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

Commentary

Concluding reflections

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Abstract

In October 2020, Chilean voters resoundingly elected to abandon the constitution left behind by the Pinochet dictatorship. A new charter will be written by a fully elected, gender-balanced, constitutional convention. Given that Chilean political leaders have floated the idea of jettisoning the 1980 constitution for the last 35 years, what accounts for their decisive step at this point? Summarising and reflecting on the contributions to this special issue, I argue that the October 2020 vote was, in a sense, the result of decades of popular resistance, nurtured and informed by rich and tragic historical memories and experiences. The October result demonstrated an understanding of how to mobilise and energise a huge and diverse base of popular support as well a keen awareness of how to prepare for the violence that inevitably was launched against it.

Keywords: Unidad Popular; historical memory; constitution; social movement; *estallido social*; violence; democracy; grassroots

Some 7.5 million voters flocked to polling places across a COVID-19 pandemic-impacted Chile on 25 October 2020 to decide the fate of the 1980 Constitution put in place by the Pinochet dictatorship. Those casting ballots also considered the mechanism for writing a new charter, should that become necessary. Nearly four in five voters called for a new constitution with 79 per cent opting for a fully elected, gender-balanced, citizen-led constitutional convention. In so doing, they rejected a 'mixed' assembly in which half of the seats would be reserved for elected members of congress. That voters would opt to bin the most consequential residue of the dictator's legacy was not surprising, although the size of the rebuff was astonishing in a country where conservative sentiment remains strong (current centre-right president Sebastián Piñera won in 2017 with 55 per cent of the vote; even General Augusto Pinochet carried 44 per cent of the vote in the 1988 plebiscite). Given, as analysts have argued,[1] that nearly 80 per cent of the country cannot be considered 'centrists' or 'leftists', the vote likely signals two things: first, that growing sectors of the right are willing to sever their most glaring attachment to *pinochetismo*, and second, that conservative electoral victories are as much an indication of progressives' disenchantment with their own parties as they are an indication of the strength of right-wing ideology.

This latter point was made even more evident in the second issue on the October ballot. Polling in Chile from November 2019 to the election itself consistently predicted that around 55 per cent of the voters would opt for a fully elected convention; never did any forecast suggest that more than 65 per cent of voters favoured that option. In the end, nearly 80 per cent of voters chose a fully elected citizen's assembly.[2]

So what can we take from these results? In the first place, the hard *pinochetista* and *piñerista* right has again proven itself incapable of understanding, let alone attending to, the widespread demand for change. This is not a surprise, given its utterly inept response to social revolt that stretches back many years. Yet this is not a feature of the right alone since unresolved social unrest has been a constant in Chile since at least 2011. What is more, it has been poorly handled by both centre-left and centre-right parties. As Mario Garcés Durán argues in his discussion with Peter Winn in this issue,[3] the *clase política* (political class) as a whole has proven itself incapable of taking seriously the deeply felt public discontent.

Second, while it is fair to think that conservative voters who opted for a new constitution have very different ideas than a Communist *militante* about what social order should be inscribed in a new governing charter, the outcome indicates a massive consensus that social, economic and political life *at the very least* needs 'rebalancing' – reducing the power of the executive and the Constitutional Tribunal, increasing the legislature's range of action and better insuring the human security of Chileans – for example, by improving health care, educational access, food security and wages – gutted by 40 years of neoliberalism. But considerable differences will need to be resolved when the assembly considers how the new constitution can protect and advance human dignity and promote second- and third-generation human rights.

Finally, the overwhelming vote for a fully elected, gender-balanced, constitutional convention indicates, as suggested above, that political parties and politicians are even more toxic than previously imagined. Party leaders from both the right and the left have been talking about a new constitution since 1985, but they have consistently refused to follow through on their promises.[4] We are, in the phrasing of Garcés, witnessing a *movimiento de la sociedad* (movement of society), not simply or only a *movimiento social* (social movement), and it is hard to know exactly how the parties will attempt to reinsert themselves into this process before the April 2021 election of constituents. But their success or weakness in that endeavour will indicate what shape the final 'rebalancing' might well take.[5]

The October 2020 plebiscite raises a series of necessary historical and political questions that the authors of this special issue help us think about, and not only for Chile. A primary fascination for me is not why a prodigious majority of voters in a formal democracy would seek to overturn a constitution penned by a dictatorship, but rather how they were finally able to generate the momentum to overcome both the crime and force, to paraphrase Salvador Allende's final speech to the nation, that had held it in place for so many decades. How one challenges the constitutional barriers that sustain minority rule seems a reasonable topic of discussion for others besides Chileans.

