

In Chile, Two Kinds of Terrorism

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October 16, 2010

Santiago.

At a September 14th symposium on the Chilean anti-terrorism law, the lawyer Julio Cortes pointed out that the frequent use of the law despite the absence of any real terrorism in Chile illuminates its fundamentally political, persecutorial character. Historically, terrorism was first used by the new bourgeois state against the old order. Only later did the phenomenon of terrorism from below emerge.

September 11th in Chile is an interesting day. While much of the rest of the world follows the US-driven discourse of the War on Terror, Chileans remember the state terrorism at work in the 1973 military coup by General Pinochet against the socialist president, Salvador Allende. Ultimately thousands of political opponents of the new regime would be tortured, disappeared, or executed. Once the dictatorship transferred seamlessly into democracy, with many of the same people remaining in power, and without revoking any of the neoliberal economic changes violently forced through by the dictatorship and under the direction of economists trained at the University of Chicago, people began commemorating September 11th with massive protest marches. The marches typically go from the city center to the General Cemetery, where there is a memorial to the victims of the regime, and where the day usually ends in heavy rioting against the police. At night, in the poorer neighborhoods, which received the brunt of state terrorism under Pinochet and continue to be the prime targets for police violence under democracy, people traditionally set up burning barricades and fight the carabineros and military special forces that come to antagonize them.

This year, the media and the government made a concerted effort to minimize the disturbances. On September 18th, the state is set to celebrate its bicentennial anniversary, and it has already spent millions on whipping up the population into

a fervor of patriotism and national unity. President Piñera, whose rightwing National Renewal party supported Pinochet in its early days, has made the facile declaration that this September 18th would mark the final unification of the Chilean people and the resolution of “past” problems. This unification has been based on a heavy dose of state terrorism, in which usage of the anti-terrorist law has played an important role.

The problem is, from its inception Chile has been a violent fiction. Much of its territory stolen from Peru and Bolivia and all of it stolen from indigenous nations, in the 1880s the Chilean state finally accomplished what the Spanish conquistadors failed at in 300 years of warfare: the violent conquest of the Mapuche nation. And throughout the early 20th century, a government led by robber barons and close with American and British investors carried out some of the worst massacres ever visited on the radical labor movement. Neither of these conflicts have gone away.

The Mapuche are still fighting for their territorial integrity against white landowners, the Chilean military, and forestry transnationals. Some Mapuche groups are seeking greater autonomy within the Chilean state, while others are struggling for full sovereignty. And the movement of people fighting against the ravages of capitalism is becoming increasingly libertarian, as the communist and socialist parties all renounced the struggle and scrambled for positions in government after the transition to democracy. A hundred years ago anarchists played a major role in the workers’ movement, and starting in the ’90s they became prominent again, as punk music spread new forms of cultural resistance the traditional left wouldn’t touch, and as many ex-combatants from the armed leftwing groups that struggled against Pinochet developed a critique of their own internal authoritarianism.

To squash the Mapuche struggle, the state has frequently used the Pinochet-era anti-terrorism law against activists and warriors accused of such light acts as setting logging trucks ablaze or threatening landowners. The situation has reached such absurd proportions that after one altercation in which a landowner sustained what could only be categorized as “minor injuries,” prosecutors subsequently spoke of “terroristic minor injury.”

Thirty-four Mapuche prisoners are currently on hunger strike, most of them since July 12, with a list of four demands:

- An end to the anti-terrorist law and its application in cases against the Mapuche.
- An end to the double jeopardy by which Mapuche can be tried in civil and military court.
- Freedom for all Mapuche political prisoners.

– A demilitarization of Mapuche lands.

Their struggle has received support across Walmapu (the Mapuche lands), from anarchists, and from the broader Chilean left. In Santiago, the capital of Chile, which has never been a bastion of the Mapuche struggle, the walls are covered in graffiti and posters calling for their freedom, and there are weekly protest marches and Mapuche cultural festivals that regularly draw over a thousand people.

In order to defuse the situation before the bicentenary, the government proposed a modification of the anti-terrorist law. When the Mapuche prisoners and their supporters rejected the reform, declaring that it did not meet their demands and would only make things worse, the government retracted the carrot and brought out the stick. On the weekend of September 11th, police arrested three spokespeople for the hunger strikers while they were on their way to the hospital in Concepcion to visit some of the prisoners who had been transferred there so they could be force fed intravenously. The arrests have been widely denounced, as they make it impossible for the coordinating committee of supporters to make joint decisions and declarations. It seems certain that the hunger strike will continue through the bicentenary celebrations.

On August 14 of this year, police in Santiago and Valparaiso raided seventeen houses and three anarchist social centers, two of which they closed down, in the process destroying one of the country's most important anarchist libraries. Police arrested fourteen people, accusing them of "illegal association" and the "planting of explosive devices." Over the past couple years, a number of clandestine groups have taken responsibility for a string of small bombings targeting government institutions, banks, multinationals, the media, and other targets. The bombings were all carried out at night, and no one was ever hurt. In May, 2009, one anarchist, Mauricio Morales, died while transporting a bomb. Over the same time period, the media have consistently tried to mobilize fear and panic, and present the anarchists as public enemy number one.

Enabling the police to make their case despite a total lack of evidence, the media described the open social centers and libraries as "command centers." During the raids, no explosives were found, but the media reported "traces of TNT," which in reality were nitrate traces that could have come from a plethora of benign sources. The people arrested were public anarchist organizers, many of whom did not know each other, but the media portrayed them as a hierarchical clandestine organization (a necessary component for the "illegal organization" charge) with leaders and followers, and a detailed chain of command. In fact, Chile's leading newspapers were somehow able to release more information about this terrorist organization than the police could present in their accusation.

After the initial bombardment, there has been something of a media blackout on the case. Ten of the detainees are in maximum security prison awaiting trial, and the other four are on conditional release. Their supporters are trying to spread the word about their case and build solidarity.

The Chilean government, which is building close ties with the European Union and the United States, is especially concerned with its public image abroad. After the collapse of the Argentine economy, relatively prosperous Chile has taken over the role of neoliberal poster child for South America. But as is true everywhere, that prosperity comes with an ugly underside. What the politicians in Santiago are wishing for more than anything else this September 18th, their independence day, is that the citizens keep waving their flags, keep believing in the illusion of national unity and social peace, and that they believe in the myth of only one kind of terrorism, the kind from below, and trust their government to protect them from it. Despite the opposing histories that manifest on September 11th between the US and Chile, it's really not so different here, on the other side of the world.

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Retrieved on June 23, 2013 from
<http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/09/16/in-chile-two-kinds-of-terrorism/>

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