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Two Roads, One Shock: The Impact of the Cold War's End on Cuba and Chile's Political and Economic Models

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War represents a watershed episode not only in international affairs, but also in the domestic politics of countless nations – especially in Latin America, a region often put at the margins of the debate by international scholars. In this context, the threads of two nations, Cuba and Chile, unravel. Each one forged by divergent political projects. One born on the burning rubble of the revolution, the other shaped by a bloody dictatorship; one committed to socialism, the other to neoliberalism. And even so, both confronted the same challenge: adapting to a new international order no longer governed by the struggle between the United State and the Soviet Union.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR have been read by many as the definitive triumph of Western liberal democracy. There was a general expectation, to paraphrase Fukuyama, that history had reached its epilogue – that capitalism, free markets, and representative democracy would soon be adopted in every continent, nation and corner of the globe[1]. Latin America, long caught in the battlefield of Cold War, was expected to embrace this new chapter. Chile appeared to do just that, while Cuba was seen as an anachronism on the brink of collapse. More in the details, the disintegration of the USSR inflicted an economic and ideological shock to Cuba, representing the loss of its principal ally as well. It meant the beginning for the island of the *Período Especial en Época de Paz*, a time of deep economic contraction and scarcity. On the other hand, Chile was going through a fragile democratic transition, under the strong neoliberal framework, institutionalized during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet and crystallized in the 1980 Constitution – still in force today, the most enduring scar left by his regime.

This thesis aims to study how Cuba and Chile, molded by opposing ideological visions and international alliances, handled the challenges of a different scenario. It elaborates an answer to the following research questions: What were the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall on the political-economic models of Cuba and Chile? How did two systems at the odds, socialism and neoliberalism, survive in the context of the global post–Cold War transition?

The main argument is that the end of the Cold War produced profound but contrasting consequences in Cuba and Chile. The former, once sustained by Soviet economic aid and ideological support, was thrust into an unprecedented crisis that challenged its very socialist

[1] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" The National Interest, no. 16 (Summer 1989).

foundations. However, contrary to widespread expectations in the early 1990s, Cuba did not collapse. Instead, it adapted to survive, combining limited market openings with ideological resilience, and reasserting its international role through new regional networks like ALBA. In contrast, the latter – celebrated internationally as a model of successful democratic transition and neoliberal reform – maintained the economic order of Pinochet's dictatorship. Thus, this continuity revealed the limits of Chile's transformation, because behind the image of prosperity there are deeply rooted inequalities and unresolved authoritarian legacies.

By comparing these two cases, the thesis highlights how socialism and neoliberalism both endured the global post-Cold War transition, challenging the post–Cold War optimism whose apex lays in the belief of the "end of history". Neither case fits clearly into the narrative of inevitable convergence toward Western-style capitalism and democracy. Instead, both reveal how socialism and neoliberalism endured – as evolving systems, rather than as static blueprints.

The methodology used combines the analysis of primary sources, namely official speeches and political documents, with the examination of secondary academic literature, incorporating historiographical debates and political economy studies. Additionally, state ideology and collective memory is further deepened by the use of visual elements like photographies and campaign visuals.

With regard to the structure of this analysis, Chapter I provides the historical background of Cuba and Chile. In the first part, it delves into the rise of the Cuban Revolution, which brought Fidel Castro to power, paving the way for the establishment of a socialist state. The second part analyzes the 1973 military coup against Salvador Allende consumed by Pinochet and the consolidation of his dictatorship, followed by the country's democratic transition. Then, Chapter II examines aftermath of the Cold War, with a focus on the economic crisis and isolation experienced by Cuba and the democratic but constrained governance in Chile. Finally, Chapter III deepens – through a comparative analysis – the political and economic models adopted by Cuba and Chile in the post-Cold war period, paying attention to three dimensions: healthcare, education and inequality.

Chapter I

1. Contextual Background: How Cuba and Chile Reached the 1990s.

Both Cuba and Chile pursued different but connected paths as the Cold War transformed world politics from the start, influenced by internal unrest, foreign forces, and ideological conflicts. Following the revolution of 1959, Cuba sided with the Soviet Union, embracing a socialist model that was centrally organized and actively supporting revolutionary movements worldwide. A military dictatorship, on the other hand, replaced Salvador Allende's democratic path toward socialism in Chile following the 1973 coup headed by Augusto Pinochet, who enforced neoliberal economic policies. This chapter will examine these cases, along with their respective historical paths and the factors that mainly formed their political and economic models.

1.1.Cuba

1.1.1. Overview of the socialist model under Soviet influence.

Developed over decades, the Cuban socialist model has emerged as both a response to Cuba's long history of economic and political subordination and a direct outcome of one of the most transformative events of the 20th century: the Cuban Revolution.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution – whose apex is represented by Fulgencio Batista's downfall on January 1 – was the result of longstanding economic dependence, social inequality, and political repression. The insurrection marked the rupture of Cuba's previous alignment with the United States, which had played a dominant role in the economic and in the political sphere[2]. The "Army of Liberation", which broke these chains and seized power, handed over the reins of government to revolutionaries and, more specifically, to Fidel Castro and his leadership[3].

[2] At the end of the XIX century, the United State carried out its plan of securing its influence on the island, not only through militar occupation but also via political agency, such as through the Platt Amendment in 1902 and the Reciprocity Treaty in 1904. Helen Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020) p. 16.

[3] Louis A. Pérez Jr., Cuba Between Reform and Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 236.

Deeply inspired by Jose Martí[4], Fidel Castro embodied a new generation of revolutionary leaders whose great charisma and vision enable him to gather people around his flag. Indeed, Castro drew much form the thinking of the *Maestro* to plant the seeds necessary for a social revolution, as shown also in his notorious discourse *La historia me absolverá* [5]. His revolution intended to address two main issues: the national and the social question. The former consisted in attaining autonomy from the foreign powers, while the latter lied in fighting the profound inequalities that pervaded Cuban society. Both concerns were seen by the revolutionaries as consequences of the adverse United States rule on the island, which had transformed Cuba in a sort of military, economic and political protectorate and had opened the doors to capitalism[6]. According to Michèle Grenon, «the Cuban Revolution can be viewed as a radical initiative to attain the State sovereignty and to split with the previous social order»[7]. This transformation also would have required the creation of a "new man", a «fluid and flexible identity that encompass principles of solidarity, fraternity, egalitarianism, cooperation, sacrifice, service, work and honesty»[8]. This notion was developed by another key revolutionary figure, Ernesto "Che" Guevara[9], who argued that the Cuban *hombre nuevo* should embody the country's pledge to internationalism, a policy that will be explored further in the next paragraph.

However, what makes the Cuban revolution unique is inherent in its ongoing development: it is a "*proceso*", as defined by Fidel Castro himself. The goal of the revolution is postulated

[4] Jose Martí (1853-1895) was a Cuban nationalist and writer, whose ideas shaped the ideological basis of Cuba's independence movement. Born in Havana to Spanish parents, Martí joined separatist politics at an early age, which – alongside his anti-colonial sentiments during the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) – led to his arrest and exile to Spain in 1871. Over the successive decade, he traveled throughout Europe, Latin America, and the United States, where he developed his revolutionary vision and became a leading voice for Cuban independence. The latter was viewed by Martí only as the initial step of a deeper process, as a mean to achieve social justice. Indeed, the *Cuba libre* envisioned by him was a just and equitable republic. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, pp. 109-111.

[5] For instance, the main elements of Jose Martí's ideology captured by Castro may be seen either in the unity of the different forces opposed to the same tyranny or in the need to organize popular sectors and to provide them with social justice. Pedro Pablo Rodríguez, "José Martí en Fidel Castro" in Yo soy Fidel, ed. John Saxe-Fernández (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), p. 49.

[6] Loris Zanatta, Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea (Rome-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2010), p. 147.

[7] Marie Michèle Grenon, Cuban Internationalism and Contemporary Humanitarianism: History, Comparison and Perspectives (Quebec: Université Laval, 2016), p. 202.