Many of the authors in this issue consider when the seeds which blossomed on 25 October 2020 were first planted. Was it, as Alison Bruey describes, during the *estallido* which began 12 months earlier when some school kids jumped the subway turnstiles rather than paying an additional 30 pesos (£0.03) fare, a response that, within weeks, had grown to more than 1 million protesters flooding Santiago's streets and some 5–6 million people around the country mobilising for change?[6] Had the seeds been sown, as Karen Alfaro Monsalve writes, at an April 2018 protest at the Universidad Austral de Chile which rapidly generated women's marches that blanketed the country?[7] Can they be traced to the university students protests of 2011–13, demonstrations which, as Romina Green Rioja details, served as training grounds for many of the women who would take the lead in 2018?[8] Are they present in the *pingüino* (secondary students) revolt of 2006? Yes, certainly, to all of those.

And how much further back do these roots extend before they thin to only the slenderest thread of memory? To the anti-dictatorial struggles that emerged in 1982 and expanded in scope until 1985, generated and tended and as they were by women, *pobladores*, miners, artists and young people – a movement whose energy was ultimately contained and controlled by the politicians? To the copper miners, discussed by Georgia Whitaker and Ángela Vergara, whose activism in 1977 and 1978 broke the silence imposed by the coup?[9] Back 50 years to the brief, incandescent moment of the Popular Unity (UP) government when, as Alfaro Monsalve writes, Chilean society was 'closest to carrying out a revolution'?[10] Many of the scholars included in this issue, myself included, find lines of clear historical continuity and evidence of lessons learned rooted in events of a half-century past.

I arrived in Santiago in July 1972 to an anxious, effervescent country, one already positioned on a rare historical stage. My previous stay in Chile had been nearly a decade before when, as a high school exchange student, I attended the Liceo Eduardo de la Barra in Valparaíso. Years later I discovered that Salvador Allende finished his high school studies there, as well. Who knows whether, in my chemistry class, I occupied the same chair as Allende had, even listened to the same, now quite ancient, chemistry teacher who lectured more about Communism than calcium? But much had changed in the intervening decade since my first trip to Chile. The outwardly polite politics of the early 1960s had become raucous as both right and left muscled for control of the streets and fought over the country's future, as described in this issue by Marcelo Casals[11] and Camilo Trumper[12], respectively.

Within two days of landing, my wife and I found ourselves jumping up and down on the Alameda, bellowing along with thousands of others, '*El que no salta es momio*' – 'if you don't jump you're a "mummy"', the term used to characterise right-wing Chileans. The crowd's energy was thrilling, both defiant and giddy. It felt quite different from the many anti-war demonstrations I had marched in back in the United States, where, as much as we hoped we could change the course of the war, we knew at some level that we lacked the power to accomplish much of anything. Here, with a *compañero* in the presidential palace and no police standing ready to crack open our skulls, we were actually helping bend the elusive arc of history towards justice. My euphoric feeling would be brought down a peg soon enough – it was no more than two days later that anti-Allende protesters claimed those same streets, an indication that, as Casals again discusses,[13] the right was quickly learning how to construct its own, substantially more violent, mass politics.

Then, as now, the challenge that faced 'the revolution' (to hide behind a vague banner that accommodated a large number of people and ideas, which itself indicates the problems the left faced) was how to align the 'revolution from above', directed and controlled by Allende and the UP parties, with the 'revolution from below'[14] that I saw swelling on Santiago's streets. This latter revolution unfurled in fascinating ways on factory floors and at meetings of local food distribution boards, known as the JAP, in the conversations and arguments that were carried on over cheap plates of fish and beans in the UNCTAD's dining halls and in *campamentos* (encampments on lands seized by squatters) and university halls. In this issue, historian Gina Inostroza Retamal[15] defines the process of mediation between 'above' and 'below' as one of attempting to find an opening between *lo social* (the social) and *lo político* (the political), a space that lay outside of the State and its institutional presence in party and trade union structures.

