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Article

A 'popular option' for development? Reconsidering the rise and fall of Chile's political economy of socialism

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Abstract

As Salvador Allende and his supporters forged a democratic path towards socialism, the task of building a more sovereign and egalitarian national economy became one of the Popular Unity (UP) revolution's first priorities. To that end, Allende's coalition promoted a massive downward redistribution of income during its first months in office while also extending state control over many of the country's most essential industries. Chile's food economy, including its agricultural sector, received special attention during this early period as both purchasing power and domestic production soared. However, when a combination of economic, ecological and political factors caused consumer production to stagnate, acute shortages for a wide range of goods raised questions about the viability of the UP's plans for a more just consumer economy. The emergence of a powerful opposition movement also raised questions about the government's reluctance to pursue substantive political changes at the same time that it implemented major economic reforms. By examining the political economy of the UP experiment in the context of Chile's 2019–20 uprising against inequality and political exclusion, this article reconsiders the consequences of the UP's inability to link economic transformations with changes in how political power was exercised in mid-century Chile.

Keywords: Chile; Salvador Allende; Popular Unity; revolution; agrarian reform; socialism; food history; political economy

Shortly after Salvador Allende's Popular Unity (UP) coalition assumed office in the final weeks of 1970, *El Siglo*, the newspaper of record for Chile's Communist Party, reported glowingly on the rapidly changing economic conditions in the country. As it described the feeling of jubilation that swept through the downtown areas of the Chilean capital, Santiago, the newspaper observed that city residents had never before experienced an atmosphere 'so full of life and hope'. The upcoming Christmas holiday, the daily added, would be a joyous celebration of 'triumph', 'copper' and 'bread'.¹ A few months later, as retail stores still teemed with eager patrons, a headline in the *New York Times* confirmed much of what *El Siglo* reported. Chileans, the US newspaper proclaimed, were on a 'buying spree'.²

By most accounts, the period from late 1970 to mid-1971 was one of unparalleled plenty – a reflection of Allende's promise that the democratic revolution he led would ensure a 'right to happiness' in Chile, particularly for those who lived on the economic margins of society.³ Articulated as such, basic human contentment was not a traditional goal of most revolutionary movements. But understood within the context of the country's multi-decade struggle against persistently high inflation and scarcity, the end of consumer uncertainty in major Chilean cities undoubtedly felt like a seismic occurrence.⁴ This was no accident. From the government's perspective, the early focus on revved-up consumption was an expression of Allende's own belief that bettering everyday economic conditions in the country was a necessary first step before broader social transformations could be pursued further down the road.⁵

Yet as critics of the UP were quick to show, celebrations of consumer bounty were relatively short lived. During the revolution's second and third years in particular, Chilean workers struggled to keep domestic production growing and consumers stared down shortages for an ever greater number of essential goods. Indeed, these latter memories – for example, recollections of waiting in unbearably long queues at markets and improvised food distribution sites to obtain whatever staples were available on a given day – generated the conventional wisdom, still prevalent among many Chileans today, that the UP revolution was an era of everyday economic hardship.⁶

This article is an attempt to reckon with the disparate economic realities that comprised Chile's 1000-day experiment in democratic socialism – one defined by the euphoria of economic plenty and the other marred by the dreaded uncertainty of economic want. In particular, it interrogates the experience, causes and consequences of what historian Mario Garcés Durán, among others, has identified as the UP's decision to prioritise an economic revolution over a political one in early 1970s Chile.⁷ In its initial months, the Allende government sought to fulfil pent-up demands for household economic security, particularly those related to the affordability and availability of basic foodstuffs. To do so, it linked structural transformations of Chile's national economy with what some scholars have referred to as 'economic development goals' – that is, prioritising domestic production for consumer staples and the expansion of social welfare programmes that improved living standards for Chile's working poor.⁸ In effect, the UP reimagined how economic production and commercial distribution could be more effectively tied together. Whether intentional or not, the consequence of such reconfigurations was to articulate Chile's political base as a bloc of popular consumers.

But the fleeting nature of consumer abundance – the lasting impression that a socialist economy of mass consumption may have been obtainable in the short term but was hardly sustainable in the medium or long term – demonstrated the weaknesses of an agenda that pursued economic change without also dismantling the entrenched political power of opposition groups. In fact, the UP's inability to keep scarcity and inflation at bay after a year of economic bliss provided an opening from which anti-UP forces, their political power largely untouched, reorganised themselves and mobilised against the revolution. By challenging Allende's government in those spaces in which the revolution had initially succeeded, like the marketplace and choke points of the consumer supply chain, the medium- and large-sized landowners, small business owners and private distributors who fiercely opposed the UP would begin to set the groundwork for one of Latin America's most radical free-market counter-revolutions.⁹ Many of the UP's most heralded early accomplishments when it came to guaranteeing abundance in the marketplace would ultimately become the source of tremendous vulnerability. In short, the problem of consumption became the Allende government's Achilles heel, and consumer identity became deeply associated with reaction rather than revolution.

Five decades after Chile's UP revolution commenced, Chileans are once again struggling to create a more just and democratic society. Now, like then, those committed to such changes have made the construction of a new model of economic development an important priority – something Chile's forthcoming constitutional assembly process will no doubt demonstrate. But there are many indications that today's generation of Chilean reformers and revolutionaries are envisioning economic democracy in far more capacious ways than their progressive predecessors, despite the fact that the horizon for change in the region is, in some respects, far more limited today than it was five decades ago. Upon reviewing the 'patterns of mobilization' that have swept across Chile in the last decade, one sees that the sorts of inequalities that activists are seeking to undo 'go far beyond those related to income', the political analyst Rossana Castiglioni writes; today's struggle has taken aim at political, geographic, ethnic and gender-based inequalities as well.¹⁰ As suggested by the central demand of Chile's current movement for change – the demand for a new Constitution – those committed to transformational change in contemporary Chile seek a new 'social pact' between state and society, something that largely eluded the country in the early 1970s.¹¹ A fundamental change that said pact must make, many activists today note, is to end a system in which citizens are treated primarily as consumers. In essence, Chileans who support the movement for change today are confronting a logic that quickly turned a period of unprecedented progressive change into one in which the problems inequality and social segregation became ever more entrenched.

