leadership of the Radical Party (linked to the bourgeoisie), integrated communists and socialists into governmental practice. During the 20th century these partisan forces showed their willingness to combine workers' struggles with the parliamentary sphere. One of these figures, Luis Emilio Recabarren (founder of the Partido Obrero Socialista (POS or Socialist Workers Party), defended this policy throughout his life, also considering the elections as a forum that could serve to educate the class. Starting in the 1950s, the plan to conquer power through the ballot box took shape around a communist/socialist axis. This tactic was also reflected in the union movement: in 1953 the powerful Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT or Workers United Centre) was founded, where the PS and the PC were the majority forces, together with a rapidly expanding Christian Democracy (DC). However, these broad alliances were subject to constant turbulence, intensified by

various episodes of repression and even political illegality (as was the case of the PC between 1948 and 1958, which had to go underground). In spite of everything, and despite its highly oligarchic character, it is evident that the Chilean Republic and its compromise State [3], derived from the 1925 Constitution, left a margin of institutional manoeuvre that could be taken advantage of. The gravitation of the socialist and communist left, the presence of a conservative right around the Partido Nacional or National Party (starting in 1966) and the development of a Christian Democratic center (created in 1957), structured the party system around three blocks of quite similar electoral weight.

To the left of the left, the revolutionaries did not share the perspective offered by the institutional and parliamentary game. While the anarchist and libertarian movements lost ground starting in the 1920s, several small currents, including Christian revolutionaries, Trotskyists and, in the 1960s, Maoists and Guevarists, challenged the reformist and electoral orientation of the large parties. The creation of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR or Movement of the Revolutionary Left) in 1965, marked from the beginning by a hybrid strategic option of permanent revolution [4] (influenced by Trotskyism) and prolonged and irregular people's war [5] (close to Guevarism), reflected the radicalisation of trade unionists, workers, intellectuals and students who believed that a break had to be made not only with imperialism, but also with the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus, following in the wake of the Latin American revolutionary processes.

At the end of the 1960s, in the midst of the Cold War, the reforms of the Revolution in Freedom project [6] of the Christian Democratic government (1964-1970), actively supported by the Kennedy administration, failed. The promised industrial growth did not materialise and repression resurfaced. The organised working class, small peasantry, youth and the urban poor (settlers) demanded more substantial changes. The break up of the populist government of the Christian Democrats (DC) opened the way for the left: in 1969 the Popular Unity (UP) was officially founded. This coalition was supported by the PC and the PS, but also by important sectors of the Christian left. Its leader, who had already been a three-time presidential candidate (1952, 1958, 1964), was the socialist doctor and Freemason Salvador Allende. Born in 1908, a co-founder of the Socialist Party (PS), expert in parliamentary politics (he was President of the Senate between 1964 and 1969) and former Minister of Health of the Popular Front, he declared himself a Marxist. Despite being an admirer of Fidel Castro, he firmly defended the possibility of building a revolution legally and non-violently, taking into account the Chilean political tradition. Using the conceptualisation of Juan Garcés, his close adviser, Allende defended a political and institutional transition to socialism, without interruptions and respectful of the 1925 Constitution. The bet was that the State was sufficiently flexible and, as a sine qua non condition, that the Armed Forces would respect the results of universal suffrage.

The hopes and the struggles of a people

The birth of the new unity of the left was not without problems. It followed in the footsteps of the Popular Action Front (Frente de Acción Popular or FRAP), which in the 1950s sought to bring together those "willing to fight for an anti-imperialist, anti-oligarchic, and anti-feudal programme." Motivated by the continental impact of the Cuban revolution, some leftists, especially socialists, thought that such a programme was insufficient and that it gave too much prominence to the concept of a revolution in stages, highly appreciated by the communists: first anti-oligarchic, in alliance with certain sectors of the national bourgeoisie, and in a later phase, socialist. On the other hand, the strategic debate on the paths to follow to forge socialism and break with Washington's tutelage is far from being settled. Armed or legal? Political-military confrontation with the state apparatus or electoral victory based on the popular movement? Santiago was not Havana and the Chile of 1970 did not experience the Batista dictatorship: the unarmed route seemed a possible prospect. This was the position defended by the communists, and with them the USSR, which saw it as a consequence of its policy of global peaceful coexistence (consisting of a division of the world between capitalism and the socialist camp). On the other hand, the fact that Allende was about to win the 1970 elections against the conservative Jorge Alessandri ended up convincing a good part of the party's cadres.

