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Article

‘A new power structure will be built from the grassroots’: The challenge of radical democracy in Allende’s Chile

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Abstract

Chilean history in the twentieth century poses a number of unresolved questions about the limits of liberal capitalist democracy to effectively include the interests of non-elite sectors. The origins of the contemporary crisis for Chile’s political elites – as well as of neoliberalism more broadly – can be found in the chasm between political parties and their social bases. The parallels faced by Chilean activists and protestors in 2019 invite a closer look at the possibilities for and restraints on popular sector participation during Chile’s experiment with democratic socialism. As an act of radical democracy, the 1972 People’s Assembly in Concepción represented a vital attempt to create new mechanisms for citizen participation within an unfolding revolutionary process. Today, as Chileans grapple with how to construct an alternative to neoliberal democracy, past historical experiments in radical democracy and building grassroots movements can offer important lessons for the present.

Keywords: Chile; Popular Unity; radical democracy; People’s Assembly; Concepción; social movements; Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria

To stir and to shake the given is not a hangover from the hot politics of times past but lives on as part of an internal periphery of institutional politics.

Benjamin Arditti¹

What happens when political parties become perceived as insufficiently representative? When they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public in whose name they govern, but whose interests they fail to represent? Can social movements effectively express their own agenda and achieve their goals, particularly at the national level, without political parties?

In 2011, Chilean students took to the streets to protest a privatised and class-segregated education system installed by the military dictatorship. Among the array of creative protest tactics, the unofficial anthem of the Popular Unity (UP) years, ‘El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido’/‘the people united will never be defeated’, became replaced with ‘El pueblo unido, avanza sin partido’/‘the people united advance without political parties’. The updated chant demarcates the distance between past and present and underscores a key element of what historian Mario Garcés characterises as Chile’s contemporary ‘movement of society’ – that is at once ‘a protest against the State [and] against its institutions’ and a civil society effort to create new forms of expression and organisation.²

In October 2019, protests over the 30 pesos increase in the Santiago metro fare quickly erupted into sustained, nationwide protests against the country’s social inequalities. The most common phrase to explain the source of discontent – ‘It’s not about 30 pesos, but about 30 years’ – located the origin of disenchantment in the 1990 transition from military dictatorship to neoliberal democracy. The slogan made clear that Chile’s political class bore responsibility for the last 30 years of neoliberal economic governance. The top-down negotiated transition ushered in and presided over by the centre-left Concertación coalition (1990–2010) (rebranded as Nueva Mayoría from 2014 to 2018) reasserted the traditional primacy of political parties at the expense of demobilising the sectors of society whose sustained National Protests across the 1980s had eventually forced the military to the negotiating table.³ The origins of the contemporary crisis for Chile’s political elites – as well as of neoliberalism more broadly – can be found in the chasm between political parties and their social bases.

This was not always the case for the Chilean Left. The revised version of ‘El pueblo unido’ differentiates between a past with political parties that represented *el pueblo* and the present in which many Chileans mobilise not ‘through political parties, but against them’ to make change ‘separate from the state’.⁴ By mid-century, leftist political parties and to a lesser extent the Christian Democratic Party (DC) enjoyed widespread legitimacy and acceptance as the primary vehicles for advancing popular sector interests – *una política popular* – and representing them within the state.⁵ Yet Chile’s democratisation of society from the bottom up and from the left across the 1960s and early 1970s posed significant questions about political representation and the mechanisms for citizen participation. Beyond voting in elections, what platforms existed for their voices to be heard? How could people’s power (*poder popular*) be institutionalised beyond street demonstrations?

Deliberations about the meaning and practice of democracy are once again at the forefront of national debates in Chile. Historian Gabriel Salazar observed in 2003 that ‘the Chilean political system has never incorporated institutional mechanisms of citizen participation in making policy decisions’.⁶ Contrary to his assertion, I argue that the 1972 Concepción People’s Assembly was a short-lived attempt to institutionalise participatory democracy. In its conception and its celebration, the 1972 People’s Assembly cut across political parties, state and non-state actors, distinct productive sectors, social sectors and local territories. This representativeness, particularly of popular sectors, made the People’s Assembly a radical democratic project that defies typical moulds.

As an experiment in popular sovereignty, the Concepción People’s Assembly was abandoned because it threatened the Chilean political system. It did not find support from President Allende or the national UP coalition. Despite its involvement in building radicalised grassroots movements, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR) did not escape the same rigid internal hierarchies and top-down control that plagued other political parties in the era. Although the MIR’s national leaders rhetorically endorsed *poder popular* as a strategy, they failed to validate this initiative

from below. This opposition at the top foreclosed both regional alliances in Concepción between four UP parties and the MIR and the possibility to convene more people's assemblies as territorial spaces of deliberative exchange.

President Allende and the national UP coalition's disavowal of the Concepción People's Assembly and the MIR's failure to validate its importance sheds light on the tensions between leftist political parties and their rank-and-file bases that emerged prior to 11 September 1973, as well as the limits of the Chilean political system built in the 1920s and 1930s to effectively facilitate popular sector participation. As both an inspiration and a cautionary tale, the 1972 Concepción People's Assembly offers a microcosm of the fraught possibilities of radical, participatory democracy. Today as Chileans grapple with how to construct an alternative to neoliberal democracy, past experiments in radical democracy driven by popular sector participation can offer important lessons for the present.

Political parties and popular movements: Dialogues and *desbordes*

Chilean history in the twentieth century poses a number of unresolved questions about the limits of liberal capitalist democracy to effectively include the interests of non-elite sectors. Motivated by the desire to win in highly competitive elections, political parties across the spectrum, but particularly on the centre and left, as historians Gabriel Salazar and Julio Pinto have argued, encouraged social mobilisation and popular empowerment, 'only to subsequently repress' these popular movements or 'to actively contain this impulse from below'.⁷ From the Popular Front governments in the 1930s and the Christian Democrats' Revolution in Liberty in the 1960s to the UP and the MIR in the 1970s and the Concertación coalition following the 1980s National Protests, these distinct historical junctures witnessed popular-sector mobilisation force a public reckoning with collective grievances. These moments are characterised by a *desborde*, literally an overflow, in which popular-sector demands for an alternative to the status quo escape the top-down control of national political party structures and exceed the formal bounds of the political system.

In the late nineteenth century, Chile's labour movement took root in the northern nitrate mines and the southern textile and coal-mining communities. In the early twentieth century, this leftist, often Marxist-oriented, labour movement formed the backbone of new political parties that represented the working class: the Socialist Workers Party (POS) in 1912, which became the Communist Party of Chile (PC) in 1922 and the Socialist Party of Chile (PS) founded in 1933. Across the twentieth century, the two largest parties of the Old Left – the PC and the PS – sought to channel social struggle through electoral participation. As a result, Chilean democracy became synonymous with competitive multi-party elections, coalition governments, and representation of non-elite sectors (*sectores populares*) within the political process.