The foundation for a more social economy

Winning just over one-third of all votes cast in the early austral spring of 1970, Chilean voters elected Dr Salvador Allende to be Chile's 28th president. In the weeks that followed the September vote, Allende and his political allies confronted an array of opponents, both foreign and domestic, who were intent on blocking the congressional ratification of official vote tallies. Chile's national congress ratified Allende's narrow electoral victory on 24 October 1970. This followed an attempt by the Chilean right, the United States and elements within the Chilean military to block his assumption of power.¹² Nevertheless, when Allende finally took office in November, he remained as committed as ever to carving a democratic path towards a new socialist future in Chile. Seemingly overnight, the UP's pronouncements shattered the dominant Cold War-era claim that socialism and democracy were irreconcilable. Then US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger underscored how Allende's election ruptured the prominent Cold War narrative that socialism and democracy were incompatible. In a 1970 memo, Kissinger wrote that 'the example of a successful elected Marxist government in Chile would surely have an impact on – and even precedent value for – other parts of the world, especially in Italy.'¹³

Allende's political coalition mimicked the country's Popular Front of the late 1930s both in content and form. Like its predecessor coalition, the UP included a diverse array of ideological tendencies, including members of the country's socialist and communist left, a wide range of smaller nationalist reform parties and supporters of an incipient progressive Catholic left. The UP, again like the Popular Front before it, also promised to respect the rule of law and future electoral results. Related to these commitments, Allende's government sought to minimise the formal influence of various New Left movements that advocated for the armed defence of Chile's revolutionary project, in the mould of Fidel Castro's Cuba.¹⁴ However, in stark contrast to Chile's reform-minded leaders in the 1930s, Allende believed that Chile should delay no longer in pursuing a more radical economic agenda. If the Popular Front had committed itself to reforming Chile while maintaining the country's state capitalist architecture, the UP was determined to build a socialist model that put the needs of working people first.¹⁵

Instituting major economic reforms was thus a first-order concern for the government officials who were charged with blazing Chile's revolutionary path. Eduardo Frei, Allende's immediate predecessor from the country's centre-left Christian Democratic Party, had expanded state intervention in Chile's economy with the goal of asserting Chile's economic sovereignty in the 1960s. But according to key UP policy makers, such measures did not sufficiently address the fact that the interests of monopoly capital and foreign investors regularly superseded the welfare of working people.¹⁶ Evidence of the disproportionate power held by capital seemed to exist in every corner of the economy. Less than one-fifth of all private firms controlled more than three-quarters of all assets in the country, some noted. In the

country's most important economic sector, the export-oriented mining industry, just a handful of US multinational companies dominated the extraction of Chile's valuable copper reserves; in fact, the mining of copper by multinational firms accounted for well over half of Chile's total exports. In the area of distribution, meanwhile, a dozen private firms were said to control almost 50 per cent of all wholesale activity, including the distribution of vital foodstuffs.¹⁷

When it came to issues that affected the everyday lives of Chilean workers, conditions in Chile were, from a quantitative perspective, perhaps worse at the end of the 1960s than they had been just a few decades earlier. When adjusted for inflation, the purchasing power of Chile's living wage, known as the *sueldo vital*, was significantly lower in 1970 than it had been in 1950, according to at least one prominent Chilean economist (and future minister in the UP government).¹⁸ Another study of working-class food consumption in Chile was even more damning in its conclusions: if social and economic policies pertaining to food did not change, the average Chilean's inability to access vital nutrients, particularly protein, would prevent the country for sustaining a decent standard of living for the vast majority of its own citizenry.¹⁹

Such figures and conclusions were shining symbols of inequity in the eyes of UP planners, but they also were critical pieces of data that the UP could wield to justify the pursuit of major structural changes on moral and ethical grounds. In short, figures like these lit a fire under coalition leaders who, in turn, pledged to deepen national control over Chile's mineral and metal deposits, hasten agrarian reform efforts and socialise critical elements of the country's private banking system.²⁰ For a revolution that emphasised its democratic credentials, the presentation of uncomfortable data points was a key part of reframing democracy in terms of working people's social and economic needs rather than the accounting sheets of industrialists, foreign investors and Chile's politically powerful class of *latifundistas* (large landowners).²¹

In the lead-up to the 1970 election and immediately after, Allende presented the structural and everyday changes that the UP pursued as two parts of the same whole. By asserting national control over the country's most profitable industries, the government would gain access to a steady stream of revenue. That funding would then help finance the new social and economic programmes that benefited the working people of Chile. In the final instance, living conditions would improve for the vast majority of Chileans. This idea of using the mining sector and other profit-generating industries to subsidise both less lucrative productive enterprises, as well as social initiatives, was dubbed 'socialist accounting' by some leftist thinkers of the era.²² But in a 1972 article, two young Chilean economists, Sergio Bitar and Eduardo Moyano, concocted a more evocative term to articulate how they understood the new government's approach to matters of political economy. As the revolution marched forward, the two wrote, the Chilean state would build and protect a 'popular option' for development.²³