A number of the contributors to this special issue point to the power of popular mobilisation during the UP years and the ways that party structures, and Allende himself, attempted to shape, shepherd or,

most often, contain them. Some of the most magnetic of these grassroots efforts took the form of 'claims to the city',[16] to use Trumper's words – that is, attempts to create arenas of political practice from urban and visual culture. The most arresting of these, the striking political muralism of the Brigada Ramona Parra (a branch of the Communist Party's youth wing) and the capacious New Song movement which included Víctor Jara, Quilapayún and Inti-Illimani, among others, provided openings that transcended the deeply ingrained sectarianism of the time. And, in many ways, it is the power of the cultural arena to continually reimagine itself while doing the work of social justice that has provided a through line to the protests of the 2010s, particularly as animated by Chile's feminist movement and its protagonists like LasTesis, Vaginas ilustradas and Conciencia fem. Other forms of popular activism from the UP period, including responding to the quotidian demands of *campamento* existence or distributing food through the JAPs, were less widely spread, but still provided experience and networks that directly impacted the anti-Pinochet protests of the 1980s and would come to inspire the *estallido social* of the 2010s.

Contemplating the affiliations between current protests and grassroots organising during the UP years, two questions come to mind: (1) How can grassroots activists valorise democratic participation, serve as a training ground for political leadership, and force an agenda for change?; and (2) How do we better appreciate the dialectic between violence and non-violence that takes place in popular protest movements?

To live in Chile from mid-1972 through the 1973 coup was to be immersed in a tension which mounted as the right stepped up its attacks on the government and the government attempted to channel grassroots energy in ways it felt would advance the UP's chances for success. As the article by José Del Pozo, Danny Monsálvez and Mario Valdés[17] indicates, while the meaning of failure was clear enough, there is still no historiographic consensus as to what strategy, if any, might have succeeded, likely because 'success' meant very different things to different political sectors.

But there were moments in which the tension between popular organising and the demand to adhere to control from above seems most acute, and the July 1972 People's Assembly in Concepción was one of those moments, as Marian Schlotterbeck[18] and Gina Inostroza Retamal[19] both write. The People's Assembly brought together 140 grassroots social organisations, drawn from unions, *poblaciones* and *campamentos*, mothers' centres and student and peasant federations, among others. While organisers had promised a 'people's' meeting, they moved to bring it to an end after representatives from five political parties, including the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR), had spoken. An overwhelming demand to 'let the people speak', prevented its adjournment and allowed many uninvited speakers, including many women, to 'express their desires publicly, collectively and democratically',[20] subject to the instantaneous approval or disapproval of the gathering. As Schlotterbeck notes, 'The Concepción People's Assembly was one of the few large, public events in which local grassroots leaders could take centre stage and voice their desires, and in turn, find them validated by others.'[21]

If the Concepción Assembly suggested a means of mediating between the 'revolution from below' and the 'revolution from above', a way to gather and foreground demands generated by the *pueblo* and present them to Allende and the parties, it was a ghastly failure. Allende outrightly dismissed the assembly; the shape of any transition to socialism would continue to be determined by Congress and the UP parties and even the MIR, as Schlotterbeck concludes, 'failed to legitimise grassroots democratic practices'.[22] The UP remained committed to addressing the relationship between the state and the economy, even though its control of the economic chessboard was limited and the ability of the right to use institutional mechanisms to block its advances grew stronger over time, as Joshua Frens-String[23] discusses. Allende's remaining power in a presidential system was to call for a referendum that, if approved, could revise the governing system and open the way for a new constitution, but only at the very end did he suggest this as a way out.[24] By then, his pawns blocked and the bishops and castles turned against him, there was no way to escape checkmate.