The 1930s and 1940s Popular Front governments were a prototype for the kind of multi-party, multi-class coalition that brought UP candidate Salvador Allende to office in 1970. Historian Jody Pavilack documented how coal miners, in tandem with the Communist Party in Southern Chile, 'pushed to make representational politics effectively serve the interests of popular sectors, not just those of the oligarchic and bourgeois elites or foreign investors', while Greg Grandin expands this perspective to apply to the entire region: 'To the degree that Latin America today may be considered democratic, it was the left, including the Marxist left, that made it so.'⁸ Pavilack adds,

that democracy, as it was embraced by Marxist parties and their working-class followers in mid-twentieth century Chile, was an intrinsically contentious project. Organization and mobilization from below came to be seen by workers not as a way to overthrow Chilean democracy or halt its capitalist advance, but rather as a way to participate fully. Workers were prepared to fight within existing systems rather than against them, but this did not mean an end to class conflict.⁹

Indeed, under the Popular Front governments, which included the Socialist and Communist Parties, urban workers gained important rights, including the right to strike and unionise, and saw a rapid expansion of their political participation.¹⁰ At the same time, rural workers were systematically deprived of these same rights, and other important social sectors, including women, indigenous people, peasants and

illiterates, remained disenfranchised.¹¹ The 1948 Cold War proscription of the Communist Party under the last Popular Front government, as well as the subsequent internment of many working-class Communist militants, underscored the limits of Chile's political system to tolerate not only political pluralism but also popular empowerment.

Politicisation of social organisations was a key feature of Chilean politics in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly with the Christian Democrats' expansion of the electorate and creation of Promoción Popular (Popular Promotion) programmes that incentivised popular-sector organising. During Eduardo Frei's Administration (1964–70), electoral changes lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and extended the right to vote to illiterate Chileans who accounted for approximately 10 per cent of the population. The 1970 presidential election was the first with the newly expanded electorate.¹² Yet politicisation does not equal democratisation nor necessarily party militancy. In fact, clientelism defined many of the relationships between political parties and social organisations. The Christian Democrats' relationship to the landless urban poor (*pobladores*) exemplifies this dynamic of mobilisation and subsequent repression when popular-sector actions and demands escape institutional control. For example, despite initially encouraging self-organisation as a key step to resolving Chile's housing crisis, the Frei Administration began to crack down on illegal land occupations, most notoriously in the March 1969 'Massacre of Puerto Montt', in which Chilean national police violently dispersed an illegal land occupation, killing ten *pobladores*.¹³

Just as the labour movement pre-dated the emergence of Chile's Old Left political parties in the early twentieth century, popular movements composed of workers, students, peasants and *pobladores* drove the democratisation of Chilean society across the 1960s, carrying the five-party UP coalition to power in 1970 and forming the milieu out of which Chile's New Left parties emerged. In this sense, Salvador Allende's election reprised a familiar dynamic in which popular sector organisation and mobilisation preceded and subsequently facilitated electoral victories for leftist parties. His victory also represented the culmination of a decades-long strategy by the Old Left (PC and PS) to take state power through peaceful means.¹⁴ Allende campaigned on promises to radically redistribute power 'from the established dominant groups to the workers, peasants and progressive middle-class sectors in the city and the countryside'.¹⁵ In his inaugural speech on 4 November 1970, Allende declared, 'the pueblo, at long last having reached the Government, takes leadership over the nation's destiny'.¹⁶

Yet it remained to be seen how power would be transferred and whether or not the Chilean political system could absorb the level of class conflict engendered by such a redistribution. In the rhetoric of the times, the creation of the UP's 'Gobierno del Pueblo' often became equated with the empowerment of male workers.¹⁷ It quickly became clear to many UP supporters, however, that holding just one branch of government was not commensurate with a broader transfer of power that gave real decision-making powers to non-elite sectors. Allende promised that, unlike under previous governments, state force would no longer repress popular movements. Protected and emboldened by the institutional 'revolution from above', activists mobilised in ways that simultaneously pressured the government and demonstrated their capacity to solve their own problems, most emblematically through *tomas*, or land takeovers in the countryside and cities, as well as workplace occupations.¹⁸ As Chileans from diverse walks of life seized the opportunity to carry out what they thought the revolution should be, their collective actions often centred on transforming their daily lives. These accumulated experiences created not only a desire, but an expectation among many popular movement activists that they deserved decision-making powers.

In July 1972 in the southern industrial province of Concepción, regional political leaders and grassroots activists inside and outside of political parties convened a People's Assembly as one step in the fulfilment of the UP government's agenda. Allende had campaigned on the promise that 'through a process of democratization at all levels [of society] and an organized mobilization of the masses, a new structure of power will be built from the grassroots'.¹⁹ The 1969 UP programme outlined plans for a new political constitution premised on 'institutionalizing the inclusion of the *pueblo* into state power'. It proposed replacing the existing two-chamber parliament with a single-chamber 'People's Assembly as the national expression of popular sovereignty', aimed at ensuring 'respect for the will of the majority'.²⁰ In addition to a new national People's Assembly, further people's assemblies would also function at the

local and regional levels. Throughout the first year and a half of Allende's presidency, the UP government prioritised transforming the relationship between the state and the economy by growing the public sector and redistributing wealth, as Joshua Frens-String details in his contribution to this special issue.²¹ It set aside the question of transforming the state with a new constitution and unicameral legislative body for an unspecified future moment.

In 1971, the Socialist Party renewed calls for 'the formation of a People's Assembly as the culminating process in the creation of a Popular Power in the bases'.²² Similarly, the MIR-affiliated mass front, the Frente de Trabajadores Revolucionarios (Revolutionary Workers Front, FTR), called for direct representation by productive sector, noting that those elected to Parliament 'represent and respond to their own political parties, not to the masses. Since workers are a majority of the population, it should be from within their class organizations that they elect representatives, who will answer to the masses.'²³ The December 1971 FTR platform specifically highlighted the absence of 'mechanisms that allow workers to democratically express their will, or control those elected, or censor or recall them in the event of not fulfilling with their [political] program'. Influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the MIR-FTR proposal identified the end goal as 'the destruction of the bourgeois State', but tempered this assertion by noting this would only be possible after the working class gained 'the necessary power' to constitute a legal People's Assembly.²⁴ In July 1972, regional leaders from the UP coalition, with the exception of the Communist Party, convened the Concepción People's Assembly with the MIR to offer the nation a new platform for popular sector participation in the revolutionary process.

The extant literature on the UP years tends to minimise the significance of the 1972 Concepción People's Assembly, noting its singular occurrence. It generally receives only brief mention to illustrate internecine conflicts within the Chilean Left that plagued Allende's ability to govern.²⁵ With the suspension of plans for a second Concepción People's Assembly in August 1972, scholars relegate the 27 July Assembly to mere propaganda that was 'limited in its political scope'.²⁶ Contrary to these dismissive accounts, I contend that it is essential to revisit the People's Assembly as part of this broader pattern of *desborde* that defined the relationship between the political establishment (political parties) and society (popular movements) across twentieth-century Chilean history.

'Thinking with the people': Radical democracy at the grassroots

The location for the 1972 People's Assembly and its demonstration of popular sovereignty was not happenstance. On the basis of local organising traditions, it became possible for leftist parties and popular movements to converge in the southern province of Concepción in a way that was impossible nationally. Although the MIR's national leadership cast itself as a Marxist-Leninist vanguard and never joined the Allende government, the MIR in Concepción succeeded in becoming a key regional political actor precisely because of its cooperation with four of the five parties in the UP coalition, the PS, the Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitario (Popular Unitary Action Movement, MAPU), the Radical Party (PR) and the Izquierda Cristiana (Christian Left, IC). Contrary to depictions at the time and since, the 1972 People's Assembly was not the act of a single party – the MIR – nor of a few rogue regional UP leaders. Rather, it was driven by the strategic coalitional building work of local popular movements and political parties.