In September 1970, after a very dynamic campaign, Salvador Allende won the presidential elections with 36.6% of the votes against the Christian Democrat candidate Rodomiro Tomic with 28%, and the conservative right-wing candidate Jorge Alessandri with 35.2%. Since the Constitution only provided for one electoral round, it was up to Congress to decide between the two main candidates in the absence of an absolute majority. The result of the left raised great hopes, but also showed the difficulties that lay ahead with a UP in a minority in Parliament [7]. Allende had to immediately negotiate a set of democratic guarantees with the DC and promise institutional stability in exchange for his candidacy. This search for agreements with the political center was a constant issue during the thousand days and weighed down the reformist capacity of the executive. The UP programme and its promises of forty immediate measures sought to promote sustained economic development, a bold policy of wealth redistribution and wage increases, the deepening of agrarian reform and control of the main national resources. The expropriation of copper from foreign capital, the nationalisation of several dozen large monopolistic companies and the main banks should have allowed the creation of a Social Property Zone (ZPS), although the private sector would continue to be the majority. In an original system, employees were invited to co-manage public sector companies. The country was experiencing a true revolutionary climate in various social spheres: strikes and occupations of land and factories increased. The explosion of collective participation favoured the left. Popular Unity obtained almost 50% of the votes in the municipal elections of April 1971. Allende and the UP Political Committee wondered if it was not the right time to dissolve Congress, call new legislative elections and launch a referendum for a new Constitution that would incorporate the socialisation of part of the means of production and the establishment of a single chamber of parliament. But the PC was reluctant and the President hesitant. The opportunity was lost.

The executive's policy directly affected the interests of the big bourgeoisie, the advance of agrarian reform destroyed the power of the large landowners and the nationalisation of copper (1971) was fiercely opposed by the United States. Allende also affirmed himself as the international leader of the non-aligned countries, defending the right of the colonised countries to emancipation by all means and bitterly denouncing imperialism and the world financial system. After the Cuban revolution, the United States feared the effect of Cuba's revolution in its own backyard. Beginning in 1969, the CIA and the US embassy actively conspired to stop Allende's political rise, even by force. Subsequently, the right, with loud and furious support from Washington, set the goal of dismantling the political and social bloc that supported the government and sought contacts in the reactionary sectors of the Armed Forces. Attacks from the extreme right of the Nationalist Front Fatherland and Freedom (Patria y Libertad or PyL) multiplied, and constant pressure was exerted on the Christian Democratic Party until (in 1972) it went into total opposition, while big business launched a tactic of economic boycott that caused havoc. The conservative media, essential cogs in this system, constantly warned against what they called a Marxist dictatorship. This relentless spiral gradually closed in on the left, while the explosion of inflation, the international boycott and the development of a black market alienated the urban middle classes from the labour movement. Locked in a state straitjacket that no longer allowed it to breathe, the Popular Unity was increasingly on the defensive and was losing the initiative.

Popular power and the tragic outcome of the battle for Chile

In this context, the left-wing coalition quickly divided between a moderate pole (classified as gradualist by historians) led by the communists and Allende, and a rupturist pole led by a sector of the Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Christians, who called for progress without compromising, and with the critical support of the MIR (led by Miguel Enríquez). The latter denounced the looming coup d'état and the dead-ends of legalism, urgently demanding a bold Constituent Assembly and the acceleration of the expropriation of the means of production and distribution to put them at the service of the people. This was the demand expressed by the Popular Assembly of Concepción, which brought together various left-wing social and political organisations in July 1972 to denounce the counterrevolutionary character of Parliament. Allende and the PC immediately denounced the delusions and adventurism of this resolution, and political polarisation did not take long to take to the streets. The government seemed overwhelmed by the magnitude of the class conflict. The march of empty pots organised by conservative women, followed by the

