
ESSAY

Translated by John Bell

POPULISM AND POLITICAL RADICALISM DURING THE UNIDAD POPULAR GOVERNMENT

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In this essay Carlos Cousiño reflects on the path taken by the government of Salvador Allende, in the light of the profound division between its real populist legitimacy and the revolutionary understanding which the elites in the political leadership had of this legitimacy. In particular he underlines the role played by the young intellectuals of the Left who kept on pushing the government towards revolutionary positions that became more and more radical. By the middle of 1992 populism had given way to revolution. In the opinion of the author, this path, which supported the conviction of the young Miristas that they were engaged in a war which had to end in a victory for one side or the other, sealed the destiny of the country, forcing it react in the severest way possible.

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Time cancels out possibilities in the history of societies as much as it does in the lives of people. And because of this it is possible nowadays to refer to the period of the Unidad Popular government, because the passing of time has ended the possibilities associated with this project, reducing it to a brief period in our contemporary history.

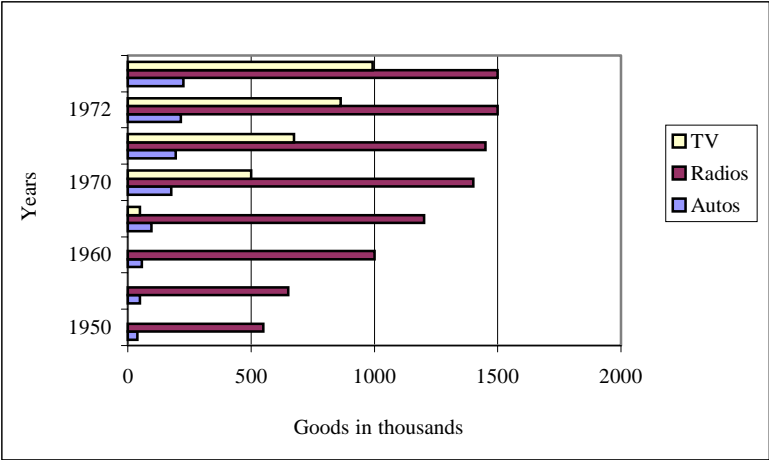
The world in which we live is characterised by a giddy acceleration in time. It is not as if the days or the years pass more rapidly: it is only that many more things happen in these days or years than happened before. And so while the time of historical events is shortened, the time of personal biography is lengthened. So we are witnesses more frequently every time to the fact that historical periods grow, develop and finish before the time of a personal biography is over. In this sense the paradox occurs that we are historically further away from that which is near to us in biographical terms.

Only 30 years have passed since Salvador Allende became President. When we look back towards that time, it is very difficult for us to think that it is only a brief generation away. And yet for Chileans of the year 2000 our society of 1970 appears to be unrecognisable, in much the same way as the society of 1970 looking back twenty years to 1950 would have found that society enormously distant. And it is just in that period, from 1950 to 1970, that Chile passed from being a rural to an urban society as it is just in the period from 1970 to the present that we passed from being a simple society to a complex one. While these kind of transitional periods are never free of problems, in the case of Chile they have left traumatic traces to such a point that our investigation of the recent past is nearer to the perspective of a psychoanalyst than a historian.

If we look back a half a century there are numerous facts that catch our attention. From the saturated viewpoint of today it is worth recalling that it was only in the 1950's that we got to know that great medium of communication, the radio. While in the USA 75% of households had Television in 1955, and Argentina reached the same percentage of coverage by 1970, our country had to wait until the World Cup of 1962 for that medium of communication to start to spread here and in 1970 there were only 500,000 sets in the whole of Chile which was equivalent to 25% of households. As recently as 1973 that figure increased to 1 million TV's which barely covered 50% of households. In 1950 there were practically no cars circulating in Santiago. In the whole of Chile there were about 40,000 vehicles in the car pool. In spite of a strong increase in the following decades, the total number of vehicles in the country had barely reached

60,000 by 1960. In 1970 the number of private vehicles reached 176,000 and just over 200,000 by 1973. That is to say that as recently as 1973 only 1 household in every 10 had a car. By the same date 50% of households in Argentina had a car which formed a car pool of 2 million vehicles, that is 10 times more than Chile for a country whose population was a little over a double of ours at that time. In the USA 75% of households had cars as far back as 1960.