The university reform movement (1967–73) – an apex of student mobilisation – heralded the arrival of two New Left, or Revolutionary Left political parties on the national scene, the MAPU (1969) principally in Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago, while the MIR (founded in 1965 in Santiago) rose to prominence at the Universidad de Concepción.²⁷ A deliberative, assembly-based tradition underwrote student politics in Concepción. It facilitated the MIR's successful expansion in Concepción, first as a student movement calling for university reform (1964–9), and then among pobladores and workers in the province.²⁸ As a new political organisation, the MIR lacked the infrastructure or material resources of well-established political parties, but instead it drew on the prestige and resources of the Federación de Estudiantes de Concepción (Concepción Student Federation (FEC)). By holding the FEC presidency from 1967 to 1970, the MIR was able to promote a radical politics that questioned the status quo, particularly regarding whose voice counts and who gets to make decisions. At the same time, the MIR proposed direct

actions as a valid means to resolve basic needs with a degree of autonomy from the state. The MIR did not invent assembly-driven practices nor direct-action politics; rather they drew on the long legacy of the Old Left and labour organising in Concepción province, particularly the deeply held notions of solidarity and community building. The MIR validated these practices with a Marxist–Leninist revolutionary discourse, inspired by the example of a successful socialist revolution in Cuba.

Following the radicalisation and politicisation of campus life, student-centred New Left parties like the MIR and MAPU started to organise beyond campus. Historians Gabriel Salazar and Julio Pinto highlight how the so-called '68 Generation of Rebels displayed an 'audacious trust in *the bajo pueblo*' as they creatively sought 'to organize more autonomous "mass fronts" with greater autonomy for local action than . . . the cliental-ized "union fronts" and the obedient "nucleos of Party militants"' of the Old Left.²⁹ The MIR and the MAPU faced considerable competition in organising Chilean workers who had a decades-long relationship with the Communist and Socialist Parties. Thus, the New Left initially concentrated efforts in attracting supporters among pobladores and *campesinos*, relatively new political actors thanks to reforms carried by the Christian Democratic government. Concepción MAPU leader Eduardo Aquevedo confirmed that informal collaborations across party lines emerged in the late 1960s, when he was still a Christian Democrat university student leader. Starting during the Frei Administration (1964–70), Aquevedo observed:

there was complicity [in Concepción] between Socialists, the left-wing of the Christian Democrats (who later became the MAPU), and the MIR. Between the three groups, we carried out actions with peasants and pobladores and shared the common struggle for university reform. If there was going to be a land occupation for pobladores or campesinos, the MAPU would invite the MIR and the Socialists, and vice versa. Each group sent assistance and afterwards we would defend the invasion by issuing press statements.³⁰

During the UP period, these kinds of united leftist fronts continued, particularly in small working-class enclaves like Coronel and Tomé and across different popular movements and MIR-affiliated mass fronts as I explore in my book *Beyond the Vanguard*.³¹ While the literature tends to emphasise popular movements as party-controlled, all parties, but particularly new ones like the MAPU and MIR, competed at the bases to attract new militants and supporters, often by engaging in people's everyday needs. Moreover, beyond party-affiliated mass fronts, broader popular movements were always heterogeneous in composition, including sectors inside and outside political parties.

While the emergence of Chile's New Left signalled a rupture with existing political parties, the MAPU and the MIR were both products of the country's political culture. When it came to organising across different social sectors, they succeeded by utilising many of the same grassroots organising practices advanced in previous decades by the labour movement and established political parties.³² The New Left filled its initial ranks with militants who had previous political formation: for the MIR, militants came from among the 1920s and 1930s generation of dissident Trotskyists, Socialists, radical syndicalists and the 1960s generation of young self-styled revolutionaries. Dismayed by the Christian Democrats' shift to the right, a younger generation of DC militants opted to break away and form the MAPU in 1969 and Christian Left in 1971, both of which joined the PC- and PS-dominated UP coalition.

Lily Rivas exemplifies this trajectory. During the UP years, she became one of most visible women in Concepción within the MIR's mass front for workers, the FTR, including running in May 1972 as a candidate for the provincial branch of the national labour federation, the Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT). Rivas was no political novice. Hailing from a landowning family of Radical Party politicians in Southern Chile, she rebelled against family tradition by joining the Socialist Party in Concepción. In 1964, she left the PS along with her close friends Bautista Van Schouwen, Miguel Enríquez and other socialist youth dissidents to form the Vanguardia Revolucionaria Marxista (VRM), which merged the following year with the newly formed MIR. Following Allende's election, national MIR leaders agreed to suspend armed actions and instead prioritised organising mass fronts among workers, students, peasants and pobladores. Since the MIR eschewed participation in national elections, their grassroots organising was less about collecting votes than about generating spaces for self-governance and self-expression. Rivas characterised

MIR militants who engaged in organising mass fronts as being ‘like assistants’ who ‘legitimated grassroots democracy (*democracia de base*)’ through popular sector participation and collective action. She perceived this approach as distinct from the practices of ‘the Communists who arrived to impose a party line, [and] more or less [it was] the same with the Socialists’. In addressing her organising work, she emphasised, ‘there has to be democracy with the grassroots sectors with whom you work and of which you are also a part of’.³³ Her reflection indicates valorisation of democratic participation and the importance of democratic decision-making practices for cultivating leaders from among diverse social sectors, a process termed ‘credentializing’ by scholars of the US Civil Rights movement.³⁴

During the UP years, Lily Rivas occupied multiple, overlapping identities, blurring the line between grassroots social leader and dedicated party militant. As a schoolteacher, she organised the FTR’s outreach in multiple high schools across the province. She earned the respect of her fellow teachers as an outspoken advocate for democratisation of educational establishments: ‘we have to elect our leaders (*directivas*) and we have to decide how to administer the school’. In doing so, she promoted student, parent and teacher participation and power sharing in the key decisions of school administration. Her efforts to awaken a feminist consciousness in her female students by calling attention to gender disparities frequently ended in conflict with school authorities, but her popularity soared among students. She characterised her work in the FTR as a give-and-take process: ‘It doesn’t just mean I listen, and go along with what others propose [*me someto a ellos*], I also make proposals. Sometimes my proposal is accepted, and sometimes it isn’t.’³⁵ In her study of US social movements, Francesca Polletta similarly emphasises how ‘in talking through different options. . . , participants gained strategizing skills. They also had the opportunity to articulate, question and sometimes redefine their own preferences. . . . [The] deliberative aspects of participatory democratic decision making can build solidarity by pressing participants to recognize the legitimacy of other people’s reasoning.’³⁶ In building popular movements, MIR militants listened to local people, validated their concerns, encouraged their participation and fostered an ability to act using the inner strength they already possessed.

The May 1970 *toma de terreno* (land takeover) and creation of Campamento Lenin illustrated the role of collective action and self-governance within the MIR’s early organising efforts among pobladores.³⁷ The Communist Party had been involved in backing tomas by pobladores since the 1950s and in the 1960s Christian Democrats created new institutional mechanisms for organising the homeless urban poor under the auspices of Popular Promotion programmes, in particular the Junta de Vecinos (neighbourhood councils), which acted as intermediaries between the state and the pobladores. What differentiated the MIR’s approach was not only an injection of revolutionary discourse, often drawing inspiration from Che Guevara’s ‘Socialism and the New Man in Cuba’ on the need to live exemplary lives, but also an emphasis on creating a deliberative, assembly-based internal governance structure. For example, while the Juntas de Vecinos delegated most governing functions to a small number of often male representatives, by contrast, MIR-affiliated campamentos privileged the general assembly of pobladores as the highest authority. This distinction both validated direct democracy and opened up participation to a broader cross-section of residents, including women and young people.