At a time when progressive Catholics across Latin America were beginning to talk about establishing a 'preferential option for the poor', Bitar and Moyano married an ethical concern for redistributive justice together with the economic imperatives of growth. Their new model of development centred on manufacturing high-quality popular consumer goods at home for a growing popular class of consumers. If one goal of economic democracy was to expand access to the fruits of modernity, an objective Bitar and Moyano supported, the two thinkers believed that the state should focus its energy on producing relatively basic, value-added consumer goods rather than high-profile luxury items; the former would generate 'multiplier effects' throughout the national economy while the latter would only reproduce entrenched spatial and economic inequities.²⁴ It made far more sense that every rural family should have access to a bicycle to travel from one's home to a job or local market in a nearby town than it did for Chile to manufacture expensive automobiles so that a small minority of well-off, city-dwelling Chileans could possess two cars instead of one.²⁵ This 'popular option' developed by Bitar and Moyano contrasted with what they called the 'spontaneous' path of development. In the latter, the country would keep producing a select set of 'durable' goods in Santiago and those goods would continue to reach only a very select segment of the population. But, as had occurred a decade earlier, the production of such goods would soon stagnate in the face of cheaper, higher-quality consumer durables from abroad. This was essentially the failed route of traditional import substitution industrialisation, the two economic thinkers argued. But if Chile redirected its productive apparatus towards the mass production of basic consumer goods – such as food, textiles, clothing, shoes and even bicycles – a 'popular' model could be constructed. Through the

'popular option', the Chilean government could lay the foundation for a new infrastructure of collective consumption that prioritised production related to healthcare, education and public transportation, among other things. The added benefit of this new model was that it would also produce greater geographic equity by decentralising economic activity away from Santiago and towards smaller provincial cities and towns. One of the defining features of the 'popular option' was that the content of production and distribution of production, not just the total volume of production, mattered.

Throughout late 1970 and into 1971, the UP made notable progress towards enacting a socially inflected developmentalism that promoted economic growth while also ensuring economic redistribution. Indeed, these two objectives were to be pursued simultaneously. In the final days of 1970, Allende finalised his proposal to nationalise the country's major copper deposits, and by the winter of the following year, the country's national congress had officially adopted the measure.²⁶ The government proceeded to take a controlling stake in Chile's coal mining industry, while also setting in motion the nationalisation of iron ore quarries, large portions of the banking sector and what remained of the nitrate economy in Chile's most northern provinces.²⁷ Then, in one of its boldest moves to date, the UP established a new, state-run economic sector, the Social Property Area (APS). The government would populate this new sector with industries that it deemed economically inefficient or identified as exceptionally important to the social well-being of the nation. Nearly six dozen companies had moved from private hands to state hands by the end of Allende's first year.²⁸ The fact that the UP's vote share grew by 13 per cent between September's national elections and municipal elections that were held in April 1971 was proof, in the view of Allende and his supporters, of just how popular these early measures were among the general population.²⁹

While the UP's major structural reforms received greatest media attention, policies and programmes that would gradually undo deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities complemented such efforts from the beginning of the revolution. In pursuing its redistributionist goals, the Allende administration enforced price controls on staple goods as few previous governments had. It implemented unprecedented wage increases for working-class wage earners, but also many professions that constituted a key 'middling' sector.³⁰ Relying on the prevailing assumptions of Keynesian economic theory, the UP maintained that more cash in the pockets of Chile's working and middle classes would generate new employment employments. (When British historian Eric Hobsbawm visited Chile in 1971, he emphasised the fact that Chile had a small domestic consumer market. He noted that before Allende's election, 'no more than 300,000' of Chile's roughly 9 million citizens were 'effective customers for industry'.³¹) And, at least initially, they did. During the UP's first year in office the national gross domestic product grew by 8 per cent, industrial production grew by 12.1 per cent and agricultural production grew at a slightly slower, but still impressive, rate of about 6 per cent; those growth rates had not been witnessed in Chile in roughly two decades.³² Unemployment fell precipitously, particularly in Greater Santiago where rates of unemployment hit record lows of between 3 and 4 per cent in 1971.³³ According to Chile's planning ministry, 146,000 more people were employed in Chile in 1971 than in 1970. The data analysed by prominent economic historians of the era suggest that around 89,000 of those 146,000 people were new or first-time entrants into the labour force. Approximately 57,000 had been previously employed but re-entered the labour force in 1971.³⁴ As the real value of worker wages rose and price ceilings kept consumer purchasing power intact, inequities in the broader labour force became far less acute.³⁵ In fact, it seems likely that policies pursued by the Allende government during its first year led to the most significant downward redistribution of income in modern Chilean history. In 1970, the share of labour in the gross domestic product amounted to just over 52 per cent, but just one year later it was estimated that wage labourers accounted for nearly 62 per cent of national income.³⁶

Ordinary consumers reaped the immediate benefits of the UP's macroeconomic miracles and became unlikely revolutionary subjects.³⁷ As various historians of the era have noted, first-time purchases of everything ranging from the most basic goods – like new bed sheets, tableware and new leather shoes – to modern amenities – for example, television sets, radios, record players and refrigerators – are widely recounted in newspapers and magazines of late 1970 and into 1971, often featured alongside advertisements that announced the opening of new restaurants and grocery shops.³⁸ In one *New York Times* report on Chile, published midway through the UP's first year, a North American journalist observed

the ‘bulging shopping bags’ of working-class women as they moved between the stalls of Santiago’s major food markets and new commercial shops in the city centre.³⁹