With this history in mind, it is fascinating to contemplate, as Alison Bruey and others do in this issue, what has changed and what has been learned over the past half century as we observe the emergence of the contemporary *movimiento de la sociedad* in Chile.[25] In the first place, while feminist demands were most often written off by the left as concerns of the *pequeña burguesía* (petit bourgeoisie) in the earlier

period, there is little question that Chile's feminist movement has been the leading force in the otherwise 'leaderless' (what we have begun to call 'leaderful') movements that emerged in the 2010s.[26] Second, and similarly, indigenous demands on the state, largely folded into a Marxist framework under Allende, have become an integral part of the wider protest movement, as Fernando Pairican and Marie Juliette Urrutia write.[27] Third, given the unwillingness of the *clase política* to attend to popular demands, the path towards grassroots democracy unchained from traditional party mechanisms has widened. What Allende imagined as the 'grandes Alamedas' (great boulevards) opening to popular demands, have now become considerably broader than even he could have imagined. The *estallido social* took concrete shape in the local assemblies and cabildos that Green Rioja describes, some of which mirrored similar attempts under the UP government, but now no longer constrained by orders from *lo político*.[28] Their emergence across the country (and abroad), and dexterity in linking with other similar organisations at the local, regional and national level has been impressive. Unidad Social (Social Unity) includes over 90 organisations.[29] Equally so has been the movement's ability to expand and unite a social base that now includes crews of rival *fútbol* clubs: imagine, if you can, Manchester City and Manchester United fans linking arms to protest Tory policy (see the Winn and Garcés discussion in this issue).[30]

Finally, as opposed to the UP, which only raised challenges to Chile's institutional order at the 11th hour, it took the *estallido social* but a few *weeks* before settling on a single demand to unite the movement: abandoning the 1980 Constitution, the issue that has been raised time and again only to be dismissed by the politicians. The result of that strategy can be seen in the 25 October election results. It may be unfair to suggest, as I have here, that the UP should have moved towards constitutional reform more quickly, since, as Tanya Harmer[31] and Marcelo Casals[32] detail in their respective articles, they faced a domestic and international opposition that would certainly have mobilised quickly to oppose such a move. But with a new constitution on the horizon, one which will be written by an elected assembly marked by gender parity, we might see whether Allende's dream of a peaceful transition to socialism, or at least a path out of neoliberalism, remains a possibility.

Which, of course, raises my second point, the dialectic between violence and non-violence, since the *estallido social* has hardly been peaceful. Security forces, including the armed forces – called to the streets for the first time since the dictatorship – and the carabineros (national police, nicknamed *pacos*) repeatedly have attempted to crush the protests with rubber bullets, tear gas, water cannon and batons.[33] According to Chile's National Human Rights Institute (INDH), in the four months between October 2019 and February 2020, nearly 3,800 people were wounded and 445 suffered severe eye trauma.[34]

In response, various 'clans' – small groups of individuals, without leaders or a centralised organisation, and drawn from many social sectors and a welter of different interests – came together to protect the demonstrators in what became known as *la primera línea*.[35] These front-line forces also incorporated those, perhaps including some provocateurs, whose looting or torching of buildings quickly became the focus of media accounts and whose actions threatened to put at risk the goals of the vast, non-violent movement for change. One member of the ACAB clan (from the English: all cops are bastards) explained it as follows: 'There are good and bad people on both sides, but the *pacos* enjoy repressing people because they can feel their power. This is what it's about: a struggle for power.'[36] It is perhaps one of the greatest ironies of Chilean politics under the UP government that the right appeared to understand more about the use of power than the Marxist–Leninist left. The opposition to Allende was not only ruthless in the pursuit of Allende's removal, but grew in its capacity to mobilise force and deploy violence to achieve its ends, all the while blistering the president for alleged constitutional violations, as Casals[37] shows. The MIR and left sectors of the Socialists and the Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitaria (Popular Unitary Action Movement, MAPU) provided some protection for peaceful protesters, but their actions were more often than not frowned upon by the UP.

