
Special issue: *Chile's Popular Unity at 50*

Commentary

The politics of the street: Street art, public writing and the history of political contest in Chile

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How to Cite: Trumper, C. 'The politics of the street: Street art, public writing and the history of political contest in Chile'. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 3.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2021.v6.1.003>.

Submission date: 16 September 2020; Acceptance date: 18 December 2020; Publication date: 1 June 2021

Peer review:

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access:

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Abstract

This commentary focuses on the politics of public space in democracy and dictatorship. It delves into what Peter Winn calls the revolution 'from below' from the perspective of urban conflict, suggesting a political history that attends to urban and visual *culture* as a crucial arena of political *practice*. It suggests that the often-conflictive battle over public spaces was, and continues to be, a mechanism by which an unprecedented range of citizens entered into an ongoing debate over the boundaries of citizenship, practice, politics and that this practice was adapted, transformed and reimaged over the last five decades. The struggle over streets and walls continues to be central to Chilean political history, and urban space remains a field of ongoing contest and debate: the *estallido* of social unrest in contemporary Chile connected a new generation of activists to this longer history of creative politics of protest and protest art and gave them the opportunity to articulate new forms of intersectional political thought in public space, even in the face of state-sponsored violence. Studying these forms of unrest reveals that theirs is an incisive, intersectional critique of the limits of the 'transition to democracy', of neoliberal democracies and of the legacies of dictatorship.

Keywords: politics; public art; graffiti; GAM; mural; urban and visual culture; streets; walls; squares

A vibrant ‘explosion’ of street art and song has, in many ways, fuelled the power of the October 2019 *estallido*, or uprising, and driven an ‘awakening’ of dynamic political debate on city streets. This is not a surprise. Public art and performance were central to politics and the public sphere in Chile, both in Salvador Allende’s democratically elected Unidad Popular (UP) government and again in Augusto Pinochet’s military regime. Under Allende, an unprecedented range of Chilean citizens laid claim to city streets and walls, creating a platform from which they could engage in political debate and fashion new language and practices of political citizenship. Then, immediately after the 11 September 1973 coup that toppled Allende, even as dictatorship forces washed city walls of the political debate that was etched on seemingly every surface, Chileans recast street art and public writing as a clandestine political practice, a furtive means of communication that could turn the very structures of repression and censorship into a support and cover for an ongoing political dialogue that took place in public and semi-public arenas. In so doing, everyday Chileans rebuilt structures of political organising, crafted nimble languages of political debate and imagined themselves, again, as political citizens. It is fitting, therefore, that attention to the entangled histories of politics and public art, a history written of and from the street, can shed new light on the complex process that gave rise to the events of October 2019. The protagonists of the *estallido* often draw on or reappropriate the very practices and languages of public art and public writing that were honed in the past; in so doing, they create dynamic, creative forms of public art that respond, in real time, to their rapidly changing present. An account of the *estallido* that attends to the longer history of street art and writing therefore suggests that the dynamism and creativity of the contemporary movement stems, at least in part, from a longer, intergenerational dialogue with earlier forms of ephemeral art rooted in the UP, but reinvented, over and over again, in dictatorship and democracy.¹

The UP’s commitment to a constitutional, democratic road to socialism, and the growing clash between the government and opposition, opened unprecedented opportunities for Chileans to participate in and shape the *revolución de empanadas y vino tinto* (‘revolution of meat pies and red wine’) in myriad creative ways. Even as Allende’s democratic, constitutional road to socialism unfolded in Congress, women, workers, artists, activists, students and *pobladores* (the urban poor) made what Arjun Appadurai and James Holston have called political claims to the city in order to make demands on the state.² Chileans seized lands and factories, marched through city streets, occupied public spaces and squares and painted murals and graffiti on city walls. They occupied public spaces, often only fleetingly but, in so doing, they radically transformed personal, local and national political histories.

It was in these spaces that Chileans fashioned dense networks of social and political association, created innovative forms of political practice and experimented with creative forms of representative democracy. Under Allende, this unprecedented, wide range of citizens turned ephemeral forms of urban and visual practice into creative acts that generated a new way of acting on and thinking about the city as a democratic arena. For them, the everyday struggle for the street was neither distinct from, nor secondary to the battle of the ballot box: the often fleeting forms of urban practice they favoured generated new political identities, new political languages and new ways of acting on and thinking about the city as a space of fluid democratic debate and a stage for creative political citizenship.