[8] Ibid., p. 203.

[9] Ernesto "Che" Guevara (1928–1967) was a Marxist revolutionary and physician who turned to be one of the pivotal figures of the Cuban Revolution. Originally from Rosario, Argentina, he traveled extensively across Latin America, witnessing profound disparities that shaped his ideology. In 1955, while in Mexico, he met Fidel Castro and joined the 26th of July Movement, committed to overthrowing Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. In 1956, Guevara landed in Cuba with Castro's guerrilla force aboard the Granma yacht. After surviving initial setbacks, he fought in guerrilla, leading rebel forces in the Sierra Maestra mountains. His military and ideological leadership helped secure Batista's downfall in 1959, after which he held key government positions – such as Minister of Industry and President of the Natonal Bank – promoting socialist reforms, before leaving Cuba to support revolutionary movements abroad. For more details on Guevara's life and ideological evolution, refer to Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1997).

as «an immanent function of the process of revolutionary statecraft itself»[10]. It may be seen as a historical phenomenon that was «underway, inalterable, and invincible» whose boundaries have always been blurred[11]. By keeping open this liminal situation, Fidel Castro's approach facilitated the gradual emergence of a new order, preventing the premature solidification of structures and allowing for the development of a unique socialist identity in Cuba[12].

Figure 1: Fidel Castro alongside fellow revolutionary fighters in Cuba, 1959(Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images).

Therefore, Castro proved to the world that an armed revolutionary struggle could succeed against an entrenched power, challenging domestic elites and foreign dominance. A triumph that inspired different feelings. From the point of view of the left, the Cuban revolution hinted that «transformation of a society to alleviate historic injustices could be done with heroic speed»[13]. From the perspective of the right, it resonated with the fear of the elites, armed forces, and conservative groups in the whole region that the status quo could be overturned[14]. Whilst, for the United States, it appeared to corroborate the Containment doctrine, which helps explaining its foreign policy not only in relation with Cuba but also with the entire continent[15].

[10] Martin Holbraad, Revolución o muerte: Self-Sacrifice and the Ontology of Cuban Revolution (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), p. 373.
[11] Louis A. Pérez Jr., Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 240.
[12] A concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep and expanded by Victor Turner useful to interpret sociopolitical phenomena in a tripartite sequence: separation, liminality, and reintegration. Indeed, the liminal stage is characterized by uncertainty and radical change. Bjørn Thomassen, "Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions," Society and Globalization, Roskilde University, 2012, p. 679.
[13] Jerry Dávila, Dictatorship in South America (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 15.
[14] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[15] «The cuban Revolution transformed US policy in Latin America. It prompted US officials to rethink the significance of development: if aid to development could alleviate social inequalities and poverty, perhaps support dor radical movements in Latin America would diminish. […] Alonside development aid, the US government

Immediately after the victory, Cuba's leadership, under Fidel Castro, embarked on an ambitious program of economic and political transformation. This plan included nationalization, namely expropriation of U.S.- owned businesses, implementation of agrarian reform and restructuring the economy. In the meantime, the Cuban government began to finance the economy and control the prices, moving towards a planned economy. Still, one of the Revolution's main targets was to decrease Cuban economic dependency on the U.S. To achieve this goal, Cuban government did not limit its action to nationalize U.S. enterprises: it started to sign trade agreement with Soviet Union, where the latter made a commitment to purchase one million tons of sugar every year and provide oil, equipment and chemicals in return[16]. The move resulted in a series of retaliations that culminated in the US fixing the quota for Cuban sugar import at zero, imposing a trade embargo and – in January 1961 – breaking the diplomatic relations with Cuba[17]. Besides the economic repercussions and in the wider context of the Cold War, this event represented a significant defeat for the Land of Liberty, marking «the birth of a revolutionary regime at the heart of the United States sphere of Influence»[18].

Cuba's vulnerability to the U.S. economic sanctions and the trade embargo compelled Castro to seek alternative partners to his old ally, with the Soviet Union emerging as the most crucial. To be more precise – at least initially – the Cuban revolution did not have a socialist nuance: the communist party had a marginal weight in the process and anti-imperialism was the main driver[19]. The choice of embracing Marxism-Leninism has been mainly a pragmatic and successive move. Driven more by necessity than ideological conviction, «it was – as

increased military assistance such as counterinsurgency training and supported military conspirators seeking to overthrow democratic governments». Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America*, pp. 16-17.

[16] Ibid., p. 178.

[17] «The Cuban-Soviet oil agreement had immediate consequences. In May, Cuban authorities ordered Standard Oil, Texaco, and Shell to refine Soviet petroleum. On June 7 the companies refused. Three weeks later Cuba nationalized foreign refineries. Up to this point, Cuban expropriations had been confined principally to sugar and cattle land, within the larger framework of the agrarian reform law. More than one year had lapsed between these two expropriation decrees. After June 1960, there was no going back. The United States retaliated. On July 5, Eisenhower cut Cuban sugar imports by 700,000 tons, the balance of the quota for 1960. The quota was thereafter fixed at zero. The Cuban reaction was not long in coming. On August 5 Cuba expropriated additional North American properties on the island, including two utilities, 36 sugar mills, and petroleum assets. A month later, the government nationalized the Cuban branches of North American banks. On October 13, the United States responded with an economic embargo on Cuba, a ban of all U.S. exports except medicines and some foodstuff». (Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 240.)

[18] Silvio Pons, The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917–1991 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 233.

[19] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 249.

written by Louis A. Pérez – a way to obtain protection and support without which the revolution would have eventually faltered and inevitably collapsed»[20].

Hence, while initially cautious and implicit, Cuban Soviet relations solidified following the events of Bay of Pigs in 1961 and after the Cuban missile crisis, which in addition reinforced Castro's image as the embodiment of permanent revolution against U.S. aggression. These two events – the Bay of Pigs invasion (April 17–19, 1961) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962) – had a paramount importance not only in relation to Cuba's foreign policies, but also in the domestic realm. The Bay of Pigs invasion was a failed U.S.-backed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro's government using Cuban exiles trained by the CIA. The operation, authorized by President Kennedy, ended in disaster, with most invaders captured or killed. Then, the Cuban Missile Crisis, one year after, further cemented Cuba's place in the Cold War. After the U.S. discovered Soviet nuclear missiles on the island, a tense scenario developed, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. The crisis ended with a negotiated withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and U.S. missiles from Turkey. Both events reinforced Castro's legitimacy and his anti-imperialist rhetoric. However, if the first episode led to a closer alignment with the Soviet Union, the second one showed Cuba's vulnerability to the USSR's will[21]. In November of the same year, Fidel Castro declared himself a Marxist-Leninist and affirmed his lifelong commitment to it[22]. As the revolutionary rhetoric evolved, so too did the ideological stance of the Cuban government. Before 1959, slogans like *Revolución o Muerte* reflected the insurgent phase; however, after the revolution, *Patria o Muerte* became the dominant revolutionary call. From the 1960s onwards, this rhetoric transformed into *Socialismo o muerte*, underscoring Cuba's definitive commitment to Marxism-Leninism and its alignment with the Soviet-led socialist bloc[23].

Thus, after 1961, Cuba had to face another transition, the one from capitalism to communism that paved the way for the unique political and economic system that emerged on the island[24]. After having analysed how it has surged, it is possible to explore the key features of this socialist model, which have slightly changed over time until the Special Period, including central planning, state ownership, social welfare, political and social control, and reliance on the Soviet Union.

[20] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 249.
[21] Odd Arne Westad, The Cold War: A World History (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017), pp. 146-147.
[22] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 252.
[23] Holbraad, *Revolución o muerte*, p. 378.
[24] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 257.

