

Allende for the 21st century

Paula Francisca Vidal Molina and Ximena Odekerken review *Allende and the Popular Unity. The Road to Democratic Socialism*, New York, Routledge, 2024. 208 pp.208 pág

**Dr. Rafael Rojas
Centro de Estudios Históricos Colmex**

DOI:10.5354/2735-6620.2024.76249

This book brings together speeches by President Salvador Allende and government texts by officials of his government, such as Pedro Vuskovic, a Socialist Party militant and Minister of Economy, Development and Reconstruction in the Unidad Popular government, also Minister of Agriculture from 1970 to 1972, who played a crucial role in the Agrarian Reform of the government before Allende's, Eduardo Frei Montalva's and the Christian Democracy. The volume also includes documents by female leaders, such as the journalist Amanda Puz, director of the magazine *Paula*, and the writer Virginia Vidal.

189

Documents from institutions such as the Central Única de Trabajadores and Mapuche and Araucanian communities are translated here. Some of Allende's speeches, such as the one at the National Stadium on 5 November 1970 or the one at the University of Guadalajara in December 1972, are well known, but other texts in this book rescue less visible voices – some of them collective – from the Chilean political process, in addition to that of the socialist president. This effect of discursive chirality is slightly reminiscent of Listen, Yanqui, the book by C. Wright Mills (1960) on the Cuban Revolution, in which the American sociologist reproduced other voices of the Cuban revolutionary leadership, in addition to those of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, which were the most recognisable.

This anthology is organised thematically, towards a redefinition of what is traditionally assumed to be “democratic socialism” or the “Chilean road to socialism”. The latter has generally been understood from the point of view of the means of access to power, no longer through armed insurrection but through democratic elections and a preservation



of the Chilean liberal constitutional framework, with its representative government and division of powers.

In Allende's discourse, for example in his conversation with Regis Debray and the debates between the armed and peaceful lefts of the 1970s, this emphasis was already apparent. However, by focusing more on the ends or concrete impacts of Unidad Popular's public policies, this book contributes to giving new meaning to or redefining the content of "democratic socialism".

This redefinition is in tune but also in contradiction with a new historiographical corpus on the Popular Unity project, which we can identify with studies such as those of Eugenia Palieraki (2014), Marian Schlotterbeck (2018), Tanya Harmer (2011) and Marcelo Casals (2010), among others.

There would be at least four flanks to this redefinition of Chilean democratic socialism. The first would be the adjectivisation of that democratic experiment as "participatory" rather than parliamentary or representative, two conceptualisations that carried a lot as well as time's actors and in the historiography. Both in the section that includes documents related to the nationalisation of copper (or mining in general) and those that deal with industrialisation, the role of the working class and trade union politics, the emphasis is placed on the "participatory" dimension of that democracy.

The second flank would be that of popular government as a platform of existing social rights. Agricultural and industrial policies do not appear here to be too closely tied to developmental planning strategies or the search for community self-management. The people's government would be the transition to socialism, insofar as through the structural transfer of ownership of the means of production, the destruction of the liberal state would take place from below or from within.

The third flank is the one we can associate with the participation of women in the Unidad Popular project and the gender policies of Allende's government. The selected documentation conveys a desiderative sense or a sense of demand to the Allende government from the voices of Amanda Puz and Virginia Vidal against the predominant machismo in Chileans that the correspondence between these demands and the programme of "women's emancipation" or the gender policies of the Unidad Popular is not so clear. Perhaps, here, a dissonance could be identified between the meaning sought by the anthology and the studies of Tanya Harmer (2011), for example.



Finally, the fourth flank would be that of the indigenous communities. It is interesting to note here that two of the documents, Allende's agreements with the Mapuche community of Ñielol, Temuco, and that of the Araucanía representatives on the Law for the "protection and integral development" of these peoples, date from 1964, when Allende was the presidential candidate of the Popular Action Front (FRAP), during the government of Jorge Alessandri. These documents would converge with another line of more recent historiography, which calls for the origins of the Popular Unity project to be traced back to the FRAP.

So this anthology seeks to propose a romanticisation of the Unidad Popular project, not in terms of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, but of the more recent left of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A left that sought alternatives to representative or parliamentary democracy, this time feminist and communitarian rather than developmentalist or extractivist. It is, therefore, a revision and updating of the interpretative repertoire that has most commonly been applied to the reading of the political programme and governmental performance of Salvador Allende and the Unidad Popular.

191

Therefore, the anthology has the value of bringing primary documents of the Allende government into contact with the English-speaking reader, bringing that fundamental experience of the Chilean and Latin American left closer to the English-speaking public of the 21st century. Similar projects from those years include a well-known study by Aviva Chomsky (2010), for example, on the Cuban Revolution, understanding the phenomenon in terms of racial, sexual, gender and religious diversity, a reality like that of Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s, a period which, according to the most up-to-date historiography – Lilian Guerra (2012), Michelle Chase (2015), Alejandro de la Fuente (2001), Abel Sierra Madero (2016) – was marked by the homogenisation of the revolutionary subject.

TI conclude, then, by asking whether there is not a risk here of extemporaneous political correctness that displaces the project of Allende and the Popular Unity of the 1960s and 1970s from its Cold War context and, above all, from its belonging to the heterodox Marxism of the New Left. A location which guarantees that experience of a highly innovative, open-minded or even dissident field of significance within the tradition of the Latin American left in the 20th century.



Bibliographical references

Casals, M. (2010). *The dawn of a revolution: The left and the strategic construction of the “Chilean road to socialism”, 1956-1970*. LOM Ediciones.

Chase, M. (2015). *Revolution within the revolution: Women and gender politics in Cuba, 1952-1962*. University of North Carolina Press.

Chomsky, A. (2010). *A history of the Cuban revolution*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Dalla Fuente, A. (2001). *A nation for all: Race, inequality, and politics in twentieth-century Cuba*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Guerra, L. (2012). *Visions of power in Cuba: Revolution, redemption, and resistance, 1959-1971*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Harmer, T. (2011). *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press.

Mills, C. W. (1960). *Listen, Yankee: The revolution in Cuba*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Palieraki, E. (2014) *La revolución ya viene: El MIR chileno en los años sesenta*. LOM Ediciones.

Schlotterbeck, M. (2018). *Beyond the vanguard: Everyday revolutionaries in Allende’s Chile*. University of California Press.

Sierra Madero, A. (2016). *El cuerpo nunca olvida: Trabajo forzado, hombre nuevo y memoria en Cuba (1959-1980)*. Rialta Ediciones.

Details of the review author:

Name: **Rafael Rojas**

Institutional Affiliation: Centre for Historical Studies, Colmex

Email: rerojas@colmex.mx