A focus on food production also provides a particularly vivid portrait of economic vibrancy beyond Santiago during the early revolutionary period. At a time when critics of land reform efforts in Chile and around Latin America argued that breaking up large estates would precipitate the collapse of domestic agriculture, the first year and a half of the UP revolution turned out to be a period of bumper production. In 1971, Chilean farmers produced more wheat than during any previous year on record. Production statistics reveal similar patterns of growth for key foods staples, like chickpeas, beans and dairy products.⁴⁰ While Allende’s opponents would denounce the fact that beef production struggled, particularly during the second year of the revolution, domestic production of many animal products, including pork, poultry, milk and eggs, were all greater in 1972 than during the preceding two years.⁴¹ According to one nutrition researcher, the number of calories available in Chile during 1971 and 1972 was approximately 8 per cent greater than during the half-decade that preceded the UP’s election.⁴² Once again, it is worth emphasising the fact that these accomplishments occurred while the Chilean countryside was in the throes of one of twentieth-century Latin America’s most significant land redistribution initiatives.⁴³

At the same time, the Allende government promoted food processing enterprises that joined new forms of technical know-how with social justice ideals. Nutrition scientists and engineers manipulated underutilised grains to produce what they believed were healthier biscuits and crackers for young children, as well as a special soya-based infant formula, the price of which was stringently controlled by state regulators.⁴⁴ In that same spirit, Perlak, a Chilean food processing company (and one whose workers took control of the factory in 1972), even began producing what it referred to as *caldo proletario* – an inexpensive, nutrient-rich broth supplement for young working-class children.⁴⁵ The omnipresence of powdered milk packets was perhaps the most defining everyday product of the revolution’s first year. In 1971 alone, the amount of powdered milk distributed by the state increased nearly threefold.⁴⁶ Estimates suggest that more than 3.5 million Chilean children ultimately benefited from the programme, making it one of the most admired initiatives of the UP era.⁴⁷

Plenty into penury

The above experiences and initiatives gave real material significance to Allende’s promise of a revolution free from short-term disruptions to Chileans’ everyday quality of life.⁴⁸ In his first annual presidential address – the Chilean variant of a presidential state of the union address – Allende marked the first anniversary of the UP’s election by highlighting the palpable sense of material abundance in the new Chile his government was building. He even boldly compared the situation in Chile to that in revolutionary Cuba, suggesting that the citizens of Chile had accomplished more during the first year of their revolution than had been accomplished during the first 12 months of the Caribbean nation’s 1959 revolution. Though Allende insisted that it was not his intention to ‘diminish’ the achievements of the Cuban experience, he concluded that Chileans of all political tendencies should remember that the changes his government had enacted – whether they related to the structural conditions of the economy or the everyday conditions of daily life – had been made ‘without social costs’.⁴⁹

Yet as the second year of the UP revolution approached, several economic metrics suggested that the abundance Allende so proudly and confidently trumpeted might, in fact, be quite fleeting. Moreover, as economic conditions shifted, the consequences of the UP’s hesitation to confront the entrenched nature of political power in the country grew more discernible. Starting midway through 1971, certain basic foods, most notably red meat, began disappearing from neighbourhood grocery shops and butchers’ counters. In some cases, the shortages were the result of ecological disruptions. A major earthquake in Chile’s Central Valley and a series of exceptionally hard snowstorms during the UP’s first winter contributed to delays in the winter seeding of grains. Those events also disrupted the logistics network within the country and between Chile and its neighbour Argentina, on the other side of the Andean cordillera. However, economic problems were also the consequence of the UP’s ambitious wage and price policies; in most parts of the country, purchasing power far outstripped consumer supply as a result of aggressive wage increases and strictly enforced price ceilings.⁵⁰

Political opponents of the government seized upon these and other missteps, and in the process, the anti-Allende opposition exacerbated both challenging environmental conditions and underlying economic disequilibria. To cite one example, Chilean ranchers reportedly shipped tens of thousands of cattle out of the country (mostly to Argentina) shortly after the UP took power, fearing either the expropriation of their herds at the hands of agrarian reformers or a sudden collapse in market prices.⁵¹ Making matters worse, the US cut off critical foreign assistance and credit to Chile and lobbied international financial institutions and banks to do the same. Commentators of the era referred to such hostility as an ‘invisible blockade’ of the Chilean economy, an update on the more traditional economic blockade that the US had imposed on Cuba a decade earlier.⁵²

To sustain the country’s consumer appetite, Chile was forced to spend its vital currency reserves on food and other consumer staples. In just one year, the \$95 million trade *surplus* that the government had inherited became a trade *deficit* of an almost equal amount.⁵³ Making matters worse, falling international copper prices forced the Allende government to print new money to meet the social and financial commitments that copper earnings were originally expected to fulfil. As a result, the country’s old nemesis, inflation, ticked upwards once again.

The old economic inequities and distortions that Allende claimed to have relegated to the past during his first annual address to the nation still remained as year one of the revolution concluded. And opponents of the revolution were keen to highlight these shortcomings as the UP’s second year in office began. In summoning the traditional domestic roles of Chilean women, a group of anti-Allende housewives demanded their compatriots bring empty pots and pans to Santiago’s Plaza Italia on the first day of December 1971. The empty pot or saucepan quickly became an expression of feminine frustration with the government’s political and economic trajectory in general, and isolated shortages of meat, milk and other consumer essentials in particular.⁵⁴ UP economic officials soon realised that the opposition was prepared to transform the same issues that had exemplified the UP’s success during its first year into the basis of political critique.