To begin with the first trait, Cuba was heavily influenced by Soviet-style central planning, where all the decisions regarding the production and distribution of goods are in the hands of government bodies. In 1961, Cuba adopted the Stalinist state-directed economy, which prioritized state control over production, distribution, and investment[25]. This system was institutionalized through the creation of JUCEPLAN (Central Planning Board), agency of state action, responsible for formulating and implementing annual and medium-term economic plans. Its function included allocating resources, establishing production goals, and monitoring the output[26]. Alongside economic planning, the process of industrial collectivization was gradually implemented, which means that control, specially of means of production, is centralized[27]: Firstly, they confiscated properties and assets of the overthrown dictatorship's officials. Then, they expropriated – throughout the Agrarian Reform Law – farms that exceeded 400 acres of land and rental housing. And, eventually, they extended this policy to all foreign-owned oil refineries, US-owned sugar mills, banks, and telephone and electricity corporations, US properties and so on[28]. Consequently, private enterprises were either absorbed into state-run entities or restructured into state-controlled cooperatives.

Additionally, the emphasis on welfare is one of the most defining attributes of the Cuban socialist model. It is a cornerstone of the country's ideology and embodies the revolutionary government's dedication to social justice and the welfare of all. By promoting education, healthcare and social security as universal rights than market-driven privileges, the Cuban government sought to create a more egalitarian society for *los hombres nuevos*[29].

As shown by data, the expansion of education stands as one of the most notable achievements of the revolution. If prior to 1959 almost 24% of the population was illiterate, just three years after the rate reached the 96%, the highest in the region and among the highest of the world[30]. To overcome the inequality between rural and urban areas, a special program

[25] Carmelo Mesa-Lago et al., Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies: Comparative Policy and Performance in Chile, Cuba, and Costa Rica (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) p. 182.
[26] «The Central Planning Board (JUCEPLAN) was initially established in March 1960 to coordinate government policies and to guide the private sector through indicative planning; however, these functions were never exercised, and, in the second stage, JUCEPLAN would become the agency for state central planning. Financing of the economy was increasingly done by the state, with private financing largely restricted to agriculture». Ibid., p. 177.
[27] As defined by Dictionary: «the act or process of organizing a people, industry, enterprise, etc., according to collectivism, an economic system in which control, especially of the means of production, is shared cooperatively or centralized» Dictionary.com, s.v. "collectivization," accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/collectivization.
[28] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 176.
[29] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 259.
[30] «The inauguration of the literacy campaign in 1961—the "Year of Education"—mobilized Cubans in a national crusade to eliminate illiteracy. An estimated 271,000 people were organized into four instructional groupings». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 273.

was introduced by the State, consisting of scholarships that covered housing, food, transportation and clothing[31]. The target of state investment in education underwent changes with time: throughout the 1960s, investment focused on primary education and adult literacy. By the 1970s, the emphasis shifted to secondary education, and during the 1980s, resources were directed toward higher education[32]. Thus, the Cuban education approach had a twofold aim: on the one side, to guarantee the development of an essential sector and promote economic growth. On the other, it served to infuse in the population new values, that would have represented the milestone of political support[33].

Equally transformative was the development of the healthcare system, built on the principle of universal access. Despite the first setback due to the emigration of health personnel[34]Cuba rapidly expanded its healthcare infrastructure; new health facilities were constructed and more attention to the countryside was given. By 1969 the doctor/population ratio reached the pre-revolutionary level[35] and by 1985 there were 22.5 physician per 10 thousand inhabitants, up from 7.1 per 10 thousand in 1970[36]. Regarding social security, a broad net was created to provide financial assistance for retirees, the disabled and those unable to work, as shown by the 1963 law, which extended to all workers illness benefits[37]. The number of pensioners rose steadily, touching 80 thousand in 1985[38].

Beyond improving material conditions, Cuba's social welfare system was also intended to foster a sense of collective solidarity, addressing inequalities and emphasizing wealth redistribution. Therefore, as soon as possible, the latter started implementing measures to lessen income disparity and raise the living standards of the most vulnerable segments of society. Between 1959 and 1978, the per capita income of the 40 % most poor rose from $182 to $865, while that of the richest 5% fell from $5.947 to $3.068[39]. In addition to promoting income equality, the Cuban government aimed to boost female participation in the economy and reduce

[31] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 250.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 273.
[34] «The deterioration of health services resulted largely from the dislocation caused by the revolution. Among the nearly half a million Cubans who emigrated during the 1960s were large numbers of physicians and other health personnel. More than half the total number of practicing physicians, nearly as many dentists, and virtually the entire senior medical faculty at the University of Havana departed. Private practices disappeared and were not replaced. Medical services and facilities, clinics, and hospitals were disrupted. Medical studies at the university were in disarray. The break of diplomatic relations with the United States resulted in a shortage of medicines, pharmaceutical supplies, and medical equipment that Cuban production could not meet» Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 276.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 250.
[37] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 272.
[38] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 250.
[39] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 272.

the impact of gender gap through state policies. But the struggle for gender equality was at the same time hampered by two structural features of Cuban revolutionary society. First, the state was unable to provide childcare and fully alleviate home pressures due to a serious lack of resources. Second, the development of an independent feminist movement that could articulate and advocate for its own understanding of women's rights had become nearly impossible inside an all-encompassing revolutionary ideology[40].

As with every socialist state, Cuba had to contend with the Communist Party and the influence of the Soviet Union. To begin, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) quickly became the sole legal political entity, consolidating its authority over the state and society. Even though the socialist party only had a minor role in the revolution, the PCC was officially founded in 1965 and has maintained a monopoly on political power ever since. Through its control of mass organizations and civil institutions, the party tried to unify society under the revolutionary ideology while suppressing dissent, which «was portrayed as tantamount to subversion» since the beginning of the revolution[41]. Secondly, the Soviet Union played a crucial role as both a strategic ally and economic lifeline for Cuba. Soviet influence on the Cuban economy was profound, manifesting itself through trade relations, technological assistance and financial assistance. Cuba's reliance on Soviet subsidies was significant, with the URSS accounting for nearly 50% of Cuba's exports and supplying approximately 40% of its imports during the peak of their economic partnership[42].

Figure 2: Cuban leader Fidel Castro, Russia's Premier Khruschev and President Brezhnev among others for the May Day parade in Moscow's Red Square, May 1st, 1963, (Getty Images)

[40] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 285.
[41] Ibid., p. 246.
[42] Ibid., p. 270.

This relationship was further solidified in 1972 when Cuba became the first non-European nation to join COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance). It marked a crucial moment in the island's integration into the socialist economic bloc, because this membership meant preferential trade terms and facilitated long-term economic planning within the framework of Soviet-style central strategy[43]. Four years after, the first Soviet Cuban Five-Year Economic and Trade Agreement was signed, aiming to double trade volume and provide additional aid for industrial and agricultural projects[44].

However, this reliance on the Soviet Union was not without risks, as shown by growing trade deficits. Between 1966-1970, Cuba's trade deficit with the USSR reached $1.4 billion USD, constituting 75% of its total deficit[45]. Moreover, in 1969, 92% of Cuba's oil imports arrived from the Soviet Union, leaving the island with limited alternatives[46]. These imbalances explain all the difficulties that Cuba faced when the soviet support was no longer available, triggering the economic crisis also known as *Período Especial.*

1.1.2. Internationalist ventures in Latin America and Africa.

Internationalism has always been an intrinsic trait of the Cuban revolution, which not only sought to overthrow domestic tyranny but also embraced a broader global mission. This duty is deeply related with the concept of a new human being emerging from the streaming rubble of the revolution itself. This new man or woman – «motivated by moral imperative and values the common good» – assumes a larger responsibility towards humanity[47]. By tying his destiny to the nation's one, the *hombre nuevo* is expected to live for the revolutionary cause[48]. Transitioning from the individual action to State agency, generally, internationalism implies the belief that nations may gain more by cooperating and attempting to understand one another than by fighting each other[49]. In the Cuban case, internationalism has always meant the support

[43] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*., p. 288.
[44] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 241.
[45] Ibid., p. 223.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Marie Michèle Grenon, Cuban Internationalism and Contemporary Humanitarianism: History, Comparison and Perspectives (Quebec: Université Laval, 2016), p. 202.
[48] «Defense of the nation became indistinguishable from defense of the revolution.[…] Opposition was portrayed as tantamount to subversion. "To be a traitor to the Revolution is to be a traitor to the country," Fidel Castro proclaimed in 1960». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 246.
[49]Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "internationalism," accessed February 22, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/internationalism.

of revolution abroad, in the wider optic of fighting against imperialism and exploitation of other nations[50].

