“All this time no one ever asked about the people,” retired textile worker Juan Reyes said softly. The words hung in the air on a warm spring day in the southern Chilean town of Tomé in October 2011. I had met Reyes through my research on Chile’s iconic, controversial, and often misunderstood Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR; Revolutionary Left Movement). Over the past months, he had arranged and often accompanied me on interviews with former members of the MIR and its student and labor fronts.

Looking back on this process of recovering historical memory, Reyes enumerated the dramatic political shifts in twentieth-century Chile—the attempt at a democratic path to socialism under Marxist president Salvador Allende (1970–73), the seventeen-year military dictatorship headed by General Augusto Pinochet (1973–90), and the long transition to democracy (1990–2010)—before reflecting on Chile’s collective amnesia, a deep inhibition born of fear and self-preservation that had for decades prevented the country from asking what happened in people’s lives and how they felt about it. He paused before admitting that even as former revolutionaries, “we never talked about it either.” The silencing of Chile’s recent history, particularly what came before the 1973 military coup, was so complete that Reyes initially had been surprised that I wanted to know about his involvement with the MIR. When the local textile mill closed in 1997, Juan Reyes was the oldest employee—a distinction that earned him a handful of local history interviews. No one had ever asked about his politics.

In September 1970, Chile captured the world’s attention when it elected as president physician turned Socialist senator Salvador Allende Gossens. Allende and his Popular Unity coalition promised a peaceful, democratic transition to socialism—
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a revolution by ballot box that would redistribute wealth. In the midst of the Cold War, Chile appeared to offer the world an alternative development model to both U.S. capitalist liberal democracy and Soviet-style Communism. The opening of a democratic revolutionary process in Chile expanded the constellation of radical political projects across the continent. At a time when enthusiasm for the 1959 Cuban Revolution had tempered as Fidel Castro moved into the Soviet orbit, Allende's improbable victory in 1970 fueled a progressive, leftist imaginary around the world. Alongside the proliferation of revolutionary Lefts that validated armed struggle as legitimate for carrying out a revolution, the Popular Unity project offered a top-down model that would not destroy the state but occupy and transform it.

As novel as a peaceful revolution appeared in 1970, Allende's victory was deeply rooted in the Chilean political system. It represented the fulfillment of the Chilean Left's decades-long strategy of channeling social struggle through electoral participation. Within Chile's tradition of multiparty coalition governments, Allende's Popular Unity coalition was the first time representatives of the working class—the Socialist and Communist Parties—led the government. With the goal of creating a state-run economy, Allende expanded many reforms begun during his predecessor Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei's “Revolution in Liberty” (1964–70). Allende campaigned on a platform to end foreign and monopoly control of the economy, grow the public sector, and deepen democracy through the creation of worker control in state-run factories. Within a year of taking office, Allende's government had nationalized the American-owned copper mines with unanimous congressional approval and acquired other key industries, including coal mines, textile mills, and steel mills. In just eighteen months, his government implemented one of the most extensive land redistributions in world history without widespread violence. The Popular Unity government hoped that economic strength would translate into political support as it sought to persuade the majority of Chileans to vote for socialism by the end of Allende's term in 1976. Allende faced stiff opposition from Richard Nixon's administration in Washington, Chilean business elites, and the military, as well as sharp criticism from leftists inside and outside his governing coalition. To the very end, Allende steadfastly eschewed the idea that violence was necessary for revolution and relied on his skills at political negotiation to carry him through crisis points.

He did not complete his six-year term as president. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military overthrew Allende's government in a coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power. Chile's 1973 coup marked a turning point in the consolidation of right-wing military dictatorships across South America. During seventeen years of military rule, Chile became both an international pariah, synonymous with human rights violations, and a poster child for neoliberal economic restructuring. State terror decimated the armed and the unarmed Left. Guided by
neoliberal economists, many trained at the University of Chicago, the Pinochet regime implemented shock doctrine economic policies. Justified as necessary to find Chile's competitive niche in global markets, these reforms undercut the foundations of Chile's pluralistic democratic society. In 1973, the Chilean junta cast itself as a reluctant actor that stepped in to save the country from Marxist subversion and economic chaos. Over time, as Pinochet consolidated his hold on power, the narrative shifted to argue that the benefits of economic growth outweighed the human cost of political repression.

