

The other 9/11

The horrendous impact of the attacks on September 11th 2001 and the resulting wars is not in doubt. But beneath the devastated ruins of Ground Zero, Iraq and the increasing fragility of Pakistan thanks to the bombardment of Afghanistan, lies the different memories of Latin Americans.

On September 11th 1973, the democratic socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile was bombed out of his La Moneda Palace and forced to commit suicide. He was replaced by a US-backed military junta headed by General Augusto Pinochet, a regime which lasted until 1990. A total of 200,000 Chileans were forced to exile their country with not travelling to Europe. Since the coup, the regime has been condemned by human rights groups worldwide

Pinochet's IMF-endorsed regime soon rounded up political opponents, dissident voices, labour organisers, female rights workers, minorities, majorities, while torturing and detaining any perceived threat. Tens of thousands of people 'disappeared' after the coup, in Pinochet's battle against the forces of public opinion and NGOs. The coup was supported by Richard Nixon, who approved the CIA's Project FUBELT to remove Allende, which aimed to, in the words of Nixon, 'make the economy scream' to unseat any socialist trends and replace them with a neo-fascist dictator willing to turn Chile into an 'investor's paradise' (*The Economist*) for US multinationals.

Chile's economic direction consequently took a neoliberal turn, with Chicago School economists (the 'Chicago Boys') entering parts of Pinochet's government to help remove any trade barriers threatening the 'national interest' of the US. Friedrich Hayek wasn't deterred by Pinochet's Chile either, and even held a meeting of his Mont Pelerin society there during the more violent stages of the regime. The wage levels Allende had worked to increase soon fell, with the banning of trade unions encouraging the Nobel Prize committee to grant the Chicago Boys their prize in economics. Impressed by Chile's economic 'health,' including the decline of real incomes amongst the poorest Chilean families (which fell by 30 percent between 1969 and 1978), Thatcher's Trade Minister Cecil Parkinson explained in 1980 that 'the Chilean economic experience is very similar to what we are developing here.' British ministers 'continue to evade responsibility for having conferred legitimacy on, and given their backing to, this nasty regime for so long.' (Mark Curtis, 'Unpeople')

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's Secretary of State, had this to say: 'I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves.' Though the Chilean labour movements had virtually no connection to Marx, the term 'communist' has to be understood as a euphemism for 'the spread of the Castro idea of taking matters into one's own hands,' in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Kennedy's special advisor. Thatcher was also pleased with Pinochet's actions, meeting with the exiled dictator in 1999 to thank him for helping Britain during the 1982 Falklands War and for 'bringing democracy to Chile.' Pinochet thanked the prime minister for her 'kindness.'

The Wilson government, after their victory in February 1973, 'decided to honour existing contracts to deliver two frigates, two submarines and a consignment of Rolls-Royce engines for the Chileans' Hunter aircraft – thus breaking Labour's pre-election commitment not to supply arms' (Curtis). Pinochet's regime was described by Trade Minister Peter Rees in 1982 as a 'moderate and stabilising force'. 'The bulk of Chile's navy', continues Curtis, 'was supplied by Britain, which provided around a dozen warships, including frigates, destroyers and submarines.'

Today, the west regards Chile as a fine model of the free market, and yet its main export was nationalised in 1976. The Codelco corporation, the largest copper producing company in the world, is by far the country's greatest export, from which the economy gets most of its strength. But there's a difference between Chile and the likes of Venezuela and Cuba: Chile doesn't no longer steps on the toes of the US or any other major western power, and so it escapes being branded 'communist,' 'socialist'. Allende was killed not because he was a communist but because, as Johann Hari points out, 'he was threatening the interests of US and Chilean mega-corporations by shifting the country's wealth and land from them to its own people.'