

Becoming part of a memorial 50 years after the Coup in Chile: “Solidarity is Political”.

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It was from 20 to 22 October in 2023 when I joined 300 delegates, predominantly Chilean political prisoners, and community activists to celebrate the Chilean Resistance movement against Pinochet and his regime at a three-day memorial cum highly engaging conference at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) in London. The event, co-organised by Associate Professor Tanya Hermer in LSE Department of International History and Gloria Miqueles, and hosted by the LSE, was a united platform for the memorial. It showcased the resistance movement and reminded us once again that political solidarity is important and that the strengths of political resistance in and outside of Chile should not be undermined.

The three-day conference enabled a collective space for honouring, connecting, and remembering Chilean Resistance 50 Years After the Coup. The highly political conference took place at a personally and politically difficult time - at a time when I was going through heinous hate crime in Essex - which made a more meaningful contribution to my own strength. My engagement with Chilean resistance was first made possible through the Chilean “Crafting Resistance Archive” project which Gloria, Paul Dudman, Ximena Pardo and Tanya Harmer have been involved in and co-established at UEL. I joined the conference mainly to express solidarity with and to learn from the first and second generation of the Chilean political prisoners in the UK. Celebrating Chilean resistance through a delicate and stimulating international conference in October turned out to be a memory itself. I attended the conference with a heavy heart though it empowered me in many ways. The many small, interconnected conversations with anti-racist colleagues and community activists from Chile and different parts of the UK meant so much for a political sociologist and an anti-racist feminist activist from Bangladesh who have been still undergoing vicious cybercrime and racialised sexist hate crime relating to her eligibility to teach in UK universities and right to citizenship here in the UK. Writing this brief report for a publication in the *Displaced Voices* where many other conference delegates and Chilean colleagues of different generations is a privilege, and it brings back memories of the memorial and three-day summit of political solidarity with anti-racist struggles.

This report is a reflection on the conference and many invaluable lessons I learned from what I would call an intellectually influential and politically highly empowering anti-racist and anti-sexist summit. Day one of the conference was more about academic discussions where scholars and international speakers discussed the context of the resistance and the history of the British responses to Chilean political prisoners who fled the brutal dictatorship, still resilient and resisted in 1975. In the afternoon of the first day, I attended a brilliant panel which included

six speakers from intergenerational and international background including Alan Burge, Ruth Aedo-Richmond, Paul Dudman, Veronica Diaz-Cerda, Sebastian Bustamante, and Foteini Aravani who spoke about archives and memory work. The discussion by Alan Burge provided a history of organising with the Chilean political prisoners in the UK with a reference to the case study of Wales organising for Chilean struggles against dictatorship. This was followed by discussions by other five speakers on voices of humanitarianism and British Responses to Refugees from Chile, the role of photography in memory studies and archiving memories of Santiago's Resistance, and the democratising knowledge – Collections for All, and how archiving of Chilean Resistance can be useful for showing solidarity with the voices of Chilean political prisoners and archiving solidarity and crafting resistance for counter-narrative about representation and agency of the Chilean strugglers.

Memory and Archive

The panel kicked off with a powerful presentation of Latin American solidarity activist organiser Alan Burge from Swansea in South Wales who actively co-organised a series of highly powerful and significant protests against Pinochet's murders and dictatorship from Wales.