great strike for miners' wages in El Teniente, skillfully led by the DC against the executive, showed that Marxists did not have a monopoly on the mass movement. Part of the labour movement had also gone beyond the UP programme. In response to each seditious attempt by the right or a bosses' strike, forms of self-organisation, direct supply and workers' control multiplied, especially in October 1972 and June 1973. Popular power became a reality and new organisations appeared, such as the industrial cordones or belts in the proletarian areas of the main cities. These cordones refused to give back the occupied factories, criticised the indecision and lukewarmness of the government and created new territorial coordinations without waiting for orders from the CUT, although the majority remained faithful to the UP: the comrade-president remained their president. In the countryside, heroic land occupations encouraged by the MIR flourished. In the cultural sphere, the revolution was everywhere: in music and song, in painting and cinema, on the walls and in companies.

Lacking a unified leadership and convinced of the broadly constitutionalist character of the military, the government believed to the end that it could avoid civil war and, at the same time, channel popular power around legalist proposals. Beginning in November 1972, high-ranking officers were integrated into various ministries. The figure of General Prats, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, to the Ministry of the Interior and later to Defense, pacified the population. His performance was decisive in crushing the sedition of a tank regiment in June 1973. The revolutionary process seemed trapped in a double strategic blind alley: that of the institutional path to socialism, which had become completely impracticable, and that proposed by the MIR, which was a minority and struggled to distance itself from an essentially political-military and vanguardist conception. Between both, the embryos of popular power and the industrial cordones shine to this day as an unfinished revolution from below, held back by the historical context and strong headwinds.

On the morning of September 11, 1973, with the explicit support of the Nixon administration, a quarter of the officers revolted. Among them was Augusto Pinochet, who had been appointed head of the Armed Forces a few weeks earlier by Allende because he had a reputation as a legalist. The left found itself disarmed unable to organise resistance, as were the industrial cordons. Instead of surrendering to the traitor generals, Allende committed suicide in a presidential palace bombed by fighter jets and surrounded by soldiers. The battle for Chile came to a dramatic end. Relying on national-conservative Catholicism, on the doctrine of National Security and then on Operation Condor on a regional scale [8], the military regime closed parliament, banned political parties, repressed unions, declared a state of siege and practiced censorship. State terrorism was unleashed against the Marxist cancer that had to be extirpated from society, particularly against the working classes and activists. During the 16 years of dictatorship, the armed forces and political police tortured tens of thousands of people and murdered more than 3,200, more than a thousand of whom remain detained-disappeared today (their bodies have never been found). Hundreds of thousands of people were forced into exile. Starting in 1975, these times of social brutalisation were also times of shock therapy: a true capitalist counterrevolution transformed Chile into the world's first experiment in neoliberalism.

*Translated by David Fagan for **International Viewpoint** from the Spanish version in [viento Sur](#). This text is the prologue to the book "Découvrir la révolution chilienne 1970-1973", Paris, Éditions sociales, 2023.*

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[1] Inti Illimani, "Cancion del Poder Popular, Canto el programa, 1970 (text: Julio Rojas, music: Luis Advís).

[2] Throughout the whole of the 20th century only two constitutions were approved.

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[3] A concept that refers to the expansion of certain forms of state regulation of the market and public social policies (education, health, housing), while seeking to integrate and channel the demands of the labour movement under the hegemony of the dominant classes.

[4] A concept inspired by Trotskyism; see Jean Batou, *Découvrir Trotsky*, Paris, Éditions sociales, 2023.

[5] This strategic option insists on the need for a military conquest of power led by a political-military vanguard supported by a popular insurrection.

[6] Name of the political programme of the government of Eduardo Frei Montalva, intended to respond to the social emergency while trying to prevent the spread of the communist threat.

[7] The March 1969 legislative elections gave 37 deputies (out of 150) and 7 senators (out of 30) to the left (PC and PS), plus 24 deputies and 5 senators from the Radical Party. The Christian Democrats control 56 deputies and 12 senators, confirming their pivotal role in the parliamentary game.

[8] See: John Dinges, *Les Années Condor. Comment Pinochet et ses alliés ont propagé le terrorisme sur trois continents*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005