FIGURE 1: AVAILABILITY OF MODERN GOODS



Looked at from today, the Santiago of 1950 was little more than a large town. The city had 650,000 people in those days. 10 years later the population had doubled and by 1970 was more than 3 million. It is this that is the most relevant phenomenon of that era. Nothing seemed to be able to contain the migratory tide flooding towards Santiago, not even the agrarian reform so timidly started by Alessandri and which accelerated under the government of Frei Montalva. It is not difficult to understand what happens to cities when their population increases 5 times in 20 years or triples in 10 as happened to Santiago between 1960 and 1970. What basically happens is that life becomes worse. There are not enough housing or even the basic services such as drinking water, sewer systems or electricity. What predominate are conditions of overcrowding and an insufficient labour force, where the educational infrastructure cannot absorb all the young

people and where health care always collapses. All this happened in Santiago during this period making it into a city full of slums, which mushroomed overnight in empty pastureland. The other thing, which changes are, numbers. Spaces become saturated with people. The phenomenon was such that you began to hear the words “the popular masses” being used in speeches from the Chilean Left. And in the 60’s and the 70’s that was a real phenomenon, although not in way that the Left understood by masses.

FIGURE 2: POPULATION DISTRIBUTION 1950

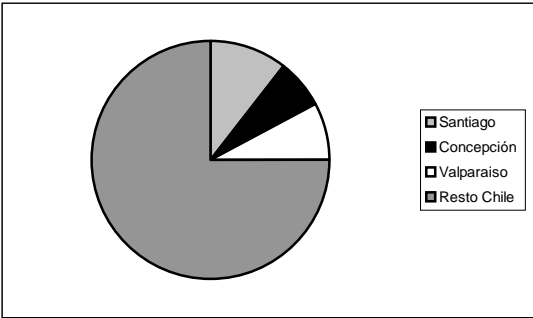


FIGURE 3: POPULATION DISTRIBUTION 1960

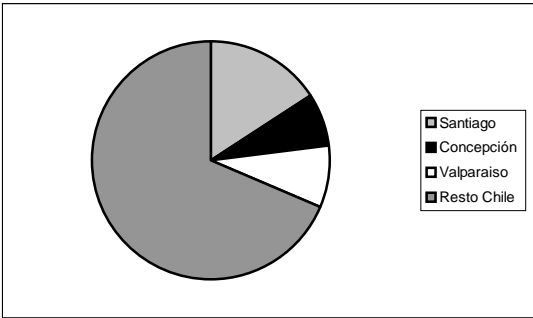
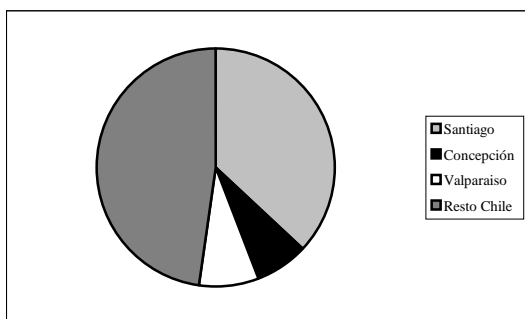


FIGURE 4: POPULATION DISTRIBUTION 1970



The demographic explosion that occurred in Chile and Latin America also determined another characteristic relevant to the population structure of the country: the strong predominance of young people. Information gleaned from censuses indicates that the percentage of the population between 0 and 29 years of age was around 60% from 1950 to 1970 when it reached a maximum of 65.2% and from when it began to decline to 56.7% according to the 1992 census great numbers of young people in a population are a challenge for society mainly as regards the educational system. This was a principal worry of governments since the 40's and during the period of Frei Montalva there was an educational reform programme designed to give a better and larger coverage to primary education. The problem was encountered in secondary education or enseñanza media as it has been called since the 2nd half of 1960. In 1952 only 16.4% of the population between 15 and 19 years of age had matriculated from secondary school. By 1960 this percentage had risen significantly to 31% and by 1970 had reached 34%, even though one considers that the years of enseñanza media (or secondary education) had been reduced to 4. Where there was a really huge transformation during the period from 1950 to 1970 was in the area of higher education. There were 11,00 Chilean University students in 1950 and in 1960 this number had grown to 25,000 while by 1970 it had increased to 78,000. That is to say that the number of students who had entered university had gone up 7 times in 20 years. In 1975 the number of University students reached 147,000.

