The lessons of the Chilean revolution, crushed for the time being by the military junta, will long be discussed. Any final conclusions must be reached with caution, for the full facts of the situation and the assessments of surviving participants are only gradually coming to light. The views raised here are provisional, and are offered as a contribution to an ongoing analysis. They rely on the author’s study and impressions of Chile on a brief visit in 1965, on presently available material, and on the analysis made in his book by the young French revolutionary intellectual Regis Debray who had the opportunity just after the 1970 election victory to study the situation and talk at length with Allende. (1) (He had shortly before been released from a Bolivian jail where he had spent some years as a result of his association with the unsuccessful guerrilla war launched by Che Guevara in 1966.)

I propose to take four main dimensions of any revolution, and try to see them in their inter-connections in Chile. These are the social processes, the state of consciousness of the participants, tactics, and organisation.

1. The social process, viewed as such — that is, as far as one can do, objectively, independent of the state of consciousness of parties, classes or masses. It should be realised that this is an abstraction, not a statement of what actually exists — a major aspect, but still only one aspect of the situation is taken. Three well-known (and no less important for that) features stand out in Chile:

a) The economic basis of power in ownership of the means of production. In Chile this power of the local bourgeoisie merged with that of imperialism, and was ruthlessly exercised. The machinations of giant US corporation ITT and others; the withholding of credits and spare parts; the flight of capital; agrarian, industrial and commercial sabotage; the strikes of the truckers (many of them expropriated landowners) show once again that unless this economic base is changed, power, including the power to make the position of any government eventually untenable, remains in capitalist hands, and socialism is impossible.

Allende and the participants in the Popular Unity, as well as others such as the MIR outside it, were all conscious of this, and much was done by nationalising the copper industry, the banks, and government intervention of different kinds in various industries, in distributing landlords’ land to the peasants, and in encouraging and assisting the Pobladores (fringe-dwellers — a very large section of the population of towns in Latin America) to squat on land and build dwellings, etc. However, active classes are needed to carry such measures through and overcome the opposing class power at the very grassroots in the processes
of production. There was such action, fairly widespread and spontaneous, though the extent and degree of socialist consciousness of it is not clear as yet, and there was encouragement, though not unequivocal at all times, by the Popular Unity. In the end, however, the reaction was able to bring about a state of economic chaos.

The Communist Party concentrated on increasing production in the nationalised and "controlled" industries to combat this, but in doing so they failed to place sufficient emphasis on the ultimately decisive political mobilisation.

b) Political power -- army, police, courts, parliament, the bureaucracy (civil service) are not neutral, and still less are they an instrument of revolution. They must be smashed and replaced by new ones. This does not necessarily mean that they must (or can always be) smashed all at once and in a particular way, but that must be the firmly held-to perspective and orientation.

The only organ of political power that was in fact "smashed" was the executive government, and this was done by the mobilisation of the masses in the Presidential election (as in the US, the President appoints the government). But it is the army that is the ultimate repository of political power, and possession of the executive government represented only a small, and a very insecure, section of the total power, as was evident from the beginning, when even confirmation of Allende as President by the Congress (still controlled by reaction) came only after a sharp struggle, including an attempted Rightwing putsch, and considerable mass mobilisation.

So far as one can judge, the strategy of the Popular Unity was correct enough in the respect that they planned to use (and did use) various laws -- most passed by an earlier popular government and forgotten -- to erode the economic power of capital, and to assist mass mobilisation, so as to create new ground to win the majority they did not yet have for the further development of revolution. They also spoke of not ultimately counting on the neutrality of the army or adherence to "the law" by the opposing classes, and it is therefore a great over-simplification to speak of them as espousing a "parliamentary road" to socialism.

They were also counting on the fact that conscripts, called up for only one year, were likely to be influenced more by their previous, than their army environment. During the coup there were instances of rank and file soldiers fighting against the Junta, though these were not widespread.

Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence indicating in practice, even if not in theory, that they did count too heavily on the enemy observing the law at all times, and the degree of likely neutrality of the army, and that these illusions as well as other factors mentioned later hampered their reliance on mass mobilisation, and colored their judgment of the tactical situation. This also heavily influenced what was ultimately a failure in strategic thinking. There was great division within the Popular Unity about the way forward, and the view which seems to have prevailed was that the main thing to do was to win a majority in a plebiscite to change the constitution, or at Presidential elections in 1976. (The unresolved idea of Allende's resignation mentioned later was involved in this.) It seems to have been the view that even if they failed here, irreversible structural changes had already been made which would advance the socialist cause at a later date. Unfortunately, greater strategical clarity and unity was developed in the camp of the enemy, who acted, realising that there are circumstances in which voting majorities do not count, whatever the depth of bourgeois democratic traditions -- though orientation on winning majority support in some form must always lie at the base of revolutionary strategy.

c) Self-action of the masses on a great scale is required to provide the necessary degree of force to overcome the power of the opposing classes in the economy, and politically, and also to develop the dynamics of self-transformation and self-liberation which is in a sense the ultimate objective of socialist revolution.

There is little doubt that there was a considerable degree of mass mobilisation, and that much of this was actively sought and welcomed by the Popular Unity. For example, already in 1965 I saw some of the first "Poblaciones" in Santiago and Valparaiso, which were directly stimulated by the Communist Party of Chile. There was also realisation of the need for a new stage in this mobilisation after the abortive coup of June this year.

However there was as well some "bestowal of liberation from above" (e.g. of land on the peasants), hesitation in relying sufficiently on the workers, and an apparent failure of work in the armed forces. It is unjustified to say there was none, and this would be hard to believe, and contrary to indications given,
and what flowed from them, and that this
despite the illusions referred to. More likely
was also the source of the mistaken reaction
about. The crucial importance of a split in
the armed forces at a time of revolution is at­
tested by experience in all revolutions, and
the masses.

The task of revolutionaries cannot be regard­
ed as confined to the propagation of truths,
however important, about transforming the
relations of production, smashing the state,
the self-emancipation of the workers, or other
marxist principles. Lenin, who was not given
to rhetoric or flamboyant statements spoke
of another vital principle: “... in order that
actually the whole class, that actually the
broad masses of toilers and those oppressed
by capital may take up such a position (either
either of direct support of the vanguard, or at least
of benevolent neutrality towards it), propa­
ganda and agitation alone are not enough.
For this the masses must have their own polit­
ical experience. Such is the fundamental law
of all great revolutions.” (3)

“Fundamental law of revolution” - these
are strong words. They mean that revolution­
aries cannot ignore or change at will the his­
torically moulded and now existing mass out­
look, and must somehow relate mass action
to it. One can “issue a call,” but this does not
mean it will be heeded. It is the easiest thing
in the world to write a scenario of revolution
provided it is assumed that “the workers” are
ready to follow the (correct) lead; but this
means treating this “fundamental law of rev­
olution” as non-existent or of only passing sig­
ificance.

The point being raised can of course be used
to excuse errors. That is not the intention --
there were indeed failings in the more distant
and the immediate past which contributed.
But the reverse also paints a false picture, and
is an inverted form of elitism which regards
the masses as exercising no influence of their
own and being entirely the creation of leader­
ship. Are revolutionaries in Australia to hold
that we know how to create the necessary
mass consciousness in another country when
we are (or should be) only too conscious that
adherence to correct principles is not enough
to change widely held attitudes here?

Many observers speak of the strong belief of
large numbers of Chileans in bourgeois-demo­
cratic processes, and lack of developed social­
list consciousness. For example, Debray in
1970 described the key problem of the revol­
tution in these terms:

“First, a marked gap between class instinct
and class consciousness, i.e., the fact that the
political consciousness of the workers, or
their consciousness of the long-term strategic
interests of the proletariat and its allies in the
struggle for hegemony, does not seem com­
mensurate with their spontaneous will to de­
fend their immediate vital interests. This dis­
location is hardly surprising, since political
consciousness is by definition the attribute
of a vanguard; but in the long run, in a revol­
tutionary period, the protection of the imme­
diate interests of the workers, and the improve­
ment of their conditions of existence, depend
on their ability to transform a discrete, static,
defensive position into a line of offensive aim­
ing at the conquest and consolidation of pol­
tical power as a nationally answerable class.
And, a second dislocation - the duplication
of the first at a higher stage - the gap between
class organisation (in quantity and quality)
and the class consciousness itself. This is dis­
cernible at the union level (one quarter of the
working class is unionised -- and, as is to be
expected, unionism is still steeped in the wage­
claim mentality and ‘economism’ of the bad
old days); and at the political level, the level
of the parties, especially the Socialist Party
whose qualities in the organisation and mobi­
labilisation of the masses and consistent disci­
pline have not hitherto seemed commensurate
with the political consciousness of its milit­
ants, nor with the objective responsibilities
of its leaders in the conduct of the revolution.
This phenomenon is still further underlined
by the absorption of the available political
cadres into the administrative and governmen­
al apparatus at the local and national level,
thus depleting the strictly political forma­
tions of leadership and cadres, leaving them
anaemic and in no condition to perform their
own tasks as vanguard organisations.” (4)