This narrative about the necessity of authoritarianism held sway for decades. Even after Pinochet's stunning arrest in London in 1998, when Chileans experienced renewed "irruptions of memory," these "memory battles" were largely concerned with accounting for the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship. Despite the triumph of a human rights movement that eventually made the public defense of the dictatorship untenable, what had come before, as Juan Reyes suggested, remained taboo.

This is a book about radical politics in Chile in the decade before the Pinochet dictatorship. Alongside Allende's institutional project for a democratic transition to socialism, a multiplicity of understandings of revolutionary change emerged. Beyond the Vanguard is about those other meanings. It charts the untold history of how ordinary people challenged the existing social order. It examines the lost opportunities to create a democratic revolution in Chile as well as the lasting, everyday transformations in society that endure in spite of defeat. It concludes by suggesting how the legacies of 1960s revolutionary movements continue to resonate in Chile and beyond.

Spanning the thousand days of Salvador Allende's presidency (1970–73), the Popular Unity period is one of the most exceptional moments in Chile's history, yet it has inspired few social histories. Instead, most accounts are overdetermined by the finality of the coup and present Chile's experiment with socialism as an inevitable march toward destruction. The Popular Unity project in this retrospective light takes on the air of a noble but naive dream destined to fail. With time, the responsibility for its failure increasingly moved away from the military and civilian leaders who plotted and carried out the coup to rest instead on a divided, ideological Left and a "hypermobilized" politicized citizenry. The political context section of the 1991 Truth Commission report, written by the conservative Chilean historian Gonzalo Vial Correa, exemplifies this democratization of responsibility.

In the literature on the Allende years, the Chilean MIR is typically presented as the troublesome Far Left that remained outside of the governing Popular Unity coalition and that pushed Salvador Allende so far that the coup was inevitable. The MIR's support for illegal land takeovers in the city and countryside challenged the controlled pace of a revolution planned from above. Voices across the political spectrum at the time, and particularly in retrospective accounts, accuse the MIR
of pushing the radicalization of Chile’s socialist experiment to a breaking point. During the dictatorship, the military targeted the MIR as an internal enemy of the state and systematically disappeared its militants—more than four hundred men and women in the first two years of the dictatorship alone. The governing junta pointed to the MIR's defense of armed struggle in the 1960s to justify relentless repression. Even after the return to civilian rule in 1990, the social taboo around 1960s armed struggle foreclosed a critical examination of the origins of the continent’s revolutionary leftist movements, the MIR among them. At best, many observers saw these young revolutionaries as misguided idealists turned victims of state terrorism; at worst, as the main provocateurs of violent repression turned on themselves and society at large. It should hardly be surprising that no one had bothered or dared to ask Juan Reyes about his politics. The stigma of association with leftist politics had real consequences for decades.

RETHINKING CHILE’S RADICAL PAST

The year 2011 turned out to be a watershed for Chileans to rethink their radical past. In the largest social movement since the dictatorship, high school and college students occupied the streets and their schools en masse. Like the nearly simultaneous Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, the “Chilean Winter” struck a deep chord of discontent over growing social inequality. What started as protests against Chile’s privatized education model quickly moved on to challenge the dictatorship’s market-driven neoliberal policies—and by extension, the legitimacy of a political and economic system that still maintained them twenty years after General Pinochet had left office. Born after the return to democracy in 1990, the students belong to the so-called generation without fear. These young people captivated the nation and the world with creative repertoires of protest that heralded a return not only to the streets but also to politics. Observers proclaimed 2011 as the “awakening of Chilean society,” as powerful social movements once again succeeded in transforming the national political agenda and the nation’s conscience.