This is a development, which is worth while stopping and analysing, which we will do a little later.¹

The Populist Character of the First Year of the Unidad Popular Government

The typical Latin American response to the upheavals provoked by rapid and devastating increases in demographic growth which were accompanied by the massive emigration to the cities, was populism. In this sense populism was a political response to the appearance of popular urban masses. The Brazil of Vargas and Goulart reacted to the phenomena of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the Argentina of Peron to the explosive growth of Buenos Aires and later on it was the turn of Alan Garcia's Peru to respond when Lima overflowed with emigrants. Populism is always associated with the idea of caudillos who can restore the bonds of personal loyalty towards themselves from the urban masses that had been dispossessed of such bonds by abandoning their rural open spaces only to find anonymity in the city.

Fundamentally what characterises populism is excess. An excess of words and an excess of expenditure. In this sense it is an experience that is based entirely on a political message, founded on rhetoric, which has a strong and very virulent anti-oligarchic orientation. As is proper and traditional in our culture, words by themselves are not capable of transforming themselves into a principle of political legitimacy, even less so if what is sought is a personal loyalty to the caudillo. As has been repeatedly proved, loyalty is based on the tit for tat principle, which assumes a present and a gift. Nothing binds tighter than a gift has been received. From this need to give in order to sustain the bond of political loyalty stem the two central tenets of populism: its propensity to increase public spending and its tendency to political corruption.

Populism is characterised by a total disinterest in the economy, or at least in its monetary dimension. If the economy has to have some relevance, it will have it in a relationship that subordinates it to politics. Hernando Soto, in his book "El Otro Sendero" ("The Other Path"), about Alan Garcia's Peru, correctly reverts back to the term "mercantilism" to refer to the way in which populist regimes conceive of the economy. The basic economic concern of populism consists of expanding the mass popular demand on which their political support is founded. Priority is therefore

¹ All the data used here has been taken from "International Historical Statistics", by Brian R. Mitchell, Volume "The Americas 1750 – 1993" (1998).

given to public spending without paying any attention to the effects of this uncontrollable expenditure on the economy. As they do whatever they can to keep themselves in power, populist governments always end their days overwhelmed by an inflationary crisis of such magnitude that it requires strong measures for economic adjustment which are generally carried out by the military.

The great populist experience that Chile experienced was headed by Allende during the 3 years of the Unidad Popular government and the greatest mistake that Allende and the Chilean Left committed was precisely the one of not realising the populist basis of their legitimacy and of having believed that they were heading up a revolutionary process which would lead our society to the promised land of socialism. The fatal mistake of the Unidad Popular government was of not understanding the people they represented, and of being convinced, blinded by ideological excesses, that they were leading masses with a revolutionary class conscience and not abandoned urban masses who were seeking to improve the miserable conditions in which they lived.

The Centre for Public Studies has recently edited a mammoth documentary study undertaken by Victor Farias which brings together more than 6,000 pages of speeches, political and economic documents, reports and other sources taken from the most relevant actors on the Chilean Left during the Unidad Popular government. The study is an unquestionably valuable to understanding the deep division between the real populist legitimacy which the Allende government enjoyed among the popular masses and the revolutionary understanding which the elites of the political leadership had of this legitimacy.

The economic policy pursued by the Unidad Popular during its first year in government falls completely inside the boundaries of populism. Allende knew that his political base was weak. He had got to power with the support of less than a third of the vote. An expansive economic policy would be a political weapon that would pay dividends and he put all his efforts towards this end. Basically it was a policy that wanted to pass to the state a hegemonic control over the apparatus of production and credit. To do this meant the nationalisation of mining, intervention in or requisition of national "monopolies" of production, and control of the private banks. The control over monetary policy, which permitted a Central Bank dependent on the government as well as state direction of big business and the banking sector, formed the basis for a strong expansion in demand, generating in 1971 a general feeling of bonanza. Unemployment fell to 3.8%, GDP grew by 8% and consumption per was up 11% more than 1970. In spite of the

fact that inflation was kept under control, it would not be long before an expanding monetary policy would provoke serious imbalances.

