

Salvador Allende's Brief Experiment in Radical Democracy in Chile Began 50 Years Ago Today

Socialist leader Salvador Allende became Chile's president fifty years ago today. Allende's election inaugurated a unique experiment in radical democracy that was cut short by Augusto Pinochet's brutal US-backed coup.



"What really changed for Chile's revolutionary left was Allende's election, because suddenly it opened up the possibility for effervescent grassroots social struggle."

Fifty years ago today, Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile. His thousand days in office raised the hopes of millions in Chile, enacting policies to nationalize industries, expand education, and empower workers. It remains a much-discussed chapter not only in Latin America but among the international left.

In her book, [*Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende's Chile*](#), historian Marian Schlotterbeck brings to life the spirit of "everyday" revolution that characterized the period of Allende's government. While the Popular Unity government often preached moderation, it unleashed radical changes from the bottom up — raising the hopes of the historically oppressed

that society could be remade for their benefit rather than the “Yankee imperialists” or traditional landed elite. The September 11 coup crushed those popular democratic dreams.

In the following interview — which has been condensed and edited for clarity, and first appeared on the radio show [*Against the Grain*](#) — Sasha Lilley speaks with Schlotterbeck about Chile’s three-year experiment with a socialism that was both top-down and bottom-up.

Sasha Lilley

What were the currents of the traditional left in Chile?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Starting in the late nineteenth century, Chile had a very strong labor movement that came out of the northern nitrate mines and the southern textile and coal mining communities, and that militant leftist labor movement allied itself to the emergent political parties that represented the working class: the Communist Party and the Socialist Party.

Across the twentieth century, the goal of those two parties was to take state power through engaging in electoral politics. And that’s what Allende’s victory represented in 1970. It might have shocked the world, but it was part of a decades-long strategy by the Left in Chile to take power through peaceful means.

Sasha Lilley

Chile was regarded as a more middle-class country than some in Latin America. What did Chilean society look like, and what were the forces politically, economically, and socially?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Chilean politics typically broke down into what were called “the three thirds.” There was the Right, there was the center (represented by the Christian Democratic Party), and the Left (represented primarily by the Socialist and Communist Party as well as the smaller leftist factions).

Chile had a fairly large urban population, largely concentrated around Santiago, the capital, and the industrial port cities of Valparaíso and Concepción. While industrial workers had gained significant political rights in the 1930s, rural workers had been systematically excluded from those same rights to unionize and organize. That started to change in the 1960s as Chile’s political system opened up to include more actors.



That period begins with the 1964 election of Christian Democrat [Eduardo Frei](#), who promised a “Revolution in Liberty,” a sort of middle-class revolution that was in large part bankrolled by the US government’s Alliance for Progress. This was [John F.] Kennedy’s vision — stave off the threat of communist revolution by improving standards of living across the continent. The US government realized it could no longer keep supporting the same oligarchs who had been in power since the nineteenth century. The Christian Democratic Party became seen as, in the words of one US policymaker, the “last best hope.”

Eduardo Frei started carrying out a series of progressive but still relatively moderate reforms. Things like land distribution, which really had not been touched in Chile since independence in the early nineteenth century. For a lot of the traditional landed elites in Chile, that agrarian reform in the ’60s was the beginning of the end. Allende’s election was just one more step. As much as the Frei government wanted to carry out a very moderate transformation of Chilean society, they also raised expectations. And they weren’t able to meet those rising expectations, both from rural peasants as well as from the urban homeless poor, who were engaged in a series of shantytown land occupations.

Sasha Lilley

How did the Right and the traditional elites respond to these reforms?

Marian Schlotterbeck

One key element of Chilean history is the extent to which there’s an

authoritarian right that doesn't believe in democracy at all. When its back is up against the wall, it's going to turn to force, to violent repression, to maintain its hold on power. For example, landowners started to arm themselves to take back or defend their land from being expropriated or occupied by peasants.

Sasha Lilley

Allende didn't come out of the blue when he was elected in September of 1970. Who backed him, and what parties came into coalition behind him?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Allende led the Popular Unity coalition, which was composed of the two largest parties, the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, as well as smaller leftist parties. Allende's election represented a victory for workers and for the working class — the non-elite, popular sectors of Chile. They saw his victory as their own.



There had been a massive groundswell of popular support for Allende beginning in the 1960s. Chilean society in the 1960s experienced a number of different social movements, from the peasants' movement to the shantytown movement to a very active university-reform student movement.