As the government and its supporters pursued the objective of cheap and abundant food for popular consumers, the circuits of production and distribution that comprised Chile’s food system were transformed into battlegrounds where UP sympathisers and opponents confronted each other on an almost daily basis. The Chilean countryside was one critical theatre of this broader struggle.⁵⁵ In 1971, as domestic food demand outpaced food production, the UP made the countryside the epicentre of its so-called battle of production. But one year into that battle, the leadership of Chile’s most powerful landholders’ association, the Sociedad Nacional de Agricultura (National Agricultural Society), highlighted Chile’s growing reliance on foreign food imports to meet domestic shortfalls as an example of the government’s losing strategy. Some predicted that Chile might spend more than \$450 million importing food in 1972, more than triple the amount that the UP government originally budgeted for such purchases. While a figure that large did not come to pass in 1972, Chile did end up importing more than \$500 million in foreign foodstuffs the following year.⁵⁶

Included in those foreign purchases were numerous goods that Chileans had been well positioned to produce in previous years.⁵⁷ Consider the case of wheat production. During the UP’s first year of economic plenty, Chilean farmers harvested more than 13.5 million metric quintals of wheat, but two years later, in 1973, the country’s annual harvest was nearly half that amount, coming in at just over 7 million metric quintals. That latter figure constituted less domestic wheat than had been cultivated in Chile during the economically lean years of the mid-1930s, despite the introduction of various innovations in the sector like high-yield seeds, new farming technologies and new strategies for soil improvement.⁵⁸ Between 1970 and 1972, Chilean imports of wheat nearly doubled.⁵⁹ Providing further evidence of stagnation in the food-producing economy, the UP government would in 1972 issue a decree that mandated Chilean flour millers use less raw wheat to make the same amount of wheat flour. The consequence of this change would be felt in the stomachs of Chilean consumers who bought and ate less flavourful – and less nutrient-rich – loaves of bread during the second half of Chile’s 1,000-day revolution.⁶⁰

The 1972 *paro patronal* (bosses’ strike) marked a key moment of convergence within Chile’s domestic opposition and between domestic opponents and international opponents of the Allende government. After

obtaining secret economic aid from US intelligence groups – namely, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – Chile’s powerful private trucking syndicate carried out the most infamous anti-government uprising of the UP period, starting in early October 1972. The movement of essential goods in Chile was brought to a near standstill as disgruntled truckers, fearful that their industry might be socialised, parked their trailers in open fields and on the hard shoulders of roads, often for weeks at a time.⁶¹ Quickly, the protest spread far beyond the transportation sector as white-collar professionals called in sick, and the proprietors of retail stores refused to open their doors to customers. All the while counter-revolutionary militia members, many of them affiliated with the neo-fascist group *Patria y Libertad* (Fatherland and Liberty), kept close watch over the streets of Santiago and other major cities, often coercing shopkeepers who were reluctant to back the aggressive tactics of the opposition into participating in the strike action.⁶² In an especially dramatic instance of economic sabotage, one anti-Allende butcher was arrested for setting fire to hundreds of kilos of pork in front of his shop.⁶³

The 1972 bosses’ strike paved the way for opponents of the UP to take aim at revolutionary institutions and programmes that were associated not only with the production of food but also with its distribution and sale. In so doing, counter-revolutionary groups boldly proclaimed themselves to be the true defenders of Chilean consumers and the household economy. UP-backed neighbourhood consumer distribution sites, known as *juntas de abastecimiento y precios* (supply and price control boards, JAPs), became the most identifiable target of ire for anti-Allende shopkeepers and the private distribution firms who historically supplied them. Frustration with the JAPs is notable in the opposition’s list of demands, known as the *‘pliego de Chile’* (demands of Chile), issued on 21 October 1972. Among other things, the *pliego* called for the ‘immediate termination of the controlling actions of the JAPs’, calling the organisation (and other UP-backed organisations) ‘totalitarian’ in nature. Comparisons were sometimes made to Cuba’s Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.⁶⁴ In some working-class neighbourhoods, groups of anti-UP merchants even took it upon themselves to build their own networks of economic cooperation, thus diminishing consumers’ dependence on distribution boards whose leadership was closely identified with the political parties of the UP.⁶⁵ According to one anti-Allende shopkeeper, the cement that bound merchants and consumers together in those days was a shared desire to end the partisan discrimination that residents, correctly or incorrectly, believed the JAPs were responsible for promoting.⁶⁶

Whether by arguing that Allende was taking Chile down a path towards hunger or by hyperbolically asserting that food shortages were being intentionally imposed by the state to gain total control over the most private spaces of daily life, including the functioning of the human body itself, anti-Allende activists turned the consumer – the subject of Allende’s early revolutionary success – into the most recognisable victim of revolutionary mismanagement. As an example of the sometimes fantastical and international dimensions of the anti-Allende food campaign, an article published some time in 1973 by the Mexican right-wing publication *Réplica* purported that human remains had been found in the meat supply of one Chilean municipality and argued that Allende’s government was to blame. The report was allegedly produced by the Associated Press, though this claim, like the story in *Réplica* itself, seems almost surely to have been manufactured by anti-Allende groups. (No other credible traces of the article have been found by this author.)⁶⁷ ‘For the first time in Chile’s history, consumers needed to be in the good graces of the state’ to access adequate nutrition, read a statement from the leading anti-Allende coalition just a few weeks after the October shutdown. Citizens’ ‘right to subsistence’ was not the only thing under threat, according to government opponents; restrictions in the marketplace were part and parcel of a broader attempt to silence and marginalise the voices of those who opposed the government.⁶⁸