Drawing on a city wall was a creative political act.³ The UP’s political murals were contingent and ephemeral. They were always replaceable, quickly erased or painted over. Because of this, they supported an ongoing political dialogue, in which a range of actors could participate, a dialogue that was defined by the complex give and take of public art. Public artists fought daily to reassert their place in the city and in city politics, and street art was the mechanism by which they could transform the city into an inclusive space of democratic debate. Thus, the politics of the street and wall was defined by a continuous process of articulation, erasure and rearticulation, and a wide range of urban residents became active, creative, political citizens by producing public art.

Standing by the wall, it is impossible to see politics only as fixed and ‘from above’. Politics appears instead as non-stop dialogue – presented, erased, presented again, in slightly new forms. This is a dialogue that did not involve only politicians, party militants and predominantly male union leaders, but *also* women, artists, activists and *pobladores*. The latter groups’ creative interventions shifted how and where politics was done. And herein lies a key paradox: though conceived of as ephemeral and evanescent, the

quintessentially political practices of this diverse cast of urban political actors had significant, long-lasting impact for Chilean and Latin American politics – in democracy and again in dictatorship.⁴

In fact, the key to understanding the collapse of one of Latin America's sturdiest democracies requires that we take the 'street' as seriously as the dictatorship did. From the street, the violence of the military junta appears as a brutal engagement with the history of urban politics under Allende. It was a concerted attempt to mobilise terror to silence the forms of grassroots urban politics that had flourished under Allende. But citizens responded to the shuttering of the public sphere of political debate that had been rooted in public space by turning to those very ephemeral practices they had honed in democracy, transforming them into the foundation for a rich visual and material culture of clandestine political activity and one of the most effective forms of political engagement and resistance in Pinochet's Chile. In other words, although public art and public writing itself may have been meant to be evanescent, the practice of street art and writing proved remarkably persistent and remained central to Chilean politics in democracy and dictatorship.

A very particular inventive material and visual culture that challenged the dictatorship's drive for aesthetic, political 'purity' emerged in the absence of generalised armed struggle, and in the wake of the military's repression of older militants in the first months and years after the military took power.⁵ This was a relentless, if anonymous, form of public writing scrawled on city walls, etched on the back of bus seats and public toilets or written on currency before it was passed hand to hand.⁶ What I define broadly as public writing helped build a critical language of analysis and debate, and it convened a vibrant, clandestine public in a loose network of places that were seemingly removed from traditional politics.

These endlessly serialised literary acts, these small, furtive, transgressive exchanges, held outsized political significance. They sustained a field of 'politics by another means': they were 'novel practices' or creative 'ways to manifest dissent' by which Chileans could mark semi-public spaces as arenas of resistance, and carve out sites where citizens could begin to re-engage in political praxis in a city fractured by terror.⁷ Soon, Chileans fashioned an intricate network of social and political association in the shadow of state-sponsored violence, a network that included soup kitchens, food pantries, youth centres, church meetings, athletics clubs, community schools and universities. This network grew to include, among others, the radical Church, political parties' militants who had been forced underground or into exile and human rights groups and associations of the victims of political violence, as more and more Chileans put themselves in harm's way to rebuild an effervescent political public.⁸ They built on these early forms of organising and, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, dissent spilled onto the streets in the form of local, city- and nation-wide marches, protests and strikes that challenged the regime's authority. If the authoritarian state 'created spaces of exception' where violence could be exercised with impunity, it was in these very sites that contestatory or 'uncivic' forms of activism were carefully and methodically built, where 'forces that bind' and 'forces that fracture are most present'.⁹

Paradoxically, the 'return to democracy' in the 1990s undermined these networks of activism.¹⁰ The 1988 plebiscite 'was a devil's bargain' that ended the dictatorship, but at the cost of maintaining, with slight modifications, the Pinochet-era constitution and many of the other structures of dictatorial rule.¹¹ Yet throughout the post-dictatorship years Chilean activists, and young activists in particular, have challenged the new democratic regime. Schoolhouse activism has been notable, especially the student and social movements of the early 2000s, of which the 2006 *pingüino* student uprising might be the most emblematic. And, in October 2019, it was the student movement that would detonate an uprising that would call explicitly for a recognition, and reversal, of the legacies of the dictatorship. They would pose the most comprehensive challenge to Chilean neoliberalism to date. When secondary students, wearing school uniforms and backpacks, leapt over metro turnstiles in Santiago in October 2019, their exuberant, symbolic transgressions signalled the resurgence of middle and secondary school age students onto the political stage. These young Chileans were heirs to a decades-long tradition of creative protest that stretched back to the Allende and Pinochet eras, as well as the movements that had pushed back against the structures that had helped broaden social inequity during the military civilian dictatorship and after the 'transition to democracy'.¹² But the October 2019 *estallido social* had an unanticipated reach, and it soon became clear that it had the potential to transform Chilean politics.¹³

