REFLECTIONS ON MEMORY AND DEMOCRACY

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Memory as a Pillar for Democracy and Reconciliation in Chile

Sergio Bitar

Achieving reconciliation in societies that have experienced a major crisis requires a national effort to bring out what happened, to understand what went wrong, and to draw lessons from it. We must resist the temptation simply to put the past behind us.

Real reconciliation can only be achieved if we create institutions that respect and guarantee the rights of all sectors of society and enable disagreements to be resolved in a democratic fashion. Reconciliation cannot, therefore, occur while ignoring the past. Learning from our collective experience is a fundamental step in building a common future and lasting reconciliation. In the case of Chile, it is important to remember the human rights violations committed by the civic-military dictatorship from 1973 to 1989, and also to understand and acknowledge the political and economic conditions that led to the coup.

A Personal Experience

I have to confess that reconciliation has not been the political goal that has inspired my public actions. Since the military coup, I have been committed to the construction of a civilized coexistence based on democracy and respect for human rights. My conviction was, and is, that reconciliation as a social process requires underlying political conditions that are not yet present, and that reconciliation will only progress if we are able to improve, day by day, the democratic underpinnings of coexistence (“convivencia”).

I have not had to reconcile myself with persons who violated human rights. Even today I don’t seek reconciliation with those who still justify violence. I can coexist with those people, but I cannot be reconciled with them.

For me and for thousands of my compatriots, the essential task right after the coup was to survive. The shock was monumental. The bombing of the presidential palace, La Moneda, with President Salvador Allende inside,
the assassination of friends, the disappearances, the torture, the prison, and the exile—it was difficult to endure all of these without breaking.

As time went on, my feelings and reasoning started evolving. From those first days in 1973, I observed that, as peaceful as Chilean society had seemed, it had enormous potential for violence, which could erupt when the norms were broken or worse, when they were broken through state terrorism. It was difficult to explain how the apparently civilized colonel from the FACH (Chilean Air Force), who had visited my house when I held the post of Minister of Mining under President Allende, could just a short time later order his subordinates to resort to torture. Or, how people with whom we had interacted every day could become the first informers or spokesmen of the rhetoric that would hide or try to justify what was happening.

I never felt hatred nor the desire for vengeance. But indignation became for me a motivating force to combat injustice. At that moment, no one was aiming for reconciliation or even trying to organize people to fight; we simply lived to overcome our circumstances.

I found it healing to tell the story of my life on Dawson Island in 1975, as a political prisoner, and to leave it a testimony for my children, and for all children. However, I put the text away for more than eight years and returned to it only in 1983. Upon rereading it, I realized that there were bits that I no longer remembered. I felt the fragility of memory, and the strength of the mind to block out bad memories in order to allow us to move forward. But if we forget tragic events, they could be repeated.

I learned through my own experience that we must keep our memories because they can both heal us and keep us alert. In 1987, when Pope John Paul II visited Chile, publishers dared to launch the first edition of my book Isla 10. It became a bestseller as Chileans wanted to understand what had happened.

This opening of past experience led to an important evolution in Chilean political thinking, especially in the left. On the one hand, the abrupt end of the Chilean road to socialism and, on the other hand and later, the crisis of “real” socialism in Eastern Europe, along with the attractiveness of European Social Democrats’ experiences, all contributed to a review of ideological positions. It opened the way for reassessing democracy and its institutions, and the idea of broad coalitions became important to the moderate left in Chile and Latin America. The examples of governance in democratic countries also opened up new perspectives and showed us new national paths forward.

In exile, we had begun to organize ourselves, help others who arrived, and launch international campaigns to protect human rights and condemn
the dictatorship. To seek a political way forward we had to ask ourselves seriously why the democratic process had failed and the coup happened—what did we do wrong? Unlike many others, I had a self-critical vision that I expressed in the book *Chile: Experiments in Democracy*, which was published in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and Chile (where it was titled *El Gobierno de Allende, Chile 1970–73*). The main aspiration and goal of the book was to unite democrats in Chile and abroad who shared a respect for human rights, to fight the dictatorship and rebuild democracy through peaceful means.

At that time the fight was for what today appears to be a modest goal: that the justice system would offer, at the very least, legal recourse (*habeas corpus*) when someone disappeared. It was an almost futile battle. Only a very few judges acted with dignity and offered some consolation. We tried to stop the violence, combat fear and, through those efforts, protect social mobilization.

The process of political and social convergence began early. A first meeting of leaders connected to democratic socialism and the Christian Democrats was held in 1975 in Colonia Tovar, Venezuela, with the support of the Ebert Foundation. They would later be joined by liberals from the right.