The ideological foundations of Cuban foreign policy may be found in Marxist theory, particularly in the proletarian unity against capitalist division, that resonates with Karl Marx's notorious call in The Communist Manifesto of 1848[51]. Fidel Castro transformed these concepts into a distinctively Cuban kind of solidarity: it incorporated both Marxist theory and anticolonial traditions, such as the ones shown by José Martí and Simón Bolívar[52], and positioned itself in the moral framework of Catholicism. Indeed, Fidel's nationalism is steeped in Catholic values such as social justice, moral duty, and collective wealth that make it a unicum. His rhetoric and leadership style also carried clear traces of a catholic tradition, particularly in his development of a messianic political figure.

Figure 3: : In this photograph, the dramatic use of backlighting shows Fidel Castro's profile with intensity, emphasizing the iconic silhouette of the revolutionary leader. The composition expresses his enduring charisma and the larger-than-life aura that characterized his political persona (Getty Images)

Like a religious leader, Castro positioned himself as the guardian of the people's faith and as the head of an organic body where the well-being of the community justified the sacrifice of the single individual. In this last sense, he embodied both the secular and the spiritual guide of the nation[53]. One of the most poignant examples of this mixture is represented by the Second

[50] John M. Kirk and H. Michael Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism: Origins, Evolution, and Goals, Studies of the Americas*, ed. James Dunkerley (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London, School of Advanced Study, 2009), p. 18.
[51] «Working Men of All Countries, Unite». Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848), chap. 4, accessed February 22, 2025, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch04.htm.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Loris Zanatta, *Fidel Castro. L'ultimo re cattolico* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2019), p. 77.

Declaration of Havana of 1962, where he urged Latin America to rise[54]. Soon, it expanded its original geographic boundaries, and it was translated into concrete support to different countries of the Third World. There were two types of cooperation that characterized the international experiences of Cuba: on one side military support; on the other civil and medical aid[55].

Initially, the Cuban commitment to spread the revolution was expressed by backing armed insurgencies, which were either anticolonial movements in Africa or left-wing guerrillas in Latin America. In 1963, Havana provided both civil and military assistance to Algeria in a border conflict with Morocco. Concurrently, it extended technical support to Portuguese African colonies, such as Congo and Ethiopia, by aiding liberation movements[56]. Meanwhile, Cuba supported guerrilla groups in Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru and Bolivia, relying on «the hopes of peasants' revolutions ignited through Latin America by their own model»[57].

At the beginning of 1966, the Cuban Revolution reaffirmed its position by hosting the First Tricontinental Conference in Havana. Gathering 512 representatives from 82 countries across the globe, it gave birth to the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL), an NGO led and funded mainly by Cuba[58]. The following year, to draw a common Latin American identity, the Organization of Latin America Solidarity (OLAS) was created[59]. With the slogan *Para nosotros la Patria es América,* OLAS reunited all the representatives of movements and organizations aligned to the Cuban Revolution. It aimed to harmonize regional efforts keeping in line with Bolivar's vision, and among the participants was Salvador Allende, then a Chilean senator[60].

During his charge in the 1960s, Allende publicly backed Castro's revolution, condemned Washington's aggression against Cuba, and expressed sympathy for the extreme Left in Chile. Havana did, in fact, view Allende as a very important ally due to his political position and dedication to the Cuban cause[61]. The relationship between Castro and Allende was primarily based on their shared understanding of Latin America context, whereas the United States' oppressive influence impeded their attempts to change the system. However, even if they

[54] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 286.
[55] Jean Cruz, "Internationalist Experiences in the Foreign Policy of the Cuban Revolution," Política Internacional 4, no. 2 (2022), p. 134.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Pons, *The Global Revolution*, p. 251.
[58] Cruz, "Internationalist Experiences in the Foreign Policy of the Cuban Revolution", pp. 134-135.
[59] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 287.
[60] Cruz, "Internationalist Experiences in the Foreign Policy of the Cuban Revolution," p. 136.
[61] Tanya Harmer, Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 28.

fought on the same side of the field, the two personalities visited, their approaches were fundamentally different: on one side, the Cuban guerrilla insurgency; on the other the non-violent path of democratic reform[62].

Figure 4: Fidel Castro with Salvador Allende in 1972 (AFP/ Romano Cagnoni).

Towards the end of 1960s, Cuban involvement in the American continent started to decline, notwithstanding its early achievements. Once driven by revolutionary impetus, guerrilla groups in Latin America were increasingly on the defensive and in decline. Ernesto "Che" Guevara's defeat and death in Bolivia in October 1967 was the biggest setback, showing a devastating blow to Cuba's insurgency plan. Furthermore, the Soviet Union complicated the revolutionary process by contesting what it saw as Cuban insubordination rather than providing steady support[63].

Albeit the insurrectional approach in Latin America suffered significant defeats, these challenges led to a strategic reorientation, leading Cuba to renew its commitment to the Third World by focusing on the liberation struggles in Africa. A case in point is given by Angola, where over a period of 15 years more than 300,000 Cuban soldiers and civilians contributed to the liberation movement, culminating in the victory at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988. The result of this battle – also known as the apartheid's Waterloo – paved the way for the independence of Angola, recognition of Namibia and severe blow to South Africa's regime[64].

[62] Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*, p. 31.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

Figure 5. Pérez, Antonio (Ñiko); Manifest for Angola 1968. OSPAAL archive
Available at: https://www.docspopuli.org/CubaWebCat/detail.np/detail-14.html

Besides military support, the second strategy of Cuban international engagement was the civilian and medical cooperation, with the objective of sharing its educational and health-related societal achievements[65]. Many were the socio-economic programs launched by Cuba, especially during the 1970s, when its economic conditions improved. Most of these plans dealt with civil construction, employing around 8,000 Cuban workers and involved technical guidance, planning and organization[66]. For what concern the medical support, Cuba immediately after the revolution, deployed a medical brigade to Chile and to Algeria in 1962, even though many doctors had already left the country[67]. Throughout all these years, medical missions have been a constant element of Cuba's international agency, and most of them continue to operate to this day. An example of this is given by the International Contingent of Specialized Doctors "Henry Reeve", which has been deployed to fight COVID-19[68]. The According to official statistics from WHO, UNICEF, and UNDP, Cuba has sent 420,000 health professionals to 164 countries in the past sixty years: about one-third of the world's population has been treated by this number of medical personnel[69].

In addition to concrete political and economic actions, Cuban internationalism has also been expressed through culture and art. The visual narratives disseminated by organizations like the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL)

[65] Grenon, Cuban Internationalism and Contemporary Humanitarianism, 203.
[66] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 289.
[67] To help Chile's population after an earthquake and to support the newly indipendent Algeria, that at the time had only 200 doctors. Cruz, "Internationalist Experiences in the Foreign Policy of the Cuban Revolution," p. 136
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p.138.

contributed to create a transnational image of resistance and unity. Graphic art from OSPAAAL, as analysed by Natália Ayo Schmiedecke, has not only testified but also constructed the symbolic identity of the Third World as a community that resists oppression and imperialism[70]. These cultural expressions serve as both propaganda and documentation of Cuba's commitment to fostering global solidarity.