President Sebastian Piñera's response to the student uprising included a shockingly resonant display of brutal militarised violence, and such violence once again turned on citizens engaged in peaceful protest. Quickly, security forces fired into gathering crowds, and aimed tear gas canisters and rubber bullets directly at protestors' chests and faces, a decision that would ultimately cost hundreds of young Chileans their eyes, and leave at least thirty-four dead. In response to the violence with which the state handled the early days of unrest, students' peaceful, exuberant demonstrations, which had been confined to metro station turnstiles, now spread throughout the city and the country. The urban poor, and in particular the young shantytown residents who lived along the city's periphery and who bore the brunt of the unequal neoliberal system built since 1973, and were most directly affected by rising transportation costs, were the first to join in tense confrontations with heavily armed police. They were soon joined by a wide range of activists demanding economic, environmental and social justice; Indigenous, gender and immigrant rights; and an end to the institutional, political and economic legacies of the dictatorship.

Their protests were quintessentially creative exercises. In the days, weeks and months that followed the original October 'evasions', an ever-growing number of citizens took to city streets, plazas and squares. Students, artists, labourers, women, Indigenous peoples, pensioners, environmentalists and many others convened in public, occupied symbolic centres, schools, buildings and neighbourhood parks around the clock. Santiago's Plaza Italia (which connected the city's commercial and political centre to its elite residential and business neighbourhoods, and which also contained a large metro hub) became a site of daily contest. There, a 'front line' of protestors erected and held barricades against police water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets. Behind the barricades, crowds gathered, chanting, dancing, mingling, discussing, producing the ephemeral art and text that would define this protest movement. These performances of protest remade the plaza into a generative site of political analysis and debate. Protestors renamed the plaza 'Plaza de la Dignidad', or 'Dignity Square', and it became the heart of a burgeoning social movement that would soon mobilise millions.

An increasingly diverse, multigenerational crowd blanketed city streets and walls with graffiti, posters and murals. These visual and textual interventions upon the urban landscape were creative forms through which protestors articulated increasingly complex political ideas and analyses, and participated in a wider debate about the nature of citizenship in the twenty-first century. An early slogan hints at the political potential of public art as a creative, critical, analytical and expressive medium: protestors summarised the critique that sparked their movement in a few words, writing, succinctly, *No Son 30 Pesos, Son 30 Años* ('It's Not 30 Pesos, It's 30 Years'), on walls, posters and placards, first near the Plaza de la Dignidad, then throughout the city. This simple articulation tied the seemingly minor metro fare increase to a broader critique of the social and economic decisions of the post-Pinochet governments of the 1990s and early 2000s – decisions that, protestors argued, entrenched rather than overturned the policies the Pinochet dictatorship, enshrined in the 1980 Constitution. Other slogans proliferated. A particularly poignant turn of phrase – *El neoliberalismo nace y muere en Chile* ('Neoliberalism was born in Chile, and will die in Chile') – spoke to the scope of protestors' ire, and announced their desire for deep structural change that would turn into a call for constitutional reform, greater political representation and, ultimately, a transformation of the economic model first instituted by the Pinochet regime.

Many more potent new forms of critique, and new grassroots alliances, emerged from city streets and walls, from the public sphere of political debate that took root in public protest.¹⁴ On 25 October, little more than a week after the beginning of the protests, 1.5 million marchers convened in Santiago's city centre. This march marked the largest single political gathering in Chilean history, signalling the unprecedented range and reach of protestors' grievances, demands and interconnections. They built upon their critiques in the myriad open-air neighbourhood councils that they created as spaces for all community members to debate political issues and the problems of the everyday, to explore the potential of direct representation and to propose new forms of community governance. In other words, protestors wove together a unique, vibrant, intersectional analysis of structural and everyday forms of violence and inequality, and a poignant awareness of the historical roots of this inequality; they did so on the street, in everyday acts of protest and contestation in these occupied spaces. Their effects were felt locally and nationally. Smaller neighbourhood councils would soon coalesce into a national Constitutional Assembly

governed by the principles of community governance developed on the streets and neighbourhoods. And this assembly would, through sustained pressure, secure from the state the guarantee of a national plebiscite in which the citizenry would overwhelmingly approve the writing of a new Constitution. There was an overarching challenge to the legacies of dictatorship written into the present political system.

