

A detailed reflection of my neighbourhood

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Una detallada Reflexión de mi barrio

Part 5

What we ought to know about the Chilean lower classes and the 'roto' Chileno.

In 1970, the upper classes did not succeed in preventing the socialist deputy, Mario Palestro, from giving, in Congress, the very expressive nationalist cry of “**Viva Chile, Mierda !**” (“Viva Chile, shit !”) to celebrate the arrival of the **rotos** (the poor) at the helm of the Chilean nation. In the eyes of the middle and upper classes, it was a **rotería** (a sign of bad manners – a “Chileanism” in bad taste). However, **el roto Chileno** is the spiritual soul of the Chilean lower classes, the same persona that the Chilean aristocracy love to celebrate in Chilean culture as representing the picturesque side of Chilean folklore and history. The 19th century Peruvian writer and scholar, Manuel González Prada, provided us with his Peruvian view of the **roto chileno** of the 19th century: the aristocracy, he said, tend to forget that they, too, have humble and obscure origins. Their ancestors were **tinterillos, abogados, curanderos, despacheros, carpinteros, hojalateros, sastres, cigarreros**, etc. Others, such as Vicuña Mackenna who was a **mestizo** - that is, a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Araucano Indian, dared to say that that **el roto Chileno** had in his blood the instinct to rob and to kill. However, Prada asks “But is it the **rotos** who rob the wealth of the Chilean state and push the Chilean nation towards bankruptcy?” “*The spiritual conditions of the roto,*” wrote Picón Salas in 1933, “ - his boldness, generosity, patriotism, spirit of adventure - were never drawn upon in order to build a nation.” The **rotos chilenos** were, however, the first pioneers in California in search of gold in 1847. They were the ones that built the first houses there, established the first businesses and organised the first fights in the port of San Francisco. In the figure of Joaquín Murieta we have a **roto sufrido, a pata de perro**, fighting against injustice in California, as Pablo Neruda wrote in one of his poems. Picón Salas tells us that, to make the voyage to California, what was needed was marine instinct, more than nautical experience. He said it was driven by popular energy, the freedom of a **macho pueblo** acting independently of Governments which, as usual, were busy dealing with matters that had nothing to do with their promises to the people in need. “*Cualquier roto equipaba su tosca lancha maulina, contratava sus hombres valientes, llenábala de huesillos, de grasa, de cebollas, de trigo e iba con su decisión y sus productos de la tierra, al Pacífico del Norte, después de cincuenta días de mar gruesa.*”. Mariano Picón-Salas, Atenea, 1933, University of Concepción. (Any roto equipped its River Maule rough boat, hired his courageous men, filled the boat with dried peaches, fat, unions wheat and travelled with his decision and his product of the land to the Pacific Ocean of the north, after a journey of fifty days of rough sea.).

Carlos says that it was only during the Government of Allende that the **roto** began to take centre stage and to fight for his cultural identity and the right to exist as a valuable, and recognisable, Chilean. The lower classes were really encouraged to discuss the social and economic state of the Chilean nation and encouraged to take a more active role in Chilean politics as an important part of their civic rights. “ *Yes, for the first time in my life I felt that my vote had a real meaning for my future. The famous cry of “Viva Chile, mierda!” can be interpreted as “que Viva Chile mi alma !”, that is, “Long live the Chilean soul, for ever ignored!” You see, we were educated to feel that our vote was important and that democracy was important, but*