That year also marked an awakening of historical memory. Amid intense debates about Chile’s future in living rooms and on street corners across the country, many individuals who had been silenced by fear, like Juan Reyes, openly acknowledged past activism. The Popular Unity years persist in popular memory as an experience that continues to form a central part of the identity of millions of Chileans. For Reyes and his compañeros from the textile factory, watching the student protests on TV—and sometimes even accompanying their grandchildren to marches in nearby Concepción—gave a sense of urgency to telling their own stories. The palpable sense of expanding horizons in 2011 invited the question, What did revolutionary change look like in 1970s Chile?
In scale, effervescence, and intensity, the 2011 student movement evoked another moment in Chilean history when young people like Juan Reyes had mobilized for radical change. Forty years earlier, Chileans had similarly searched for alternative forms of politics, built cross-class alliances, engaged in collective actions, and shared the exhilaration of being part of a larger movement. Decades of authoritarian military rule had suppressed but not ultimately resolved these perennial questions about democratic participation. In the early twenty-first century, in Chile and around the world, protests once again led predominantly by young people put these questions at the center of political debate.

Oral history happens in the present and is, by its nature, retrospective. The oral histories that form the core of this book are, necessarily, the stories of survivors—those who lived to tell and those who chose to speak. Memories of the Popular Unity years were filtered through seventeen years of military dictatorship with widespread repression, detention, torture, and exile for some and broad disenchantment with the unrealized promises of the 1990 democratic transition. This process of remembering was not easy, not only because—as Juan Reyes had suggested—their experiences during the Popular Unity had been suppressed for so long, but also because many leftist militants faced what the cultural critic John Beverley has described as the “paradigm of disillusion”—a refusal among 1960s activists to find anything positive in an experience that ended so badly. Many college-educated former revolutionaries have written ex post facto apologies for their youthful flirtations with revolution and armed struggle. As Beverley reminds us, these narratives by “repentant guerillas” often tell us more about the neoliberal present than they do about revolutionary politics in the 1960s. By contrast, most of the more than sixty grassroots activists I interviewed had not been prominent public figures. They were not accustomed to telling their stories and did not have neatly packaged narratives of heroic deeds. Rather, it was the sense of possibility and hope in the present that generated an opening for previously unspoken memories. For the first time in many years, it appeared that all those sacrifices in the past might have been for something.

For one thousand days in the early 1970s, Chileans experienced revolution not as a dream but as daily life. I use the term “everyday revolutions” to differentiate the local, contingent, everyday pursuit of change from the simultaneous national, globally mitigated, top-down battle for a peaceful revolution in Chile. The election of a compañero president, who promised state force would no longer be used to repress, afforded an opening for grassroots movements on an unprecedented scale. The perception of expanding horizons enabled many Chileans to imagine revolutions beyond the promises of the Popular Unity platform. By widening our conceptual framework for revolution to mean something more than just the seizure of state power, other processes become visible. When given the opportunity to act,
what did people do? What was the content of their radical dreams? How does the ordinary become revolutionary?

I argue that revolutionary change took the form of quotidian transformations in people’s everyday lives. These smaller-scale transformations might seem less threatening than the specter of armed insurrection, but they were no less of a challenge to the status quo: not in the ideological sense, but in the very real, material remaking of lives. The experiences at the heart of this book might appear wonderfully mundane: to acquire a political education not as indoctrination but as critical thinking, to speak before one’s peers in an assembly, to occupy empty land and build one’s home, to take over a bakery and ensure that bread reached those who needed it most, and to feel capable of shaping one’s own destiny. It was through these collective efforts to reorganize daily life and democratize relations in classrooms, workplaces, and even the spaces of the home that Chileans started to enact a transformation of the social order. These efforts to redefine the terms of inclusion and overturn social hierarchies were driven not by violent destructive forces but by empowering creative energies.

By foregrounding how local experiences of radical, participatory democracy formed the backbone of revolutionary Chile, I reveal the extent to which a Cold War framework based on polarization and ideological conflict confounds more than it explains political conflict in Latin America. Through a local study, it is possible to see the complex working through of different notions of politics, democracy, and revolution. During the sixties and early seventies, as Chilean students, workers, pobladores (urban poor), and peasants became increasingly visible political actors, their participation drove the democratization of Chilean society. The Nixon-facilitated 1973 military coup sought not just to overturn a Socialist president and a democratic transition to a Socialist economy but also to turn back the decades-long struggle of working people for full inclusion as citizens. Rather than consign grassroots projects to defeat, I recover and reassess projects for popular sovereignty that affirm both the transformative potential of democracy and the ability of people to be agents of change. In this sense, the impact of radical politics cannot always be measured by immediate political victories but rather in the capacity for long-term social transformation. Understanding this history enables us to comprehend the present-day challenges that students and other activists face as they seek to envision new social contracts.

