

READING 7

The Chilean Struggle for Truth and Justice

In 1988 growing domestic and international pressure forced Pinochet to permit a referendum on his regime. Years of devastating hunger strikes and demonstrations had paid off. The choice was simple: a “yes” vote would extend Pinochet’s rule for eight more years; a “no” would initiate a transition back to democracy. On October 5, despite scare tactics and a well-funded campaign in support of the 73-year-old dictator, the people of Chile chose democracy. On March 11, 1990, Pinochet formally stepped down and Chile began a long and painful road to democracy, truth, and reconciliation.

How important had the *arpilleras* been in ending Chile’s long nightmare? The historian Peter Winn argues that during the last years of the dictatorship activists “used all means available to dramatize the plight of Chileans under the dictatorship—human rights organizations like Amnesty [International] and the UN . . . , speaking tours, media appearances and publications, musical performances—and the *arpilleras*.” The *arpilleras*, “whose authenticity was very moving, [played] an important role in [this] process.” They were particularly successful, Winn says, “in making Pinochet the emblematic dictator and human rights abuser of the era,” and “in creating international sympathy and support for his victims and opponents.”¹



AP Photo/Dario Lopez-Mills.

Violeta Morales (far right) holds a vigil with other women commemorating the disappeared.

When Pinochet stepped down, the Vicaría de la Solidaridad considered its job done: soon the *arpillera* workshops were dismantled. But although many of the weavers have since died or are now too old to weave, a new generation of artists has sprung up to continue the work begun during the dictatorship. Close to 2,000 women work under the auspices of a new organization. “The *arpilleristas* represented by Fundación Solidaridad,” Agosín explains, “represent continuity, but also an extension of motives, themes and a philosophy espoused by the first *arpilleristas*.”² Their political art continues to document social injustice and the *arpilleras* provoke discussions about how to incorporate the memory of the missing into Chile’s history. These artists continue to believe in the power of women and the effectiveness of nonviolence protest. In recent years,

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Arpillera 8: This arpillera symbolizes the women pushing away the wall of the dictatorship to foreshadow the beginning of democracy.

arpilleristas have not only asserted the rights of the poor to land, water, electricity, and education, they have also denounced a judicial system reluctant to punish the most bloodthirsty of Pinochet's followers.

Elsa Esquivel Rojo, whose son Luis is one of the disappeared, speaks of her anger and her need to know the truth:

Some people say that one day we will have to learn to forgive, but I don't agree. If I knew who had taken my son, I wouldn't pick up a weapon and kill them, because I don't believe in the death penalty, but I wouldn't pardon them. . . . I would give up my home to have some kind of answer! We have to have some kind of justice for criminals, but a justice without amnesty, so that those who are responsible are punished and so that this will never happen again.³

As Esquivel's comments suggest, the Pinochet legacy has not been handled to everyone's satisfaction. With Patricio Alwyn, the first democratically elected

president since 1973, Chile began a long and painful journey. The search for truth and justice proved frustrating and, at times, hopeless. Then Pinochet was arrested. Hopes soared. But the British magistrate who authorized the arrest in October 1988 ordered the ailing former dictator to be released 16 months later on "humanitarian grounds."⁴ Late in 2005 a court in Chile finally found Pinochet fit to stand trial and cleared the way for charging him with human rights violations, tax fraud, and embezzlement. Other officials, including the notorious head of the DINA, Manuel Contreras, had already faced charges of abduction, torture, and murder.⁵ But it was always doubtful that Pinochet would make it through a trial as prolonged as his promised to be. In December 2007, shortly after being placed under house arrest, he died of a heart attack in the middle of extended and complicated legal proceedings.

At the end of 2004, a commission headed by Sergio Valech, a former archbishop of Santiago, published its report on crimes committed against Chileans by the state between 1973 and 1990.⁶ The commission recommended that a pension and health and educational benefits be granted to each of the regime's victims. President Ricardo Lagos accepted the commission's recommendations; for Chile to move forward, he felt, the state needed to

* Having interviewed roughly 35,000 former detainees, the commission concluded that close to 28,000 people had been detained by the military and that 94 percent of them were brutally interrogated and tortured. Some 3,400 women gave evidence; all had been victims of sexual assault or physical torture or both.

acknowledge the crimes committed in its name. He drafted a program with a resonant title: “There Is No Tomorrow Without Yesterday” (*No hay mañana sin ayer*).⁶ This statement and other recently issued admissions of guilt by the Chilean military have dispelled once and for all the lies promoted by Pinochet’s staff—that they knew nothing about the disappeared.

Early in 2006 Chile came full circle: a majority of the people elected Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria president. Michelle Bachelet’s father had been punished by Pinochet’s minions for serving in Allende’s government. Detained and tortured, he died in prison of a heart attack. Bachelet and her mother were also detained and tortured until, thanks to connections in the military, they were deported. An independent, educated socialist in a country that until recently marginalized women, Michelle Bachelet represents many of the values the arpilleristas fought to restore.⁷

In an interview she gave at the beginning of her presidency, Bachelet reflected on the times:

I’m a completely normal woman in Chile. In fact, we have experienced a cultural shift in the last 30 years. Many women run social organizations, are union leaders, and play important roles in their children’s schools. The only place where women were still absent was at the higher levels of government. . . . [As far as the disappeared go, a] country that has experienced such deep trauma as Chile can never be completely healed. I’m a doctor, so allow me to use a medical analogy to explain the problem: only cleaned wounds can heal, otherwise they’ll keep opening up again, and will likely become infected and begin to fester. It’s clear to me that the truth must be brought to light. Of course, there are those . . . who just want to sweep everything under the rug. In a constitutional state, the government must take steps to ensure that the judiciary can operate without obstruction. The fact that I was elected shows that Chile has a mature society. And that’s why most citizens insist that no one should be allowed to place themselves above the law and escape punishment.⁸

