

IN FOCUS

CHILE

A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture

Nick Caistor

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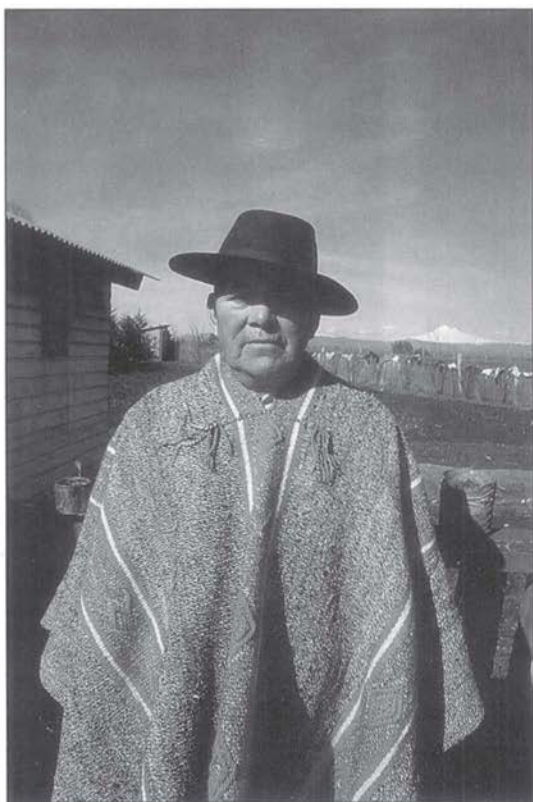
INTRODUCTION: THE COST OF SUCCESS

Chile today is the envy of many countries in Latin America. Its economy has grown steadily in the last decade, averaging annual growth of over six per cent in the 1990s. Levels of poverty, according to the government, have halved in the last ten years. Chilean exports now reach every corner of the world: Chilean grapes decorate tables in the United States, Chilean wines are drunk from Vancouver to Newcastle; Chilean blackberries are transported halfway round the world and appear on supermarket shelves all over Europe. Chilean capital is expanding abroad, being used to buy up companies in Argentina, Peru, even Brazil. Two successive civilian presidents appear to have set the seal on a lasting return to democratic rule, in which Chileans may disagree politically, but will not take to the streets to fight for their views.

A generation ago, things were very different. The early 1970s saw President Salvador Allende and his Popular Unity government trying to find the "Chilean path to socialism." Their attempts attracted the attention of people all over the world, many of whom saw this parliamentary approach to revolution as a more viable model than the Cuban one of guerrilla warfare and one-party rule. But this hope proved an illusion, and in the end it was the U.S.-based armed intervention of a dictator and his supporters which dramatically changed the lives of an entire generation of Chileans and made the country sadly familiar to many more people in countries around the globe.

General Pinochet became the symbol of retrograde, bloodthirsty dictatorship. But when his plans to continue in power were defeated in the late 1980s, over 40 per cent of Chileans still supported him: more than had ever voted for Allende, as the general's sympathizers pointed out. It was under his rule that the economic policies which are so praised today were initiated, with their insistence on privatization, the curtailing of the welfare state, the undermining of labor, and the promotion of the individual consumer as the final arbiter. The civilian politicians who have followed the general in power have not challenged these basic assumptions, but, as one senior official has said, have seen their main goal as being "to lay the foundations of a stable, competitive, non-confrontational political system."

This approach has led to considerable economic success. But it has also thrown up many problems, which range from the increasingly damaging impact of rapid growth on Chile's environment to the fact that this ideal of competition without confrontation leaves many sectors of society on the



Mapuche indian

Julio Etchart/Reportage

sidelines. Those who suffer most, as ever, are the indigenous peoples like the Aymara or the Mapuche who have always had a different vision of what constitutes progress and social organization.

But even for the majority of the population, competition has led to a growth of inequality. On the one hand, the rich increasingly live in ghettos or bunkers, afraid of the violence of those excluded from the bright new world of consumerism. On the other, those who have not competed as successfully are told that shortages and poverty are a personal rather than a political problem. Money and possessions have now become the almost exclusive yardstick of individual worth, in a society which once appeared to offer other values which bound Chileans together in a unique way. In the following pages, we focus on how those other values of community and solidarity emerged from the interaction of

land, history, and politics in Chile, in the hope that they can find a way of re-asserting themselves in a more truly rich, humane, and sustainable way than at present.

1 LAND AND PEOPLES: FROM DESERT TO FJORD

Noche, nieve y arena hacen la forma
de mi delgada patria,
todo el silencio está en su larga línea

Night, snow and sand make up the form
of my thin country,
all silence lies in its long line
— Pablo Neruda, *Discoverers of Chile*, 1950

Chile, one writer has observed, is so thin that everyone there has to walk sideways as in an Egyptian frieze. This may be a poetic exaggeration, but it does contain an element of truth. Chile is a country 25 times longer than it is wide. Its physical borders are very definite ones. To the west is the vast length of the Pacific Ocean; to the east, Chile is the only country in Latin America completely cut off from the rest of the continent by the Andes mountain range which runs down from Venezuela for more than 3,500 miles (both Peru and Ecuador, for example, spread beyond the mountains into the Amazon basin). This gives a sense of isolation to the country, in the minds of visitor and inhabitants alike. Then again, even today there is only one major north-to-south route, the Pan-American highway, with other roads coming off it like spurs. As another saying has it: "In Chile, you travel north to south; west and east, you go for a stroll."

