

Alan Angell

Memories of Pinochet's Chile

Memories are not always accurate history. This account is a record of what I remember of the time I spent in Chile under the military dictatorship – which may or may not be historically accurate.

Memories of Silence

From 1966 onwards I was a frequent visitor to Chile until the coup of 1973. I returned to Chile under Pinochet only in 1981 – just before the economic collapse of 1982, and the start of a process of very modest liberalisation. I did not go to Chile earlier as it seemed that – thanks to my involvement in the campaign to help Chilean refugees – I might be followed, which could create problems, not necessarily for me, but for those with whom I met.

On arrival, I was struck was by the eerie silence in the lines to go through immigration and customs at the airport. Practically no one spoke and the atmosphere was tense, even sinister. The officials seemed to enjoy the fear that was generated – though I was allowed in without much fuss having stated that my profession was that of a geographer.

But silence was not limited to the airport. I was told to be careful when talking to strangers, and on the phone, and to take care that political conversations were not overheard. I was also told to be careful of talking politics in taxis just in case. People seemed subdued. At times during my

visits, there was a curfew and the only sound in the night was that of the helicopters surveying the city. It was very eerie.

One day I was sitting in *La Coppelia*, an ice-cream parlour in Providencia. Outside were the street salesman (*vendedores ambulantes*). Suddenly a car drew up outside – it had no number plates which meant it was part of the security services. Several men leapt from the car and proceeded to savagely beat one of the salesmen, pushed him into the car and drove off. The reaction inside the café was a complete and embarrassed silence. People just did not want to know. If it was like this in a wealthy part of the city, imagine what it would be like in the shanty towns.

When, in 1988, the announcement of the plebiscite allowed for some degree of free debate, the nation was electrified as they watched a debate on television. Ricardo Lagos (later to become President) demanded the attention of the TV camera (*cámara por favor*), aggressively pointed with his finger, and uttered the phrase – *hablo por quince años de silencio* (I speak for fifteen years of silence). The phrase crystallised the fear created by the years of dictatorship. In the rallies that were allowed once a plebiscite had been announced, whenever Lagos appeared, there were cries of '*el dedo*' – the finger.

Memories of Censorship

Another feature of the dictatorship was censorship. Most newspapers did not need to be censored because they supported the regime. Although a mass-circulation newspaper would not have been allowed to criticise the regime, a few journals were permitted after 1981 but

circulation was very limited. However, as liberalisation developed these journals became more and more adventurous in exposing the human rights violations of the regime.

Television was very anodyne and criticism of the government was unimaginable. One of the programmes with the largest following (including, it was said, Pinochet himself) was the crude British comedy series *The Benny Hill Show*. News programmes were entirely pro-government and even the reporting of international events was slanted. For example, the coverage of the miners' strike in Britain in 1986 praised the Conservative government's brutal response to the strikes as the right way to deal with protesters.

There were two radio stations that went as far as they could go in terms of defending human rights – *Radio Cooperative* and *Radio Chilena* (run by the Catholic Church). I remember one broadcast when, following one of Pinochet's many ludicrous comments, this time about the German army being infested with communists, agitators (and no doubt worst of all) homosexuals, the radio station just played the remark over and over again without comment. These radio stations were important because they allowed opposition politicians to speak on air of their proposals for the future. There was a clandestine radio station – *Radio Magallanes* – run from Moscow but it reached few people, not least because it broadcasted from the far south of Chile and had limited coverage.

The theatre was also censored. One courageous company, *Ictus*, put on political plays, but they were cautious not to be overtly critical of the

regime. For example, one play that deal with exile and suffering was located not in Chile but in Uruguay, while there was another play about a military coup in Chile - but it was the coup of Ibáñez in the 1930's.

A playwright I met – David Benavente – wrote a play called *Tres Marías y Una Rosa* about working class women in Chile. He was called to answer to the censor, but he managed to persuade him that the play was not subversive. Then the censor complained that his own work was very difficult, and he would appreciate Benavente's help with Shakespeare's plays as he could not understand them, and thought that some might be subversive. I was also told – though I have not been able to corroborate this - that the opera company was not allowed to stage Puccini's *Tosca* – which, of course, features the murder of the principal agent of repression.