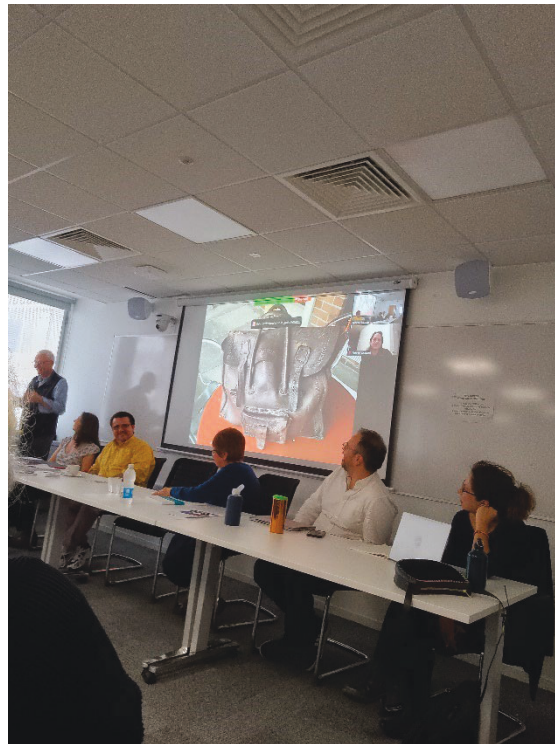


Figure 1: Alun Burge presenting his paper on "From Santiago to St Fagans: Chile, International Solidarity, and the National Museum of Wales" in the Archives and Memory Work Panel. Copyright: Rumana Hashem.

Alan not only talked about the organising from Wales but also how this has made significant changes in the entire struggle of the Chileans here and there in 1970s. Some of the posters and pictures which Alan's talk shared with the cohort in the room are still available in the University of East London's Refugee Council Archive, if you are interested in having a look at the Chilean's struggles, said the UEL archivist Paul Dudman. The archivist at UEL, Paul Dudman was the third in the panel to speak. He presented an embedded talk on how the resistance of political prisoners has been preserved through textile and artifacts in the Refugee Council Archive which works with the Chilean political prisoners.



Figure 2: Paul Dudman presenting his paper on 'Crafting Resistance and Archiving Solidarity: Documenting Chile and the Living Refugee Archive as Counter-Narratives of Agency and Representation' in the Archives and Memory Work Panel. Copyright: Rumana Hashem.

Then Veronica Diaz-Cerda as the next speaker discussed some findings from her AHRC-funded oral history project at the University of Warwick, which looked at micro narratives in particular emotionality, subjectivity, and in partiality by using oral history to archive memories. Archive and Transitional Justice are connected in this project. There is a need to collect and analyse these stories and disseminate the stories in different forms than those collective memories only. For this reason, Veronica is looking into and considering the other micro-narratives and different stories, emotional stories in particular. "How can we fulfil our narrative

obligations by telling their stories as outsiders? How to tell a story that doesn't belong to us?" Veronica raised these important questions which still remain unanswered as the discussion moved on how to form solidarity to collective struggles of the Chilean.

Is "Solidarity is Political"?

Solidarity is political, a response from the floor by Rossana Leal, an organiser brought in provocation or a bit of tension in the room as we were listening to the speakers who quite openly accepted this statement by Rossana. Rossana is the one who gave witness in the third Witness panel on Day 3, while discussing how exiled activists including first- and second-generation Chileans in Britain understand solidarity. It was a comment that Rossana made in reflection of how she connects with the discussion by the panellists about the Museum of Memory in Santiago. She spoke from the floor, but the panel and the entire room agreed with Rossana. It was a statement of the conference which was followed throughout the three-day conference. At the end of the day one, Grace Livingstone, in her keynote speech expressed gratitude and paid tribute to those political prisoners and the archivists including Susan Carstairs, Sue Lukes, and many others. The keynote by Grace Livingstone, "Chile Solidarity and the Path to an Ethical Foreign Policy" also illustrated significant implications of policies by the labour government back in 1980s which positively impacted on the Chilean struggles in the UK and how the later foreign policies have helped bringing in the changes, while the recent policies have been almost erasing those glorious days when Britain was able to extend solidarity with such major international struggles. Grace's keynote and the concerns regarding how racism and hostility towards international migrants and refugees seeking sanctuary in the UK were shared by the delegates, including a cohort of LSE students who joined the lecture. The room was becoming a room of witnesses, loss and damage, and resistance which has now become an archive. Grace, as one of the respondents, started her talk by acknowledging the importance of these witnesses and the voices of the archive by saying: "Ah, I know who you are", when you are talking Susan, Sue Luke. Rodrigo is one of those bearers of the loss, who lost his father in Pinochet's dictatorship.

