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

Editorial

Fifty years after Popular Unity: Chile's *estallido social* in historical context

Joshua Frens-String^{1,*}, Tanya Harmer^{2,*} and Marian Schlotterbeck^{3,*}

¹ Assistant Professor of History, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

² Associate Professor, Department of International History, London School of Economics, London, UK

³ Associate Professor, Department of History, University of California, Davis, CA, USA

* Correspondence: jfstring@utexas.edu (J.F.S.); t.harmer@lse.ac.uk (T.H.); mschlotterbeck@ucdavis.edu (M.S.)

How to Cite: Frens-String, J., Harmer, T., Schlotterbeck, M. 'Fifty years after Popular Unity: Chile's *estallido social* in historical context'. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 14.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2021.v6.1.014>.

Submission date: 9 March 2021; Acceptance date: 6 April 2021; Publication date: 1 June 2021

Peer review:

This article has been through editorial review.

Copyright:

© 2021, Joshua Frens-String, Tanya Harmer and Marian Schlotterbeck. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2021.v6.1.014>.

Open access:

Radical Americas is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

In this article, the co-editors introduce key themes and contributions of this special issue of *Radical Americas*, particularly as they pertain to the 50th anniversary of Chile's Popular Unity revolution (1970–3) and the more recent *estallido social* (social uprising), which began in Santiago de Chile in October 2019. They underline the historical context for contemporary events, arguing the need to recognise the influence, memory and significance of the past in the present.

Keywords: Chile; Popular Unity; revolution; Allende; *estallido social*

This special issue of *Radical Americas* puts into broader historical context the social and political protest in Chile since October 2019 – a process that commentators have come to refer to as the *estallido social* (social uprising). From the vantage point of the 50th anniversary of Chile’s Popular Unity (UP) government (1970–3), it places particular emphasis on the connections between Chile’s radical past and present. As Chileans continue to deliberate the refounding of their country through the writing of a new constitution, such linkages are more relevant today than at any point in recent memory. Bringing together scholars working in Chile, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, the issue therefore seizes the moment to take stock of what we know about the UP period 50 years after that historic experiment while simultaneously probing its significance for contemporary Chilean politics and society. As historian Alison Bruey writes in this special issue of *Radical Americas*, there is no doubt that the UP period continues to represent a ‘cultural touchstone’¹ for progressive movements today, even if many of those contemporary movements for change seek to simultaneously critique certain assumptions that a previous generation of leftist activists held.

The Chilean government’s October 2019 rollout of a 30-peso (approximately 4 cents or 3 pence) fare increase on Santiago’s overcrowded metro system ignited a wave of protests in the months that followed. In the immediate wake of that decision, young people from across the capital took to the streets. Many jumped turnstiles and occupied subway stations as they chanted now-famous slogans like ‘evadir, no pagar, otra forma de luchar’ (evade, don’t pay, another way to fight). As Bruey, Romina Green Rioja and Camilo Trumper discuss, in their contributions to this issue, that discontent quickly escalated when Chile’s conservative president, Sebastián Piñera, declared a ‘state of siege’ in the capital, provocatively adding that Chile was ‘at war’.² As Bruey notes, Piñera’s order marked the first time since the country’s 17-year military dictatorship (1973–90) that the Chilean armed forces had been called into the streets. For many, Piñera’s words brought back dark memories of the Pinochet era.

From nearly one day to the next, the government’s violent response seemed to transform a primarily youth-led protest movement into a national urban awakening. As Mario Garcés Durán describes in his discussion with Peter Winn for this special issue, students lit ‘the fuse of a much broader feeling of discontent’³ that had been building for years. While the scale and speed of this *estallido social* was a surprise, its underlying causes – including structural patterns of abuse, exploitation and marginalisation – were predictable. In the weeks that followed, newspapers and protest signs declared that Chile had ‘awakened’, and in local communities across Santiago and other cities, neighbours joined together to form open town halls and neighbourhood assemblies that addressed what future Chileans envisaged. To many, this moment echoed the sense of protagonism – or ‘historicidad’, as Julio Pinto and Garcés Durán suggest – that people seized during the UP years.⁴ Society reclaimed ownership of politics and insisted on having a voice in determining their collective future. As Green Rioja writes in her article, the open town hall meetings, known in Chile as *cabildos abiertos*, that began in late 2019 ‘were spontaneous and organic but rooted in historical understandings of popular power’.⁵ And a significant reflection of such conversations and power occurred on 25 October 2019, when more than a million people took to the streets of Santiago. Tens of thousands more filled smaller towns and cities across Chile in what many believe to be the largest single day of mobilisation in Chile’s national history.