One name that must not be forgotten is that of Cardinal Silva Henríquez. Along with other denominations and church leaders, he defended life and offered hope in the midst of despair. That may have been the moment when the Catholic Church was closest to the heart of the majority of Chileans. No one, not even the church, talked about reconciliation then.

**Rediscovering My Country and Moving On**

Chile’s transition was a slow process, as are many transitions worldwide. In fighting the dictatorship, the progressive convergence of political forces and their coordination with workers’ organizations, professionals, women, students, and the Catholic Church grew into a political power capable of defeating Pinochet. The Group for the new Constitution or the Group of 24 in 1980, the Democratic Alliance in 1983, the National Agreement in 1985, the Assembly for Civility in 1986, the Free Elections Committee in 1987, and the *Concertación por el No* in 1988 were successive steps that allowed the plebiscite to triumph in 1988. All these steps were not aimed at forging reconciliation, but at dislodging the dictatorship from power.

In 1984, when I was allowed to reenter Chile and the L stamped on my passport was removed, my exile ended and my “un-exile” began. I found a very different country. Only little by little could I see that the familiar parts were still there, albeit buried. I felt the oppression of the dictatorship and sensed the contempt for those civilians who supported it. I understood
that although all of us Chileans lived in the same country, we thought very differently, and that it was essential to reorganize a country based on democratic rules and tolerance for diversity. It was unacceptable for one to crush the other through force.

Parties, social organizations, and civil society continued to fight for lessening the ideological strife with persistence and patience. As time went by, some factions of the dictatorship began to incline in favor of a return to democracy. Cardinal Francisco Fresno’s call for a National Agreement attracted people who were open to seeking the truth. My book Isla 10 was read by people in the Navy. I began to feel hope that this could bloom into a spirit of coming together.

The 1988 plebiscite to decide on whether Pinochet would be given an additional term, and the triumph of the NO vote, marked a historic change. We took on the enormous task of reconstructing the institutional democratic foundations, neutralizing hatred, and seeking unity among Chileans. The Concertación (a coalition based mainly on Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) acted with conviction to re-establish the authority of the civilian government over the military, ensure respect for human rights, seek justice, and focus on reducing poverty.

The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was an audacious step that President Aylwin took in 1991. Its precepts of truth and justice, also hailed by the church, were rejected by many supporters of the dictatorship. Pinochet, still Commander in Chief of the Army, protested and threatened: his argument was that, far from contributing to reconciliation, the truth would open wounds and provoke hatred. On the contrary, the Commission’s work brought peace, dissipated fear, and led to a demand for justice in the tribunals. It became an international example, observed later by South Africa.

To identify lessons that might be useful for Arab nations and some countries in Asia and Africa, my colleague Abraham Lowenthal and I recently interviewed former presidents of countries that had managed transitions to democracy. With all its lights and shadows, Chile achieved something unlike any other country in looking for truth and justice, and keeping memory alive. These results are also due to the moral force of women and the families of those who were detained and disappeared, of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, and of many human rights organizations.

From the beginning of democratic governments, it was clear to me that reconciliation could only emerge from each person’s spirit to the extent that truth and justice moved forward. It was also apparent that there would never be only one version of history, but many; not one memory, but
many; and though we will always disagree on some issues, we can coexist if we cling to democratic norms and respect for human rights.

After President Aylwin’s National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, the Frei government followed up with the “Roundtable Dialogue,” engaging in conversations with the military, human rights organizations, and lawyers; the Lagos administration organized the “Valech Commission” to identify those who suffered political imprisonment, torture, and abuse; and President Bachelet opened the Museum of Memory. Then came the trials and the reparations. After many attempts, Congress succeeded in approving Chile’s entry as a member of the International Criminal Court and the Committee against Torture (CAT).

Is Reconciliation Possible with Those Who Justify the Coup?
The debate about the causes of the coup is still unresolved, perhaps because such a resolution logically comes with a risk: to find justification for the coup may once again provide justification for human rights violations.

No one is free from responsibility for what happened. Each person has to draw his or her own lessons from the past. Mine are that the Allende administration, of which I was a part, created tension and polarization that served as an excuse for others to reject the government’s legitimacy and unleash a military coup. Whatever the reasons for the coup, however, nothing, under any circumstances, can justify human rights violations. There is a moral boundary that must not be crossed. Those who seek refuge in political justifications for the coup are ultimately justifying violence against their fellow citizens. Those who, in turn, ignore the causes of the coup and don’t honestly examine the lessons of that period, also contribute to its repetition.