the fact of the matter was that our vote was never taken into consideration". The lower classes were educated to be patriotic and to think of Chile as a nice country with beautiful women and good wine, a democratic country with a loyal army. Chileans were also told that their flag was the most beautiful in the world and that the Chilean National Anthem was second only to the French one. They were also told to learn the pathetic phrase: **"nosotros somos un país pequeño y pobre"** ("We are a small and a poor country.") If we look at the map we discover that Chile is far from being a small country and if we look at its resources, we see that it is very rich. The Pacific Ocean alone, and the fertile valley of central Chile, could well feed all the Chilean people. Objectively, therefore, neither of the above statements is true. In 1962, Chile, without being a football power, won the right to organise the finals of the football World Cup, thank to a big lie, which went undetected by FIFA officials. Carlos Dittborn, the Chilean delegate to FIFA, said that "***Queremos hacerlo todo porque no tenemos nada !***" ("We want to do everything because we have nothing !"). But Chile has many things, not least its human resources. Chileans can be as hard workers as any in the world. "The Economist" of December 23rd, 2000 reported that a recent study by the Swiss bank, UBS, showed that "*the world's hard-working people reside in Santiago, Chile*". The **Santiaguinos** were found to work 2,250 hours a year. The survey, taken in 35 countries of the world, included New York, Paris, London, Kuala Lumpur, Buenos Aires etc. Parisian workers, in contrast, only work about 1600 hours a year. Chileans were never told that their country could have been a better place to live in if the upper classes had created, even recently, the political conditions to allow Chileans to live in real democracy, which would have allowed poor Chileans to have better economic and social conditions. The only thing that the upper classes managed to do was to create the conditions for a large middle class to surface as an economic and political force. In 1964, the upper classes allowed these middle classes to govern. The presence of a large middle class may have helped Chile to remain, for a long time, a more politically stable country than any other in Latin America. Political stability, however, does not guarantee the abolition of injustice, lack of democracy and poverty. Carlos adds that this statement is clearly true, as it is also true that the core of the middle classes were there to defend their own class interests and to aspire one day to become an upper class. "*We cannot forget that, in 1970s, the Christian Democrats, the party of the middle classes, contributed to the fall of Allende. They felt, at the time, that their own interests were put at risk by the type of reforms carried out by Allende.*" Since Allende came to power with a minority of 34%, and not a majority of more than 50%, he was in need of support from the Chilean Congress and he received that support from the Christian Democrats. What this party was doing was, in fact, giving support to the social and economic programme of Salvador Allende, which had been put to the Chilean people at the elections. However, before committing themselves to support Allende in Congress, they humiliated the would-be President of Chile by making him sign a package of guarantees that he was meant to respect. In other words, he was treated as a **roto**, as someone who could not be trusted - ignoring at a stroke the fact that Salvador Allende had been a parliamentarian for many years. In other words, the action of the Christian Democrats was to humiliate the 34% of Chileans who had voted for Allende. Many people have argued that Allende came to power with only a minority vote - and this is true - but if we look back into Chilean history, we will see how a right-winger called Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez came to power in 1958 with 31,2 % of the vote. In that election, Allende was second with 28,5% of the vote and

only 35.000 votes separated Alessandri from Allende. Then too, Jorge Alessandri also needed the support of the Congress to become President of Chile. In his case, however, he was not humiliated by Congress. In fairness, it must be said that the most progressive section of the middle class were at the helm of the Government of Popular Unity. Allende himself was middle class, as were many members of the parties of the Left, whose aim was to create a better Chile. But, in the end, thousands of them were also tortured, exiled and killed by Pinochet, another child of the middle class.

Tough workers.

The Chilean working class, described by many foreign travellers as being as noble and hard-working a people as any in the world, have laboured long and hard throughout Chilean history in harsh, and contrasting, climatic conditions. In 1863, Henry Meiggs, an American railway engineer, recognised the merits of the Chilean people and expressed his view of their treatment. “ *I treated them as men and not as dogs, as is the custom here....I would prefer to work with five hundred Chileans than with a thousand Irishmen..*” A History of Chile 1808-1994 by Simon Collier and William F. Slater, Cambridge Latin American Studies.).

The lowest classes in Chile have, throughout its history, only managed to create a humble living for themselves, although their hard work and enterprise have helped to fill the Government coffers and, above all, to create enormous wealth for Chilean, British and American capitalists. Visitors also saw them at work, in very harsh conditions, as miners of **salitre** and as coal miners, creating wealth at Lota, in the south of Chile, and below the cold Pacific Ocean floor, in long, dark tunnels running, like Borges’s labyrinth, for miles under the seabed. They were found mining copper in the Atacama desert and the Andes Mountains, creating a living for themselves, income in the form of taxes for the Chilean State and enormous wealth for big American multinationals whose enormous profits go to create jobs in the United States. The Chilean lower classes are the masters of many trades. They are what, in Chile, are called **los maestros chasquillas**, the odd-job men, able to work at many different things. They are the fishermen risking their lives in poorly equipped fishing boats in atrocious weather, competing against the high-tech factory fishing ships from all over the world which are allowed to fish in Chilean waters under dubious international ‘co-operation’ treaties with the Chilean State. The Chilean workers also include the impressive army of women, often without proper education, working for very little in the well-to-do barrios of the middle- and the upper-class families. They, the well-off, refer to them in the possessive form as **mi empleada** (“my employee”) using the patronising Chilean Spanish of the Chilean upper classes. The Chilean workers are the peasants (**campesinos**) working, until recently, for rich and powerful landowners under a feudal system. The Chilean workers are also those who work long hours in factories, shops and offices and who, in the case of those from Santiago, are transported dangerously, like animals, at high speed on the buses which ply the busy roads and streets of Santiago. The Chilean workers are also the drivers of these same Santiago buses, who, in order to earn a living, are forced by their bosses, the bus owner, to race through the streets at dangerous speeds. “*The Santiago bus drivers (microbuseros) do not have fixed wages. They must race along the roads in order to take on as many passengers as they can, because they are paid according to the numbers of passengers they manage to take on board.*”. The Chilean workers are the Mapuches, the Aymaras and the Pascuenses (Easter Islanders), racially discriminated against by the rest of the Chilean population and by the Chilean Government, which

does not recognise their legitimate rights. The Chilean workers are the teachers in the State schools and the nurses in the dilapidated State hospitals. They are the craftsmen and the artists who exhibit in their work their own artistic frustrations. The workers are those who have lived, and still live, in the hundreds of poverty-stricken **conventillos** and shanty towns in the poor barrios of Chile.

