

CHILE – THE FORBIDDEN IMAGES – FORTY YEARS ON

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In the last few weeks, every Wednesday evening at 8:30 p.m., millions of Chileans have been holding virtual meetings. What has brought them together? *Chile -- The Forbidden Images – Forty Years On*, a four-part television series that has broken all viewership records and has also gone viral on You Tube.

The Forbidden Images combines footage of the brutality of the Augusto Pinochet regime never seen before inside the country with present-time interviews with the journalists who recorded it and the protagonists who survived the violence. The result is an unabated documentary that has generated a nation-wide discussion among Chileans of all ages and backgrounds.

This stands in stark contrast with the amnesia that affected the country for decades. Salvador Allende? The military coup? The dictatorship? Why talk about all that? Why dwell in the past when the present and the future look so promising? Not anymore. By 2011, most Chileans had had enough of the *status quo* and the country entered a period of upheaval that continues to this day.

The first ones to show their discontent were university and secondary students -- they took to the streets by the hundreds of thousands to demand the reinstatement of public education as a right guaranteed by the state.

For over a century, Chile prided itself on the quality of a state-supported, public educational system. But, as part of its neoliberal agenda, in 1981 the dictatorship imposed a reform that put an end to that tradition and turned education into a commodity. Since then, practically anybody can become a school or university “owner” and sell expensive courses and careers. Thirty years later, the students said “Enough” and in doing so, they also brought to the forefront the injustices inherent to Chile’s entire economic model and the inadequacies and limitations of the country’s democracy – the nation is still being governed by the 1980 Pinochet Constitution.

Today, as the country commemorates the 40th anniversary of the September 11, 1973 military coup and prepares for a presidential election, Chile is recovering its collective memory. At the same time, the demonstrations and strikes have extended to all sectors of society and to every corner of the country: the labour movement is asking for an increase to the minimum wage and better working conditions. Regional and local organizations are demanding participation in the affairs that concern them, including access to proper medical care. Pensioners are calling for the elimination of private pension plans. And the students continue their relentless campaign for the reinstatement of state-supported, quality education.

While those who uphold economic and political power insist on presenting Chile as a show-case of success, the majority of Chileans have become disillusioned with the country’s neoliberal economic model, its political system *and* its politicians. With the November election looming, the people must decide not only who they will vote for, but perhaps most importantly, whether they will vote at all.

Michelle Bachelet and Evelyn Matthei are the two main candidates. Bachelet is a medical doctor and social democrat who -- because she supported the government of Salvador Allende -- was imprisoned and tortured at the time of the coup, lived many years of exile in Germany and was elected to a four-year term as President in 2005. Matthei is an economist, a former senator, and until recently, Minister of Labour and Social Security in the current right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera.

Interestingly enough, they are both women. But even more interesting and even ironic, they are both daughters of Air Force Generals who found themselves at opposite ends of the political spectrum in the 1970's. Like his daughter, because he was an Allende supporter, Alberto Bachelet was imprisoned and tortured after the coup. But unlike her, he didn't survive; he died in jail a few months later. Fernando Matthei, on the other hand, served as Minister of Health under Pinochet and in the 80's became a member of the official military junta.

Forty years later, the generals' daughters are running for President on platforms that, although based on the same economic model, speak of fundamental differences in values and approaches.

Will Chileans elect the right-wing, hard-core neoliberal candidate whose name echoes of "the forbidden images" that have finally penetrated the country's conscience? Or will they vote for the one who survived the dictatorship's violence and represents the humanitarian face of Neoliberalism?

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