From that experience we drew political lessons that have guided our later decisions. We pushed for change by fostering a majority capable of confronting the enormous economic and political power of the dominant non-democratic forces. We have continuously educated the public, being aware that in Chile more than 40 percent of the population voted for Pinochet’s regime to continue in power. I also learned to mistrust the voices of the extreme left that loudly proclaimed intransigence, providing fodder for the fascist-inspired groups. Constructive and democratic changes must be forged through successive reforms, profoundly linked to the assent of the citizenry.

It was very difficult to reconstruct coexistence with a living dictator who had headed the Army for more than eight years and then became a Senator for life. In 1998, Pinochet entered the Senate without an election, installed through a constitutional rule that he himself inserted in his 1980
Constitution. I was sitting within ten meters of him in the Senate for a number of months. He was responsible for so many crimes, and there he was, voting, with the same right as the senators chosen by the people, surrounded and protected by some senators who served as his bodyguards. Maintaining my composure was difficult. Reconcile? Impossible. The goal was to change the rules and get him out.

The extended presence of Pinochet delayed the whole process, particularly changes in the judicial branch. Barring a few notable and honorable exceptions, the Chilean judiciary had been subordinated to the dictatorship. The Chilean transition to democracy was strengthened by the European decision to try Pinochet for the assassination and disappearance of European citizens. The actions of Judge Baltasar Garzón (of Spain) and the British justice system were invaluable, and reflected the recognition that human rights are a universal value, guaranteed in international agreements. Without this decision, Pinochet would never have been held accountable and the story of our transition would have been a different one. Impunity would have weakened our democracy and strengthened the anti-democratic sectors that had justified the dictatorship’s actions. An important segment of the Chilean right has still not drawn the line between justifying the coup and justifying the violation of human rights.

The Future: From Personal Memory to Social Memory

Notwithstanding the explosion of memory that occurred in Chile on September 11, 2013, on the 40th anniversary of the coup, there is still an essential step we must take to leave a legacy that endures and sustains a common future. We must move from the personal memory of those who lived their own experience to a collective memory for those who come after us. Forgetting is an illness of our time. Many wish to forget, thinking that we will then be more at ease. But memory is a source of healing and hope. Memory has its own dynamics; it is not a way of clinging to the past but of gaining knowledge to help build a new world.

Mine was a privileged generation that fought for its dreams, suffered through the dictatorship, and actively participated in the creation of a new democratic society. But that legacy is still inconclusive if we don’t preserve the memory of what it cost, learn the lessons for preventing a repeat in Chile and elsewhere, and enshrine the importance of protecting our essential values for the future. Have we built the foundations to coexist in a democracy? Certainly. Has memory helped to build those foundations? Absolutely. Has Chile achieved reconciliation? Not yet. The culture of
human rights is still not yet deeply rooted. The mission for all of us is to turn it into common sense.

If memory helps democracy and democracy is a precondition for reconciliation, we Chileans should work together to forge common futures based on deepening democracy and respecting the rights of everyone. A priority task is to elaborate a new constitution, together, with widespread participation. The existing constitution, despite having been amended during this democratic period, drags the illegitimacy of being imposed in 1980 by Pinochet, in the midst of a dictatorship, without respect for any democratic rule. Chileans now demand a future agenda that represents a common project. A constitutional process developed in a working democracy may help us to agree on norms and institutions that revere the values of liberty, solidarity, participation, and a collective will. This step, among others, will favor reconciliation.
In this article I explore a number of ideas concerning civility and its relationship to democracy and empathy inspired by events (both political | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. By exploring the ways in which they engage with cultures of (mis)representation, I offer a series of reflections on the ways in which culture can reaffirm its civic responsibility and offer modes of thinking through issues of community, civility and camaraderie in troubled times. Discover the world's research. In This Review. Reflections on Memory and Democracy. Edited by Merilee S. Grindle and Erin E. Goodman. 274 pp, Harvard University Press, 2016. Purchase. Sign in and save to read later. Save to Pocket. Share. Print this article. Save.Â The elegantly crafted contributions cover means of historical memory as diverse as investigative journalism, Mayan oral histories, and Argentine fiction. At times, the authors assert causal relationships between historical truth commissions, judicial punishments, and victim compensation, on the one hand, and the legitimacy and sustainability of democratic institutions, on the other. Alas, these case studies are too few in number and too specific to particular times and places to allow for robust generalizations, as Grindle recognizes in her introduction. Reflections on Race & Democracy Prep is part of an ongoing and evolving dialogue about atonement, reparations, and progress. I hope that those for whom it was most important have seen it. If youâ€™d like to speak with me about it, please reach out personally and I will lean into the discomfort. â€™m going to take the next few weeks simply to listen. â€” Seth.