DECENTERING THE REVOLUTION

Decentering this history, moving it away from Santiago and national political actors, opens up new understandings of both Chile’s revolution and Chile’s misunderstood revolutionary Left—the MIR. In Chile, as in many other Latin American countries, the capital metropolis often stands in for national history. Beyond the
Vanguard foregrounds the local experience of Chile’s revolution. By looking beyond the center of state power, a different story emerges about the convergence of workers, students, professionals, and urban poor in Chile’s “red zone.” The locus of this study is the provincial, port city of Concepción and its surrounding industrial enclaves located 500 kilometers to the south of Santiago. Pedro de Valdivia, Spanish conquistador and “founder” of Chile, established the city of Concepción at the mouth of the Bio Bio River in 1550, marking the southernmost boundary between the Spanish Empire and the autonomous indigenous-controlled territories. The Mapuche people resisted Spanish rule, and Concepción remained a frontier until the late nineteenth century when the Chilean state waged a genocidal military campaign to incorporate the lands to the south. Concepción figures prominently in the national history of Chile, as Bernardo O’Higgins, liberator of Chile, declared independence from the city’s central plaza in 1818. Throughout the nineteenth century, creole elites challenged Santiago’s hold on central power. In the twentieth century, residents drew on Concepción’s dual meaning as frontier and as alternative to Santiago to develop a strong regional identity based on cultural and economic autonomy and novel political formations. (See map 1.)

Concepción long prided itself on being a middle-class city. It boasted the country’s first private university, founded in 1918 by local professionals associated with the Masonic temple. Dedicated to the “free development of the spirit,” the Universidad de Concepción (UdeC) remained autonomous from the control of both the state and the Catholic Church—unlike the Universidad de Chile and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile in Santiago. Even as it attracted students from across southern Chile and became an important cultural mecca, Concepción retained the feel of a provincial city. Nothing was more than a short walk from the self-contained campus and barrio universitario (university neighborhood). Students routinely marched from campus to the central plaza, which bordered sprawling working-class neighborhoods. For university students in Concepción, the sites of local power as well as urban poverty were never far away. When coal miners and textile workers arrived by train and by foot to occupy the city center, students often joined them. (See maps 2 and 3.)

As an important site of labor and student activism, Concepción occupies an outsized place in the history of the Chilean Left. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, capitalist expansion in the export sectors transformed peasants into industrial workers in the nitrate fields of northern Chile and to the south in Concepción province’s Lota and Coronel coal mines and Tomé textile mills. Between 1880 and 1930, Chilean workers organized, joining with other working-class sectors and with the Chilean Communist and Socialist Parties. Chile’s radical, Marxist-oriented labor movement extracted key concessions from the state in the 1920s and moved the entire political debate to the left. Chile, like many other industrializing countries in South America, went through a period of populist...
MAP 1. Central Chile. Map by Molly Roy.
MAP 2. Concepción Province. Map by Molly Roy.
governments, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, when multiparty Popular Front governments, which included Socialists and Communists, came to power. The historian Jody Pavilack has demonstrated how in Concepción province the Popular Front, as a national and international political project of multiclass alliances, acquired its own local expression when Lota and Coronel coal miners, closely allied with the Communist Party, succeeded in gaining control of local government and radicalizing the scope and reach of welfare and labor policies in the region.

These expressions of working-class agency did not go unchecked. In October 1947, coal miners launched a legal strike. In response, the Chilean military occupied the coal zone. The military rounded up hundreds of labor organizers and Communist Party members and sent them to northern detention camps, foreshadowing by a quarter century the ferocity of repression unleashed nationally in 1973. President Gabriel González Videla pushed through a national security law that banned the Communist Party, stripping nearly forty thousand Chileans of their rights as citizens to participate in politics and union organizing. The anti-democratic legislation backed by state terror targeted not just Marxist ideology but also the region's militant working-class culture.

