



Photo by Esteban Ignacio Paredes Drake.

CHILE

Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, Concepción, Chile, August 2015.

Reflecting on the Revolutionary Left

By Marian Schlotterbeck

Four years ago, in October 2011, I was sitting on a park bench in the southern Chilean town of Tomé, enjoying the warm spring day and talking to retired textile worker Juan Reyes. I had met Reyes in the context of my dissertation research on the rise of Chile's revolutionary left, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, MIR). Over the past months, Reyes had arranged and often accompanied me on interviews with former members of the MIR and its student and labor fronts.

Reflecting on this process of remembering, Juan Reyes said softly, "All this time, no one ever asked about the people, what happened in their lives, and how they felt about it...the Unidad Popular, the dictatorship, the Concertación...*se tapó* — it was all covered up." He paused before adding that even as former *miristas*, "we never talked about it either, about how we were, and what had happened in our lives." The silencing of Chile's

recent history, particularly about what came before the 1973 military coup, was so complete that Reyes initially had been surprised that I had wanted to know about the MIR. When the iconic Bellavista-Tomé textile mill closed in 1997, he was the oldest employee — a distinction that earned him a handful of local history interviews. No one had ever asked about his politics.

I was interested in his politics because I wanted to know *why* everyday people decided to join Chile's revolutionary left. A question we could ask more generally about radical politics: Why does someone wake up and decide to be a revolutionary? These kinds of questions move us towards the realm of subjectivity to consider historical actors and their motivations, hopes, and values. These matters are entirely separate from the viability of a particular political project. Instead, they move us closer to understanding what gave a revolutionary project meaning, then and now.

Oral history happens in the context of the present. Memories of the Unidad Popular years (1970–1973, when Chile had a democratically elected socialist president) were filtered — just as Juan Reyes suggested — through the subsequent experiences of 17 years of military dictatorship with intense repression, exile for some, and broad disenchantment with the unrealized promises of a democratic transition.

But 2011 turned out to be a watershed year for Chileans to rethink their radical past. In the largest social movement since the dictatorship, students occupied the streets and their schools en masse. Like the nearly simultaneous Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, the "Chilean Winter" struck a deep chord of discontent over growing social inequality. What started as protests over education in Chile quickly moved on to question the dictatorship's market-driven neoliberal policies and, by extension, the legitimacy of a political system that still maintained them 20 years after General Pinochet had left office.

Born after the democratic transition in 1990, this so-called "generation without fear" has returned, not just to the streets, but also to politics in new ways. Much has been written about the creative repertoire of student demonstrations that captivated the nation — like the 1,800-hour continuous run around La Moneda (Chile's presidential palace) or the massive kiss-a-thon. One element that caught many by surprise, including on the left, was the reappearance of the red and black flags of the MIR at student marches. Why had this iconography of revolution resurfaced after so many years and to what ends?

As historians, we often shy away from making explicit connections between past and present. A number of structural parallels exist, however, between the 1960s and our contemporary world. The student protests in Chile are responding to Cold War legacies of political violence and neoliberal economic restructuring. As heightened levels of inequality reached a breaking point with the 2008 financial crisis, the second decade of the 21st century resembles a more extreme version of the 1960s. Starting in 2010, we saw a series of movements in different parts of the world — from the *indignados* in Spain to Occupy Wall Street in the United States to the Chilean student movement — that not only questioned, but rejected the neoliberal economic model that once seemed hegemonic.

I want to consider this question of past and present working in two directions. First of all, I want to ask: How

does the past continue to act on the present? As Chilean youth today engage in reimagining political practice, what historical memories do they mobilize?

And, in turn, how does the present-day resurgence of social movements change the kinds of narratives we can tell about the past?

If we consider the Cold War in Latin America, the election of Salvador Allende in 1970 marked a kind of crescendo to the opening of radical options across Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1973 military coup that overthrew his government and brought Augusto Pinochet to power marked a turning point in the consolidation of right-wing violence throughout the region. The chain of military dictatorships across South America spelled defeat for an array of leftist political groups, some of which explicitly validated armed struggle as a legitimate means of carrying out a revolution.

Like many other radical political movements, from the Sandinistas to the Black Panthers, the MIR has been alternately demonized, victimized, and romanticized. After the coup on September 11, 1973, the military junta targeted the MIR as an internal enemy of the state, and *miristas* disproportionately numbered among Chile's disappeared (more than 400 in the first two years of the dictatorship). During the dictatorship, the MIR functioned as a scapegoat for the specter of Marxist subversion that justified ongoing political and social repression.