Campamento Lenin pobladores offered a particular take on what it meant to live in a self-identified revolutionary shantytown. Just days after the initial land invasion, pobladores collectively determined the ‘eleven commandments’ detailing the codes of conduct by which they would govern themselves. Some explicitly banned fighting, wife beating, gambling, drinking and stealing; others regulated participation in camp life, including mandatory attendance at general assemblies, active service on night patrols and collaboration in securing outside support; and still others addressed the residency requirement – all sites had to be actively inhabited and orderly. The sanctions ranged from mandated service on behalf of the community to expulsion by general assembly vote.³⁸

Lily Rivas and Ricardo Ruz, two local MIR militants who had not been involved in the initial toma, visited Campamento Lenin soon after its creation to understand ‘what a land takeover was all about’. ‘We have to think with the people’, Rivas recalled Ruz reminding her; ‘if the people come up with some idea, even if you are not convinced, let’s go for it, and afterwards we can see if they were right or not.’ For the next several weeks, on their own initiative, Rivas and other MIR *compañeros* ‘started going a couple of

times a week and on the weekends' to Campamento Lenin to organise activities for the children. Soon, she and her compañeros 'started to discuss creating a public school' with a more reflexive, experimental curriculum inside the newly created shantytown. While pobladores expressed their enthusiasm for the project, they preferred a more formal, traditional school and curriculum, and a prominent MIR-affiliated camp leader nominated his girlfriend as the schoolteacher. Although she did not agree, particularly with the qualifications of the girlfriend to lead the project, Rivas acceded to both requests in acknowledgement that 'the norms for coexistence . . . [that] the very same pobladores established through their assemblies' regulated communal life. This brief account underscores the ethos behind the early years of the MIR's grassroots organising, summarised succinctly by Rivas as: 'we believe in democracy (*el creernos la democracia*)'.³⁹ Lily Rivas's experience illustrates how assembly decisions carried the day, even when they contradicted the MIR party line or preferences of college-educated party militants. Thus, even in an emblematic MIR-affiliated campamento, the pobladores themselves exercised autonomy from political party oversight. The national MIR's vision of the party as a Marxist–Leninist vanguard that would at some point lead the workers and the masses to armed victory meant that promoting the radicalisation of popular movements became seen as a necessary precursor for 'the final assault on Power'.⁴⁰ This vision existed in tension with the experiences on the ground and in the provinces, where the reality of the MIR as a party in the process of building its social base granted militants like Lily Rivas greater leeway to validate democratic decision making at the grassroots.

In a short period of time, popular movements in Concepción, particularly those associated with Revolutionary Left politics started to scale-up collective actions into spaces of regional deliberation that directly proposed to the UP government an 'effective path for the inclusion of the poorest sectors of the proletariat in the tasks of the socialist revolution in Chile'. For example, in December 1971, Campamento Lenin pobladores joined approximately 1,000 other pobladores from campamentos in Lirquén, Penco, Talcahuano, Chiguayante and Concepción, many of them loosely affiliated with the MIR's mass front, the Movimiento de Pobladores Revolucionarios (Revolutionary Pobladores Front, MPR). In Concepción's central plaza, they convened an assembly, calling themselves the Comando Provincial de Pobladores Sin Casa. Their demands ranged from concrete solutions to overcome construction delays, including calling for 'the expropriation of private construction companies' and organising residents into 'unemployment committees, workshops, and brigades of construction workers', to calls to fight poverty and marginalisation through 'the socialization of medicine' by building clinics in shantytowns, and the 'creation of cultural fronts' to counter 'the influence of bourgeois ideology'. These tasks could only be achieved, the assembly concluded, if the UP government backed the pobladores' right to remain on the recently occupied lands and if all those who supported the UP government mobilised to 'reject the seditious acts of the right'.⁴¹

The pobladores underscored the dialectic between their ability to maintain concrete gains made through collective action and the continued survival of Allende's increasingly embattled government as it faced a resurgent and recalcitrant right-wing opposition in late 1971. The centrality of democratic decision-making practices within Concepción popular movements generated a belief among many grassroots activists, inside and outside of political parties, that they had a central role to play in defending Allende's government and ensuring the full implementation of the UP programme.

'The streets belong to the people': The impromptu People's Assembly, May 1972

By 1972, it appeared to many on the left that forces opposed to Allende were moving towards sedition. As a region with deep historical ties to the Old Left (the Communists and Socialists) and a rapidly expanding New Left (MIR, MAPU, Christian Left), Concepción could send a message to the nation that the Chilean people were prepared to defend Allende's government and the revolutionary process in the streets. Following with the right-wing March of the Pots and Pans in Santiago in December 1971, the Left in Concepción – both regional party leaders and grassroots activists inside and outside of political parties – interpreted these anti-Allende street demonstrations as open class warfare 'by the exploiters' who sought to regain the power lost under the UP government.⁴² In response to the Christian Democrats' plans to invite the National Party, Radical Democracy and Patria y Libertad to a 'Democracy

March' in Concepción on 12 May 1972, the regional UP, including the PC, joined with the MIR to call their supporters to occupy the streets.⁴³

Citing the potential for street violence between pro- and anti-government forces, the Allende government suspended the Left's march, but as a demonstration of respect for political pluralism and democratic dissent did not initially rescind permission for the Opposition march.⁴⁴ While the regional Communist Party heeded the government's request, the other four UP parties (PS, MAPU, IC, PR) announced together with the MIR, they would mobilise as planned, explaining that the Opposition's 'hypocritical slogans of "democracy and freedom" obscure their dark class interests and their reactionary resentment against the program of the UP government and against the people's mobilizations'.⁴⁵ Despite the pleas of Communist Intendente Wladimir Chávez, prominent social organisations co-sponsored the counter-march, including the Communist-controlled provincial branch of the national labour federation (the CUT).⁴⁶ Socialist leaders in the CUT argued that 'it is the obligation of the CUT to be on the barricades with the working class and . . . we call on all the combative workers to support their Government'.⁴⁷

Although President Allende made an 'express request' to Intendente Chávez to suspend all marches on 12 May 1972, and took to the radio airwaves in the afternoon appealing directly to the common sense (*cordura*) of citizens of Concepción to stay at home, it was the anti-Allende protesters who rallied near Concepción's city centre, determined to denounce his government's 'sectarianism, misgovernment, incapacity, food shortages, and inefficiency'.⁴⁸ Across town on the University of Concepción campus, the leftist parties and social organisations regrouped their supporters for a different form of protest.⁴⁹ There they offered the nation evidence of an organised, mobilised society's ability to exercise popular sovereignty.

