

CLOTARIO THEN AND NOW (*)

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4 páginas

Santiago, 1972. May Day. Clotario stands for Allende's salute and applause at a huge outdoor rally. Among the dignitaries on the platform is Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez, under whose leadership the Catholic church established the Vicariate of Solidarity to protect human rights and support the victims of [Pinochet's dictatorship] repression.

The Chilean labor movement began in the nitrate pits of the arid north, where the world's only supply of the gray crystals that yield both fertilizer and explosives covers some 450 miles of the Atacama Desert. Although Chile had won the territory from its northern neighbors in a bloody four-year war at the end of the 19th century, the nitrates for which Europe hungered belonged mainly to the British. Instead of re-investing their royalties, the Chilean gentry built mansions in frontier towns and imported vast quantities of perfume and champagne. Foreigners became so powerful that they could finance the overthrow of presidents.





The men who processed nitrates in the scorching desert by boiling it in open pits were paid in scrip, and compelled to shop in the company store. Prostitutes abounded in the mining camps, while drinking water was scarce. Miners died young.

A grisly event in 1907 fueled song and legend and helped establish Chile's combative and highly politicized labor tradition. To protest the brutal working conditions, thousands of miners trudged on foot to the port of Iquique where, reassured by the presence of warships in the harbor, they stood

patiently in a schoolyard, waiting for the government to intervene on their behalf. Instead, troops were ordered to fire, and wagons hauled away tire corpses after dark for interment in mass graves. The number of dead, many of them single men who were never reported missing, is unknown. Estimates range from hundreds to thousands.

Germany developed synthetic nitrates after World War I. Chile's nitrate boom collapsed and the economy, dependent on nitrate exports, went into a tailspin. When copper became the dominant export, the British were replaced by Americans Grace, Guggenheim, Kennecott and Anaconda. The historic pattern of foreign exploitation of the country's natural riches continued.

When printer Luis Emilio Recabarren was elected to the congress in 1906 he was barred from his seat after refusing to take an oath. Nevertheless, as the "father" of the labor movement, he remained immensely popular. Later he founded the Worker's Socialist Party, the forerunner of the Communists.

Clotario Blest was a charismatic, romantic revolutionary of the Christian Left who sympathized with the MIR [Movement of Revolutionary Left] and was critical of the Communists and the Socialists. Friend and enemy alike called him by his first name. During the dictatorship, even Pinochet did not touch Clotario.



CLOTARIO, 1972: *"This government is full of promise, but people follow coldly, without spontaneity. There are men in the government from the parties of the left who preach revolution, but still live in big houses and enjoy excessive creature comforts. The workers have been deceived so many times that they don't believe any politicians.*

Let's have no illusions. The right lies and it conspires against the people. They fear nothing

and they respect nothing. When somebody in misery asks for bread, they give them bullets or prison instead. Now that there's all this talk of legalism and constitutionality, our government must watch out for attacks by its proponents, and not play their game. We're only in the waiting room of the revolution, and that is a situation that's sure to end in confrontation between the people on one side and the exploiters on the other.

The big parties like the Communists and Socialists are only interested in gaining members; it's the MIR that deals with workers' real problems, real desires, and creates a sense of participation, of mystical fervor.

Revolutions are not made "en frio" [coldly], but with "rojo vivo" [living red or hot blood]. The idea may be in the head, but it is also in the heart. And what is in the heart is the most important because it is love, not reason, that drives the world. We must live what we preach, and thereby touch the hearts of men."

Clotario, who had been a small boy at the time of the Iquique massacre, began organizing in his youth. That was a time when unions were disguised as cultural or sports clubs. In 1953 he became the first president of the CUT (Central Workers Union), from which he resigned eight years later to protest what he considered its waning militancy and its subservience to the orthodox political parties.

In 1972, the wiry Clotario, dressed in denim because, "I want to be a worker not only in my soul, but on the outside," welcomed visitors into his dark study where books and papers were piled up everywhere. The walls were covered by posters and photographs, including Recabarren and a martyred Colombian priest [Camilo Torres]. Roaming freely on his papers was Gato (simply cat). He also introduced a great, plodding dog. "I call him Momio (reactionary) because he doesn't work, but merely eats and gets fat."

1989. Clotario sits outside his bedroom in the Franciscan monastery shortly before his death.

In 1989 everyone in Santiago seemed to know Clotario's health had failed. He reportedly had lost the will to live until he was moved from a hospital to the Franciscan monastery. There we found the frail, elegant old man in dressing gown and pajamas, sitting outside his spartan bedroom. Other rooms off the long, windowed arcade overlooking neglected gardens seemed empty. Keeping Clotario company were a nurse, a student with a guitar and a monk in work clothes.

Clotario's face brightened at the sight of guests. He called for tea, but by the time he reached the plank table on the arm of the monk, he had forgotten about us and retreated into confusion.

A newspaper soon featured a Christmas scene in full color, with glowing tree and happy children surrounding Clotario, who stood stiffly in cardboard-new, electric blue denims. The monk in brown, sashed habit



stood watchfully off to one side. "I'm very content with this new life of peace and spirituality," Clotario was reputed to have said. Some days later he died.

(* From "Today is not Like Yesterday. A Chilean Journey", by Ted Polunbaum and Nina Brael Polunbaum, pages 84-87. 1992. Editorial Light & Shadow, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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