For decades, the stigma surrounding the MIR effectively curtailed any serious investigation into its formative years. Following the 1990 democratic transition, victimhood became the most accepted narrative. As Chilean social historian Mario Garcés has argued, the MIR remains "a group about whom it is better to speak of as victims — of their own idealism or of state terrorism — rather than as political subjects who proposed a radical transformation of Chilean society." It should hardly be surprising then that no one had bothered or dared to ask Juan Reyes about his politics — the stigma of association with leftist politics had real consequences for decades.

With the return of social movements to the national political scene, 2011 has been called the "awakening of Chilean society." It was also an awakening of historical memory. For the first time in many years, it appeared that all those sacrifices in the past might have been for something. Amid intense debates about Chile's future, many individuals who had been silenced by fear, like

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The front page of the clandestine MIR newspaper, August 1975.

Juan Reyes, openly acknowledged their past activism. For Reyes and his *compañeros* from the textile factory, watching the student protests — and sometimes even accompanying their grandchildren to marches in Concepción — gave a sense of urgency to this task.

But this process of remembering was not always easy, not only because — as Juan Reyes had suggested — their experiences during the Unidad Popular had been repressed for so long, but also because many *miristas* faced what cultural critic John Beverley has described as the “paradigm of disillusionment” —

a refusal among 1960s activists to find anything positive in an experience that ended so badly. Lest it seem like 2011 suddenly made it fashionable for everyone to have been a revolutionary in the 1960s, I want to underscore that most of the grassroots activists I interviewed had not been prominent public figures. They were not accustomed to telling their story; they didn’t have neatly packaged narratives of heroic deeds. Rather, it was the sense of possibility and hope in the present that generated an opening for previously unelaborated memories.

More than one interviewee (around 60 in total) remarked at sensing a flood of speaking more freely than anticipated, of unburdening. Their memories contained multiple timeframes and conflicting emotions of sadness, anger, and hope. To tell their stories and to listen to others was to confront defeat and the consequences of loss. But it was also an opportunity to find one’s ideals again and to remember how it felt to be an agent of change. As one interviewee put it: “People in the MIR gave me the possibility of hope, but it is a hope that I myself build.”

A number of instructive parallels exist between this oral history of activism in 1960s and the student protests in 2011. Too often, endless debates about ideology and strategy forestall an understanding of the impact that these movements for radical change have on participants. Under the auspices of the admittedly grandiose rhetoric of utopias in the 1960s were many smaller transformations of daily life and people’s sense of self. For example, Juan Reyes explained that “people changed” during the Unidad Popular years: “They were no longer content to be little people because they wanted to be more than that. Someone had opened their eyes, and now they could open [the eyes of] others.” Subjective experiences of empowerment and equality remain the Chilean left’s enduring legacy — one that has been overshadowed in the defeat of its major utopian projects.

Young Chileans’ perception of the reality that confronts them today has parallels to the 1960s — in the distance they feel from the state and their suspicion of traditional political parties. In the 1960s, the MIR posed

a challenge to the political system by demanding its expansion to include “the urban and rural poor.” These demands for a more fully participatory and inclusive political system were suppressed, but not resolved, by the military dictatorship. That unresolved contradictions have become visible again should not surprise us. Until new institutions are created that can allow for actual social representation, democracy in Chile (and elsewhere) will always be incomplete, lacking legitimacy in the eyes of many citizens.

In Chile’s case, the 2011 student movement revealed a crisis of legitimacy for the political system, inherited from dictatorship and still governed by the 1980 Constitution. If anything, this crisis has only deepened at a time when politicians across the political spectrum faced mounting scandals over corruption. Today, the discussions in Chile about an Asamblea Constituyente and new constitution reflect the process of social transformation that students set in motion in 2011. Democratization in Chile — and much of the world — remains a pending task and the experiences of 1960s activism offer lessons for how this task might proceed.

Above all, Juan Reyes’ story underscores the real success of the MIR’s grassroots organizing and its capacity to be an ally in diverse social struggles. In a short period of time — from 1965 to 1973 — the MIR and Students ran for 1,800 hours straight around La Moneda, Chile’s presidential palace, to protest poor education in 2011.



Photo by Nicolás Binder.

its many young activists succeeded in promoting a vision that society could be radically transformed through people’s participation. The historical contribution of the MIR was the recognition that change comes from society, not solely from the state. In this sense, long-term changes cannot always be measured by immediate political victories, but rather in the capacity for long-term social transformation.

Understanding this history enables us to comprehend the present-day challenges that students and other activists face as they seek to envision a new social contract for Chile. In their efforts to redefine political practice, it will be important to move beyond the limitations of past political forms and to realize that change happens not just through the state and formal politics, but also from an organized citizenry. In this sense, the usable past of the MIR is its grassroots empowerment, rather than its vanguard politics.

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