1.1.3. Reagan's Policy and Intervention in Nicaragua

As previously mentioned, after the Cuban Revolution the US – Cuba relations have frozen completely, reaching the rupture of diplomatic interactions and the embargo. Nevertheless, during the Jimmy Carter's administration, there was a period of détente between the two countries, during which they resumed cooperation in some areas: for example, by allowing Cuban diplomats to oversee Cuban interests as part of the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington and US diplomats to handle American ones as part of the Swiss embassy in Havana[71]. Carter based his foreign policy in the region on respect for human rights and localization of conflicts, to reduce them to their national dimension[72]. Using the words of the National Security Adviser Zbigniev Brzezinski, the Monroe Doctrine, the core of U.S. interventionism in Latin America, was «an imperialistic legacy which has embittered our relationships»[73]. This explains all the concessions made to the ruling revolutionaries in Nicaragua by then-President Jimmy Carter, which his successor—Ronald Reagan—would not have granted.

At the end of 1970's, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla force, came to power when a large revolutionary alliance overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. The Sandinista Front, as new leaders of the country, had an extreme agenda that included land reform and nationalisation and could count on tight ties with both the Soviet Union and Cuba[74]. Profoundly inspired by Cuban revolutionary ideals, the Nicaraguan Revolution succeeded due to internal and external factors. On the domestic level, there were high levels of dissent against the dictatorship - due to corruption, repression and economic

[70] Natália Ayo Schmiedecke, "Oppressed, Resistant, and Revolutionary: The Third World as Designed in the OSPAAAL Graphic Art," Antíteses 16, no. 31 (January–June 2023), pp. 256-258.
[71] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 290.
[72] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p.188.
[73] Hal Brands, Latin America's Cold War: An International History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 161
[74] Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 237.

crisis - all of which the revolutionaries knew how to exploit. On the international one, the revolution received support from Cuba and other Latin American governments, namely Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama. Hundreds of FSLN fighters were trained by Castro's intelligence services, and in certain instances, Cuban advisors fought alongside them. In addition, to arm new FSLN members that flooded into the group in the late 1970s, Cuba sent thousands of weapons to Nicaragua[75]. To encourage revolution in Central America, the Sandinista party also joined Soviet Cuban initiatives, acting on the "principle of revolutionary internationalism" as well as the need of finding new friends[76]. Thus, Cuba expanded its network of alliances, securing new footholds in the region, including Nicaragua, as well as Grenada and El Salvador[77].

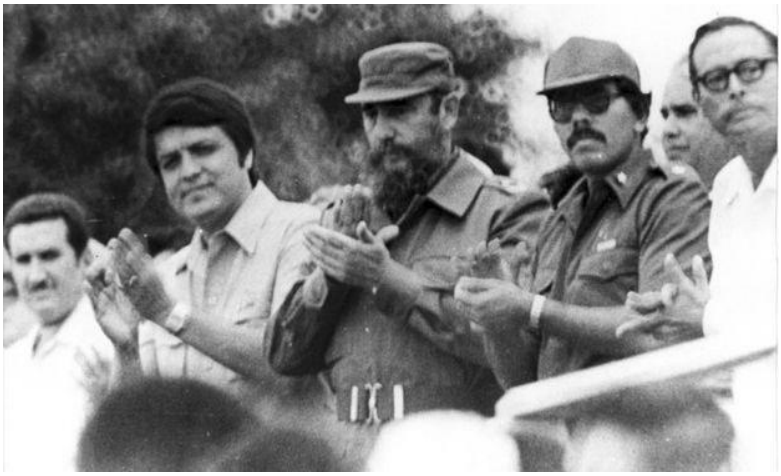

Figure 6: Castro during the celebration of the first anniversary of the fall of Somoza, on July 19, 1980 in Nicaragua. La Prensa Archive. Available at https://translatingcuba.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Castro-Nicaragua-Revolucion-Sandinista-PrensaArchivo_CYMIMA20180627_0002_13.jpg

The situation underwent a drastic change in 1981, when Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States. According to Reagan, Latin America – and particularly the central region – represented the nerve centre of the Cold War rivalry with the USSR. Driven by a strong anti-communist sentiment, Reagan's administration pursued a resolute interventionist policy, which

[75] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War: An International History*, p. 167.
[76] Ibid., p. 182.
[77] As written by Pérez, «the decline of Cuban global influence occurred at the same time of renewed ascendancy of Cuba in regional affairs. Once more, changing circumstances created an atmosphere conducive to Cuban participation. The triumph of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979 provided Cuba a new ally in the region. So too did the emergence in 1980 of the Maurice Bishop government in Grenada. An armed insurgency in El Salvador showed every sign of expanding. At the same time, Cuba won new friends through its defense of Latin American interests. Havana supported Panama's demands for control over the canal. Cuba's support of Argentina during the Falklands/Malvinas war led ultimately to strengthened ties between both countries». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 290.

can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the need to block Soviet and Cuban attempts to impose communism by force in the region, and, secondly, the desire to restore American strength and credibility following the defeat in Vietnam[78].

By the end of 1981, the U.S. aided the formation of the *Contras*, a counterrevolutionary force in Nicaragua, supplying them also through illegal means[79]. The U.S. economic embargo, alongside the contra war, aggravated Nicaragua's economic conditions, such as runaway inflation and failing wages[80]. As argued by Zanatta, a similar fate also fell on Guatemala and El Salvador, which had to wait until the 1990s for stability[81].

About Cuba, in 1982, it was added to the list of states sponsoring international terrorism, denouncing Castro for helping, directly or indirectly, militant communist movements in Angola, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua[82]. One year after, Grenada was invaded by Reagan's administration, enabling the marines to depose the Cuban-aligned regime[83]. In addition, a new organisation called the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) was established in early 1980. Together with its political action committee, "Free Cuba," it became a powerful lobbying group against Castro[84].

Thus, the intervention in Nicaragua by the Reagan administration was a component of a larger Cold War policy meant to stop the Cuban and Soviet advance in Latin America. For what concerns Cuba, Reagan's presidency marked one of the most hostile periods in US-Cuba relations since the 1959 Revolution.

1.2. Chile

1.2.1. The rise of the Pinochet regime and the establishment of neoliberalism.

On September 11, 1973 – a date that would forever be remembered in Chilean history as *el Once*[85] – the Chilean military forces broke into La Moneda, the presidential palace,

[78] Brands, Latin America's Cold War, p. 183.
[79] The President circumvented the Congress's refusal to fund Contras by financing them through the illict sale of weapons to Iran. Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 203.
[80] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 198.
[81] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, pp. 199-202.
[82] Mark P. Sullivan, Cuba and the State Sponsors of Terrorism List, CRS Report for Congress, Order Code RL32251 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, May 13, 2005).
[83] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 203.
[84] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 319.
[85] Simon Collier and William F. Sater, A History of Chile, 1808–2002, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 359.

overthrowing President Salvador Allende in favour of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. The *coup d'etat* was neither spontaneous nor coincidental: rather, it was orchestrated by the Chilean military, endorsed by the national business elites and actively supported by the United States[86].

Figure 7: Armed guards stand watch as Chilean President Salvador Allende exits La Moneda Palace during the military coup that ultimately led to his overthrow and death. (Photo by Luis Orlando Lagos Vázquez/Keystone/Getty Images)

Three years before, Salvador Allende was democratically elected as president of Chile, leading the Unidad Popular, a coalition of left-wing parties[87]. The *vía chilena al socialismo* was a unique experiment in global politics, marking the first instance of a Marxist government coming to power through electoral means, with the goal of achieving socialist transformation via democratic processes[88]. Allende's economic policies sought to nationalize key industries, particularly copper, which had been dominated by U.S. companies, such as Anaconda and Kennecott[89], and implement an agrarian reform, to redistribute land to peasants. To improve income distribution, he also introduced wage controls and expanded social expenditure[90].