So, you see the ways in which society is mobilizing, and that brings Allende into power. It wasn't that his election suddenly, overnight, inspired all these people to mobilize and demand more of their government and to begin carrying out transformations on their own. It's the reverse: the movement is what made

possible Allende's electoral victory in 1970.

Sasha Lilley

What did Allende campaign on? What was his agenda?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Allende promised a peaceful revolution through the ballot box. He promised to redistribute wealth. He wanted to end foreign control as well as monopoly control over the Chilean economy. And he wanted to deepen democracy by extending things like worker participation in factories.

Sasha Lilley

How did his coalition come together? Was it a kind of motley crew, or different entities with a pretty similar vision?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Chilean party politics, throughout the twentieth century, was built around forming coalitions. In the 1930s and 1940s, Chile had a number of successful [Popular Front](#) coalition governments, and in some ways, Allende's Popular Unity was just a reconstituted version of what the Chilean left had been doing all along.

That said, because it wasn't a single party, there were, of course, differences between the Socialists and the Communists. There were differences between those inside and outside Allende's governing coalition, particularly critics from the Left.

Sasha Lilley

Tell us about the far left. For a long time, the dominant model in Latin America was armed struggle to overthrow the state. Was there a revolutionary left in Chile that was trying to go the Cuban route?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Yes. In 1965, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) was founded by dissidents from the Communist and Socialist parties. They drew inspiration from the model of the [Cuban Revolution](#), but they also drew on Chile's much longer tradition of anarchism and labor activism. The MIR, in its early phase, was a motley crew of this older generation of dissidents from the 1930s and a young generation of rebellious youth in the universities who participated actively in the reform movement.

In the 1960s, with the Christian Democrats in power, the MIR did support armed struggle. They said, "We've looked at the models. Look how many times Allende's run for office, and he never wins. Why are we going to keep supporting this same old, tired strategy?" What really changed for Chile's revolutionary left was Allende's election, because suddenly it opened up the possibility for effervescent grassroots social struggle.



Allende was often called the *compañero* president. He promised that, unlike in the past, state force was no longer going to be used to repress people. A lot of different sectors of society saw this as a green light to go forward with their vision for change because the president was behind them. Things were going to be different from before, where so often the police and the military had come in to break strikes and to forcibly evict people from squatter settlements.

Sasha Lilley

What did those [thousand days](#) of Allende's Popular Unity government look like on the ground? How much was changed or altered?

Marian Schlotterbeck

So often, we talk about “capital R” revolution — the seizing of state power — that’s when the revolution happens. But there’s so many ways in which there were smaller transformations: people stood up to the boss for the first time, people organized their neighbors and collectively carried out an action to occupy land and started building their homes and building a new community. These are really radical transformations in the ways in which people conceive of themselves, in the ways in which they conceive of their place in society.

What happened in Chile was what I call “everyday revolutions” — transformations in how people saw their place in society, and saw an opening to act. In some ways, I think these smaller-scale transformations are a lot less threatening than that specter of armed insurrection, than the bearded ones in the mountains or the scruffy college students building bombs in the cities. These are the images that we often think of when we imagine Latin American revolutionaries.

But as people came together to try to transform their daily realities, those transformations challenged the status quo, challenged the de facto powers that had been held by the traditional landed elite in Chile. And so they were a threat to the status quo — they were claiming a life with greater dignity, a life in which they felt like equals in society.

Sasha Lilley

There were also demands to move more quickly, seizing land and pushing changes faster, is that right?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Yes, that’s right. A classic debate about revolution is how fast you go. Do you move as quickly as possible and try to consolidate your hold on power by consolidating those revolutionary changes, or do you go step by step?

Allende was very much committed to working within Chile’s institutional system, working within Chile’s constitution, and at a certain point, there was a contradiction, because the constitution was not written to benefit the working class. It was a document built to reinforce the power of those who already had it.

And so part of what the Chilean experiment with socialism illustrates are the real limits of liberal capitalist democracy to respond to people’s needs. What happens when more and more people have a stake in the process and they want to demand something of it? To what extent can a liberal democratic system open up and be responsive? And what’s the breaking point?

Sasha Lilley

You studied the city of Concepción, where workers threw themselves into this process to challenge the powers that be. What forces of reaction were apparent there and elsewhere in the country?

