The CHILEAN MALAISE

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The following is an abridged version of an article by Marco Calamai in the June 6 issue of the Italian Communist Party journal Rinascita. It gives a rare account of conditions inside Chile today and of the various political trends within the opposition to the Pinochet military junta.

On return from Chile: June. ...Santiago would astound anyone like me, returning after three years. The centre is all lit up, shop windows full of goods from all over the world, traffic as in European cities, new buildings — even skyscrapers. A completely different picture from the Santiago of old: sleepy, poor, a city typical of the backward and marginal third world.

For the regime and the “Chicago boys” of the government, these changes are the result of the monetarist (neoliberista) economic model. Chile is consolidating its position in the international division of labor: “Exports are increasing (not only copper but also non-traditional sectors) and foreign capital, after years of uncertainty, is at last coming into the country.”

But the official glorification of the successes of the outright monetarist model applied in Chile (with a coherence without comparison in the rest of Latin America) does not stand up to a closer analysis of the reality. Just outside the centre of Santiago are the signs of mass unemployment and underemployment, of a misery not seen in Chile for decades which, I was told so often, “represents the real conditions of the great majority of the population.”

Two underground Communist militants explained to me: “Not only the popular classes, the workers and peasant masses but also vast intermediate strata, the sectors which at first sympathised with the coup (a good part of the Christian Democrat electorate) are now expressing their repudiation of the regime.”

In recent years, opposition to the dictatorship has broadened and only that small part of society made rich by the new economic policy remains favorable to Pinochet. A leader of the Radical Party told me that “this is shown by the uneasiness which extends even into the oligarchy and the government itself.” The conflict between the duros (hard) and the blandos (soft) is
evident more than ever since the recent failure of Pinochet's trip to the Philippines became public. (The dictator Marcos refused him entry when he was already on the flight from Santiago.) And it is not just a matter of clashes in this or that point, but the fundamental prospects of the regime.

The blandos, men of the monetarist policy, say that sooner or later the "free market" must lead to political freedom. And other experiences are referred to, such as those of Brazil and Spain. Hence the contacts with the opposition, in particular with the sections more amenable for old or new reasons to a compromise with the "open" groups of the oligarchy and the armed forces. Is this practical? "The economic policy of these forces," DC president Andres Zaldiver told me, "is at present incompatible with a return to full political and trade union freedoms. Their model of development seriously harms the living standards of the great majority of Chileans and we are firmly opposed to it." This thesis is repeated by the parties of the Unidad popular, Communists, Socialists, Radicals, minor left groups. The blandos, according to this analysis have in mind a model of democracia restringida (restricted democracy) not much different from that of the duros who would like to consolidate a reactionary regime of a fascist type.

But if there seems to be a common analysis, the distance between the left and the Christian Democracy is still great. The dramatic rifts that led to the military coup continue. An agreement between all the democratic forces such as that proposed repeatedly by the left, particularly the Communists, has been recently rejected by the DC of Frei. Recent international events such as the taking of the hostages in Iran and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan have brought new elements into the polemics between the parties. The Communist Party has been criticised from a number of sides for its positions favorable to the Soviet intervention and the rifts already present in the Socialist Party have been further accentuated.

If the DC appears uncertain by the prospects, the left also emerges divided, rent by old and new polemics. A general difficulty is evident in the face of the necessity to deepen further the critical analysis of the Allende period (the errors and the limitations which led to the rallying of a broad social front amenable to military intervention) and to the urgent necessity to understand better the profound economic and social modifications of these years in order to define a strategy of democratic struggle to match the great malaise which pervades Chilean society.

Six years after the coup the opposition forces must take account of their past as well as a present full of unknowns which were to a large extent unpredictable a short time ago. Not only has the internal situation changed profoundly ("Chilean society will not be the same again," says a leader of Mapu obrero y campesino), but the international context is more than ever thick with worrying questions. "The hopes raised by American foreign policy in the first two years of Carter's presidency, together with the more general international isolation of the regime, a process of democratic opening towards the convergence of all the opposition forces appear now to be strongly modified," admits a militant of the Communist Party.

Here in Santiago the signs of this change are to be observed more perhaps than elsewhere: and it is evident how much the crisis of detente helps the regime to recover an image which has been lacking until now. It is just as evident how international events make more difficult than before the ties of unity between the parties of the Unidad popular. The serious difficulties of the Socialist Party are significant from this point of view. If the break between Altamirano and Almeida has not had a particular impact within the country (the section of Almeida, the closer to the CP of Corvalan, remains largely in the majority) there is still the malaise of criticism, above all among the youth, of the traditional alignment of the party. "We are working," a Socialist intellectual who asked not to named told me, "for a new party in which there must be a converging of a number of forces of the minor groups of the Unidad popular, (Mapu, Mapu obrero y campesino, Izquierda cristiana) with the sections of the Socialist Party which believe in a re-forming of the left."