Despite the initial economic growth, with GDP rising and employment improving, at the end of 1973 significant endogenous issues emerged. Inflation escalated beyond control, reaching over 508%, fiscal deficit touched 25% of GDP and real wages fell more than 28% under 1970[91]. The balance of payments deteriorated as Chile faced shortages of essential goods, exacerbating social tensions. In the meantime, political fragmentation within Unidad Popular

[86] David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.
[87] Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*, p. 39.
[88] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 164.
[89] "Latin America: Clamor Over Chilean Copper," Time, July 25, 1969, accessed February 24, 2025, https://time.com/archive/6637036/latin-america-clamor-over-chilean-copper/.
[90] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 32.
[91] Ibid.

(UP)[92] intensified[93]. The Communist Party, favoring a gradualist and institutional approach, was in stark contrast with the Socialist one. Indeed, Allende's party was internally divided: on one side, Allende and his followers supported gradual change, while the left wing of the party, inspired by Cuban and Yugoslav models, did not exclude the use of revolutionary violence and supported direct worker and peasant mobilization. The MAPU, a secessionist faction of the Christian Democrats, leaned toward Marxist-Christian revolutionary ideals, while the Radicals was the most moderate member of the coalition. Finally, the API, representing a more nationalist-populist current, maintained a pragmatic stance within the coalition[94].

The exogenous factors were equally decisive. The United States, alarmed by Allende's socialist program and his alignment with Cuba, launched economic and political sabotage efforts. In the context of the Cold War, once again the Monroe Doctrine instilled the fear that communism would win another battle in the region[95]. The Nixon administration, under the guidance of Henry Kissinger and the CIA, orchestrated a covert campaign to destabilize Chile, restricting access to international credit, supporting opposition media, and secretly funding strikes such as the October 1972 truckers' strike, which paralyzed the economy[96]. The U.S. also played a pivotal role in financing and coordinating opposition forces, actively working to create the propitious conditions for a coup[97].

These economic, political and external pressures paved the way for the military intervention, when General Augusto Pinochet put an end to the democratic socialist experiment and built the military dictatorship that lasted 17 years[98]. In a country famous for its durable and progressive democracies, the Pinochet regime ruled through terror and by decree. The Congress was closed

[92] Unidad Popular (UP) was a left-wing coalition formed in 1969 to support Salvador Allende's presidential candidacy in 1970. It consisted of the Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party (PCCh), and the Radical Party (PR), alongside Partido de Izquierda Radical (PIR) and two movements: Acción Popular Unitaria (MAPU) and Acción Popular Independiente (API). Despite a shared commitment to Allende's project, the coalition faced deep ideological divisions.. These internal fractures complicated policymaking and weakened UP's ability to maintain a coherent strategy, contributing to growing instability and the polarization that culminated in the 1973 military coup. Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 348.

[93] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 166.

[94] G. Arriagada, *De la vía chilena a la vía insurreccional* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial del Pacífico S.A., 1974), pp. 67-84.

[95] Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*, p. 154.

[96] Ibid., p. 110.

[97] «Actuated by their unreflective view of Realpolitik, [the U.S.]they were certainly the chief authors of the credit squeeze against Chile orchestrated in Washington, and the various forms of "covert action" used by the CIA in Chile in its efforts at political "destabilization."27 Nixon's intentions are crystal clear, and the US$8 million allocated to the CIA for its operations against Allende (much of it used to subsidize the opposition, including El Mercurio) has long been a matter of public record, thanks largely to the United States Congress». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 379.

[98] «General Augusto Pinochet broke the previous record for length of tenure among Chilean rulers (all since 1540) – until then held by Governor Gabriel Cano de Aponte at fifteen years, ten months (1717–33). By the time he left office, Pinochet had ruled Chile for eight months longer than his colonial predecessor. Ibid., p. 383.

and the parties of the UP coalition banned, alongside all leftist movements; opponents – ranging from Allende's supporters to students, union leaders and intellectuals – were hunted down, tortured and, eventually, executed[99]. The state of emergency was declared and later made permanent in 1977[100].

The concept of "internal enemy", which was invoked by Pinochet to justify the brutal repression, was deeply related with the U.S. National Security Doctrine. Drafted after the Cuban Revolution, this doctrine aimed to prevent socialist revolution in Latin America, by transforming national militaries into counterinsurgency forces loyal to US interests. Under this framework, the United States provided ideological and military training, as well as equipment, to Latin American armies, preparing them for domestic repression rather than external defence[101]. Hence, the Pinochet's dictatorship was not just a domestic phenomenon, but part of a regional dynamic, namely the Operation Condor, an intelligence and repression program coordinated with other countries of the Southern Cone to fight the leftwing subversion[102].

Pinochet portrayed himself as the saviour of Chile, claiming a divine mandate to protect the nation from what he labelled as cancer – Marxism – and used to justify state terrorism against civilians[103]. Repression was soon institutionalized through the *Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional* (DINA), a powerful secret police agency closely tied to the CIA[104]. This was reinforced by Henry Kissinger's private assurances to the Chilean dictator, reassuring him that his government need not be concerned about human rights violations[105].

Military support was not the only help that Pinochet received from the U.S.: to sustain a regime, economic stability is crucial. Thus, the United States immediately provided financial and material support to the junta, viewing it as a milestone in the Cold War battle against communism. Towards the end of October 1973, Washington had extended a loan of $24 million

[99] According to Borzutzky «The regime's legacy of abuse includes about 4000 people killed or disappeared (unofficial numbers can be as high as 25,000); tens of thousands of people tortured (the official number is near 40,000, but it could be as high as 100,000 according to credible sources); between 150,000 and 200,000 people detained for political reasons, and between 200,000 and 400,000 exiled. The regime made sure to enact an Amnesty Decree in 1978 that protected those who had committed the abuses». S. Borzutzky, Human Rights Policies in Chile, Studies of the Americas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 10.
[100] Federico Sesia, Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia (1981-1990) (Linea Tempo 20, 2019), p. 83.
[101] Ibid., p. 12.
[102] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 147.
[103] «As stated by Pinochet, when the society is confronted with communist penetration that attempts against basic Western and Christian values it needs to be defended. […] General Pinochet led a patrimonial system in which the authority of the ruler was, in his view, the result of a mandate of the Divine Providence, which had chosen him to save the country». Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*., 11.
[104] Headed by Manuel Contreras, it operated extrajudicial detention centers, torture chambers, and execution sites, orchestrating forced disappearances and international assassinations, including the Washington, D.C., murder of Orlando Letelier in 1976. Ibid., p. 16.
[105] Dávila, *Dictatorship in South America*, p. 17.

for wheat imports—eight times the total amount of commodities credit granted to Allende's administration. Throughout the following years, Chile benefited disproportionately from U.S. help, receiving $237.8 million from the Inter-American Development Bank and 88% of U.S. AID's housing guarantees in Latin America[106]. However, this economic backing was not unconditional: Pinochet's Chile represented a testing ground for neoliberal reforms.

If Pinochet rise to power was guaranteed by military repression, his consolidation of power was solidified through economic liberalization. The Chicago Boys were the main characters of this shift. They were a group of Chilean economists who had been trained at the University of Chicago through a program initiated in the 1950s with the support of the U.S. government and the Ford Foundation, within the framework of Cold War efforts to promote capitalist doctrine in Latin America. Heavily influenced by the Chicago School of Economics – a school of thought rooted in the ideas of Milton Friedman and other economists like George Stigler – they believed firmly in the superiority of free markets, private property rights, and minimal state intervention as the path to prosperity[107].

Initially, many members of the military junta remained skeptical of the radicalism of these free-market prescriptions, especially given the deep social crisis facing the country after the coup. However, the 1974 global economic recession, triggered by the First Oil Shock, led to a steep decline in copper prices, Chile's main export, and deepened the country's inflation and unemployment crises[108]. It was in this precarious conjuncture that Milton Friedman himself visited Santiago in 1975, advising the General on the urgency of a "shock treatment". From that moment on, Pinochet officially aligned with the Chicago Boys, dismantling all interventionist policies embraced since the 1920s, and introducing neoliberal reforms.

[106] Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*, p. 148.
[107] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Chicago School of Economics," last modified February 6, 2024, accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/money/Chicago-school-of-economics.
[108] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 390.