The limits of consumer socialism

The claims made by Allende’s opponents resonated with a growing number of Chileans who had become frustrated with the return of everyday economic uncertainty during the UP’s third and final year in power. In some cases, decrying scarcity was likely an opportunistic political calculation, while in others it represented genuine disappointment after economic expectations had been unfulfilled by the Allende government. The opposition’s consumer appeals, however, were hardly met with universal acceptance. Indeed, for the tens of thousands of Chileans who continued to support the revolution through 1972 and

1973, equally palpable was the experience of having enough money to make regular rent payments, put healthy food on the table and acquire a wide range of household appliances and technologies that made domestic chores just a bit more tolerable than they had been before 1970.⁶⁹ In Allende's Chile, democracy would be measured in '*pan y leche*' (bread and milk), a Communist Party publication had declared in the early months of the revolution – a less-than-intuitive visual association for a party that had historically held up the worker, not the consumer, as the driving force of historical change.⁷⁰ As one indigenous woman who was incorporated into Chile's agrarian reform process under the UP would point out, one of the great memories of agrarian reform and the Chilean road to socialism was 'having animals as beautiful as the ones on the latifundio next door, drinking milk just like other children, ... [and] cooking up eggs, which became possible for everyone to do'.⁷¹

With the benefit of historical distance, it is possible to see how the UP's considerable efforts to ensure popular access to essential goods (as well as the government's ability to successfully market such efforts to its political base), contributed, inadvertently or not, to a vision of citizenship that was rooted in the promise of every Chilean citizen having ready access to the most basic essentials of life.⁷² But what happened when the new relations of production, distribution and exchange that the UP sought to build began to limit, or even impede, Chileans' ability to access their long-awaited social and economic right to a dignified level of subsistence? When the availability of material goods grew ever more uncertain, whose right to consume would be amplified and whose would be overshadowed by other economic troubles? In retrospect, these were the sorts of political questions that Allende and his top advisers did not do enough to anticipate as they held firm in their belief that economic changes could be made without disrupting the organisation of political power in Chile.

That is not to say there were no alternative voices. Emergent on the UP's left flank, for example, were many activists who were firmly committed to a socialist future but increasingly disillusioned with the UP's equation of that future with a traditional consumer society. In the final year of the revolution, such groups demanded that Allende embrace a new economic ethos to get the revolution back on track. 'He who promises unlimited abundance, he who promises that in five years we are going to be a country on the verge of becoming a mass consumer society, is being disingenuous', a prominent leader of Chile's radical Catholic left would write in one scathing critique of the UP's economic vision just after the October bosses' strike had ended. Instead of promoting such a misleading and unrealistic vision, those who adopted the aforementioned position pushed UP leaders to instead focus on 'extracting dignity from scarcity', even if that meant explicitly privileging the basic economic needs of the poorest in society at the expense of the most well-off.⁷³

On the other side of the political divide, hardened opponents of the UP – and increasingly many middle-class Chileans who had initially backed Allende's political vision based on pragmatic economic grounds – tacked in a different direction. By affirming the UP's own commitment to a modern consumer economy but attacking the Allende government's means for sustaining such an economy, members of the anti-Allende opposition would, in late 1972 and into 1973, present themselves as the real custodians of the Chilean consumer. Insisting that the state's active role in the production and distribution of consumer essentials, rather than its absence from the economy, exacerbated consumer anxieties, Allende's opponents drew closer to a small cadre of economic thinkers, who advocated for a 'social market economy' – that is, an economy in which market relations between consumers and producers determined who could consume what and at what cost.⁷⁴ Packed into this new economic philosophy were some of the key tenets of the neoliberal order that took hold during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, among them a dogmatic commitment to austerity, privatisation and economic liberalisation. The fulfilment of citizens' material needs would no longer be the state's duty to guarantee. Rather, in post-Allende Chile, food, shelter and other basic essentials would become commodities, and their production, distribution and value would be determined in an open and largely unregulated marketplace, irrespective of their essential nature or the fundamental needs of Chile's citizenry.

For the tens of thousands of Chileans who have filled streets and plazas across the country in recent years, and especially since the October 2019 *estallido social* (social unrest) began, upending the basic assumption that the market has no boundaries has become an integral component of the struggle for a more

just society.⁷⁵ This goal, rooted in a commitment to equality, is reminiscent of the UP project in certain ways. But in contemporary Chile it is an objective that is challenging both the political and economic logic of the modern Chilean state in a manner that Allende's coalition did not. Put succinctly, demands for dignity and for social, cultural and economic rights have today superseded previous discourses about consumption and consumers. As Mario Aguilar, a social leader in Chile's teachers' movement, told a reporter during the late 2019 protests that swept across the country, Chileans' discontent is driven by the fact that vital goods and services, like education, are today seen as 'consumer goods' whose allocation depends on one's ability to navigate ever-shifting market forces, not as 'social rights' to be protected and ensured by the state for all of its citizens. Only when there is 'real change' in that fundamental assumption, the movement leader predicted, would the current cycle of protests in Chile draw to a close.⁷⁶

Author biography

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The author is Guest Editor of the journal's special issue *Chile's Popular Unity at 50* this article is included in; all efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

¹'Feliz Pascua!', *El Siglo*, 24 December 1970.

²'Government's price freeze and wage rises send Chileans on a buying spree', *New York Times*, 13 May 1971.

³Sepúlveda, 'When Salvador Allende told us happiness is a human right'.

⁴For more on Chile's long struggle against inflation and scarcity, particularly as it related to the price and availability of foodstuffs, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*.

⁵On the UP's prioritisation of economic change over political reforms of the Chilean state itself, see Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'.

⁶Garcés Durán, "'Construyendo 'las poblaciones'", 77.