Salvador Allende was a good proposition for the lower classes, a bad one for the upper classes - and for the United States.

Allende's Popular Unity was far from perfect and was open to criticism on many counts - and, indeed, books on Chile, such as A History of Chile, 1808-1994 by Simon Collier and William F. Sater (Cambridge University Press, 1996), offer some fair and hard-hitting criticisms of Allende. Carlos points out that there is an incredible amount of literature accusing Allende of everything imaginable. However, a Chilean professional soldier, General Carlos Prats Gonzales, in his posthumously published autobiography Testimony of a Soldier, tried to explain to the Chilean people who Allende was and what was the nature of his vision for Chile.

“ En algunas paginas de mi testimonio”, he said, “ se patentiza mi respeto por la personalidad del Presidente Allende, tragicamente fallecido tras pretender honestamente abrir un camino distinto y controvertido, en pos de un nuevo destino para el pueblo de Chile. No compartí su ideología marxista, pero lo enjuicio como uno de nuestros gobernantes más lúcidos y osados del Chile del Siglo XX y, al mismo tiempo, el más incomprendido.” (“In parts of my Memoirs, one can see my respect for the personality of President Allende, tragically killed after he honestly attempted to open a different road in order to find a new destiny for the people of Chile. I did not share his Marxist ideology, but I judge him as one of the most lucid and bold Presidents of Chile of the XX century and, at the same time, the most misunderstood”). General Prats was assassinated in Buenos Aires in 1974 by the Pinochet dictatorship. Today, as I write, in October, 2001, an Argentinean Judge, assigned by her Government to investigate the killing of General Prats in her country, is asking the Chilean Government for the extradition of many former military and civilian personnel, including Pinochet himself, to answer, in Argentina, for the murder of General Prats.

Most honest historians will agree that Allende represented a good proposition for Chile's lowest classes and was important from their point of view because, for centuries, they were completely ignored in Chilean society, ostracised as second-class Chileans. Criticism of Allende can be either objective or the opposite. The objective criticisms deal with the methods used by his government to introduce a Socialist society into Chile and the political strategies used to carry out his aim of making Chile a more democratic country. The word 'Socialism' may have frightened a lot of people, but the reality was that, despite all the political and economic analyses which claimed to show Chile as a country with a long tradition of capitalist democracy (until the coming to power of Pinochet), in terms of people's real experience and on any objective analysis, Chile was never a truly democratic country. The Chilean working class, organised around the trade unions, had as their ideal a country where they, too, could have access to higher education, a decent house to live in, and so on. The lower classes deserved these things and thought that they had worked hard for them. Many people would argue that there was too much idealism in Allende's project for Chile. *“Yeah! That may be true. However, the idea of taking from the rich a bit of their power to place it in the hands of the lower classes, using*

democratic means, was appealing to me and to million of others.” It must be said that, from the point of view of the lowest classes, Allende offered a wonderful vision, because the upper classes had never presented the lower classes with any constructive proposals for the kind of deep reforms which would benefit them. There had never existed even the slightest desire on the part of the upper classes to raise the standard of living of the Chilean people. Since the late 1940s, relations between landowners’ organisations and the state had been characterised by continuous clashes, produced by the landowners’ discontent concerning agrarian policies, and by their unwillingness to improve the living conditions of the peasantry (P. Silva, Change in the Chilean Countryside, Macmillan Press Ltd. 1993). On the 11th of September, 1973, the upper classes and the rich middle classes celebrated the coup with champagne, in their beautiful, spotlessly clean barrios; two days later, in Carlos’s barrio of Esperanza St., at no. 358, a Czechoslovakian Jew, Ernesto Traubmann Riegelhaupt, by then a naturalised Chilean, was detained at one o’clock in the morning by the Chilean Police (**los carabineros**) and taken to a place that Carlos knew very well, **La Séptima Comisaría**, where he was held prisoner and subjected to horrific torture. From here, he was taken to the Ministry of Defence, from where he totally disappeared. **La Séptima Comisaría** was a familiar part of Carlos’s barrio, as the place from which the many **curaditos** (drunkards) of Esperanza St. would end up in jail.. Ernesto Riegelhaupt was a true internationalist, prepared to give his life on behalf of the Chilean lower classes, something that the Chilean upper classes have never been prepared to do.