



Photo: Evelyn Hevia

Chile's *Marcha Rearme* and the Politics of Counter-Commemoration

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Each September 11, to mark the anniversary of the violent 1973 Chilean military coup d'état, a broad swath of the Chilean left gathers for a commemorative march. The march begins at mid-day in the center of Santiago near La Moneda presidential palace, the emblematic site of the Chilean military attack, the death of President Salvador Allende (1970–73), and the end of Chilean democracy. Marchers wend through the streets on a route that has little changed, to Santiago's General Cemetery, where many marchers end at Allende's tomb or at the Memorial Wall of the Detained-Disappeared and Executed. The march tapers off by late afternoon. Small groups of masked protesters bring up the rear of the march and frequently clash with police, who constitute a formidable and quite threatening presence each year. The march commemorates thousands of victims, mourns the violence of the dictatorial past (1973–1990), and decries the left's profound defeat.

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Image of poster for announcing the MarchaRearme action.

photo: Evelyn Hevia

September 11 commemorations have taken different iterations in relation to the politics of the moment, seeming to culminate in 2003, the thirtieth anniversary of the coup.¹ Nelly Richard argues that the thirtieth anniversary proved a “saturation point” of Chilean memory in which both government and media collaborated in a bombardment of imagery of the past (quoted in Fernández Droguett, 6). With President Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006), the Chilean state began to claim a politics of commemoration. Icons, particularly former president Allende, were re-appropriated, toward a memory of democratic, even heroic loss. After more than a decade of uncomfortable silence regarding the relationship with the former socialist leader and president, the regime reclaimed Allende as a statesman.

As Richard anticipated, the following September 11, the government contracted the number and scope of the commemorative events, President Lagos absented himself, and reports on activity around the anniversary carried a “connotation that was more police-like than political” (Fernández 2006). The media reported on the burning tires blocking streets in the poorer neighborhoods, the small groups launching Molotov cocktails, and several arrests. In this context of saturation and a diminished and ominous subsequent September 11, a group of young people who were also frequent September 11 march participants gathered to plan an alternative.



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First staging of the recreation of the Memorial, in front of the Mausoleum of Salvador Allende.

photo: Evelyn Hevia

In 2005, Marcia Escobar, Roberto Fernández, and Evelyn Hevia were social psychology graduate students at the Universidad Arcis, a university culturally associated with the Chilean left. For Fernández, years of participating in traditional left politics and in what had become a predominantly somber anniversary march left him disillusioned and dispirited. Fernández radicalized, briefly joined an anarchist group, and then left the group. He argues that his sense of not being represented by any political organization was shared by many Chilean young people, reflected in good part by the failure of Chileans between the ages of 18 and 30 to register to vote (Fernández 2006). Escobar and Hevia echoed similar sentiments (Escobar 2010, Hevia 2008). Together with a handful of other graduate students and faculty member Isabel Piper, who offered her support and secured funding, the group organized to re-imagine the event. The collective met weekly for six months, inviting academics, cultural critics, performance artists and human rights activists to help them think through the history and politics of the event and to formulate a distinct point of entry. On September 11, 2005, the 32nd anniversary of the Chilean military coup d'état, several hundred university students, artists, intellectuals, and activists upended and inverted the march. The *MarchaRearme* (Re-Arming March) was a counter-commemorative act that sought to de-ritualize, enliven, and open up.



Police repression against MarchaRearme participants.

photo: Evelyn Hevia

Evelyn Hevia captures the many voices and ideas swirling around how to enact the inverted march. According to Hevia: “the idea of the inversion, of re-creating life and

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possibility, a *memoria viva*, rather than death and defeat, had been on the table for some time, but how to perform this, who needed to accept the idea, and how to respect the range of participants for whom the date has profound meaning, caused a great deal of tension” (Hevia 2008).² The chief umbrella group for the traditional march, the *Asamblea de Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Assembly), never accepted inverting the march, and though the Asamblea left it up to individual members to participate or not, the *MarchaRearme* collective never felt the support of the dominant human rights groups.