Moreover, protestors also recognised and asserted their own historical role, and the power of public art and public writing in making them political actors and protagonists. As more than one cardboard sign made and carried through city streets by young men and women asked: *¿Qué haces hoy?* ('What are you doing today?'). The answer, unwavering: *Historia* ('Making history'). And, when the state whitewashed walls, especially those of the Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral (GAM) building, which had become a sort of ever-changing mural covered again and again by pamphlets, graffiti, posters, collages of poems and myriad other forms, protestors responded immediately: *Las Murallas Gritan Lo Que Las Instituciones Callan* ('Our walls shout that which our institutions silence'); and *No Hay Pintura Que Borre La Injusticia* ('There is no paint that can erase injustice'); or, more directly, *La Pintura No Borra La Historia* ('Paint cannot whitewash history').¹⁵

This vibrant, cross-sectional social movement ultimately transformed city squares, streets and walls into arenas of creative, incisive political analysis; public art and performance became key mediums through which to build critical political theory. Here, public art is central, not secondary to 'politics' – it is the means through which people participate in political debate, and engage in a deep, creative, intersectional analysis of contemporary politics.¹⁶

This story of political mobilisation 'from below', from the street, is not one of linear political mobilisation in the face of authoritarian might, or violent repression.¹⁷ Rather, a history of political change from the streets must account for continual inventions and reinventions. A political history from the streets is a way of, and a model for, seeing politics as a continual contest, an ongoing struggle over the terms and limits of possible political praxis out of which emerge different, intersectional forms of analysing political realities. Recognising urban politics as a creative exercise by which political epistemologies were made and remade suggests the potential of finding new frames for a history of political change that bridges seemingly distinct periods. It also suggests new sources for the study of politics in dictatorship and democracy, including those that seem – like public art and public writing – too fleeting or ephemeral to be archived in the historical records.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the country's social geography. Hundreds of thousands make a living in informal markets and survive day by day, live in crowded houses and commute long distance to work, thus making them particularly susceptible to the virus. Rather than move to ameliorate these conditions, the Chilean State reasserted a state of emergency on 18 March 2020, taking the authority to declare curfew and restrict public gathering, and eventually postpone the constitutional referendum. Immediately, Piñera paused for a photograph in the now-deserted Plaza de la Dignidad. Soon thereafter, the state took a leaf from the dictatorship's book, whitewashing the plaza and moving to 'erase the footprints of the *estallido* . . . painting over graffiti and removing wooden statues . . . that were erected during the uprising in honor of Chile's Indigenous peoples'.¹⁸

But finding themselves under quarantine, in an ongoing state of emergency, Chileans yet again turned to the familiar strategies that had helped them survive and subvert, dictatorship. Many returned to the streets. Protests in *poblaciones* (shantytowns) shone light on hunger, segregation and other forms of embodied inequity. Others organised *ollas comunes* (soup kitchens) and free pantries, which not only served immediate needs but also became crucial nodes of neighbourhood-based community and political organising, as they had in moments of economic crisis under dictatorship. The community networks that organised *ollas* also engaged in neighbourhood action, undertaking food and pharmacy runs for elderly residents or 'patrols to accompany and support victims of domestic violence'. *Arpillera* (patchwork art) collectives that had 'proliferated in the context of the uprising' were kept alive in quarantine; this form of political art allowed housebound citizens to mobilise, engage in collective action and foster community, working together to create collective pieces that responded directly to the contingencies of the present moment, but in a way that speaks to the intersectional analytical thinking that has characterised the uprising.¹⁹

The historical ties between these distinct forms of organising indicate a more nuanced relationship, between past and present, between memory and silence, and between the radical rupture that brought the military regime to power and the deep continuities that have persisted through the dictatorship and into the present, three decades after the ‘return to democracy’. A political history written from the street suggests that young grassroots activists of the present are well versed in the political battles of the recent past, and well aware of the intersection of different forms of exclusion and inequality that continue to shape their present.²⁰ Their historical and political imagination is evident when we look at the walls, streets and squares contemporary activists have not only occupied but reshaped with ink, paper and paintbrush; at the street assemblies and *cabildos* (open town hall meetings) they have formed in neighbourhoods, *poblaciones* and villas; and in the soup kitchens, *arpillera* circles and other alternative, creative spaces of political contestation they have, and continue to fashion. Here, and in many other spaces, grassroots activists continue to reimagine the tactics and strategies of the recent past to build new forms of organising, new political languages and new political epistemologies that have deep political currency in the present.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joshua Fren-String, Tanya Harmer and Marian Schlotterbeck, as well as the anonymous journal reviewers, for their astute editorial comments on this piece.