Figure 8: Pinochet rounded by the Chicago boys. Available at https://interferencia.cl/articulos/como-se-instalo-el-modelo-de-los-chicago-boys-en-los-primeros-anos-de-la-dictadura

Following this visit, Pinochet decisively embraced the Chicago Boys' program[109]. The regime dismantled interventionist policies that had been in place since the 1920s and implemented an ambitious neoliberal agenda. This included abolishing price controls, privatizing hundreds of state-owned enterprises, liberalizing trade, and slashing public spending—especially in health, education, and social welfare. The Chicago Boys viewed this transformation not just as economic reform, but as a total ideological reorientation, in which market forces would govern not only economic outcomes but also reshape society itself.

As David Harvey notes, their mission was nothing short of reversing the developmentalist and Keynesian legacy of the 20th century, replacing it with a model where the state acts primarily as a guarantor of market functioning, rather than as a provider of social protections. However, the 1974 global economic recession, triggered by the First Oil Shock, led to a decline in copper prices—Chile's primary export—intensifying inflation and unemployment.

Based on neoliberal theory, the state role is confined to maintaining order and ensuring property rights and the rule of law. Neoliberalism – according to David Harvey – is founded on the primacy of individual private property rights, free markets and free trade. Only by reducing state interference and expanding the domain of private businesses, societies may achieve higher level of innovation, wealth and efficiency[110].

[109] «In April 1975, after hearing the arguments and counter-arguments of economists at a weekend conference at Cerro Castillo, Pinochet threw caution to the winds, came down decisively in favor of the Chicago Boys, conferred extraordinary powers on Jorge Cauas (his Finance minister since July 1974), and appointed Sergio de Castro as Economy minister. The steelier de Castro took over as Finance minister when Cauas withdrew in December 1976». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 390.

[110] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, pp. 64-65

The Chilean reforms – aimed at ensuring market efficiency and competitiveness – were implemented with unprecedented aggressiveness, a process possible only under an authoritarian regime. Price controls were abolished, state enterprises privatized, and trade liberalized, abandoning the import-substitution industrialization (ISI)[111]. The government shrank the money supply and reduced public spending, impacting mainly public health, education, and welfare programs. Overall, the immediate impact was a severe economic recession. Firstly, industrial production collapsed by 25%, as domestic industries were not ready to international competition[112]; in second place, GDP contracted, with real earnings falling and unemployment raising to over 20%, as layoffs followed the dismantling of state-owned enterprises[113]. Thus, the highest costs of this transition were the social ones, affecting principally the working class and marginalized communities. The crisis hit the countryside hardest, where Pinochet's regime abolished Allende's agrarian reform, returning confiscated lands to large landowners and multinational business. The same fate befell on the indigenous Mapuche community, whose ancestral lands were either privatized or turned into monoculture plantations[114].

At the end, neoliberal restructuring implemented under Pinochet appeared to bring results in the long period: inflation gradually fell, and GDP started to grow once again. Export diversified significantly, with non-traditional exports such as apples and wines, reducing Chile's dependency on copper[115]. Still, another recession was around the corner: the 1982's crisis. The over-reliance on financial liberalization and speculative growth had led to excessive borrowing, and when global interest rates surged, Chile faced massive debt and banking failures. In response, the government took pragmatic measures, including a temporary state intervention to stabilize the economy, contradicting the principles of laissez-faire capitalism that had guided earlier policies. As it will be seen in the next paragraph, the 1982 recession did not only show the fragility of Pinochet's neoliberal experiment but also gave a space to the regime's opposition. However, from the mid-1980s onward, Chile emerged as one of the fastest-growing economies in Latin America, with a 6.7% during 1990s[116].

While the economy eventually stabilized by the 1980s, it did so at the cost of profound inequality, social unrest, and the erosion of human rights, consequences that would influence

[111] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 208.
[112] Mesa-Lago et al*., Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies,* p. 43.
[113] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 390.
[114] Ibid., p. 391.
[115] The economic boom infused optimism, as shown by the words of Labor minister José Piñera: «Chile in 1990 will be a developed country». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002,* p. 394.
[116] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War,* p. 216.

Chile's struggles. The 1982 crisis revealed the fragility of Pinochet's neoliberal experiment and the onset of mobilization of civil society. Even if the state had to intervene to save the private sector during the recession, contradicting the free-market ideology, Pinochet's neoliberal legacy has endured and shaped for decades the Chilean political and social landscape.

1.2.2. The role of civil society and the lead-up to the 1988 referendum.

By the end of 1970s, the authoritarian grip of Pinochet has begun to loosen, as part of an effort to institutionalize the junta once for all. A reference of this project may be found in the dissolution of DINA in 1978, and its replacement with the *Central Nacional de Informaciones* (CNI), which – still repressive – was less involved in human rights violations than the former organization[117]. On the wave of the economic boom, Pinochet took advantage of the positive conjecture to pass a new constitution. Elaborated by the regime, the constitution was approved in 1980 through a controversial and noncompetitive plebiscite, which lacked any guarantees for oppositions[118]. The new Charter introduced permanent articles, which established a "protected democracy" under military control, particularly the National Security Council. At the same time, transitory clauses were aimed at ensuring Pinochet's authority even after 1988 referendum, allowing him to remain in office for another mandate if elected: otherwise, he would have remained as Commander in Chief of the Army until 1998[119].

Figure 9: Pinochet on March 11, 1981, when the new Constitution was enacted (AFP/Getty images).

[117] Sesia, *Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia,* p. 82.
[118] Paul W. Drake and Iván Jaksić, eds., The Struggle for Democracy in Chile, 1982–1990, Latin American Studies Series (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 5.
[119] Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 61.

In addition to the weakening of repression, another factor that contributed to the opposition's rise was the economic downturn of 1982-83. It led to an increasing number of strikes and protests all over the country, originally spearheaded by labour unions and students, and, later, jointed by political parties[120]. Notwithstanding all junta's decree and their persecution, political parties had never disappeared, as proved by the Communist Party's continuous clandestine activities. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party reorganized itself in two factions: one willing to open to Christian Democrats and another that remained more loyal to Allende's ideological line.

In 1983, two major party coalition emerged: *Alianza democrática* – which included the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the Socialist faction led by Núñez, the Radical Party, and some centre-right parties – and *Movimiento Democrático Popular* (MDP), which united the Communist Party, the Socialist faction of Almeyda, and the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR)[121]. Despite the relative relaxation of repression compared to early years, it did not prevent Pinochet's government from intervening with severe crackdowns. At the same time, the armed struggle was resumed, leading to the return of the state of siege.

Figure 10: Relatives of victims protest in Santiago displaying photographs of their loved ones, who disappeared. October 11, 1983, (AP-Photo/mc/stf/Santiago Lanquin)

[120] «It was Rodolfo Seguel ("the Chilean Lech Walesa," as some called him) who next took the initiative and called for a one-day general strike on May 11, 1983. Somewhat to Seguel's surprise, the strike attracted widespread support. Santiago was paralyzed: the blare of car horns and the banging of pots and pans showed that militant opposition had returned to the streets of Chile. Over the next three years or so, there were more than twenty such days of protest (*protestas*), with strikes, demonstrations, and running battles with the police». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 400.

[121] Sesia, *Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia,* p. 83.

Beyond political, student, and labour opposition, the Catholic Church emerged over time as a key character of civil society. Although its initial cautious approach, soon it took a more active role in defending human rights and assisting the victims of repression, trough institutions like the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*[122]. The Church also fostered the development of grassroots Christian communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*), which played an essential role in mobilizing opposition from below[123]. By the mid-1980s, as mass protests escalated, Church leaders – in vain – called for dialogue and democratization, behaving as mediators between the regime and civil society[124].

Furthermore, defections began occurring within the regime's traditional base of support. On the one hand, Pinochet's recent policies caused discontent among certain economic elites. On the other hand, even the military – including chiefs of the navy, air force and national police – expressed dissatisfaction with his continued hold on power. Ultimately, also women – historically conservative group – abandoned Pinochet, seeking to incorporate their specific demand into the larger democratic movement[125].