A formation mid-way between the two strongest parties of the left and the Christian Democracy? Or is this part of a broader political operation directed towards
agreement between the DC, the Radicals and the left sections more or less close to international social-democracy? An answer is perhaps premature, but it is evident that there is a re-thinking which in one way or another involves the whole of the democratic line-up. And this will be a process of reflection which goes beyond the present central question of the alliance necessary to defeat the dictatorship. With its starting point the errors committed during the Unidad popular government there has begun an analysis of the structures of the parties, the method of conducting politics, the relationship between base and leading groups, the ideological tradition of each historical component of the working class and democratic movement.

In the review Analisis (Christian and open to more diverse contributions) I read a debate on “Political parties: doubts and challenges”. The analysis sets out from the years which culminated in the coup of September 11, 1973, a date regarded as the conclusion of a “political-institutional crisis” linked with the “structure and organisation of political parties not sufficiently institutionalised.” The critical judgement on this traumatic period is explicit. “The parties were not really able to connect themselves with their bases, did not live their problems, were not capable of taking up their concerns and therefore were not true interpreters of their own militants.” Analisis asks if this reality has changed. The reply is worrying, mainly negative. Even today the defects of yesterday prevail, it says, the same distance between militants and leaders, the same limitations of “dogmatism and of centralised leadership.”

This reflection has just begun but it will develop. The illusion that the regime would last only a few years is gone and there is a common consciousness that an alternative
plan can only be born out of a radical ideological and organisational renewal of the parties. The dialogue between the various forces, the overcoming of the dramatic rifts which divided Chilean society and culminated in the military coup is closely tied to this process. And there are many militants in all the parties who deplore the slowness of the process of cultural and organisational renewal in the face of the priority need to struggle in an adequate way against the dictatorship.

Zaldivar went on to say, “Today the real opposition is basically represented by two parties — we of the DC and the Communists. Hence the difficulty of an agreement with the left which would not be understood by our militants and which would be used by the dictatorship to divide Chilean society anew, to justify the authoritarian option and the consolidation of a personal regime.” It is a fact, as all the left militants I talked with told me, “that vast sectors of Chilean society are opposed to the regime but at the same time fear a return to the situation of the early seventies.”

The regime, meanwhile, is looking around and hoping that the evolution of the international climate is favorable to its program of institutionalisation. Attention is focussed above all on what is happening in the United States. The attitude of Carter has changed, the hostility of much of the American press is not as marked as before. In one issue of Ercilia, the weekly closest to the positions of the blandos, I read a long article about recent international comments on the present situation in Chile. The conclusion is clear: Chile can emerge from its isolation only if it projects an image different from that of the first years of the regime. More attention therefore to “human rights”, greater flexibility in policical and above all trade union relations.

In Chile now one breathes a different atmosphere, one speaks more freely, the opposition can utilise the room for manoeuvre and initiative unthinkable a short time ago. The nature of the repression has changed, no longer as violent and tragic as it was several years ago, more subtle and selective (preventative arrests, sackings of suspects.)

What happened on May Day is symbolic in this regard. The police made hundreds of arrests to prevent mass participation of workers in demonstrations organised by the democratic trade union movement. But the government tolerated May Day becoming an important occasion and did not impede the several thousand workers and opposition cadres who met behind closed doors. The main daily paper El Mercurio (linked with the “open” sections) reported it on the front page, even naming the unionists who had come from other countries for the occasion.

“Even from this point of view Chile has changed,” a Communist militant maintains. “Undoubtedly new spaces for initiative by the masses and the democratic political forces have opened up. That is shown by trade union struggles, stronger than before, led by worker cadres of all tendencies from the left to Christian Democrats.”

One thing is certain: in Chile there is much debate, the newspapers speak explicitly about the economic and political situation, a new ferment is occurring in this country after years of fear and terrible silence. I recall Franco Spain in the sixties when the embarrassment of the regime became evident in the face of the drive for freedom coming from the most diverse sections of Spanish society. A process has been set in motion and it will be very difficult to stop it. Ercilia published the recent declaration of the Catholic bishops in which they called on all Chileans to strive “to promote a return to constitutional normality”, affirming that “a state of emergency cannot be made permanent”. We are certainly a long way from the collapse of the regime but it is nevertheless clear that the elements of an evolution in a democratic direction are taking shape.

The tempo and the methods of this evolution are still not predictable. They depend in large measure on the capacity of the democratic, progressive and moderate forces to develop adequately that critical consideration of the past and the present which is one of the most interesting aspects of present Chilean reality.

(Trans. note: “Monetarist” is used in this translation for the Italian word “neoliberista”, used to describe the economic policies of, for example, Thatcher in Britain and Friedman in the USA. This policy relies on the maximum freedom of private enterprise and market forces and a minimum of state-intervention in the economy. DD.)