Instead of viewing this stance as one of defiance, the MIR and all the parties in Allende's UP coalition – except the Communist Party – responded to what they understood as the desires of their rank-and-file bases and the broader popular movements to 'demonstrate that here, in Concepción, the streets belong to the people'.⁵⁰ As historian Camilo Trumper has argued, 'the battle for the streets' was not just about preventing one group from marching, but also, on a much deeper level, 'seizing city spaces, even if only for a moment or a day' created sites of 'democratic political practice, contest, and exchange' and generated 'new modes of political expression'.⁵¹ In what would become known as 'the first People's Assembly', the leftist coalition held an open forum with several dozen impromptu speeches followed by a 10,000-strong counter-march that effectively occupied the city centre and displaced the anti-government protesters.⁵² Nearly four decades later, then high school student federation president (FEPRESCO) and member of the MIR's student front (Frente de Estudiantes Revolucionarios), Marcial Muñoz did not remember his own speech, but rather the quantity and diversity of speakers: 'in my memory there were 53 speakers all together: workers, pobladores, peasants, students, FTR; people spoke in the name of the MIR and for the other parties'. Those approaching the open microphone were not party leaders or well-known public figures, 'but people who were leaders in their neighbourhoods, poblaciones, or campamentos'.⁵³ For example, Luis Astete, an FTR union leader and Campamento Lenin resident, called for ending the sectarianism dividing the Left, telling students that the workers stood with them, ready to demonstrate the Left's unity. Yet he cautioned the political leaders present that 'participation isn't just done with words'. In celebrating Concepción as 'Chile's red city', the FTR leader asserted that the workers 'want to demonstrate to the reactionaries the true power of the people'.⁵⁴

This open microphone was in part a response to President Allende's last-minute order to suspend permission for all political marches that day. Yet it drew on the tradition of direct, participatory democracy in University of Concepción student politics, where deliberative, open assemblies decided collective resolutions. It also followed the model of assemblies in the bases – where Campamento Lenin pobladores, for example, debated a course of action in their shantytown, and where the most persuasive speakers often won the day. In Concepción, 12 May was simultaneously a response from a united Left – bridging political parties, rank-and-file militants and a broader popular movement – to the newly organised reactionary Right and a challenge from below to the national party leaderships to redistribute political power to the bases.

Many participants that day sensed a greater radicality emanating from the rank-and-file bases.⁵⁵ Before the awe-inspiring crowd that had turned out on campus, Marcial Muñoz perceived that 'the [leftist] political leaders never thought, never imagined, that the response to their call to mobilize would be

answered by so many people. The level of organization of the workers and the pobladores was so great that the political leaders were a bit overwhelmed.⁵⁶ The massive turnout on 12 May perhaps exceeded the capacity of leftist political parties to channel the demands of radicalised popular movements, which increasingly appeared on the verge of escaping their control. It also revealed divergent understandings of whether 'mass mobilisation' served to demonstrate political party strength or to empower popular sectors and give rise to the possibility for self-representation. As part of a dialogue – a push and pull – between political parties and their social bases, the regional leaders from the PS, MAPU, IC and MIR sought to align themselves with the demands emanating from their bases.⁵⁷

As the afternoon wore on, tensions came to a head between the political party leaders trying to contain the rally within the campus and their rank-and-file bases agitating to occupy the streets as a show of force.⁵⁸ Eventually, after negotiating with local authorities, leaders Joaquín Undarraga (IC), Manuel Rodríguez (PS, FEC), Pedro Enríquez Barra (MIR), Rafael Merino (PS), Eduardo Aquevedo (MAPU) and Heriberto Krumm (PS, CUT), succeeded in diverting the 'never-ending march' down an alternate route.⁵⁹ The march stretched some 13 city blocks demonstrating the significant power of the Left's organising in Concepción. In convening supporters on campus and attempting to direct the march away from police barricades, regional party leaders acted as intermediaries between the UP government and energised popular sectors. Yet many rank-and-file militants broke rank from the party-led march and occupied the city centre.⁶⁰ They dispersed the anti-government protestors before clashing with the national police's riot squad. Police violence, which seemed disproportionately directed against leftist supporters, ended with one student, Eladio Caamaño, dead and 60 others wounded. Caamaño's death 'as a direct result of the systematic beating he received by police forces' prompted outrage locally as evidence of state repression against popular sectors.⁶¹ The MIR and left-wing of the UP in Concepción called for the immediate dissolution of the riot police as outlined in the UP programme and the removal of Communist Intendente Chávez.⁶²

The events of 12 May not only led the regional UP leaders into conflict with the Communist Party, but also prompted a larger debate within the national UP coalition over governing strategy. In contrast to the relative autonomy displayed by the regional PS, MAPU, IC, PR and MIR, Communist Party leaders in Concepción were more disciplined in adhering to national party directives, affirming the UP programme as the 'only valid political line' and warning that 'stunts' by 'adventuring groups on the Ultra-Left' served only to strengthen the Right.⁶³ The national PC declared that 'together with President Allende and the UP program, we will defeat the provocations of the ultra-Right and the ultra-Left'.⁶⁴ In the weeks ahead, the PC leadership did not deviate from this stance and, in response to events in Concepción, they lobbied for a closed-doors meeting of the national UP leadership to settle debates within the governing coalition over strategy.⁶⁵

Galvanised by local events, regional UP and MIR leaders, with the exception of the Communists, contended that confrontation was inevitable. They argued that the Left should create new kinds of institutions that could effectively counter the Right's entrenched economic and political power, particularly as Christian Democrat and National Party politicians blocked the implementation of UP government policies, producing a stalemate within Parliament and other state institutions. By contrast, the PC and President Allende consistently advocated an alliance with middle-class sectors and political centrists which, in practice, meant negotiating with Christian Democrats. The use of police force against leftist supporters in Concepción demonstrated a fundamental tension within the UP strategy: the Chilean state had not been built to channel popular interests, PS, MAPU, IC and MIR leaders complained, but rather, 'to perpetuate the interests of the bourgeoisie'.⁶⁶ In a document that circulated as the 'Concepción Manifesto' (May 1972), they warned that radical democracy would not be tamed by 'an institutionalism that was created to repress it'.⁶⁷

The impromptu May 'People's Assembly' on the University of Concepción campus demonstrated popular sectors' willingness to mobilise, and more importantly, their capacity to express their desires publicly, collectively and democratically. In the open assembly, the regional PS, MAPU, IC and MIR leaders saw a new mechanism for self-expression and popular-sector participation that could be a model for the country: 'never has there been a more democratic form of representation. No parliamentary

arrangement, nor any summons could be more effective and more authentic than this assembled multitude, [where] there was belief in unity and unity in belief.' Moreover, by 1972, the need for alternative forms of mobilisation appeared increasingly urgent as street demonstrations deteriorated into violence. They argued that the tremendous energy within popular mobilisation must be channelled 'in the direction of class struggle and shap[ed] through new institutional forms that lay the foundation for revolutionary power'.⁶⁸

Yet the regional left's alternative strategy was not – as the conservative press claimed – conceived as a campaign of violence. An embrace of class struggle was implicit in the Concepción Manifesto and more broadly within the Marxist–Leninist Chilean Left, but neither arming workers nor organising them into the Russian Revolution's soviets figured anywhere in the document. Instead, the Concepción Manifesto offered a platform of surprisingly quotidian measures centred on deepening democracy at the grassroots and expanding coordination across different social sectors:

- Encouraging worker participation in the state-run factories by granting workers more decision-making power and control over administrative bodies.
- Installing workers' control in private industries.
- Ensuring real participation of the pobladores in the leadership of housing agencies.
- Granting effective decision-making capabilities to the peasant councils, giving them the necessary material resources.
- Uniting popular organisations into Consejos Comunales de Trabajadores [Workers' Councils within a given territory, or *comuna*], whose bases will hold assemblies to resolve matters of immediate concern for workers, including control of foodstuffs through the price control boards (JAP), [and in matters of] education, health, etc.⁶⁹

These measures centred on building people's power through expanding spaces for democratic participation and granting greater control over matters of material interest to people's everyday lives. They built directly upon the practices of radical democracy cultivated within many MIR-affiliated popular movements. The Concepción Manifesto coalesced a set of ideas that had been circulating under the rubric of popular power into a concrete plan of action.