In the year between protests erupting and a national plebiscite being held on 25 October 2020 to determine Chile’s constitutional future, new battle lines were drawn and demarcated in various ways. Camilo Trumper and other contributors to this special issue reflect on the process by which Santiago’s Plaza Italia, the unofficial boundary between the capital city’s less-well-off downtown districts and its wealthier *barrio alto* neighbourhoods became the site of daily protest.⁶ Renaming the space ‘Plaza de la Dignidad’ (Dignity Square), protestors began to carry out an ‘itinerant’ or ongoing occupation of the plaza.⁷ For several months, masked youth, calling themselves the *primera línea* (front line), acted as irregular defenders of the space. Social identities that previously had little to do with organised politics became central to this process. As Garcés Durán points out in the conversation he recorded with Winn for this special issue, the fans of rival football clubs, for example, were some of the most important political actors in and around the plaza, engaging in near-daily skirmishes with Chile’s heavily militarised national police force.⁸

Indeed, the pervasive nature of state repression has been a defining feature of the period since October 2019. The Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos (National Institute of Human Rights) registered 3,383 testimonies of human rights violations between 18 October 2019 and 5 November 2020. Protestors have been maimed by members of Chile's national police force, and human rights groups have denounced those forces for targeting peaceful demonstrations with tear-gas canisters and rubber bullets. The police practice of firing bullets at protestors' faces has left hundreds of people with lost or impaired vision. Over 400 incidents of sexual violence have also been registered. Despite the government saying it has improved its record since 2019, and although the global pandemic and quarantine laws brought street mobilisations to a temporary halt for much of the subsequent year, almost 500 human rights violations (13.5 per cent of the total figure cited above) were reported as having taken place in 2020, reflecting a continuing pattern of state abuse.⁹

Meanwhile, as a result of COVID-19, the structural nature of violence and exclusion in Chile has only grown more intense. While the pandemic delayed the national plebiscite on the 1980 constitution (originally scheduled for April 2020), it also further showcased the social and economic disparities that rallied millions to the streets in October 2019. Since the *estallido social* began, scholars and commentators have tried to make sense of the seemingly 'spontaneous' nature of Chile's unprecedented protests. As Karen Alfaro Monsalve and Green Rioja point out in their contributions to this special issue, Chile's students have been at the forefront. Following protests by high school students in the early 2000s, Chilean university students led more than two years of street demonstrations beginning in 2011. Many credit that movement with popularising the idea that education in Chile should be a universal social right, rather than a consumer good.

In more recent years, Indigenous groups have been among those who have built upon the work of Chile's student movements, demanding that a new focus on social, cultural and economic rights be enacted to counter the legacies of Chile's free-market dictatorship. Indigenous groups today comprise around 13 per cent of the Chile's total population, but the 1980 constitution does not recognise them in any way. As Fernando Pairican and Marie Juliette Urrutia remind us in their article, exclusion and aggression against the Mapuche people have been obvious and pervasive for centuries in spite of cycles of mobilisation, progress and resistance with the early 1970s being no exception.¹⁰

Similarly, in their article about the nationalisation of copper from below, Ángela Vergara and Georgia Whitaker chart the copper workers' long struggle for labour rights.¹¹ While centring on the UP years, they put this labour struggle in the context of the decades that preceded them and the legacies they had after 1973. As Vergara and Whitaker note, copper workers played a critical role in labour's confrontation with the dictatorship in the 1980s only to be sidelined by the transition back to formal democracy.

Perhaps no group has been more instrumental in advancing demands for a new constitution in recent years than Chile's feminist movement. Emerging out of both national and regional movements against gender-based discrimination, sexual violence on university campuses and ongoing struggles for reproductive rights, the country's feminists made global news in 2018 after they led a series of university occupations and marches to raise awareness about women's rights issues. The movements of that year, detailed in Karen Alfaro Monsalve's article for this issue, became known as Chile's 'Feminist May'.¹² Feminist activism subsequently helped to secure equitable representation on the future constitutional assembly – an historic first. In Romina Green Rioja's words, feminists 'forced Chilean society to publicly engage with collective trauma'¹³ and to advance human rights demands. Now, Chile's feminists see the drafting of a new constitution as an avenue through which to consolidate gender equality and women's rights into law.