Marian Schlotterbeck

The first year Allende was in power, his government was quite successful at carrying out its policies, and the opposition was not particularly vocal. But starting in 1972, they launched what was called the “Boss’s Lockout.” This was part of a strategy to bring the Chilean economy to a standstill. Now, thanks to the [National Security Archive](#) in Washington, DC, we have all of the documents

detailing the US government's role in promoting this policy — the direct order from Richard Nixon to “make the economy scream” that was given within days of Allende being elected in September 1970.



One of the classic memories, or images, of the Allende years is waiting in line, of there not being sugar, of there not being oil, of there being rationing and shortages for basic consumer goods. A lot of those shortages, as we now know, were artificially created. Shopkeepers decided to take products off the shelf and sell them at higher profits on the black market rather than meet the growing consumer demand that Allende had created through his policies.

One of the iconic images of the Allende years was in one of these lines: a worker has a large poster that says, “Under this government, I have to wait in a line, but I support this government because it’s mine.” People were aware that the opposition to Allende’s government was what was undermining him — not his own incompetence, not the Left’s own incompetence.

Yes, there were inefficiencies and challenges, but it really was the concerted effort by the economic and political forces opposed to Allende (alongside the military and the different actions by the US government) that were effectively blocking Allende’s ability to carry out his policies the way that he had promised.

Sasha Lilley

What was the sense at the time of the degree to which the United States was involving itself in undermining Allende’s government?

Marian Schlotterbeck

I think most people knew, and part of this was because a scandal broke in 1972

that the Chilean subsidiary of ITT had lobbied the [CIA](#) to intervene and fund different renegade military factions in Chile to try to keep Allende out of office during that brief two-month window between when he was elected in September of 1970 and when he would be sworn in, in November 1970. So it was fairly common knowledge that, despite the public declarations by the White House that they were neutral toward Chile or that they had no official oppositional stance to him, behind the scenes, the CIA as well as the White House were actively opposed to Allende.

Sasha Lilley

Allende's government was [overthrown](#) on September 11, 1973. In the months leading up to that, was it apparent that such an authoritarian solution was in the offing?

Marian Schlotterbeck

Many people thought a coup was coming. It seemed apparent that Allende was not going to be able to finish his six-year term. But I think very few Chileans had any sense of just how [violent and brutal](#) the military repression would be. Violence was unleashed not just against Allende and members of his government, but against all those sectors of society — the workers, the peasants, the mother centers, the shantytown residents, the students — who had mobilized to support Allende, but also just mobilized to be a part of society, to be an active force in a broader democratization of Chilean political life.



There were mass-scale arrests and detentions in the days and weeks following the [coup](#), and those then pivoted, with the creation of the secret police force, to

targeted execution and the detention and disappearance of leftist political militants. The MIR, the Socialists, and the Communists, other leftist groups — there was a targeted effort to eliminate them.

Part of what makes Chile's experience with dictatorship and repression a bit different from other Latin American countries is the number of Chileans who actually survived the clandestine torture centers. Official truth commission reports acknowledge 3,200 Chilean citizens were executed or murdered by the regime, but 38,000 were political prisoners who survived detention and torture, and another estimated 100,000 experienced shorter detention periods and mass raids on their working-class communities.

I think the level of violence also meant that many Chileans started to believe some of the narratives that the regime propagated about why this was necessary. People needed a narrative to make sense of why this was happening, and so with time, they started to believe that some of these leftist groups hadn't just been the local schoolteacher or the local mayor or the baker, they'd actually been part of these subversive terrorist elements.

That culture of fear really worked its way into the fabric of Chilean society during seventeen years of military dictatorship. Chile's dictatorship lasted much longer than most of the other military dictatorships in power in South America at this time.

Sasha Lilley

What lessons did the Latin American left take away from the crushing of this electoral revolution, if we can call it that? Do you think that it reinforced the notion that armed struggle was the only way?

Marian Schlotterbeck

It certainly does if you look at Central America in the '70s and the '80s. The problem posed by the Chilean experience is, how do you work with an opposition that's not willing to play by the rules of the democratic game? Of all the criticisms that people could make of Allende, he was really the true democrat.

Looking at Chile under Allende highlights the tensions in these unresolved questions about what avenues really exist for citizens to participate in a liberal capitalist democracy. Beyond voting in elections every four years, what platforms exist for their voices to be heard?

It also speaks to the tensions in the relationship between social movements and political parties. To what extent are political parties co-opting and controlling social movements? To what extent can social movements remain outside of institutional channels and be effective at pressuring and changing the conversation more broadly within a society?

The military takeover didn't resolve those questions. It simply repressed them.