'Let the people speak!': Radical democracy in the 27 July Concepción People's Assembly

In mid-1972, this pressure from below found an answer in Concepción. Drawing inspiration from the experiences of May 1972, regional political party leaders from the left-wing of the UP and the MIR proposed convening a People's Assembly that would be representative of a broad cross-section of society. Social organisations across the province debated what form such an assembly should take. For example, unionised workers at the Concepción-based newspaper *El Sur* argued that 'the laws of the people, the laws that benefit the workers, must be made by workers themselves', and concluded that it was time 'to get the People's Assembly that is contemplated in the UP government program up and running'. Delegates would be drawn from Chile's national labour federation (CUT), unions, peasant councils, student federations and pobladores' organisations to create participatory bodies capable of channelling popular movements into a power that could stop the counter-revolution in its tracks and, even more broadly, transform the dynamics of power in Chile. Noting that the process would happen first 'by province, and then nationally', the workers affirmed, 'this is the way to strengthen the government and to advance the revolution in our country'.⁷⁰ For the newspaper workers it appeared essential that the state and its institutions be transformed in order for the UP's project of democratic socialism to succeed.

The *El Sur* newspaper workers' union was among the 140 social organisations that sponsored the formal, self-proclaimed Concepción People's Assembly. The power of this assembly rested in its representativeness across social sectors, local territories, productive sectors, state and non-state actors, drawing sponsorship from 60 unions, 31 shantytowns, 27 state-affiliated mothers' centres, 16 student federations and six peasant organisations and as well as across political party lines with endorsements from fove leftist political parties, the PS, MAPU, PR, IC and the MIR and its affiliated mass fronts (FTR, MPR, FER).⁷¹ On 23 July 1972, full-page invitations to the People's Assembly appeared in the local press calling people to assemble on 27 July 'to discuss, analyse, and denounce, directly and

democratically, the Parliament and its counterrevolutionary character' and, in addition, to celebrate the Cuban Revolution's 26 July anniversary. While the open invitation was addressed to 'the masses', it explicitly named the social organisations whose leaders or elected delegates must attend. These included 'unions, administrative boards, production committees, workplace vigilance groups, neighbourhood councils, pobladores' committees, campamento committees, peasant councils, agrarian reform centres and settlements, peasant unions, student governments, professional and technical organizations, artisan organizations, small and medium businessowners and industrialists, and in general, all leaders of popular and mass organizations'.⁷² This comprehensive list – ranging from peasants to industrialists – powerfully illustrated the breadth and diversity of the people's revolutionary coalition envisioned by the planners of the People's Assembly.

Almost immediately, the conservative press sounded the alarms with sensational headlines, such as 'To Supplant Parliament, People's Assembly formed in Concepción!'⁷³ While the organisers undoubtedly sought to pressure President Allende to move forward with the UP platform's plans for a new constitution and a more representative assembly, they never believed that on 27 July 1972, the open assembly in Concepción would oust the existing national parliament. For example, regional MIR leaders countered that right-wing denouncements belied a deep-seated fear of popular sovereignty. 'In this historic moment in Concepción province when the social organizations and political parties of the people want to express themselves, to deliberate, to exchange experiences, and to resolve their principal problems, the reaction hurls insults everywhere', the MIR's leadership declared.⁷⁴ A furious Opposition was natural, the MIR observed because 'when the pueblo speaks by itself and for itself, the people begin to be power'.⁷⁵ The local MIR leadership validated self-expression and deliberation as essential elements of democratic decision-making within popular movements.

As an event intended 'to be a platform for the popular movement of social organizations', the expectation was that rank-and-file leaders representing parties and popular movements would again speak as they had in May, but this time in a more organised format with national implications.⁷⁶ The goal was to scale-up local practices of radical democracy happening in places like Campamento Lenin and the University of Concepción into a regional space where an organised citizenry could articulate its own goals and find a response from national political leaders. By modelling a more representative, participatory form of democracy, it would project an alternative vision of power to the nation in which diverse, non-elite sectors had a concrete mechanism to have their voices heard.

On the evening of 27 July 1972, several thousand workers, students, pobladores, women and peasants converged in the University of Concepción Theatre for a People's Assembly.⁷⁷ MAPU leader Eduardo Aquevedo characterised the public as 'cadres from across the entire Left and all the social organizations', noting that 'all of the popular world was at that Assembly, the theatre was full'.⁷⁸ Behind the scenes, the political leaders failed to reach an agreement over the format, allegedly following the intervention of national MIR leaders in the regional process.⁷⁹ At the last minute, in place of social organisations, they decided each of the five political parties (PS, MAPU, MIR, IC and PR) would designate one representative to speak. On these new terms, political leaders inaugurated the Concepción's People's Assembly.⁸⁰

Yet for many of those gathered, the formal speeches by party representatives fell far short of the anticipated People's Assembly. The memory of the 12 May open forum raised expectations for an open assembly. As the first round of speeches ended, a MIR student militant recalled, 'no one got up. A rumour started to circulate that the people will speak. Soon this started to be chanted by different groups scattered through the theatre, we must have been 3,000 or 4,000 people, and in the end, almost all of us were standing up, shouting: "Let the people speak! Let the people speak! (*¡Que hable el pueblo!*)"'⁸¹ Not an orchestrated takeover, the chant emerged organically as the right slogan in the right moment. By altering the format and blocking direct participation at the last minute, political parties muted the very sectors whose voice the event had planned to amplify. It also reflected party leaders' own ambivalence about ceding their control, as well as, in the case of the MIR, a national party hierarchy attempting to impose a particular party line. As a moment of *desborde*, the People's Assembly made manifest tensions between political parties and their social bases.

At an open microphone, rank-and-file party militants and grassroots activists questioned the idea that only political leaders, particularly at the national level, should direct the course of change. The majority of the speakers affirmed a desire to accelerate the revolutionary process. They called for ‘going on the offensive to stop the actions of the Right’ and at the same time voiced their ‘unwavering commitment to defend the UP government and to continue advancing without compromise’.⁸² Newspaper accounts tended to emphasise the more radical interventions. One reported that ‘some speakers proposed the necessity of destroying the Parliament and creating popular militias’.⁸³ FEC president Manuel Rodríguez (PS) noted years later, ‘Whoever wanted to speak, spoke without screening or censure . . . there were certainly some very reasonable ideas presented, some very forceful ones, but there were also a lot of wild thoughts.’⁸⁴ From a carefully planned event to showcase the strength of the Left, the political organisers had failed to grasp how the region’s radical assembly-based political culture, centred on deliberative, democratic participation, could challenge the pre-written proposals presented in the opening round. In the moment, the chant to ‘let the people speak’, and the dialogue between social leaders – many of whom like Lily Rivas were also political militants – and the several hundred workers, students, pobladores and peasants in attendance transformed the People’s Assembly into a more participatory affair.