Some might be tempted to conclude from
such considerations that the campaigns cul­
minating in the elections were all a mistake.
The MIR, however, in general no supporter
of this activity, spoke in these terms of its
role in developing mass consciousness:

“The Left’s electoral triumph constitutes an
enormous advance for the workers' struggles, draws new sectors of the masses into the struggle for socialism, and assures the legitimacy and mass character of the future social confrontation. It therefore favors the development of the revolution and for that reason is also beneficial for the revolutionary Left." (5)

MIR also recognised the truth of Lenin's "fundamental law" when they realised that calls to armed struggle would not be heeded, and that they (MIR) had to find the way to have their propaganda listened to: "We consider most urgent, as a way of establishing our legitimacy among the Allendista masses, for us, as an organisation and in the mass fronts, to recognise Allende as president." (6)

And: "We must try to take the initiative in the struggle against the diehards, through mobilisations of the mass fronts or in the streets, or even through actions, which will necessarily have to be 'sympathetic' and 'clear,' in that they must not contribute to creating 'chaos' and 'provocation' in the eyes of the workers." (7)

At the same time, and reflecting the other side of the complex dialectics of interaction between organised revolutionaries and the masses, they had a more clear-sighted and healthier regard for the coming armed confrontation.

Naturally, pointing to these two sides does not of itself resolve the problem of the truth in the concrete circumstances. This requires more facts than are yet available to establish whether there were mistakes in leadership -- clearly there were, and serious ones -- but whether these were the overwhelming cause of the success of the coup. (8)

There was widespread mass action, including establishment of workers' control in factories, formation of "industrial cordons" (local coordinating groups), and organisation of armed workers' militias. But there is also evidence of disintegration, concentration on solving individual or sectional economic problems (copper workers' strikes), and for the time being immoveable belief in bourgeois legality, while later reports indicate that earlier accounts greatly exaggerated the extent of armed resistance to the coup. (8)

Also, it should never be forgotten that the government never achieved majority support, and it is facile to proclaim, as some critics do, that if the Popular Unity had only done the, to them obvious, (a) (b) or (c), they would have done so. This lacks the concrete knowledge and analysis that is essential to arrive at the truth. (9)

Many on-the-spot observers have a view similar to that expressed by Debray: "I know of no way in which (the defeat) could have been prevented. Of course there were mistakes made. Looking back one can always see how some things could have been done better. But Chile had to go through this attempt at social change. There was no real alternative. But it is different now: as a result of the fascist coup, there is no other way open but armed struggle." (10)

3. Tactics. Lack of space and information make it impossible to attempt a general review of tactics adopted at various stages of the struggle in the last three years, but a few general points seem to stand out.

It has already been mentioned that even Left critics such as the MIR recognised the fact that the tactics of aiming for an electoral victory for the presidency advanced mass consciousness and the revolution. Also that it was correct and useful to use existing laws where available to serve the interests of workers and peasants, and that the mass outlook had to be taken into account by all in determining their actions. Having this in mind, the importance of manoeuvring to put the other side in the wrong in battles over the "legality" of various measures cannot be lightly dismissed. Two years ago, an article in ALR (11), spoke of the coming crunch, which was, however, delayed for another two years as each side manoeuvred for position and sought to overcome differences within its ranks.

There was also a battle of tactics over political work in the army, and the arming of workers after June, with the reactionary Congress passing a special law under which the army searched for and confiscated weapons. Of course all tactics also have a certain "logic" of their own, making subsequent changes more difficult, and that those of the Popular Unity (leaving aside the unnecessary degree of self-delusion accompanying them) posed difficulties in this respect in switching emphasis to new tactics as the situation required. But this does not speak against their admissibility, but rather for a far greater flexibility in changing from one form to another. All successful revolutionaries have stressed this.