There were others who made meaningful contributions. After a long day of brainstorming and listening to many political stories of resistance, we went to a vegetarian meal near the Holborn tube station where we practiced real solidarity through informal conversations and exchange of views with each other. It was at dinner when colleagues were asking each other where we were going to stay that evening – "are you going back to Essex?", asked a colleague. The question was hard to answer for me as my home was in Essex, where my husband and I had lived in for many years but was treated badly by neighbours who have disrespected us and breached every way they could violate my rights to stay with dignity. We did not go home that weekend, but stayed in a small hotel room in Beckton in London instead. That sparked another thread of conversation around "racism then and now" - a topic of the conference Day Two.

Three of our Chilean colleagues were outraged by hearing the ongoing harassment we were going through in relation to our mixed-marriage and my Bangladeshi British identity. They were disgusted and one said with disgust: “why care, why does it matter [to them] what you are doing and whether you are married or not”. Another colleague was firm in saying that she thinks that “racism has increased in the UK, especially after Brexit” but she was not surprised that this kind of hate crime is happening in this country. Our conversation then moved on to compare the situation in Chile, Bangladesh and the UK. We ended the dinner with a political discussion on whether New Labour or the Conservatives will win this election.

The Witness Day

The following day was the day for witness. It consisted of Witness Panels and was mostly reserved for witnesses and community spokespersons relating to British solidarity organising, welcoming of Chilean refugees and their own experiences of living in the UK. I had to give it a miss as I had to reflect on and prepare statements and evidence on my own political situation and ongoing hate crime in the UK. However, we went back to the conference on Sunday – Day Three – which kick-started with an exhibition by the Chilean political prisoners and about Chilean resistance and history. Then another witness panel provoked further political solidarity in the room. Then I met Sara De Witt who was a witness panel speaker on Day 2 and she was the one who came to speak to me on Day One during the refreshment and tea break. She introduced herself as a first-generation exile of the political prisoners in the UK who appreciate what both of us are doing with the Living Refugee Archive and how much it means to her. She invited me to listen to her witness panel which captured some significant reflections on Exile in Britain and what role racism played in the Chilean political prisoners’ survival and struggles in the UK. We didn’t have the time to catch up afterwards, though the brief conversation and solidarity over political struggles in the UK already connected us so we could find each other again on Sunday during tea break.

The three-day conference enabled spaces for not only honouring and remembering the resistance in Chile and the UK, but also connecting and reconnecting with international and transnational activists and advocates. I was particularly interested in the talk by a colleague who is a second-generation Chilean exile, Isabel Cortes, as her reflections related to environmental aspects and climate in the context of Chilean struggle. On Sunday (Day Three) Isabel spoke about the campaign she had developed here with the community. I knew Isabel through my 2nd public talk at the Extinction Rebellion (XR) International blockade at Oxford Circus which was partly disrupted by the heavy police crackdown which Isabel and her daughter witnessed by chance. Isabel was a community participant of the protest and was outraged by the white police crackdown during my talk and a global South witness against the multinational mining company GCM Resources. She ended up video recording the talk and the police crackdown which she later shared on social media (Facebook). Isabel was unknown to me before she shared the video footage on her own Facebook. Her Facebook post got much

public attention to how international solidarity to political movements in the UK are silenced. Isabel's proactive action to document the silencing of our global South witness panel was an act of solidarity. She has shown how "solidarity is political" (as Rossana reminds us). The Chilean political prisoners and their children and grandchildren know this best.