And here it is necessary to mention the two great mistakes of those running the economy. The first was the Keynesian focus, which was based on the idea that an expansion in demand would stir into motion that part of the economy that was lying idle, creating a virtuoso circle of growth. However the Chilean economy was a long way from being a depressed industrial economy. It was somewhat depressed, yes, but far from being industrial. What was a virtuoso display from the USA by recovering after the crisis of 1929, by virtue of her accumulated industrial potential only produced an “Indian Summer” type of effect in an economy as simple as the Chilean one. In Chile it was not enough just to “win the battle of production” but first of all to win the battle of capitalisation.

The second mistake was the appropriation of the surplus from foreign trade. The populism of Cardenas in Mexico was able to sustain itself thanks to the huge surplus which resulted from the nationalisation of the Mexican petroleum industry, in the same way as the populism of Peron was backed by income from Argentina’s agricultural exports. Chile, however, was a modest exporter of copper and the depression in its international price prevented Allende’s government from counting on large surpluses here, despite the fact it had nationalised the copper mines.

These two great mistakes in evaluation made sure that this expansion in demand could not be sustained either by production or by foreign trade and thus determined that the bonanza period through which Chile was living would be an extremely short one.

Economic populism, made more extreme by an ideological language, which talked of a revolutionary transformation of society, quickly raised suspicions regarding the Unidad Popular’s interpretation of the law and legal rights. To give an example: the way in which the government intended to compensate expropriations. In the case of North American mining companies, the formula employed, which consisted of discounting excessive profits from them since 1955 led the President of the CUT confirm the following in his report to workers: “To summarise we owe nothing for Chuqui, El Salvador and El Teniente: it’s the North Americans who owe us \$388 million US dollars for these three mines while for La Exotica and La Andina we will be paying around \$19 million US dollars”². A similar logic was applied in the case of land expropriation, where those

² Victor Farias: “La Izquierda Chilena, 1969-1973: Documentos para El Estudio de su Linea Estrategica”, (2000), page 1559. (“The Chilean Left, 1969-1973: documents on their strategy”).

who had their land expropriated ended up by appearing to be indebted to those who had appropriated it. As regards national monopolies, the government looked grounds for their requisitioning in Eduardo Novoa's "Legal ways to advance socialism". These ways consisted in applying certain legal decrees passed under the Socialist Republic in August 1932 and which had never been repealed.

Towards the end of 1971 there were already factors in play, which would augur the conflicts of 1972. Among them could be seen inflation and shortages brought on by the strong expansion in demand, as well as institutional tensions and international pressure (or at least North American) who would provoke the step towards state control of the economy.

It is important to mention another factor here, which perhaps has been played down. Towards the end of 1971 Fidel Castro undertook an extensive visit to Chile. This had an especially relevant significance on the political radicalisation of an important sector of the Left: the young University students.

The Political Radicalisation of the Young

Lenin wrote that Leftism was an infantile sickness: the truth is that it is a juvenile one.

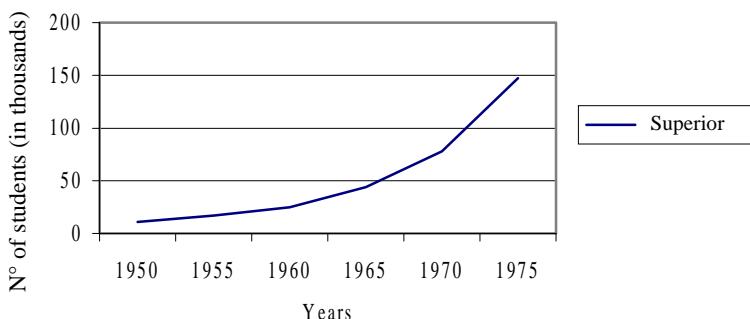
We have already referred to the enormous percentage of young people that there were in Chile during the 70's. This is not an irrelevant piece of data but one that had important consequences. Samuel Huntington has written about the sociological relevance of a young population in a way that is of particular interest for our study:

In the first place, young people are the protagonists of protest, reform and revolution. Historically the existence of great numbers of young people has tended to coincide with such movements. "The Protestant Revolution", it has been said, "is an example of one of the most outstanding youth movements in history". Demographic growth, Jack Goldsmith has persuasively argued, was a central factor in the two waves of revolution that occurred in Eurasia in the mid-17th and late 18th centuries. A notable expansion in the proportion of youths in Western countries coincided with the "Age of Democratic Revolution" in the last decades of the 18th century. In the 19th century, successful industrialisation and emigration reduced the political impact of young populations in European societies. The proportions of youth rose again in the 1920's, however, providing recruits to fascist and other extremist movements. Four decades later, the post World War 2 baby boom

generation made its mark politically on in the demonstrations and protests of the 1960's³.

What the previous quotation is telling us is that a large predominance of young people in the population pyramid has radical political consequences, especially when the economy does not manage to incorporate them into the job market. Furthermore, at no risk of being mistaken, we can confirm that this radicalisation is even more powerful potentially when this young population is found in an incipient but massive institution like the universities.

FIGURA N° 5: THE GROWTH IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS



If we recall the data expressed previously, we can see that university admissions tripled in Chile between 1960 and 1970 and then doubled again between 1970 and 1975. The obvious question that arises from these figures is whether or not the university system had the capacity to provide enough teachers for this avalanche of students. The answer is clear: the same young students, once they had obtained their degrees, transformed themselves into teachers of students who were only slightly younger than they were. In this sense the expansion of university admission did not lead to a maturing of the institution. The thousands of students who were incorporated into the universities did not find professional teachers there but only instructors who improvised and who were marginally older than they were.

Young intellectuals not only have a greater propensity to become captivated by ideological discourses than adults who are involved in more

³ Samuel Huntington "The Clash of Civilisations" (1979), page 139.

responsibilities with the passing of years, but also have a greater facility for legitimising violence as a means of political action. Young figures like “Che” or even young priests like Camilo Torrs inflaming the revolutionary imagination of the young is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to Chile in the 1970’s. We can see these tendencies in radical Islam. The same author quoted before refers to this in the following terms:

As with most revolutionary movements the core element has consisted of students and intellectuals.....

A study of the radical leaders of Egyptian Islamist groups discovered that they had five principal characteristics which appear to be typical of Islamists in other countries. They were young and mainly in their twenties and thirties. Eighty percent were university students or university graduates. More than half came from elite colleges or from intellectually demanding fields of technical specialisation like medicine and engineering. Over 70% were from the lower middle class, “from modest but not poor backgrounds”, and were the first generation in their family to get higher education. They spent their childhood in small towns or rural areas but had become residents of large cities.⁴

The picture painted is not a very different one to what was happening in Chile up to 1973 and not only in Chile but in a great part of Latin America, according to data regarding the growth in university admissions across the continent.

On the 18th of November 1971, Nelson Gutierrez received Fidel Castro at the University of Concepcion with the following words:

“Comandante, this is a country at war. A country divided by a class war, sometimes secret, sometimes open, which can only finish with the victory or defeat of one of the warring parties”.⁵ Castro’s visit became a strong incentive for the political radicalisation of the student Left and not only in the University of Concepcion. And so as the legitimacy of Allende’s government based as it had been on populism and an increase in consumer spending began to weaken among the populace in general, the basis for the legitimacy of the government was sustained for the intellectuals and the young by the promise of a radical revolution and the installation of a revolutionary state or a “dictatorship of the proletariat”. During 1972 populist legitimacy diminished and gave way more and more strongly to revolutionary legitimacy. There were objective factors that contributed to this.

⁴ Ibid, page 134.

⁵ Victor Farias “La Izquierda Chilena...” (2000), page 1304.

During the first part of 1972 the predictable consequences of the strong expansion of spending and demand which had taken place in 1971 began to show themselves in the economy. By August it was already necessary to undertake readjustments in prices (which had previously been fixed) of between 30% and 200%, with the aim of keeping companies solvent. This first price readjustment started an inflationary spiral which exceeded 250% in 1972 and 600% in 1973.⁶ Problems of supply were also appearing together with the rise of a black market in basic consumer goods. It is obvious that this would affect any claim for populist legitimacy. Shortages and inflation are the two black beasts of populism and are so because both of them dramatically undermine the acquisitive capacity of the popular sectors.