There is also a great deal of debate about tactics towards the middle strata -- small shopkeepers, middle peasants (some had their land confiscated, with the MIR pressing for still smaller plots to be taken over), professionals
and others, who seem to have ended up largely in the camp of the bourgeoisie. It is said that both too much, in some respects, and too little in others, was done, unnecessarily alienating sections of these strata. Further facts may help to clarify the truth of these contentions. But in the long run, experience seems to show, resoluteness in carrying the class struggle forward provides the only possibility (not the certainty - nothing does that) of victory at crucial times. The possible relation of this problem to current theories of the “two-stage” revolution is referred to below.

Another tactical problem is involved in reports of unjustified attacks by Leftists on Catholicism in general, at a time when considerable forces within the hierarchy as well as the rank and file were supporting the Popular Unity.

Similarly, some in the UP regarded all Christian Democrats as fascists, not differentiating between workers who followed them, and the leaders, while Allende in particular seems to have assumed that all Christian Democrat leaders would respect the constitution to the end.

4. Organisation, and the solidarity of the revolutionary forces. It is clear that there was considerable disunity between the forces on the Left, both within the Popular Unity and outside it, and that within the many parties and groups there were also divisions and sometimes splits. The general picture now emerging is of widespread disintegration. In the event no party or group was able to establish its ideological and political ascendancy, and there was no consensus as to how the coming “crunch” clearly in evidence this year was to be resolved. It appears Allende had advanced his resignation as a possibility, but even such a drastic step was not decisively resolved one way or the other.

From one point of view, this problem of cohesion lends support to the yearning for “one party of the working class,” and it is not denied that in certain circumstances this may be desirable, and that in still rarer circumstances it may become possible. But in most countries this seems quite unrealisable in the foreseeable future. The issue is rather whether the continuing fragmentation can be halted and some centripetal movement commenced. Nor should the later consequences of such a political evolution to a single party as revealed in the Soviet Union in particular be forgotten. And even in the Communist Party of Chile, which adhered to the traditional Stalin era “monolithism” (as I observed in the discussions of its 13th Congress in 1965), differences emerged in orientation, manifested particularly in actions by CUT (the trade union organisation largely under CP leadership) in supporting and furthering the take-over of factories, some arming of the workers, and other activities after June this year, in contrast to the “dragging of the feet” in these respects by other CP leaders. Luis Corvalan, secretary of the party in a speech in March indicated a certain loss of orientation and drive when he said: “Ever since branch organisation and every leading commissee of the Party should be present both mentally and physically where the decisive battles are fought...” (12). (Emphasis added.) However reports indicate that the CP suffered less disintegration than any other organisation.

There is also a tradition in most parties developing in the Stalin period, of looking with uneasiness, or even suspicion, on spontaneous actions not organised under their aegis. Further, there were the traditions of restricted internal democracy in the name of centralism, decades long propagation of the Soviet model of socialism, and, despite some bold and independent thinking (e.g. on cultural matters), a general inhibition of theoretical enquiry beyond “acceptable” limits.

Put more particularly perhaps, I feel that there is, in the traditional CP movement, an under-estimation of the importance and scope of the struggle for hegemony, and especially in more developed capitalist countries, a narrowing, in “economist” tradition, of the issues and areas of ideological contention that are considered revolutionary. The consequences of economism are not overcome just by a combination of these concerns with ultimate political issues, vital though they are. The “ideological” area between them, and its ramifications have been greatly under-estimated and neglected. This is no less the case with the Socialist Party, and Allende himself, who it seems avoided much use of the available opportunities of the mass media on the strange grounds that the people were “sick of politics.” Nor were adequate mass media developed by the Popular Unity, or sufficient efforts made to restrict those of the reaction, in which ITT had a hand.

The disintegration also affected what mass media were in the hands of the UP, and there was the situation of some socialist and other papers attacking decisions of the UP, and people in it, more vociferously than did the right.

Also more particularly, the idea of the “two-
stage" revolution, which has almost unnoticeable filtered into thinking within the international communist movement (see for example the 1969 document), may have had harmful effects on strategic thinking.

This certainly applies to developed countries like Australia. Here, the two-stage idea is that first there will (must) be an anti-monopoly, democratic revolution which will later be followed by a socialist revolution. I am not arguing against possible stages in any revolution, for one must be open-minded to concrete circumstances. What is at stake here, however, is a strategy based on two stages. Without going into details, this concept is related to watering down demands and perspectives (which always leads in the direction of economism and an emphasis on "unity" which buries principles), whereas in my view the conception of socialist revolution today must be deepened, and perspectives made more, not less, radical.

