Introduction

Colin Henfrey
Bernardo Sorj
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Chile and the Popular Unity

Few foreigners knew much about Chile when, in September 1970, a Marxist president was elected. Yet the next three years were to make it a stage on which the world watched the re-enactment of almost all the classic problems of achieving socialism. In the last, bloody act, the name of Chile would be scored, like Spain’s, across the minds of a generation.

The Popular Unity coalition supporting Salvador Allende with his programme for initiating a ‘peaceful way toward socialism’, won 36 per cent of the votes, against 34 per cent for the candidate of the right-wing National Party. Much propaganda was to be made of this lack of an overall majority. However, the Christian Democrats, who were previously in power under Eduardo Frei (1964-70) and won 28 per cent of the vote, had a programme almost as radical as the PU’s, in the short term.

Following Allende’s victory, capital was rushed out of the country. Congress, which was dominated by the opposition parties, still had to confirm the election result. It did so only after Allende had undertaken to ‘respect the integrity’ of the Church, the judiciary and the armed forces. Soon afterwards, the army’s commander-in-chief, General Schneider, was assassinated. This turned out to have been an attempt by a small neo-fascist party, Fatherland and Freedom, to provoke military intervention. (It later emerged that the CIA was also involved.) The left, meanwhile, debated what all this meant for the future. It was in this climate that Allende took power on 3 November 1970.

The PU was a broad left coalition. Its largest components were the Communist and Socialist parties, which had combined in previous elections. The former, dating from the twenties, was traditionally committed to an electoral strategy. With its roots in the nitrate mines of the north, it was strongest among industrial workers. The Socialist Party was founded in 1933, by Allende among others. Though mostly Marxist, its followers ranged from Social Democrats to Trotskyists.
The Radicals and the MAPU (Movement of Popular United Action) were the coalition’s junior partners. The Radicals were a long-standing social democratic party. Having led a Popular Front in the thirties, they dominated centrist politics until the newer Christian Democrats overtook them in the sixties. Their association with the PU provoked two splits, before and after 1970, further diminishing their numbers.

The MAPU was much the youngest party involved. Formed in 1969 by disillusioned Christian Democrats who adopted a Marxist position, it split twice in the PU period. First into the Christian Left, which dropped the explicitly Marxist label, but stayed in the PU and attracted more Christian Democrats; and later into the Workers’ and Peasants’ Movement (MOC). The latter was close to the Communist Party and also remained in the PU, making it finally a six-party coalition. The one substantial left-wing party outside it was the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). Cuban-influenced and of mainly student origin, it operated clandestinely until the PU’s victory, then offered ‘critical support’ to Allende.

These parties naturally had differing views on Allende’s accession in these turbulent circumstances. For the Communist Party, Radicals and many Socialists it vindicated the PU’s premise: the strength of Chile’s democratic traditions, even at moments of confrontation. For other Socialists and the MAPU and MIR, it had very different implications: that the Chilean ruling class would resort to violence when necessary.

The PU’s philosophy was vague, though. In immediate terms it aspired only to establish the would-be preconditions for a transition to socialism. These included the nationalization of major resources and monopolies, both Chilean and foreign-owned; measures for workers’ participation; and the completion and democratization of agrarian reforms already initiated by Frei. The question of how socialism would be finally achieved was left unstated.

In practice one sector of the PU saw armed confrontation with the right as inevitable. Another, led by Allende, felt that the left might win control, by gradual and constitutional means, of the entire state apparatus – the legislature and judiciary, still heavily controlled by the right, and the officially neutral armed forces. The latter, it was hoped, would at least divide in the event of a military coup, while victory in the congressional elections due in 1973 might pave the way for a Popular Assembly. This dominant, ‘gradualist’ position was particularly associated with the Communist Party. Both points of view were represented in the other PU parties, and it was precisely over these that the MAPU and the MOC were to finally split – the MOC to align with the ‘gradualists’, and the MAPU to join with the MIR, Christian Left and sections of the Socialist Party criticizing them as ‘reformists’. Even in 1970, perhaps their one clear point of agreement was that the PU’s victory was a critical step forward.

Three years later, on 11 September 1973, the armed forces overthrew the PU in a particularly violent coup, even for modern Latin America. President Allende died defiant in the burning Moneda Palace. United Nations sources estimate that thousands of his supporters were killed. A minority died fighting against clearly impossible odds. Others were publicly shot without trial, to create mass terror, in the factories, slums and rural communities sympathetic to the PU. Many are known to have died under torture. Thousands more were herded into gaols and concentration camps. The military junta under General Augusto Pinochet adopted a clearly fascist position: it suspended all human rights, banned political parties and trade unions, burned the electoral register and swore to ‘eliminate Marxism’ and ‘re-establish Western values’. It rapidly aligned with Brazilian-led ideological warfare on a continental scale, and established a terror apparatus that was to systematically destroy a generation of left-wingers.

Today, as the Chilean resistance develops, new forms of struggle have begun. Yet everywhere discussion of the PU continues, especially on the basic questions of the transition to socialism and relationships between left-wing parties. In Europe the ‘lessons’ of the Chilean coup are naturally felt to be crucial for the current strategies of the left.

Vital as this discussion is, it tends to ignore what happened in Chile apart from the coup. The Chilean experience is rarely examined, rather than used to vindicate predetermined positions. In practice the ‘lessons’ tend to be dogmas long pre-dating the PU. This also applies to much discussion among Chileans; but for others, such commentary neglects the concrete
achievements in many fields by every group within the left, and their impact at a popular level.