The political climate began to change alongside the first visible symptoms of economic crisis and what led to this were precisely the revolutionary proposals and identity of the government. They began to affect the smaller and medium size businessmen who felt threatened by an intensification in the amount of take-overs and labour conflicts whose aims were none other than to take their properties into public ownership and by the threat of requisitioning property belonging to the opposition (principally the transport owners) so as to implement a state distribution system of goods based on coupons such as existed in those societies under Soviet domination.

In this climate of economic crisis and growing social conflict it was the intellectual youth of the Left who profited from the situation pushing the government of the Unidad Popular towards positions that became more and more radical. It is not a document from the MIR but one from MAPU which points out the following:

The Government has not stopped, however, and is willing to keep going. But to do this it is necessary to correct several grave mistakes. The main one has to do with its political style which does not take sufficient account of the masses and their tremendous combat potential. Respect for legality is confused with respect for legalism, the need for efficiency with bureaucracy and the maintenance of order with the immobilisation of the people. In this way an action is taking place which, although profoundly revolutionary in its objectives, is bourgeois in its application by the fact that it does not open channels for the working class to exercise its hegemony and for the masses in general to exercise their vigilant and creative presence.⁷

⁶ CIEPLAN "Resultados Economicos, 1958 – 1989: INE y Banco Central", quoted in Enrique Cañas "Proceso Politico en Chile: 1973 – 1990" (1997), page 85.

⁷ Victor Farias "La Izquierda Chilena..." (2000), page 2537.

It is worthwhile pointing out that MAPU was not exactly a party of the masses but a party of young intellectuals. From the middle of 1972 this party's position, together with the Christian Left and the PS (Socialist Party) within the Unidad Popular and with the MIR and other parties of the Left outside the UP, was an advanced revolutionary one, isolating or gradually neutralising the already disenchanted populist and the gradualism proposed by the PC (Communist Party).

In the middle of 1972 the demands of young political extremism displaced the demands of the masses, demands which the productive and distributive apparatus of society had failed to satisfy. Populism gave way to revolution. Following this path could only lead to supporting the claims of the young Miristas that there was a war in progress which had to end with the victory of one side or the other.

The history of Chile during 1973 is nothing but the tragic collapse of the economy, of politics and of social equilibrium. In the period from September 1972 to September 1973 inflation reached 276%. The political system became highly polarised, which was an expression of the sharpening tensions between the different powers within the state. Labour conflict grew to levels hitherto unheard of and, as a consequence, there were increasing difficulties in maintaining order. In short, Chile was facing a destiny that was well known in so many Latin American countries: a military coup.

When we look back at this period in retrospect, a period that is so close to us in biographical terms but so far away historically, we can only meditate on the lack of a great statesman in our country, on the lack of a great politician who would have been capable of turning back what was seen as an inevitable tragic destiny. Chile had no such man. The persons on the Left, the Centre and the Right, all have the image of feeble historical figures, of men who were only the pawns of history and who lacked the political depth necessary to mould history, change its direction and alter a fatal destiny. Chile had to succumb to the same fate as Argentina and Uruguay, societies which confronted a similar panorama to our own in terms of unsatisfied popular demands and the political radicalism of youth. Brazil acted to control populism before its youth became radicalised, in such a way that the coup which ousted Goulart did not result in the drama of a "dirty war". In Peru populism was unleashed too late, when the radical youth there had already gone over to the armed extremism of the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso). The victims that were grieved over as a result make any of the other processes look pale by comparison.

Neither Allende, nor Frei, nor Alessandri nor anyone else could turn back the tragic destiny which loomed over Chile in 1973. Monuments have

been raised to three of them around the Moneda and probably the fourth will follow in a short time more. They are a mute testimony that, in the memory of peoples, history puts many on an equal footing and only praises a few, precisely those few who shape destiny and mould history itself. There were no men like this in the years when we needed them the most. As a result, we had to face a fate which was our severest yet.

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