In countries like Chile, the issue is less cut-and-dried. National independence, completion of anti-feudal tasks especially in the countryside, democracy, economic development and raising of living standards, abolition of illiteracy, etc., can be conceived of as preceding socialism. The Cuban revolution took place in two stages, the second, socialist stage occurring only about a year after the first.

But this very fact created a new situation. American imperialism and the ruling classes of the Latin American countries drew the conclusion that no such "democratic" revolution could be permitted, precisely because it contained the inherent danger of proceeding towards socialism, and thus the breadth and "latitude" usually thought to be associated with the "first stage" could not be counted on; rather the reverse.

Returning to the problem of the centrifugal forces still operating powerfully within the Left in most countries, the problem is ultimately one of theory. That is to say, the desired unity, as in Chile, was not attained because of the lack of a consensus on how even to approach the problem of analysing the revolution, and not because of a failure of "organisation."

"Marxism" is surely the obvious answer? Yet it is precisely because there are deep divisions about the meaning and interpretation of Marxist fundamentals that it can be said that a "theoretical" fragmentation lies at the base of the organisational fragmentation. This despite the fact that the differences are often, regrettably, buried within well-known propositions which apparently say the same things, but are so interpreted in practice as to make them as different as chalk and cheese, while the theoretical and philosophical assumptions involved are not even regarded as requiring examination.

As raised in an earlier article, more open and definite theoretical contention is essential to emergence from the present stage, not the muting of views in the name of a non-existent and at present unattainable "unity."

What of the future of the Chilean revolution? The past does not return, and new problems and possibilities now arise. Whatever the causes, whatever the blame, failure can advance revolution, as witness the failure of the 1905 revolution in Russia, and the defeats suffered by the Chinese revolution prior to the Long March. It should be remembered that Che Guevara's guerrilla warfare failed, and that the urban guerrillas and others have not shown that their strategy is adequate for success. The most one can say is that a combination of all available means, with flexible shifting from one to another as occasion demands, will probably emerge.

It is now reported that the core of the cadres of most revolutionary groups avoided annihilation by putting into effect previously prepared contingency plans (the existence of which incidentally also speaks against the complete dominance of parliamentarist illusions). It has been said that defeated armies learn their lesson well, and one must extend best wishes to them in the revolutionary soul-searching which will be going on, and organise the utmost solidarity in the continuing struggle.

One other problem is that of the concept of a "hemispheric revolution" for the whole of Latin America. This was Che's strategy, and Bolivia was chosen at least in part because, if a base could be built there, more or less in the centre of the South American continent, guerrillas could be dispatched into other countries. This was just a schema, besides the other failings the venture had, but perhaps the defeat of the Chilean revolution, and the struggles in Argentina and elsewhere may, in this unexpected way, lend the idea of a hemispheric revolution more reality in the future. US imperialism and reaction in each country are certainly helping to make it so, and it is clear from other places as well as Chile that an isolated revolution will find itself in extreme difficulties for that reason alone.

For example, the Chilean revolution now more than ever needs the border with Argen-
tina to remain open, which means that political developments there which may affect this become of more than purely Argentine concern.

FOOTNOTES

2. e.g., Denis Freney, Tribune, Oct. 9-16.
3. ‘Left-wing’ Communism, Conclusions.
See also footnote 9.
5. Quoted by Debray, p. 183.
8. Tribune, Oct. 30-Nov. 5.
9. One is reminded again of Lenin in his polemics with Bukharin in 1921: “I know nothing about the insurgents and revolutionaries of South China (except two or three articles by Sun Yat-sen and several books and newspaper articles which I read many years ago). Since insurrections are taking place there, there are probably controversies between Chinese No. 1 who says that insurrection is the product of the most acute class struggle which embraces the whole nation, and Chinese No. 2, who say that insurrection is an art. I could write theses like Bukharin’s without knowing any more... This will be lifeless and vapid eclecticism, because it lacks the concrete study of the given controversy, of the given question, of the given approach to it, etc.” Selected Works, Vol. 9, p. 67.
10. Stated to Australian delegates at Helsinki conference. Tribune, October 16-22.
11. Chile: A Difficult Revolutionary Model, by Jorge Witker, ALR No. 33.