Books were heavily censored, and indeed one of the most publicised images of the dictatorship was the burning of books (mine included) in the streets. On the other hand, bookshops gave prominent displays to the works of General Pinochet, which were rather pedestrian accounts of historical episodes of the armed forces.

Memories of Repression

Chile was a true police state and very efficient at exercising control. This contrasts with Argentina where repression was undertaken by multiple groups, and many more were killed than in Chile. I spent a great deal of time in Peru when I thought it prudent not to go Chile. Peru was also under a military dictatorship, yet the atmosphere was much more

relaxed, the military itself rather divided, and the level of repression far less. Indeed, at least at first, the military had a reformist agenda.

The estimated figures for the victims of the coup in Chile may have been less than those of Argentina but they are horrifying enough – at least 3000 killed, at least 30,000 tortured, and at least 200,000 forced into exile (though this was rather counter-productive as Chileans abroad became adept at organising opposition to the dictatorship).

Repression was often used to send a message to possible dissenters. In 1986 there was a failed assassination attempt against Pinochet. I was at the theatre that night and as soon as the news of the attempted assassination was announced, the programme was cancelled and we had to leave. Outside was sheer pandemonium. For some reason, the street lights and traffic signals were off and there was panic everywhere. Soon afterwards, four members of the Communist party (which was operating clandestinely) were brutally murdered by the security forces.

Even well-respected research institutes were not free from intimidation. CIEPLAN, at which I was for several times a visiting member, produced well-documented economic analysis. Nevertheless, quite often outside were one or two cars belonging to the security police, sending a clear message that we are watching you.

Memories of Support for the Regime

It is a mistake to think that the regime lacked substantial support. In the plebiscite of 1988, just over 40% voted for Pinochet to stay on for another eight years, and not all of those votes came from those afraid to vote against him. He had powerful backing from the business sectors that benefitted from the privatisations made by the neoliberal economists in charge of the economy.

He also had the support of right-wing Catholics who formed a party – the *Unión Demócrata Independiente* – which for a time after the return to democracy was the most voted party in Chile. Although the Catholic Church was critical of the human rights record of the government, there were many voters who were attracted by the policies of the Pinochet government and had very unfavourable memories of the chaos of the Allende years. Chile also had a strong Opus Dei movement which sponsored an ideology of firm government and economic liberalisation, and which had widespread support in the business sector. The UDI was adept in mobilising support in the shanty towns by paying attention to local needs and providing economic support. I found it difficult to talk with some member of the UDI as they were so convinced of the correctness of their views, and had little tolerance for those with different views. To me it seemed at times more like a cult than a political party.

The only time I talked with members of the military was when I was an observer at the 1988 plebiscite at a school where the Air Force was in control on the day of the election. Mostly they seemed anxious to get back to their professional duties, although there was no mistaking their

unconditional loyalty to Pinochet. However, I did risk a bad joke. When a woman fainted in the queue of voters, the officer with whom I was talking, said it must have been the heat. I replied that in fact it was because she had just voted for Pinochet. I am glad to say that the officer found it amusing.

After so many years have passed, it is difficult to remember the intensity of political feelings that divided Chile so profoundly at that period. But one episode remains vivid .I was with several Chilean friends in an Italian restaurant. We were discussing, quite quietly, what socialism meant at this period, when it became clear that a couple near us were becoming more and more agitated. When they got up to leave, they shouted and swore at us, told us to go back to Cuba, and accused a woman with us of being a Communist whore. The whole restaurant froze into silence until they stormed out. But when the waiter presented our bill he smiled, and said that the wine was on them. Clearly not a pinochesita.

Memories of Opposition

At least until the economic crisis of 1982, opposition to the regime took place abroad and not in Chile – with exception of the human rights activities of the Catholic Church, although even that had to be cautiously worded, and not seen as a frontal attack on the regime.

I met many refugees in England who were trying to create international opposition to the dictatorship. Reading about the level of human rights abuses in general was bad enough. But when you meet someone who

has been badly tortured it moves to another dimension. In Oxford I knew a woman who was severely tortured in the *Colonia Dignidad* – one of the torture centres of the dictatorship. Though able to walk only with great pain, nevertheless she was active in local efforts in Oxford to denounce the regime and create support for the opposition.