Rivers are also short and cut the country east to west as they plunge down the Andean slopes out to the ocean. Much of the coastline, especially in the north, is made up of cliffs several hundred feet high, which means that ports are few and far between. Further south, this coastal range of mountains comes inland and cuts the towns of the central valley off from the shoreline. Beyond the southern port of Puerto Montt, this mountain feature becomes a chain of islands, the most important of which is Chiloé. Nowadays, the country is divided into twelve numbered administrative regions, which often use the east-west rivers as boundary points.

The Great North

Chile's climate is extraordinarily diverse and literally a question of degrees, changing from area to area as one travels south. The country's northern border, conquered from Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific from 1879-1883, starts well within the Tropic of Capricorn. The rainfall



The Atacama desert in flower
after unusual rains

Peter Francis/
South American Pictures

here is so low that in some years none at all is registered. The hot, arid conditions have created one of the most inhospitable regions in the world: the Atacama desert. This is the *norte grande*, the great north, which occupies about a quarter of all Chile's land surface. It is also vital to its economy, as it is here that vast copper and other mineral deposits are exploited. The population is mostly to be

found in ports on the Pacific coast, such as the border town of Arica or the busy nitrate and fishing port of Iquique (where earlier this century fourteen years went by without a single drop of rain).

It is also here that the mountains of the Chilean Andes are at their highest, with several peaks over 19,500 feet high. The highest peak in Chile is the Nevado Ojos del Salado at 22,609 feet, and the tallest volcano Llullaillaco, which reaches 22,104 feet. In all, there are more than 2,000 volcanoes. Almost half of them are active to some degree or other, but the main geological problem for Chile is the seismic activity which they cause, not only in the north, but throughout the country. Although this has given rise to what is supposedly the world's most boring news headline ("small earthquake in Chile: not many dead"), the reality is very different, with violent quakes causing havoc and great loss of life in 1939 and again in 1960, when nearly 200 miles of coastline in the center of the country sank six feet into the Pacific.

The high mountains and exceptionally clear atmosphere have also brought two different kinds of communities to the northern regions. As the *norte grande* gives way to the more fertile *norte chico* or "small north" in places like the Elqui valley, there is the scientific community around the giant Tololo telescope. Many foreign scientists come here to gaze at the heavens as the clear skies offer perfect visibility for over half the year. Also gazing up at the heavens are the members of many alternative communities who have set up in the Elqui valley and other nearby spots, to practice different kinds of oriental religion and meditation: a little piece of California in the heart of the Andes.

The Central Valley

As one travels south, the landscape gradually mellows, waters from the mountains make the land fertile, and the climate encourages agriculture, especially in the Central Valley, which makes up the third and fourth of the administrative regions. This is where most of the booming Chilean wine industry is located, as well as the huge orchards for apples and other soft fruits. It is also where the capital Santiago and the main port of Valparaíso are situated, and where the main passes across the Andes to Argentina can be found.

Founded by Pedro de Valdivia in 1541, Santiago, which occupies a separate unnumbered metropolitan region, lies in a beautiful site, with the tall mountains of the Andes in view, and surrounded by fertile wheat fields and orchards. In the mid-eighteenth century it made a fine sight, described by the English sailor John Byron:

The city is very well paved; its gardens are full of orange trees and all kinds of flowers, which spread their perfume inside the houses and out into the streets. In the centre of the city lies the Plaza Real or royal square, with eight fine avenues leading up to it. On the western side of the square are the cathedral and the bishop's palace; to the north, the presidential palace, the royal court, the town council building and the prison; to the south are a whole line of arches occupied by a series of small shops, above which is a gallery where spectators gather to watch bullfights.

Little of this elegant and rational planning has survived in the modern city, which, with more than four million inhabitants, is the fifth largest in South America. Much of Chile's industry is also concentrated around the capital. This, combined with its location in a valley, produces grave problems of pollution and the phenomenon of thermal inversion, in which a layer of cold air lies over the city like a blanket, trapping the smog produced for days like a vast ugly pall. Schools are often closed in winter and the use of cars and buses is restricted. Even so, it is possible to escape from Santiago by traveling only a few miles, either down to the sea coast at resorts from La Serena down to Viña del Mar, or up into the mountains via the valley of the river Maipó.

The Central Valley continues down past Concepción, ending at the port of Puerto Montt at a latitude of more than 40 degrees south. For several centuries when Chile was governed by the Spanish, it was the city of Concepción on the river Bío-Bío which was considered the southern boundary of Chile, as the European settlers only managed to subdue the local indigenous population further south late in the nineteenth century.



The Opera House, Santiago

Peter Francis/South American Pictures

The South

Below Puerto Montt, the coastline becomes much more fragmented and is cut by steeply-sided valleys like the Norwegian fjords. Because the area was settled by Europeans at the end of the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth, some of the towns have a distinctly German or Alpine atmosphere, although the magnificent cones of volcanoes such as Mount Osorno clearly mark the difference with Europe. It is here that the vast forests also begin, in which traditional pines such as the *araucaria* (monkey puzzle tree) or *alerce* (larch) are increasingly giving way to managed tree plantations used for industrial purposes. Another very tangible sign of how humanity has started to modify nature comes in the tracts of bright yellow gorse which, as in New Zealand, tend to replace the native undergrowth. The first bushes were brought by European settlers in order to attract the bees used to produce honey, but now the gorse threatens to take over from all indigenous species, making the landscape even more "European." Even so, much of the countryside is breathtakingly beautiful, and is safeguarded in many national parks. The Pan-American highway ends at Puerto Montt, but one of the creations of the Pinochet era was the