Yet, as both Alfaro Monsalve and Gina Inostroza Retamal underline in their contributions to this issue, women's participation in politics is not new.¹⁴ There are important differences to note, as Steven Volk writes in his afterword to this issue.¹⁵ However, in her article, Inostroza draws on oral history to explore routes and forms of female militancy during the UP years, arguing that the experiences of the 1970s had long-lasting legacies.¹⁶ Moreover, Alfaro Monsalve, Inostroza, Bruey, and Pairican and Urrutia all argue that intergenerational transfer of knowledge and praxis over the last 50 years, if not longer, has contributed significantly to Chilean activism – feminist, social, political – today.¹⁷

Indeed, this special issue suggests that the origins of the current push for change in Chile run deep. As Marian Schlotterbeck notes in her piece, Chile's revolutionary Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s questioned the subservience of social movements to traditional political parties in ways that look similar to what we have seen in recent years. But as Schlotterbeck notes, in that previous era the public generally saw political parties as a key tool for fulfilling the demands of popular groups in ways that do not resonate today. Ultimately, assessing these two experiences side by side raises questions about the 'mechanisms for citizen participation' that are possible in Chile.¹⁸

Our efforts to understand the UP years, their significance and legacies, are as important as ever 50 years on. Focusing their attention primarily on Chilean scholarship, José del Pozo, Danny Monsálvez and Mario Valdés's article offers a panoramic view of the enormous historical attention that the period continues to attract today – as well as the historical questions that still need further scholarly attention.¹⁹ As Joshua Frens-String, Marcelo Casals and Tanya Harmer observe in their respective contributions, there are good reasons why the UP remains a fundamental reference point for those interested in radical change today.²⁰ Frens-String notes that Allende came to power with the noble goal of constructing a more equitable model of development.²¹ However, in many ways, that programme, like others since, was stymied by the UP's inability to think or act beyond the economic paradigms of its day, in particular the developmentalist and Keynesian models it inherited. Casals points out that the political forces of the Chilean Right were only too willing to help obstruct the construction of a new social and economic system.²² In this regard, Casals's article in this issue puts particular emphasis on the long history of anti-communism, detailing what this meant in a Chilean context, and why it had such potency in blocking radical change. In her historiographical essay surveying scholarship of the UP's international and global dimensions, Harmer also points to the Right's contemporary manipulation of the idea of a 'foreign' threat while ignoring its own support and inspiration abroad as eerily reminiscent of the early 1970s.²³ As Volk notes in his insightful reflections that conclude the issue, there are 'lines of clear historical continuity and evidence of lessons learned rooted in events of a half-century past'.²⁴ For all the contributors in this *Radical Americas* special issue, in fact, the past weighs heavily on challenges that exist today as Chileans try to chart a new course forward.

All of this said, in many ways the types of movements that have coalesced since October 2019 to win overwhelming approval for writing a new constitution give much to be optimistic about. To return to Garcés Durán's analysis once more, the diversity of movements involved in the *estallido social* is perhaps illustrative of an even more profound and democratic process than that which occurred in the early 1970s. To use Garcés Durán's words, contemporary Chile is being pushed towards some yet-to-be determined process of reform by a 'movement of society'.²⁵ This notion, which the Chilean historian contrasts with the more traditional notion of a 'social movement', underscores the popular character of the last year of struggle. In particular, Garcés Durán emphasises the fact that a whole host of discredited and delegitimised political organisations and parties have been sidelined since October 2019, superseded by new actors – from neighbourhood groups to social organisations to students and beyond.²⁶

While Allende and the UP committed themselves to working within the country's existing political structures of their era to pursue radical change, Chileans today have shown their determination to reimagine where and how democracy itself can be practised going forwards. The formation and deliberations of a new, citizen-led constituent assembly – an act that more than three-quarters of Chileans supported on 25 October 2020 – will be the centre of that process in the months to come. Since Allende's democratic road to socialism was brought to a violent end by the 1973 military coup, Chileans' ability to recreate their society has never looked as possible as it does today.