The emergence of the *primera línea* seems a significant departure from what took place during the UP years in two different ways. In the first place, it suggests that progressive forces have opened up to new sectors, welcoming into the fight for dignity sectors that the left wrote off as 'lumpen' 50 years ago. Among others, this includes the *barras bravas* (hooligans) of the *fútbol* clubs, school kids and children under the care of the Servicio Nacional de Menores (SENAME). Second, it recognises that while the

struggle for a new society, and a new constitution, must be a peaceful one, it cannot leave itself defenceless in the face of state, or private sector, aggression. It is a lesson that those of us in the United States, facing Trump supporters who have shown an increasing willingness to resort to violence and intimidation, should take to heart.

Let me close, then, on that note. Chile has long existed in a tense dynamic with the United States. Over the years, US policymakers have seen in Chile a model through which they could display the more decorous face of imperialism – for example, the Klein-Saks Mission of the 1950s or President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. When gentility failed, as with Allende's election, Chile became the template for how to deal with insubordination. With Pinochet in power, Chile once more served as a testing ground, this time for the neoliberal reformulation of capitalism. And, if the Chicago Boys helped guide neoliberal policymaking in Chile, at times the favour was returned, as when Pinochet's economists were invited to implant the same policies in the United States.[38]

But this dynamic does not only have to operate on the level of imperialist exchanges. The current *estallido social* in Chile offers lessons for progressives in the United States about how to unify disparate grassroots organisations around the need for deep institutional and cultural changes to address a history of racism and inequity. We are entering a period in which Republicans in the United States, finding themselves on the losing side of demographic changes and cultural challenges, are already gathering around an argument that the United States is a 'republic', not a 'democracy', and that respecting the will of the majority is another name for mob rule.[39] We would do well to pay attention to Chile's fight to deepen its democracy as it crafts a new founding document.

Author biography

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work.

Notes

[1]Jiménez and Leighton, 'En todos lados'.
[2]Wikipedia, '2020 Chilean national plebiscite'.
[3]Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'.
[4]Akram, *El estallido*.
[5]'Organizaciones exigen a Parlamentarios representación indígena en Proceso Constituyente'.
[6]Bruey, 'Protest and the persistence of the past', 3.
[7]Alfaro Monsalve, 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP', 2.
[8]Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power'.
[9]Whitaker and Vergara, '"To work more, produce more and defend the revolution"'.
[10]Alfaro Monsalve, 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP', 2.
[11]Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'.
[12]Trumper, 'The politics of the street'.
[13]Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'.
[14]Winn, *La revolución chilena*.
[15]Inostroza Retamal, 'The presence of left-wing militant women'.
[16]Trumper, 'The politics of the street', 2.
[17]Del Pozo Artigas et al., 'Scholarship on the Popular Unity in Chile since 2000'.

[18]Schlotterbeck, '"A new power structure will be built from the grassroots"'.
[19]Inostroza Retamal, 'The presence of left-wing militant women'.
[20]Schlotterbeck, '"A new power structure will be built from the grassroots"', 10.
[21]Schlotterbeck, '"A new power structure will be built from the grassroots"', 13.
[22]Schlotterbeck, '"A new power structure will be built from the grassroots"', 14.
[23]Frens-String, 'A "popular option" for development?'.
[24]Volk, 'Salvador Allende'.
[25]Garcés Durán, *Estallido*; Bruey 'Protest and the persistence of the past'.
[26]Frens-String, 'Burying Pinochet'.
[27]Pairican and Urrutia. 'The permanent rebellion'.
[28]Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power'.
[29]https://www.unidadsocial.cl/organizaciones.
[30]'Chile: cómo funcionan los Cabildos Abiertos que buscan organizer el descontento social'; see also Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'.
[31]Harmer, 'Towards a global history of the Unidad Popular'.
[32]Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'.
[33]Bartlett and Miller, 'Chile Security Forces' Crackdown'.
[34]INDH, 'INDH entrega nuevo reporte de cifras'.
[35]Joignant, 'La "primera línea"'.
[36]Claude, 'Retrato de un clan de la Primera Línea'.
[37]Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'.
[38]Piñera, 'The Success of Chile's Privatized Social Security'.
[39]Thomas, '"America is a republic not a democracy"'.

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