⁷Garcés Durán and Winn, 'Movements in dialogue'. This critique of the UP's focus on the economic over the political is also central to Barbara Stallings and Andy Zimbalist's earlier analysis of Allende's government. See Stallings and Zimbalist, 'The political economy of the Unidad Popular', 69–88.

⁸Stallings and Zimbalist, 'The political economy of the Unidad Popular', 70–1.

⁹See Casals, 'The insurrection of the middle class'.

¹⁰Castiglioni, '¿El ocaso del modelo chileno?'.

¹¹On the need to fight both political and economic inequality, see the writings of Chilean economist Nicolás Grau. For example, Grau, 'Desigualad(es) y estallido social'; and Grau, 'Bosquejo de un Nuevo Contrato Social'.

¹²See Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*, 1–79.

¹³White House, 'NSC Meeting, November 6 – Chile'.

¹⁴For a political history of the road that led from the Popular Front to the UP, see Moulian, *Fracturas*. For a personal account of that same three-decade path, see Millas, *Memorias, 1957–1991*.

¹⁵Winn, *Weavers of Revolution*, 57. Salvador Allende's speech to the convention of the Chilean Radical Party in July 1971 lays out some of the key differences between the Popular Front and the UP. Originally published in the newspaper *El Siglo* on 31 July 1971, a translation of the speech was reprinted as 'Radicalism and bourgeois sectors', in Johnson, *The Chilean Road to Socialism*, especially 285–6.

¹⁶For an example, see Zorilla, 'La crisis del capitalismo chileno', 11–22.

¹⁷Meller, *The Unidad Popular and the Pinochet Dictatorship*, 27.

¹⁸de Vylder, *Allende's Chile*, 7–9.

¹⁹On protein consumption in Chile at the beginning of the 1970s, see Tagle, 'La calidad y el valor proteico', 562. For a more thorough assessment of social and economic conditions when the UP was elected, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 5.

²⁰For a history of the struggle for copper nationalisation, see Whitaker and Vergara, "'To work more, produce more, and defend the revolution'".

²¹For a clear interpretation of the UP's economic ideology by one of its chief economic architects, see Vuskovic, 'Chile: Toward the building of socialism', especially 424.

²²Winn, *La revolución chilena*, 96.

²³Bitar and Moyano, 'Redistribución del consumo', 31–5.

²⁴Bitar and Moyano, 'Redistribución del consumo', 31–5.

²⁵Bitar and Moyano, 'Redistribución del consumo', 33.

²⁶Allende, 'La nacionalización del cobre', 127–47; and Allende, 'Informe al pueblo sobre la nacionalización del cobre', 148–68.

²⁷Martner and Bifani, 'La nueva política del hierro', 207–16; and Vuskovic, 'Necesidad de estatizar el sistema bancario', 251–3.

²⁸Allende, 'El área de propiedad social', 32–6; Allende, 'The Chilean revolution one year in', 402.

²⁹de Onís, 'Allende is given a mandate by vote', *New York Times*, 6 April 1971.

³⁰Bello, 'The roots and dynamics', 411–14.

³¹See Hobsbawm, 'Chile: Year one', 379.

³²Meller, *Un siglo de economía política chilena*, 118–19.

³³Cited in de Vylder, *Allende's Chile*, 70–1.

³⁴Meller, *Un siglo de economía política chilena*, 119.

³⁵Meller, *Un siglo de economía política chilena*, 119.

³⁶Meller, *The Unidad Popular*, 33–4.

³⁷Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian is credited with coining the term '*fiesta*' to describe the economic successes of the revolution's early months. Moulian, *La forja de ilusiones*. See the term's use also in Pinto Vallejos, *Fiesta y drama*.

³⁸'Bata regala televisores y radio-tocadiscos en todo Chile', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 20 April 1971; 'Inundarán mercado con televisores populares', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 13 May 1971; 'Todavía no ha comprador su juego de mesa "Sol" a precio rebajado?', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 16 May 1971. For advertisements for kitchen appliances, see the popular women's magazine *Eva* – for example, *Eva*, 3–9 December 1971; 'Deliciosa cita con 66 tentaciones', *Eva*, 26 November–2 December 1971, 26–9. On sales of nationally produced bed linen in 1971, see Winn, *La revolución chilena*, 81. For more on the prevalence of footwear and mattress purchases, as well as sales of more expensive appliances, like refrigerators, see Corvalán, *El Gobierno de Salvador Allende*, 24. Many of the above sources are cited and analysed in Frens-String, 'Communists, commissars, and consumers', 483–4.

³⁹'Government's price freeze', *New York Times*.

⁴⁰Braun, Braun, Briones, Díaz, Lüders and Wagner, *Economía chilena*, 40–1. For another look at agrarian productivity during the early period of revolution, see Winn and Kay, 'Agrarian reform and rural revolution', 155.

⁴¹de Vylder, *Allende's Chile*, 201.

⁴²Cited in Hakim and Solimano, *Development, Reform, and Malnutrition*, 25; see also Frens-String, 'Communists, commissars, and consumers', 484.

⁴³Winn and Kay, 'Agrarian reform and rural revolution', 153.

⁴⁴'Tratan de fabricar galletas con porotos', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 15 November 1971; 'Con nuevo alimento infantil combatirán la desnutrición', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 23 May 1973.

⁴⁵Henríquez Guaico, 'Industria Perlak "Dirigida y Controlada por los Trabajadores"', 66–8.

⁴⁶Concha, 'Presentación de Juan Carlos Concha', 65–8; Hakim and Solimano, *Development, Reform, and Malnutrition*, 38; 'Hay que salvar a 25 mil niños que mueren anualmente por desnutrición', *El Siglo*, 20 December 1970; 'La leche salvará a mis hijos', *El Siglo*, 6 January 1971.