What to name the act also became a source of creative tension. Organizers agreed it could not simply be called the “March in Reverse.” With two months to spare, the idea of a puzzle to be put together, or re-armed, emerged. An organizer proposed a great photographic reproduction of the Memorial Wall of the Detained-Disappeared and Executed, which could be cut and mounted into dozens of pieces and re-pieced together as a symbol of bringing the memory of the dead back to life, honoring *sujetos* (subjects) who had imagined another world was possible. To counter the “walk of defeat,” the pieces of the Memorial Wall would be carried out of the cemetery, to be rejoined into a whole replica at various points along the inverted march, to culminate in a re-creation at the presidential palace and the Plaza of the Constitution, the symbolic center of political-civic life. The slogan became: “*MARCHAREARME Una posibilidad de resignificar y dar nuevos sentidos a la memoria Social. Marchar desde la Muerte Hacia la Justicia*” (MARCHAREARME. A Possibility of Resignifying and Giving New Meanings to Social Memory. Marching From Death Towards Justice). As Marcia Escobar notes, the word “*Rearme*” derives from the performance of re-piecing the “puzzle” of the Memorial together, yet the name clearly connotes other meanings, including the idea of “re-arming” as re-claiming revolutionary armed struggle, re-arming memory (Escobar 2008). In addition, the *MarchaRearme* collective chose a black and red aesthetic, colors associated with the MIR, the Chilean New Left revolutionary party founded in the mid-1960s, to whom several *MarchaRearme* organizers were at least loosely linked.



Marchers carrying the pieces of the reproduction down the street.

photo: Evelyn Hevia

The *MarchaRearme* collective had low expectations regarding participation, primarily because the *Asemblea* was not collaborating, and the collective had little experience in organizing mass events (Hevia 2008). Nevertheless, an estimated 1,000 citizens participated in the *MarchaRearme*. With the pieces of the Memorial reproduction in hand, marchers began in the cemetery, at Allende's tomb, the first staging of the reconstruction of the Memorial. From the very beginning, the police presence was overwhelming. The march proceeded out of the cemetery, but the threatening show of police force turned many of the original participants away (Hevia 2008). Sub-groups of marchers, who ultimately called themselves the “disarmed march,” could not locate the main group and attributed their separation to the barricading effects of the police. At the Plaza de Armas, the third designated stop, those holding the pieces managed to construct some semblance of a replica. This is where the *MarchaRearme* virtually ended altogether. The police used water tanks and tear gas to break up the performance, and the collective realized they would not make it to La Moneda.

The remaining *MarchaRearme* participants resorted to a Plan B: a final re-grouping as a replica at the main building of the University of Chile, several blocks before the presidential palace. The march was no longer a march; rather, it had become participants running to avoid being hit or detained by police. One young person had already been arrested (Hevia 2008). When they reached the University of Chile, it proved impossible to replicate—to rearm—the reproduction. In the end, forty *MarchaRearme* participants were arrested, many of them with the Memorial pieces in their hands. Pieces did manage to be placed together at the University of Chile, but they lasted there no more than ten minutes (Hevia 2008).



The last staging of the recreation of the Memorial.

photo: Evelyn Hevia

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In an interview with Evelyn Hevia, one *Rearme* participant described her disappointment with the act's finish: "This is how it ended for me, September 11, it ended sadly, without our having arrived at La Moneda... Smelling the acid, smelling the tear gas on my clothes, without having done anything, with several of my companions arrested, with a great deal of anguish for those who were mistreated on the [police] buses for the crime of protesting" (Hevia 2008). Such an account, consistent with past police practices on September 11th, represents an eerie memory parallel. In 1973, the collective historical dream of moving toward a more egalitarian society was so brutally smashed, and the contrast between Chile's pre-dictatorial past and Chile's neoliberal present is so stark (Piper 2005). Arguably because of such a dramatic contrast between the pre-1973 past and the 21st century present, Chileans often evince a pronounced nostalgia. There is also an enormous sense of grief over the literal loss of life. The *MarchaRearme* was an interpolation of the left, a call to escape melancholic grief and repoliticize left activity, recognizing not only the horror of the human rights violations of the past, but of the violence and ongoing struggles of the present (Hevia 2008).

While traces of the *MarchaRearme* re-appeared at subsequent September 11th marches, there was no attempt to enact a sequel. To do so would conflict with the counter-commemorative principle of de-institutionalizing a hegemonic memory practice. Roberto Fernández suggests that it may be necessary that "commemorations renovate the meanings of memory... they must permanently renew themselves to be able to operate in the always present socio-political scenarios" (Fernández 2006). Counter-commemorations seek to destabilize a notion of past as past, to awaken a sense of urgency regarding the call for social justice in the here and now.

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Notes

¹ For an analysis of the tenor and meaning of Chile's September 11th over many years, on both the Chilean right and left, see: Joignant 2007.

² On common debates and tensions regarding "who owns" memory, see: Elizabeth Jelin 2003.

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