As Lily Rivas entered the over-capacity theatre on the night of 27 July, the sensation that greeted her was of stepping into ‘a beating heart that swelled and contracted’ with the energy in the room. She was an accomplished teacher, a capable leader and a gifted public speaker. She was also a disciplined MIR militant, who looked at the party’s talking points, but once on stage, spoke of what she knew. As an educator, Lily Rivas understood that success on stage hinged on her ability to engage the audience: ‘all of us who went up, each one had to argue for such and such thing at a certain time. But you always had to wait and see if you would be allowed to speak or not, because if you said things that did not have wide support, the audience would silence you with jeers and shouts.’ With the speeches that night, Rivas noted that the deliberative assembly tradition was present with ‘a constant running dialogue between the person on stage speaking and the assembled public’.⁸⁵ This ‘running dialogue’ defined the relationship between social bases and political parties, which come from and respond to broader socio-political pressures at the grassroots.

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. As one peasant leader and MCR militant recalled, behind the people’s assemblies was ‘the idea that the people had power – popular power – that the people decided their own destiny, decided how to do things, and that not everything came down from above, that the people as they advanced began to create their own initiatives, and that as the revolutionary process advanced, the people would do more and more’. Like many other participants, he underscored that the Concepción People’s Assembly and its proposals were ‘not against the UP government’, but rather sought to persuade government leaders that they ‘had to go faster, that the method should be different, that you had to go forward another way’.⁸⁶ Bridging political parties, rank-and-file militants and a broader popular movement, the Concepción People’s Assembly demonstrated the potential for an alternative locus of power with broad popular legitimacy.

Containing the *desborde*: The political backlash against the People’s Assembly

What transpired that night in Concepción illustrates the fraught potential of radical democracy within a revolutionary process. For those sectors opposed to Allende’s government, this form of radical democracy appeared to be an unruly mob challenging the foundations of the state. These reservations about ‘ultra-democracy’ were also shared by national leaders in the Communist Party and Allende himself, who believed that greater popular mobilisation without sufficient restraint would jeopardise the chances of negotiating with the Christian Democrats.⁸⁷ Allende worried that the assembly was ‘a serious political error because it gave the Right and the military a pretext’ for warning of the dangers of a revolutionary movement ‘that threatened the institutionalism of the country and the moderate politics of the Popular Unity’. Moreover, it ‘inflated the MIR and promoted the idea of a new political alliance’ outside the UP coalition.⁸⁸ For others, including many of the participants, the open microphone of the 1972 People’s Assembly represented democracy in its truest sense.

Ultimately, the 1972 Concepción People's Assembly failed as an alternative model. Almost immediately, a national political backlash worked to contain the possibility of its repetition in Concepción and elsewhere. The conservative press decried it as an attempt to create dual power premised on the destruction of the Chilean Parliament and called on President Allende to respond.⁸⁹ Prominent national Communist Party leaders again denounced it as a 'divisionary ploy of the ultra-Left'.⁹⁰ The other UP parties soon followed suit, publicly condemning the participation of the party leaders in the People's Assembly as a 'momentary error that the national leaderships will not accept'.⁹¹ The national UP acted quickly 'to intervene and put a stop to this', recalled Eduardo Aquevedo. A few days after the 27 July People's Assembly, a delegation composed of the top national leaders from the Communist Party, the MAPU and the Socialist Party, including Víctor Díaz (PC) and Adonis Sepúlveda (PS), arrived in Concepción and privately conveyed Allende's message to the regional UP secretaries Eduardo Aquevedo (MAPU), Rafael Merino (PS) and Mario Benavente (PC).⁹² Just days later, President Allende published a letter in *El Mercurio* dismissing its significance and asserting his control over the UP coalition. He contended that in order 'to continue governing in the service of the workers, it is my obligation to defend tirelessly the democratic institutional regime', putting to rest any discussion that the Parliament should be replaced by a more representative body.⁹³

In Concepción, the UP party leaders who had organised the People's Assembly accepted Allende's rebuke 'to avoid a rupture' within the governing coalition. Following the intervention by national UP leaders, the second People's Assembly set for August never took place.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the MIR's Central Committee validated the People's Assembly only to the extent that it fit the party's ideological projection of popular power. Absent in debates across the Chilean Left were the very 'people' – *el pueblo* – who had been the force in May and July behind greater mobilisations and demands for new mechanisms for democratic participation. As the national debate over the People's Assembly devolved into competing ideological interpretations and projections, rank-and-file party militants and local activists were increasingly marginalised from the conversation, as were the social organisations they represented. Encapsulating a sense of frustration that set in after the People's Assembly, one FTR-affiliated Coronel coal miner reflected, 'Allende did many things, but the government never took up the part about popular power, except as a popular power with the government and subordinated to it. The UP did not capitalize on the people: they did everything for the people, but without the people.'⁹⁵ In the end, both the national UP coalition and the MIR's leadership in Santiago failed to legitimise grassroots democratic practices and retreated from a full endorsement of popular sovereignty. As the political controversy played out, it moved further and further from the assembly's defining feature: its representativeness.

Conclusion

Rather than reducing the question of democratic crisis to state institutions and governability, Chile in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a broader democratisation of society from the bottom up and from the left that ultimately challenged the relationship between organised civil society and the state, or as Mario Garcés calls it, a conflict 'between Social Chile and State Chile'. At stake for the Chilean Left, well before the military coup, was the ability of political parties to respond to and absorb grassroots demands, both from their own party militants and broader popular movements. Doing so would probably not have avoided a military coup, which, as Garcés and Winn discuss, responded to a different logic, but it was a missed opportunity to resolve a fundamental tension within liberal democracy about whose voices count and who gets to decide.⁹⁶ Following through on the logic of worker empowerment and popular power – elements that rhetorically were so central to both the UP and the MIR's political projects – would have necessitated reconceptualising power relations between political parties and popular movements and between an elite political class and non-elite supporters, ultimately requiring a transformation of the state and state institutions to give real voice and power a broader cross-section of society.

The 1973 military coup and 17-year dictatorship that followed did not resolve this ongoing debate about the nature and quality of democracy. Military rule sought not just to overturn a socialist president and a democratic transition to a socialist economy but also to turn back the decades-long struggle of working people for full inclusion as citizens in Chile's democracy. It destroyed the Chilean state and

political system built in the 1920s and 1930s and, in its place, offered Chileans the ability to participate not as citizens in a democracy but as consumers in the market.⁹⁷ Chile's neoliberal democracy has remained largely intact in the decades since the transition to civilian rule in 1990. It is not surprising that in the twenty-first century, this 'undecidable spectre of liberal democracy', resurfaced in 'the gap between the promise of power to the people – understood as the capacity to exercise some control over major issues that affect our lives – and the actual performance of existing democracies on issues like participation and the responsiveness of elected representatives'.⁹⁸

As yet another moment of *desborde* in Chilean history, the organised society that filled the streets during the 2019 *estallido social* challenged the political establishment and the socio-economic status quo. While the very name *estallido social* suggests an unexpected explosion of social discontent, its historical roots run deep: not only in the failed promises during the 30 years since the democratic transition, but also as a renewed challenge to renegotiate the relationship between the political establishment (political parties) and society (popular movements). Among various calls in 2019 for economic, social and political change, the most consistent demand was for constitutional reform to alter the foundational charter between state and society. When Chileans once again occupied *las grandes Alamedas*, they also began to build decentralised, local spaces for democratic deliberation, as reflected in Romina Green Rioja's account of the Huemul neighbourhood *cabildo*.⁹⁹ As a direct result of the *estallido social*, the possibility now exists for Chile to replace the 1980 Constitution inherited from the dictatorship. In the October 2020 national plebiscite, the overwhelming majority of Chileans affirmed not only their desire for a new constitution, but also for the 2021 Constitutional Convention to include representatives from a broad cross-section of society. The refusal to delegate the drafting process solely to politicians creates an opening for citizens 'credentialised' by their participation in neighbourhood *cabildos*, territorial assemblies and social organisations to construct a new political legitimacy based on deliberative decision-making practices.