Talking to Chilean exiles in Europe, we were immediately struck by this gulf between the concrete events and the pundits. Accounts of the PU period give little space to the views and experiences of those who were at the eye of the storm: the activists at the base of the parties. It was to these that we found ourselves talking about their work in the factories, farms and shantytowns in which dramatic changes occurred in 1970-3. Their experiences seemed more profound, and much more relevant to the future as accounts of the popular movement, than anything we had read on the subject. We noticed, though, that recollection of these experiences was fading. This was particularly poignant, since the PU’s future history will depend heavily on oral records, given the coup’s destructiveness and the left’s own need to destroy information. It was this which led us to record and edit a selection of these activists’ stories.

We have deliberately avoided offering our views on the ‘lessons of Chile’. Our aim was to provide some answers to the question of a British docker involved in boycotting the junta, when he wondered aloud what he would have experienced, had he happened to be Chilean. We intervened little in the interviews. We have therefore felt free to omit our few questions. These simply asked for experiences of changes at a popular level and the speakers’ understanding of them as members of particular parties. Interestingly, their activism involves much more than party lines. Individual creativity and political views are reciprocal forces. Even partisan interpretations do tend to be based on concrete experience, and hence on popular response as much as on any party doctrine.

The seven interviews selected are divided into four sections – industry, the countryside, the shantytowns and the universities. These are some of the major fronts on which PU activists were working. Each section has a purely informative introduction, and each speaker a short biographical note.

Common to all the interviews is a basically chronological structure, culminating with the coup. All of them refer to the impact of major political events, so we have compiled a chronology of the PU period. Together with the index, this should enable a comparison between the different ways in which these events and common themes are understood, according to the various speakers’ fields and party affiliations.

The PU period can be divided into three phases. The first year is one of apparent successes: extensive nationalization, acceleration of land reform, a sharp reduction of unemployment, rising production and real wages and an outright majority for the PU in the municipal elections. The second phase, of roughly the PU’s second year, is marked by growing polarization. On one side collaboration begins between the Christian Democrats and the solidly right-wing National Party, leading to the lorry-owners’ strike in October 1972. On the other, new patterns of popular organization emerge, particularly the industrial cordon (cordones industriales) which developed in major cities (see chapters 2 and 3, especially). While the congressional elections showed that support for the PU was still growing, its final year was one of constant confrontation and mounting right-wing terrorism, as the military prepared to take action.

Each interview focuses on the field in which the speaker was most active. The number of interviews in each field reflects its relative importance: three for industry, two for the countryside and one each for the shantytowns and the universities. In the case of industry, anything less could scarcely have conveyed the range of views on its key issues, such as workers’ participation: hence the three selected are from the Communist Party, the MAPU and the Socialist Party. The countryside posed a difficult choice, as this field is itself so varied. The two speakers we decided on are from the MAPU and the MOC. Since their split resulted precisely from the main debates within the PU, the speakers convey what these meant for the agrarian sector, in which the MAPU had always been strong. Each of the remaining sections is accounted for by a single speaker, from the MIR and the Communist Party respectively.

While we were anxious for an overall political balance, it was impossible to present each field from every party’s point of view. Our selection was guided by the richness of the speakers’ experience, rather than their affiliations. We should also make clear that they speak as
members, but not as spokesmen, of their parties. Between them they certainly illustrate broadly the two main tendencies within the left, and their development through the period. The gradualist one of the Communist Party, Radicals, MOC and sectors of the Socialist Party saw the PU as the truest expression of the labour movement and all progressives: these should therefore support unreservedly its anti-imperialist, anti-monopolist position, which left the questions of state power and full socialism to a later stage. On the other hand the MAPU, Christian Left and the rest of the Socialists, together with the MIR, disputed that there could be two such ‘stages’. The PU’s commitment to legality and ‘gradualism’, involved it inevitably in compromises with the Chilean bourgeoisie. These checked the advance towards socialism and gave a free rein to right-wing subversion and its imperialist allies. The industrial cordons, campesino (peasants ‘and rural workers’) councils and other popular organizations should actively oppose this trend with a vanguard ‘popular power’ of their own.

The ‘gradualists’ were not wholly denying the validity of the industrial cordons etc., any more than the others were suggesting abandoning the PU. The argument was essentially as to whether to support it unconditionally or critically: whether, given the mounting confrontation, it should ‘consolidate’ or ‘advance’. However, as the polarization between the right and left gathered pace, this distinction grew increasingly urgent in ways apparent in every interview, especially as the coup starts looming.

There are perhaps two major themes in this polarization at the popular level. One is the struggle against the economic sabotage launched by the right; the other is the constant ideological confrontation, transforming people’s consciousness at every turn. These processes are interwoven. New problems foster new awareness and new ways of dealing with them. The bourgeoisie’s sabotage gave rise first to the local people’s supply control committees (JAPs, Juntas de Abastecimiento Populares), then to the industrial cordons and finally to the communal commands, combining workers and campesinos. The ideological forging of the ‘new

man and woman’ in Chile was inseparable from the everyday struggle to transform material conditions.

Finally we should mention briefly how the interviews were conducted. They all took place in 1974-5 in various European countries. They were in Spanish, tape-recorded, and followed no fixed formula. We usually held two interview sessions, lasting three or four hours in all. All the speakers were dearly informed of the exact nature of the project, and every effort has been made to preserve their anonymity and that of people to whom they referred. Even in exile their lives are not easy, while those of their comrades and relatives in Chile are much less so. We fully recognize and thank them for their confidence in us.

Few interviews are impersonal experiences. These were often intense and moving. The oldest person to whom we talked, a worker and long-standing unionist, was reluctant to tell his personal story, ‘because in the struggle for socialism there aren’t really individuals, only what people do together’. They bore this out still, in their lack of regret at the personal cost of their commitment. As individuals and as one people with a common goal – as we hope above all to have shown – we salute them.

* See Abbreviations and Glossary.