Author biographies

Joshua Frens-String is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Hungry for Revolution: The Politics of Food and the Making of Modern Chile* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021). Tanya Harmer is Associate Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011) and *Beatriz Allende: A*

Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). Marian Schlotterbeck is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors are Guest Editors of the journal's special issue *Chile's Popular Unity at 50* this article is included in. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

- ¹Bruey, 'Protest and the persistence of the past', 3.
- ²Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power'; and Trumper, 'The politics of the street'.
- ³Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue', 2.
- ⁴Mario Garcés and Julio Pinto, 'A 50 de la Unidad Popular y aportas de un Proceso Constituyente', 8 September 2020, online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0cZE61P_tY.
- ⁵Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power', 11.
- ⁶Trumper, 'The politics of the street'.
- ⁷'Una plaza donde buscar la "dignidad" para Chile', *EFE*, 18 January 2020, <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/una-plaza-donde-buscar-la-dignidad-para-chile/20000013-4153191>.
- ⁸Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue', 3.
- ⁹See Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 'Informe Anual: Sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos en Chile en el contexto de la crisis social', 18 Octubre–30 Noviembre 2019, <https://bibliotecadigital.indh.cl/bitstream/handle/123456789/1701/Informe%20Final-2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> and 'Informe de seguimiento recomendaciones: Primer Informe de Seguimiento a las Recomendaciones del INDH en su Informe Anual 2019', 2 February 2021, 11–14, <https://www.indh.cl/bb/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Primer-Informe-de-Seguimiento-de-Recomendaciones.pdf>.
- ¹⁰Pairican and Urrutia, 'The permanent rebellion'.
- ¹¹Whitaker and Vergara, "'To work more, produce more and defend the revolution'".
- ¹²Alfaro Monsalve, 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP'.
- ¹³Green Rioja, 'Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power', 3.
- ¹⁴Alfaro Monsalve, 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP'; and Inostroza Retamal, 'The presence of left-wing militant women'.
- ¹⁵Volk, 'Concluding reflections'.
- ¹⁶Inostroza Retamal, 'The presence of left-wing militant women'.
- ¹⁷Alfaro Monsalve, 'Women in Chile 50 years after the UP'; Inostroza Retamal, 'The presence of left-wing militant women'; Bruey, 'Protest and the persistence of the past'; and Pairican and Urrutia, 'The permanent rebellion'.
- ¹⁸Schlotterbeck, "'A new power structure will be built from the grassroots'", 2.
- ¹⁹Del Pozo Artigas et al., 'Scholarship on the Popular Unity in Chile since 2000'.
- ²⁰Frens-String, 'A "popular option" for development?'; Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'; and Harmer, 'Towards a global history of the Unidad Popular'.
- ²¹Frens-String, 'A "popular option" for development?'.
- ²²Casals, 'The Chilean counter-revolution'.
- ²³Harmer, 'Towards a global history of the Unidad Popular'.
- ²⁴Volk, 'Concluding reflections', 3.
- ²⁵Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue', 3.
- ²⁶Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue', 14.

References

- Alfaro Monsalve, Karen. ‘Women in Chile 50 years after the UP: “The revolution will be feminist or nothing at all...”’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 11. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Bruey, Alison J. ‘Protest and the persistence of the past’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 1. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Casals, Marcelo. ‘The Chilean counter-revolution: Roots, dynamics and legacies of mass mobilisation against the Unidad Popular’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 13. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Del Pozo Artigas, José, Danny Monsálvez Araneda, and Mario Valdés Urrutia. ‘Scholarship on the Popular Unity in Chile since 2000. Are historians lagging behind?’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 8. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Frens-String, Joshua. ‘A “popular option” for development? Reconsidering the rise and fall of Chile’s political economy of socialism’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 9. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Garcés Durán, Mario, and Peter Winn. ‘Movements in dialogue’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 7. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Green Rioja, Romina A. ‘Collective trauma, feminism and the threads of popular power: A personal and political account of Chile’s 2019 social awakening’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 2. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Harmer, Tanya. ‘Towards a global history of the Unidad Popular’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 4. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Inostroza Retamal, Gina. ‘The presence of left-wing militant women within projects of *poder popular* during the Popular Unity years in Concepción and Santiago de Chile (1970–1973)’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Pairican, Fernando, and Marie Juliette Urrutia. ‘The permanent rebellion: An interpretation of Mapuche uprisings under Chilean colonialism’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 12. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schlotterbeck, Marian. ‘“A new power structure will be built from the grassroots”: The challenge of radical democracy in Allende’s Chile’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Trumper, Camilo. ‘The politics of the street: Street art, public writing and the history of political contest in Chile’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 3. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Volk, Steven S. ‘Concluding reflections’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 17. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Whitaker, Georgia, and Ángela Vergara. ‘“To work more, produce more and defend the revolution”: Copper workers from socialism to neoliberalism’. *Radical Americas* 6, 1 (2021): 5. [[CrossRef](#)]