The witness panel in the morning on Sunday was the final witness panel of the conference on Pinochet's Arrest and the Piquet, 25 years on, which included speakers such as Jimmy Bell, Silvia Velasquez, Geoffrey Bindman, Jean Pateras who gave important information from inside - what was happening inside the prison - and Isabel Cortes who is a second-generation organiser and campaigner, and revolutionary Ana Maria Pelusa. It was Ana Maria Pelusa who reminded us that what we are doing in the conference was becoming part of a memorial. What we should remember is that "We are all becoming part of a memorial" and the memorial is never to be lost. ¹

The discussion on the day ended with a joint keynote by Cath Collins and Francisco Bustos who presented significant research findings of their project "the Search for Justice in Chile, 1998-2023" which they co-conducted in association with the "Transitional Justice Observatory at the Universidad Diego Portales in Chile and the University of Cambridge, funded by Cath herself who sometimes got scrutiny for the project. The keynote concluded with finding from Chile which shows:

that Domestic courts can do "international" criminal justice, and aspect of TJ that ICJ/ICC can't. That survivors/relatives are NOT passive victims, and they do want/make formal justice. That Survivors use international mobility and diaspora links, and that domestic justice with regional "backstop" can be preferable to neo-colonial - susceptible third country Universal Justice. For example, Germany-Syria, Belgium-DRC, Rwanda misuse Interpol Red notice; and everyone -Russia. (Cath Collins and Francisco Bustos, presentation slide)

This important and comprehensive finding of the project led delegates to raise other important questions. The first to comment was Maria Vasquez-Aguilar who asked, "so what happens to the many who were tortured in Chile, those whose stories were rarely heard because they did not make it to the exile in the UK including those women who were raped and brutally tortured by Pinochet's military?" Maria mentioned her own experience in working on this delicate issue – investigation and reconciliation. She stated that "there were important cases of torture in 1989 which got rejected as the ICJ would not consider these for justice investigation. Alongside this investigation for reconciliation Maria and her colleagues in the collaborative advocacy project "also wanted to do a British prosecution", the first generation started to give testimonies which Maria has translated in here her sister has done.

"What happened to the cases of the human rights abuses in 2019- 2020 – there were torture, rape and sexual abuses", Maria points out. Through the campaign for justice for political prisoners, Maria has learnt how to lobby, how to write petitions, collect signatures, and lobby

here in the UK. 70, 000 letters were collected and generated from Manchester. Maria has identified one serious issue: “cases after 1988 weren’t considered” for compensation and justice.

The Final Reflection or Unending Threads of a Conversation on Solidarity to Resistance?

The panel concluded with speakers’ final comments – each sharing a 2-minute final reflection. It was acknowledged by the speakers and participants that “we are all part of a memorial”. “If we don’t have memory, we are nothing” reminded Jimmy Bell asking us to hold on to the tree of memory and truth.

The conference ended with food and Chilean music from *Quimantu*, presented by Mauricio Venegas-Astorga, Laura Venegas-Rojas, Rachel Pantin and Jobine Siekman. Music, food, and socialisation are still playing vital roles in connecting and honouring the memory and ongoing struggles of Chileans . We cannot appreciate the Chilean struggles without appreciating the cultural aspects of the Chilean resistance and those who have lost their fathers and mothers in Pinochet’s murderous dictatorship.

No doubt that there are obviously some missing threads when we consider intersectionality of class and gender in this discussion on Chilean history. One serious critique raised by a senior freelance journalist and writer Jeremy Fox who mainly worked in Mexico and taught in Centre for Teaching, Research and Economics University during the 1970s – who closely worked with the economist Pedro Vueskovic in the same faculty – and saw, met and learnt from the Chilean refugees in Mexico, is that the historical context within which the coup occurred excluded the complexity of the events. What Jeremy has known about the Chilean coup from outside Chile is that Chile’s polarisation was a complicated issue because Chile had been a polarised society since its independence, and the polarisation between the liberals and conservatives had existed since the country’s independence. Many middle classes had taken the opportunities and had supported the coup. The coup was a complicated issue as it was supported by many middle-class people, which could have been explored more in depth and with breadth. Sociologically and politically, this is highly relevant in the context of the conference which missed this critical part of the Chilean history. One hopes that future conferences will explore the reasons for this support as a way to understanding how authoritarian regimes emerge and endure for as long as they do.

ⁱⁱ The recording of the keynote and the many questions and open discussion will be preserved and be made available on the [Living Refugee Archive](#).