In Concepción province these experiences of working-class agency and state repression endured in local memory. Just as the national political alliance of the Popular Unity coalition drew on the legacy and experiences of the 1930s and 1940s Popular Front coalitions, Concepción residents carried forward the sense of agency that social relations could be modified. In the 1960s, demands of “Power to the People!” echoed around the world. Chile was no exception when poder popular (popular power) became the rallying cry of radicalized leftist sectors. While terms such as this were not used during the Popular Front era, the experiences of empowerment associated with them were not unique to the sixties and early seventies. During the Popular Unity, people in Concepción drew inspiration from both the promise contained within the national government's program and a highly militant working-class culture. These traditions of worker radicalism and territorial autonomy explain the strength of grassroots movements in Concepción in the 1960s that preceded Allende's election and that multiplied in the wake of his 1970 victory.

In the 1950s and 1960s, state development strategies centered on import substitution industrialization transformed Concepción province into one of the country's leading industrial hubs. In addition to the coal mines located twenty miles down the coast in Lota and Coronel, the country’s first modern steel mill opened in 1950 across the bay in Talcahuano, along with a petroleum refinery and navy shipyard. To the north of the provincial capital, lighter manufacturing operations, like ceramics and glass factories, joined the well-established nineteenth-century textile mills in Tomé and Chiguayante. Migrants from the countryside and southern Chile arrived in the region in search of steady employment. Between 1940 and 1970, the population of Concepción province more than doubled, from 310,663 to 315,663.
By 1970, one-third of all residents—among them many recently arrived workers—lacked access to adequate housing. The basic need for a home would fuel urban land takeovers by the homeless poor and unhoused workers. By the 1960s, Concepción had a surplus of both students and workers.

RECOVERING THE REVOLUTIONARY LEFT FROM BELOW

Chile’s homegrown revolutionary Left, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, came into being and enjoyed its widest popular support in Concepción province. Despite being founded in 1965 in Santiago by ideologically pluralistic groups, including many dissident Socialists and Communists with roots in labor organizing, the MIR rose to prominence within the University of Concepción in tandem with the university reform movement. At the time, the MIR’s endorsement of armed struggle and its admiration for the Cuban Revolution were not unique in Chile or Latin America. What differentiated the MIR from other Latin American revolutionary groups was its ability to work within the Chilean political tradition and engage in grassroots organizing. Contrary to stereotypes of the MIR as a middle-class student movement, during the Popular Unity years the MIR in Concepción became a cross-class movement of workers, pobladores, and students.

For decades, the dominant narrative about the MIR has been one of resistance, repression, and defeat. This story of the MIR’s failure is a national story told from Santiago. Shifting perspective to view this history from the grassroots upends existing narratives, ranging from those that emphasize the state repression that decimated these groups to those by militant apologists that celebrate masculine revolutionary martyrdom. Similarly, previous histories of the MIR largely drawn from official party documents and biographies of top leaders re-create an image of what the MIR wanted to be—a revolutionary vanguard—rather than what it was in practice—a grassroots movement for revolution. Under Marxist-Leninist theory, the national MIR leadership rationalized its support for grassroots struggle as intensifying class struggle to produce an inevitable future confrontation. Yet on the ground, the MIR’s methods and goals were more about promoting popular participation than overturning the state.

Moving beyond an image of sixties and seventies Latin American revolutionaries as bearded guerrillas hiding out in the mountains or young people building bombs in cities, Beyond the Vanguard foregrounds their contributions to grassroots social change. Like the Black Panther Party in the United States, the Chilean MIR was more than a militant organization. In his study on the origins of Black Power and the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama, the historian Hassan Jeffries argues that “the radicalization of local people stemmed from specific movement experiences rather than a general interaction with supposed
movement messiahs.” This framework underscores how movements unfold in a context of open contingencies. Latin American history is replete with examples of how those in power blame external agents as agitators behind popular mobilization. Ideology becomes a convenient scapegoat to deny legitimate, basic demands for human decency. Rather than individual leaders being the sole drivers behind a movement, it was local people and organizing practices that redefined the goals, orientation, and actions of the MIR in Concepción, transforming it from a nascent guerrilla movement into a successful and highly radical social movement.