The parallels between the 1972 Concepción People's Assembly and the array of assembly-driven practices that consolidated during *estallido social* in 2019 and 2020 offer important lessons for the future. First, they underscore the vital role of collective action to push forward debates about social justice and economic equality. Second, these experiences affirm the capacity and agency of ordinary people – those without significant socio-economic power – to not only envision, but also to enact a more expansive and inclusive understanding of democracy. If neoliberal democracy offers a consumer choice – between products on a shelf and options on a ballot – then the uncharted path forward must provide a meaningful way for those without money or power to participate. In order to ensure 'respect for the will of the majority', national political structures must be receptive to the demands emanating from diverse, local publics.¹⁰⁰ Then, and now, the survival of democracy may depend upon the political establishment taking seriously these democratic demands from below.

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The author is Guest Editor of the journal's special issue *Chile's Popular Unity at 50* this article is included in; all efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

- ¹Arditti, *Politics on the Edge of Liberalism*, 8.
- ²Bruey, *Bread, Justice, and Liberty*.
- ³Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue', 7.
- ⁴Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'.
- ⁵Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'.
- ⁶Salazar, *La historia desde abajo*, 394.
- ⁷Salazar and Pinto, *Historia contemporánea de Chile V*, 214.
- ⁸Pavilack, *Mining for the Nation*, 6; Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, xiv.
- ⁹Pavilack, *Mining for the Nation*, 34.
- ¹⁰Garcés Durán, *La Unidad Popular*.
- ¹¹For more on the exclusion of rural Chile from the benefits of the Popular Front governments, see Illanes, *Movimiento en la tierra*.
- ¹²Loveman, *Chile: The Legacy*, 239–45.
- ¹³Vergara, 'Revisiting Pampa Irigoín', 43–54. For more on Chile's housing rights movement in the twentieth century, see Garcés Durán, *Tomando su sitio* and Murphy, *For a Proper Home*.
- ¹⁴Casals, *El alba de una revolución*.
- ¹⁵Unidad Popular, *Programa básico de gobierno de la Unidad Popular*, 12.
- ¹⁶Allende Gossens, *Primer discurso político del Presidente Dr. Salvador Allende*, 5.
- ¹⁷For scholarship that explores the privileged space given to urban unionized male workers within the ideology of the Chilean Marxist Left (both Old and New) and the limitations this posed for a broader inclusive political body, see Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict*, Crow, 'Debates about ethnicity', 319–38 and Vidaurrázaga Aránguiz, '¿El hombre nuevo?'.
- ¹⁸Winn, *La revolución chilena* and *Weavers of Revolution*. See also Garcés Durán, *Tomando su sitio* and Mallon, *Courage Tastes of Blood*.
- ¹⁹Unidad Popular, *Programa básico de gobierno de la Unidad Popular*, 15.
- ²⁰Unidad Popular, *Programa básico de gobierno de la Unidad Popular*, 15.
- ²¹Frens-String, 'A "popular option" for development?', 9.
- ²²Platform from the National Party Congress of the Socialist Party of Chile, as cited in Cancino Troncoso, *Chile: La problemática del poder popular*, 251–2.
- ²³FTR-MIR, 'Documento sobre el VI Congreso de la Central Única de Trabajadores', in Farías, *La izquierda chilena*, 1669.
- ²⁴FTR-MIR, 'Documentos sobre el VI Congreso', 1669.
- ²⁵Monsálvez Araneda, 'La asamblea del pueblo en Concepción'; Díaz-Nieva and Valdés-Urrutia, 'Desencuentros en las izquierdas'; Cancino Troncoso, *Chile: La problemática del poder popular*, 247–87; Silva, *Los cordones industriales*, 172–7; Leiva, *Revolución socialista y poder popular*.
- ²⁶Cancino Troncoso, *Chile: La problemática del poder popular*, 247.
- ²⁷For more on the origins of the MAPU and MIR, see Moyano Barahona, *MAPU o la seducción del poder y la juventud* and Palieraki, *¡La revolución ya viene!*
- ²⁸For more on the university reform movement in Concepción, see Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*, 15–36.

- ²⁹Salazar and Pinto, *Historia contemporánea de Chile V*, 221.
- ³⁰Aquevedo, interview, 20 October 2011; D. Rodríguez, interview, 31 October 2011.
- ³¹Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*, 37–62.
- ³²D. Rodríguez, interview, 31 October 2011.
- ³³Rivas, interview, 26 July 2011.
- ³⁴D'Angelo, *The American Civil Rights Movement*.
- ³⁵Rivas, interview, 26 July 2011.
- ³⁶Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*, 8–9.
- ³⁷For more on Campamento Lenin, see Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*, 63–89 and for a comparative case study on an emblematic Santiago shantytown, Cofre, *Campamento Nueva la Havana*.
- ³⁸'11 son los mandamientos de los ocupantes', *La Crónica*, 11 May 1970, 2.
- ³⁹Rivas, interview, 26 July 2011.
- ⁴⁰FTR-MIR, 'Documentos sobre el VI Congreso', 1669.
- ⁴¹'Pobladores exigen al Gobierno ponerse a la cabeza de sus movilizaciones', *El Rebelde* 5:11 (1971), 5; 'Concentración de los Sin Casa', *El Sur*, 12 December 1971, 12.
- ⁴²PS, MAPU, PR, IC, MIR, 'Declaración Conjunta (Concepción)', in 'Mañana marcha sólo la Oposición: Determinación del Gobierno (Santiago)', *El Sur*, 11 May 1972, 16; La Mura, interview, 29 April 2011.
- ⁴³'Penquistas también realizarán marcha', *El Sur*, 9 April 1972, 12; 'Acuerdo MIR-UP: "Impedir marcha de la democracia"', *El Sur*, 10 May 1972, 1.
- ⁴⁴'Mañana marcha sólo la Oposición: Determinación del Gobierno (Santiago)', *El Sur*, 11 May 1972, 16.
- ⁴⁵'Gobierno postergó marchas de la unidad popular y del MIR; militantes se tomarán las calles', *El Diario Color*, 11 May 1972, 7; PS, MAPU, PR, IC, MIR, 'Declaración Conjunta (Concepción)'.
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- ⁴⁷'La CUT', *El Diario Color*, 12 May 1972, 5.
- ⁴⁸'Suspendida marcha de Oposición: orden expresa del Presidente de la República', *El Sur*, 13 May 1972, 1.
- ⁴⁹'Izquierdistas marcharon desde el foro de la "U"', *El Diario Color*, 13 May 1972, 5.
- ⁵⁰'Gobierno ordena seguridad para acto callejero', *El Diario Color*, 12 May 1972, 1.
- ⁵¹Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*, 6–7. See also Salazar and Pinto, *Historia contemporánea de Chile V*, 217. Salazar, *Violencia política popular en las 'grandes alamedas'*.
- ⁵²'Izquierdistas marcharon desde el foro de la "U"', *El Diario Color*, 13 May 1972, 5; Muñoz, interview, 7 January 2011.
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- ⁶⁶PS, MAPU, IC, and MIR, ‘Documento de Concepción’, *El Diario Color*, 24 May 1972, 13.
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