After the collapse of the economy in 1982 the resultant increase in unemployment and poverty led to the first mass demonstrations against the government. These started in 1983 and took place regularly. I remember taking part in several, held in the Plaza de Armas in Santiago. At noon, the national anthem was sung. Once the singing was over the police jumped out from their vehicles and began to beat and arrest participants. It was widely believed that they were drugged to be more violent.

I remember that the street sellers put aside whatever they were selling, to offer instead sales of salt and lemon as an antidote to the tear gas. I ran for my life and with a friend managed to find an Italian restaurant in which we recovered. Protests were more violent in the shanty towns – one stray bullet killed a foreign priest while he was in his room reading the bible.

Apart from the large public expressions of opposition, there were small scale episodes which could be seen as expressions of dissent from the regime and its policies. For example, I picked up a catalogue of recent publications of a University press. Instead of just producing a catalogue of books available, it did that but also scored over the names of the

books censored. But they were still readable and hence one could see what had been banned. I asked a university colleague if this was the intent – and as most of the catalogues went abroad, he thought that is was the case.

In a bookshop one day, I was looking at a book by Pinochet when the owner approached me, and said that the book was by the President – but that he was not his President (*Es el Presidente de Chile pero no es mi Presidente*).

Ariel Dorfman, a leading intellectual wrote a novel *Viudas* (Widows) about women searching for the whereabouts of their disappeared husbands – but set in Greece not in Chile. But the message was clear.

I attend a concert in the *Teatro Municipal* for a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony of which the last movement is called An Ode to Joy, which celebrates the virtues of fellowship and love. The massive wave of applause at the end was surely not just for the music but for the message it contained.

On one of the national holidays I went to the cinema. On those days the cinemas play the national anthem. However, when we got to the final and newly added stanza which praises the military, half the audience sat down while the others remained standing and singing. Thereafter, pandemonium broke out and went far beyond my knowledge of Chilean swear words.

Memories of the Plebiscite

Pinochet called for a plebiscite in 1988 to determine if he should have another eight years in power, though this time as a directly elected president. He lost the campaign not least because the opposition to him ran a brilliant campaign.

I was in Chile for several months both before and after the plebiscite. The event became the subject of a well-known and excellent film NO, which concentrated on the very effective publicity campaign to contest Pinochet.

But that was only part of the story. The other part was the tireless work all over Chile, from large meetings in urban areas to small gatherings in rural locations, to persuade voters to vote without fear. There was a real fear that the vote would not be secret, and that there would be adverse consequences for those who voted against Pinochet. The campaign was organised by church groups, citizen organisations, human rights groups, trade unions and political parties. I attended many such meetings. The message was always the same - that the vote was secret, and that there were over 1000 foreign observers (of whom I was one) to guarantee that the election would be free and fair. At one very large union meeting I was called upon to speak as 'the fraternal delegate from the University of Oxford'. My speech was greeted with applause, not I think for my eloquence, but because of gratitude to those who had come from distant places to ensure that the vote would be fair and recognised by the government even if the verdict went against it

Before the vote, I attended mass rallies in Santiago. At one rally the cry went out – he who jumps in not Pinochet (*el que salta no es Pinochet*) Thousands of people started jumping up and down. At another meeting the crowd was urged to waive their hands with the palms upwards at the government helicopters overhead to show that we, at least, had clean hands (*manos limpios*).

For the day of the plebiscite, I was to be attached to a school in San Miguel, a working class area of Santiago. I met the organisers of the local NO campaign in San Miguel several days beforehand, and asked why all the committee were women. The reply was that their men were either missing, in detention, or had been executed. That was a chilling reminder of life in Pinochet's Chile.

I spent the day at the school and it was uneventful. Unusually for Chile the voters turned up even before the polls were open. Voting in Chile is gender segregated so all the electors in this station were women. When I left the polling station in the evening, there appeared to be no local transport and the normally busy highway was almost completely deserted. Fortunately, the metro was running so I went home, like millions of Chileans, to await the results. Once it was clear that the vote was against Pinochet, the celebrations started. But that is another story.