Author biography

Camilo Trumper is Associate Professor of History at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. A historian of urban politics and public sphere, his first book, *Ephemeral Histories*, was recognised with the top prizes offered by the Historia Reciente y Memoria and the Southern Cone Studies Section of the Latin American Studies Association, as well as the New England Council of Latin American Studies. His current project examines the history of childhood, youth and ‘schoolhouse activism’ during the Pinochet dictatorship.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

Notes

¹As I argue in my first book, *Ephemeral Histories: Public Art, Politics, and the Struggle for the Street in Chile*, the ephemeral nature of specific pieces of public art – graffiti or *rayado*, political mural and poster art, and performance – is also the foundation for the persistence of the practice of public art. More recently, and looking forward into a future suddenly pregnant with unprecedented opportunities for structural political change, Gordon-Zolov and Zolov, in ‘The walls of Chile speak of a suppressed rage’, write: ‘Graffiti and protest graphics are, by their nature, ephemeral. But even when the walls are wiped clean, the messages of this generation are likely to reverberate into the future.’

²Holston and Appadurai, ‘Cities and citizenship’, 202.

³Sabato, ‘On political citizenship in nineteenth-century Latin America’, 1314.

⁴For a more detailed discussion of this paradox, see Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*.

⁵Errázuriz and Quijada, *El golpe estético*, 2012; Errázuriz, ‘Dictadura militar en Chile’, 138, 154.

⁶Cristi and Manzi, *Resistencia Gráfica*, 2016, 56.

⁷Monteagudo, ‘Politics by another means’, 2017.

⁸Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds*, 192–3.

⁹Postero, 7.

¹⁰Murphy, *For a Proper Home*; Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*; Bastías Saavedra, *Sociedad civil en dictadura*.

¹¹Winn, *Victims of the Chilean Miracle*, 49, 51.

¹²Garcés, ‘Octubre de 2019: Estallido social en el Chile neoliberal’. They honed and built on the creative forms of performative protest that earlier generations of students had developed over their multiple uprisings. The manifestation of student grievance in October 2019 was, in short, not unprecedented. Students drew from historical struggles before, during and after Pinochet’s dictatorship. They made

connections to the indigenous movement of the 1990s. They built ties to the intersectional movements against the privatisation of medicine and social security in 2016. They drew symbolically on the figure of Pedro Lemebel, writer and LGBTQ and gender rights advocate, and were part of the feminist and environmentalist protest movements of 2018. Ultimately, they would carve out an intersectional space and language of revolt that gave voice to the demands of the indigenous movement, feminism, pension reform, water activists and others.

¹³For a detailed account of the trajectory of civil uprising and state repression, including particular attention to questions of silence, memory, and historical continuities, see Alison Bruey, 'Protest and the persistence of the past', and Romina A. Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism, and the threads of popular power: a personal and political account of Chile's 2019 social awakening', both in this issue of *Radical Americas* (2021), as well as the meticulous analysis by Mario Garcés, 'Octubre de 2019: Estallido social en el Chile neoliberal'. As Green Rioja writes in her excellent 'personal and political' analysis of the historical context of the *estallido*, the '2019 uprising' was 'both a process and a specific event'. These are nuanced studies of the process that led to this complex episode.

¹⁴Shortly after artist Mon Laferte expressed a critique of the Chilean government on the red carpet at the Latin Grammy Awards to international attention, local feminist group La Tesis performed a creative chant that tied state violence to patriarchy and violence against women and children in an arresting performance that would be taken up throughout the world in the months that followed.

¹⁵For a short history of the successive political reinventions of GAM, see Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*, chapter 1.

¹⁶And it carved out an intersectional space and language of revolt that gave voice to the demands of the indigenous movement, feminism, pension reform, water activists and others.

¹⁷In fact, for their own racist counter-movement, recent anti-Mapuche violence in the south was marked by supporters chanting *El que no salta es Mapuche* ('Those who don't jump are Mapuche'), appropriating the historical anti-conservative, then anti-dictatorship chants, *El que no salta es momio* (loosely: 'Those who don't jump are right-wing'), or *El que no salta es Pinochet* ('Those who don't jump are Pinochet').

¹⁸Santos Ocasio, 'Chilean arpilleras sustain political momentum during lockdown'.

¹⁹Santos Ocasio, 'Chilean arpilleras sustain political momentum during lockdown'.

²⁰A devastating example of this reality is the number of political prisoners arrested for their participation in the uprisings and held to this day in captivity.

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