REBUILDING CHILE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE BACHELET

Michelle Bachelet was elected the first woman president of Chile. Her father served under Allende's government and was imprisoned and tortured by Pinochet's secret police; he died of a heart attack in prison. Both Bachelet and her mother were also detained and tortured by the Pinochet regime, only to be sent into exile. For many, Bachelet symbolizes the radical transformation of Chile since the dictatorship. In this interview with PBS's *Online NewsHour*, she discusses the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the process of rebuilding trust among all Chileans:

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: In your speech, in your victory speech you said, "Because I was the victim of hate, I've consecrated my life to turning hate into understanding, tolerance, and why not say it—love."

As president, what policies will you follow to promote this kind of understanding and tolerance between those who tortured and killed in the past and those who were tortured, like you?

MICHELLE BACHELET: Well, I won't begin this now. I started it when I was minister of defense, and I will be doing it wherever I am until the day I will die.

It's the idea of how we're able to build bases in our society where tolerance, understanding of diversity, integration and not discrimination will be the main policies.

When I'm speaking of love, when I'm speaking of reversing hate, I'm speaking not only of reconciliation—even I don't use that word—I use another word in Spanish, that's called "reencuentro"—it's not reconciliation.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It's more a re-coming together would you say?

MICHELLE BACHELET: Yes. It's something like that because "reconciliation" is when somebody—it's related to forgiveness—and that's very individual. Some people forgive, some people do not.

So that's why I say—but let's use *reconciliation*—we will have to continue advancing in reconciliation between people who were victims and their families and people who were responsible for that. . . .

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I want to talk just a little about your own situation. For example, for you, is it important that the people who mistreated you and your mother and who were responsible for the death of your father be tried? Have there been trials of . . . any of those people who were responsible for those acts?

MICHELLE BACHELET: Well, some of them—not all because, you know, we were blindfolded so we couldn't recognize who those specific persons were.

But I don't look at this as a personal issue, you know. I look at it as a process where justice must do the work and the important thing is in our country we do have trials . . . going on.

We are advancing and under my government we will still advance on three great principles: truth, justice, and reparation for all the victims, all the families of the victims.

We have been walking in that direction. And I will do all my efforts to continue in that direction. I mean—no impunity—no! Because I'm a doctor, I know when you have an injury it will heal if it's clean enough to heal; if your injury is dirty, it won't heal.

And so when you are talking in societies, we are also talking in healing processes, and for a good healing process, you need to make things right. . . .

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I was really interested that night in the celebration many people said to me—even people who suffered a lot under the dictatorship—“We really appreciate the fact that Dr. Bachelet is willing to forgive.”

You suffered a lot. You don't like to talk about it. Your mother was six days in a cage the size of like a square. Your father died because of the tortures—he wrote letters you've read I'm sure that are the saddest letters one could imagine, about what happened to him.

MICHELLE BACHELET: Yes.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: How do you come to this position of being so positive about the possibility for *reencuentro*—the coming together of the nation?

MICHELLE BACHELET: I wouldn't be honest if I told you that in some moment of my life I [did not have] a lot of rage—probably hate—I'm not sure of hate, but rage.

But you know what happens is that then you realize you cannot do to others what you think nobody has to do to anybody. Life is important for me and not any kind of life, quality too of life.

So probably it's strange or it's difficult to understand, but everything that happened to me made me not only rationally but emotionally get to a deep conviction.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Conviction?

MICHELLE BACHELET: Yes, conviction. And that is that I have to do my best to create all the conditions in our country in order that we will be able to guarantee to further generations that they will never have to live what we had to live.⁹

CONNECTIONS

1. What do you think is the right way to address the needs and demands of people whose loved ones disappeared? If Chile is to move forward, what kind of justice should these families expect? What have other countries done to respond to the needs of victims of mass violence?
2. How can a government that abides by liberal laws cope with the legacy of dictatorial rule and massive human rights violations? Why is it important for the state to acknowledge crimes committed in its name?
3. Patricia Politzer, an outspoken critic of dictatorship and a member of the Chilean government elected after the fall of the dictatorship, described Pinochet's state of mind before his arrest in London in 1998:

Pinochet had taken the trip to England [primarily] for pleasure. Before departing Chile, the general and his advisors knew that legal proceedings against him were under way in Spain, but Great Britain was his favorite country, and he wanted to visit. . . . The general felt safe, and he boarded the plane to London with complete calm. He believed he had nothing to fear. Since leaving power eight years earlier, he had traveled on various occasions, and, apart from some more or less strident demonstrations by human rights groups, had not faced any mishaps.¹⁰

What do you think can and should be done to fight the complacency that allowed Pinochet and other leaders accused of awful crimes to get away with it? What are the responsibilities of the international community when it comes to people who have committed gross violations of human rights? What do you think the arrest of Pinochet in England can teach us?

4. In what ways did the arpilleristas and other women help Chile move toward democracy?
5. In the interview, President Bachelet says that the process of reconciliation in Chile must start with saying no to impunity. She also refers to Chile's 17 years of dictatorship as a wound. Why do you think Bachelet emphasizes that impunity would block the process of reconciliation?