⁴⁷Concha, 'Presentación de Juan Carlos Concha', 65–8. For more on Chile's milk distribution programme under the UP, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 5.

⁴⁸See Frens-String, 'Communists, commissars, and consumers', 484; also Winn, 'Furies of the Andes', 240.

⁴⁹Allende, 'The Chilean revolution one year in', 404. For more on this comparison with Cuba, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 5.

⁵⁰'Amplían prohibición para consumir vacuno', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 9 July 1971; 'Temporal hizo desaparecer pollos en Mercado Central', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 15 July 1971; 'Santiago quedó sin carne ni pollos', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 19 July 1971; 'Incidentes en el Matadero por la falta de abastecimientos', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 23 July 1971.

⁵¹'No subirá la carne', *El Siglo*, 8 May 1971.

⁵²The North American Congress on Latin America offered a preliminary assessment of US economic sabotage of the UP economy in 1973. See NACLA, 'U.S. Aid: The carrot and the stick', 45–6. Also, Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File*, 83–7.

⁵³Meller, *The Unidad Popular*, 35; Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 5.

⁵⁴Cited in Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile*, 150.

⁵⁵Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile*, 130–1.

⁵⁶Meller, *Un siglo de economía política chilena*, 127.

⁵⁷On the rollout of Chile's year-long 'battle of production', see 'La batalla de 1971: aumentar la producción', *Poder Campesino*, second half of March 1971, 4–5; and 'Compromiso para producir más firmaron campesinos y gobierno', *Poder Campesino*, second half of March 1971, 6. On food import numbers in the late Chilean fall of 1972, see 'Espectacular aumento de importaciones alimenticias', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 2 June 1972.

⁵⁸Braun, Braun, Briones, Díaz, Lüders and Wagner, *Economía chilena*, 40–1.

⁵⁹'Las cifras de importación de trigo', *El Heraldo (Linares)*, 26 November 1972.

⁶⁰Cited in Baroana Urzúa, Costabal Llona and Vial Gaete, *Mil días, mil por ciento*, 81. For more on issues related to declining wheat production, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 7.

⁶¹The first public accounting of US covert financing of the opposition, and particularly the October 1972 bosses' strike, came in the 1975 Church Report. See Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Covert Action in Chile, 1963–1973*, 2, 10, 30.

⁶²For two recent historical interpretations of the bosses' strike, see Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*, 65–92; also Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard*, 115–33.

⁶³'Comerciante quemó 200 kilos de carne', *Puro Chile*, 26 October 1972, cited in Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 7.

⁶⁴For excerpts of the opposition's demands in 1972, see Chilean Business and Professional Associations, 'So that Chile can renew its march forward', 410–14. For a longer history of the anti-Allende attacks on the JAPs, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, especially chapters 6 and 7.

⁶⁵For a historical assessment of food distribution under the UP that focuses on the JAPs, see Frens-String, 'Communists, commissars, and consumers'.

⁶⁶'Persecución de la JAP denuncian comerciantes', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 27 October 1972; 'Comerciantes repudiaron a la JAP en Población Caro', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 6 November 1972.

⁶⁷Thank you to historian Luis Herrán for directing me to this story and providing the above information on Twitter. Luis Herrán (@yo_herran), 'Fake news before fake news, or how the politics of food in Allende's Chile took a surreal turn in anticommunist magazines. cc. @jf_string @Palquelea'. Twitter, 11 January 2021, 11:22 p.m. Accessed 11 January 2021. https://twitter.com/yo_herran/status/1348862858411405313?s=11.

⁶⁸See, Gaete Ossandón, *Economía de guerra*; 'Llaman a organizar la Resistencia contra racionamiento de alimentos', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 12 January 1973; 'Oposición llama a resistir las medidas del Gobierno', *La Tercera de la Hora*, 13 January 1973.

⁶⁹On popular access to consumer goods and new public services under the UP, see Tinsman, *Buying into the Regime*, 38; Trumper, *Ephemeral Histories*, 25–9; and Murphy, *For a Proper Home*, 107–10.

⁷⁰‘Pan y leche’, *El Siglo*, 10 December 1970.

⁷¹See the testimony of Lucy Traipe in Railaf, Huentelaf and Traipe, *A desalambrar*, 44. I thank Fernando Pairican and Marie Juliette Urrutia for pointing me to this illuminating quote in their article featured in this special issue of *Radical Americas*: Pairican and Urrutia. ‘The permanent rebellion’, 8.

⁷²For a longer analysis of how the connection between consumption and citizenship was constructed in Chile, both from below and from above, during the twentieth century, see Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*.

⁷³Bosco Parra, ‘Es posible extraer dignidad de la escasez’, 3379–80, cited and analysed in more depth in Frens-String, *Hungry for Revolution*, chapter 6.

⁷⁴For early articulations of the ‘social market economy’ idea by conservative Chilean economists, see ‘El precio justo’, *La Tercera de la Hora*, 20 May 1973. ‘Economía social del mercado’, *La Tercera de la Hora*, 27 May 1973, cited in Frens-String, ‘Communists, commissars, and consumers’, 495. More than a decade later, under the iron fist of General Augusto Pinochet and with Chile’s free-market transformation firmly under way, the bulletin of the state consumer protection agency summarised the implementation of this new economic philosophy in Chile and the role of the individual consumer in it. See ‘Chile: doce millones de consumidores’, 2, also cited in Frens-String, ‘Communists, commissars, and consumers’, 496.

⁷⁵See Frens-String, ‘Burying Pinochet’.

⁷⁶‘Marcha en Chile para pedir que la educación deje de ser un “bien de consumo”’.

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