What follows is the untold story of how the MIR was far more than the masculine, Leninist, armed “ultra-Left,” as it has often been portrayed. Disproportionate to its size, the MIR became an important ally in experiments of popular democracy and grassroots empowerment during the thousand days of Salvador Allende’s presidency. The ability to build a united leftist front with the Popular Unity parties in Concepción province belied the national MIR’s own rhetoric of rupture with Allende and the Old Left. Indeed, the MIR’s appeal to broad sectors derived from its ability to fuse new calls for revolutionary change with the Old Left’s time-tested strategies of direct action, grassroots activism, and participatory democracy. In response to local conditions and labor traditions, Concepción MIR militants temporarily and strategically defied the rigid Marxist ideological orientation of national MIR leaders and sought to make revolutionary change more pragmatic and less dogmatic by challenging power relations in factories, communities, and even families. The conflict between national and regional MIR leaders over how to understand the array of experiences happening in Concepción speaks to the tension between the abstract goal of revolution and the complex realities of everyday politics. This dilemma is not unique to Chile. Rather, the tension between hierarchical internal party structures and horizontal political practices remains a perennial problem for grassroots movements and their relationship to political parties.

Studying this history through oral history interviews with grassroots activists not only adds new voices to the historical record but also makes it possible to historicize how people discovered a sense of themselves as political actors. Chilean historiography remains weak on the question of subjects and their experiences. Most scholarship on this contentious period in Chile’s history hinges on explaining “the breakdown of democracy” from different partisan political perspectives and privileges national actors and political institutions. Yet one of the defining features of the Popular Unity years was the profound sense of historicity—the sense of agency that many ordinary Chileans experienced at having made history. My extensive oral histories with grassroots activists shed light on who joined, why they joined, and how they actually spent most of their time. These kinds of questions move us toward the realm of subjectivity in which we consider historical actors and their motivations, hopes, and values. By setting aside the viability of a particular political project, this approach enables us to ask what gave a revolutionary movement meaning—then and now.
Decades later, the privileged place that the Popular Unity years occupy within individual memories speaks to the power that people continue to derive from having been participants in a process of collective transformation. Under the grandiose rhetoric of revolutionary utopias in the sixties and early seventies, spaces for participation emerged that brought people into politics in new ways. The literary scholar Kirstin Ross observed how in Paris in 1968 “the synchronizing of two very different temporalities”—students and workers—made manifest new political subjectivities and gave rise to a vision of equality that was “verified subjectively, declared and experienced in the here and now as what is and not what should be.”25 As the everyday became radical, politics became part of daily life and were no longer solely the domain of state institutions and electoral politics. In understanding how people came to make revolutionary politics their own, this study offers new insights into the repertoire of action that underwrites successful social movements: developing personal relationships, engaging people’s dual identities, organizing around basic needs, creating a platform for people to be heard, providing educational opportunities, and building on the affective experience of joy that accompanies social effervescence. The experience of personal transformation through political participation represents an important legacy of radical politics for both the sixties generation and present-day activists.

This book moves chronologically and thematically. The first three chapters trace the emergence of the MIR among students, workers, and pobladores in Concepción. These different sectors converged in the 1972 Concepción People’s Assembly, a unique experiment in popular democracy chronicled in chapter 4. By late 1972, the Allende government faced its greatest challenge in the “Bosses’ Lockout.” Chapter 5 uncovers how grassroots activists mobilized to save the government by ensuring access to basic foodstuffs. The final chapter examines how militants experienced the internal contradictions within the MIR and Chile’s unraveling revolution by charting their frustrations at being unable to reverse the counter-revolutionary onslaught and their belief that continued organizing and sacrifice might well make a difference. At the center of this narrative are—as the textile worker Juan Reyes suggested—the people themselves, the men and women who carried out everyday revolutions.