One year before the plebiscite, Pinochet's regime had lost support not only on the domestic side but also on the international one. The U.S. and western nations began to balance the admiration for the economic model with the disapproval for the brutality of the dictatorship. At the end of Reagan's administration, the United State' had shifted its approach from backing dictators to promoting transitions to democracy, putting further pressure on Chilean government[126]. This pressure was both political and economic. On one side, the U.S. expressed their position through acts with high symbolic and political value, such as declarations and pronouncements in international organizations. On the other, they exercised economic pressure on Chile: for instance, the Reagan's administration submitted its support for loans to the cessation of the state of siege, and in 1987 limited economic sanctions were imposed[127]. The regime was also being pressed by international organizations that were devoted to the respect and improvement of human rights and democratization. Even if their range of action was limited, they have increasingly drawn attention to Pinochet's domestic policy[128].

[122] Established in 1976 under the Archbishop of Santiago, it offered legal aid and documented human rights abuses. Hugo Cancino, La Iglesia Católica y su contribución a la reconstrucción de la democracia en Chile, 1973-1989 (Luogo di pubblicazione: Editore, Anno), p. 43.
[123] Cancino, *La Iglesia Católica y su contribución a la reconstrucción de la democracia en Chile*, p. 50.
[124] As shown by the *Acuerdo Nacional para la Transición* a la Plena Democracia, a new mediation with opposition parties to establish a democracy, but Pinochet refused. Sesia*, Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia,* p. 85.
[125] Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile,* pp. 7-8
[126] Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile*, p. 12
[127] Ibid., p. 259.
[128] Ibid., p. 263

Thus, most of the opposition gradually started to understand that their only option was to operate under the framework of the hated 1980 Constitution and to be united in the plebiscite[129]. After electoral lists were opened, in February 1988 the *Concertación de Partidos por el No* was officially formed: composed of more than 15 parties and movements – among which the PDC, radicals and socialists – its goal was to secure a "no" vote on the impeding poll[130]. The coalition stressed the need for social justice and peace and the entire campaign was based on pushing citizens to choose between democracy and tyranny[131].

Figure 11: : The first executive board of the Concertación. In the photo, Enrique Silva Cimma (PR),Tomás Hirsch (PH), Andrés Zaldívar and Patricio Aylwin (DC), Ricardo Lagos (PPD), Luis Maira y Genaro Arriagada (IC). - Archivofortinmapocho.cl

Despite the constant harassment from the authorities, the electoral campaign for the "no" was carried out in an innovative and effective way. A key role in this campaign was played by intellectuals, who conducted opinion research and developed persuasive advertising strategies that resonated with the public[132]. Recognizing the importance of mass media, it embraced modern campaign strategies, utilizing emerging technologies both to monitor the voting process and to spread their program through TV spots[133].

[129] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile*, *1808–2002*, p. 402.
[130] Ibid., p. 404
[131] Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 62.
[132] Matías Tagle D., ed., El plebiscito del 5 de octubre de 1988, Diálogos (Santiago: Corporación Justicia y Democracia, 1995), p. 23.
[133] Decades later, this innovative media approach became the subject of Pablo Larraín's 2012 film "No.", which stages the 1988 plebiscite campaign against Augusto Pinochet. Ibid.

Figure 12: A demonstrator points a finger at a portrait of Augusto Pinochet depicted as the devil, during the "No" campaign protest in Santiago, on October 7, 1988 (Photo by Rafael Wollmann/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images).

On October 5, 1988, 92% of the Chilean population turned out to vote. The plebiscite – «designed to consecrate and prolong, not to terminate, an authoritarian regime»[134] – resulted in a victory for the "no" campaign, with 54% of the votes[135]. Despite retaining the support of 43% Chileans, Pinochet was defeated. Facing the results, the junta was forced to recognize the loss, leading to the scheduling of new elections for December 14, 1989.

During the period between the plebiscite and the elections, even if limited, several amendments to the 1980 Constitution were obtained by the *Concertación*, to build a safer and more open environment for free and fair elections. Among the most important revisions achieved there were the end to the prohibition on parties that were "against the family "or in favour of "class struggle" and the temporary reduction of the next presidential term to 4 years[136].

For the elections of 1989, la *Concertación de Partidos por el No* changed his name to *Concertación de Partidos por la democracia*, which nominated the Christian Democrat Patricio Aylwin Azocár as its presidential candidate. Aylwin was a prominent figure in the PDC during the administration of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970) and later became the party's president during Allende's government. While he was one of the most hesitant within the PDC to break up relations with Allende, he attempted to mediate a political compromise, as evidenced by the secret negotiations held between them[137]. Nevertheless, a significant

[134] Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile,* pp. 7-8
[135] Sesia, *Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia*, p. 85.
[136] In addition, the package included changes to the composition of the new (and, in design, military-dominated) National Security Council, an expansion of the elected element in the Senate, and the easing of the procedures for constitutional amendment. Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 405.
[137] As written by Collier and Sater, two months before the coup «Allende did […] make a last-ditch attempt to reach an understanding with the PDC. He spent most of July 30 discussing (at the Moneda) the main bones of

faction of his party supported the 1973 coup, viewing it a way to restore order in the face of an escalating crisis. This historical baggage remained difficult to erase, leading Aylwin to later acknowledge, in reference to the dictatorship, that «we were all responsible»[138].

However, despite his past, Aylwin emerged as the new leader, winning with 55% of the vote, marking the beginning of four consecutive governments led by the *Concertación*[139].

How was the military's institutional transformation possible after the plebiscite? According to Chilean politician Andres Allamand Z., four factors may explain this shift. To begin with, the armed forces had no desire to continue holding power. Secondly, they recognized the plebiscite results and the democratic transition, unexpectedly adhering to all necessary conditions to ensure a fair and transparent vote. The third factor consists in the reconstruction of democratic loyalty, with the plebiscite itself being a step in this process. Lastly, the transformation occurred within the institutional framework, rather than outside it, guaranteeing a structured and legitimate change[140].

As it will be seen after, the referendum was only the beginning of the "pacted transition" from Pinochet's dictatorship to democracy, with several challenges and tensions. Even if the 1988 plebiscite represented a turning point, the *Concertación* had to face all the issues related to the consolidation of democracy, namely constitutional reforms, the balancing of military-civilian relations and addressing human rights violations.

1.2.3. Fractures during the transition to democracy.

The first democratic government of Aylwin defined the national mission as "transition to democracy". As Manuel Antonio Garretón underlines, «transitions are different from the revolutionary or insurrectional model in that the power holders […] are pressured to step down. This implies that […] transitions involve implicit or explicit negotiations between the power holders (in this case, the armed forces) and the opposition, and a regulated area of confrontation

contention with the then PDC party president, Patricio Aylwin, and his vice president, Osvaldo Olguín - both of them senators. Allende agreed to accept the PDC's demand that the government enforce the arms control law, to discuss military participation in the cabinet, and to consider limitations on the Social Area and on agrarian reform. In return, however, he asked that Congress. […] On August 17, Allende and Aylwin were to meet again, this time secretly, at Cardenal Raúl Silva Henríquez's house in Calle Simón Bolívar, but it proved impossible to restart negotiations. The Allende-Aylwin "conversations" were the last real attempt at com- promise involving both sides». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002,* p. 378.

[138] Ibid., p. 379.

[139] Sesia, *Il Cile da Pinochet alla Democrazia*, p. 86.

[140] Tagle D., *El plebiscito del 5 de octubre de 1988*, pp. 13-14.

between regime and opposition that solves the conflict between both (plebiscites, elections) »[141].

However, the onset of Chilean transition was marked by deep fractures – both political and institutional on one side, and social and economic on the other. Even if the democratic institutions were rebuilt, the remnants of the Pinochet regime, economic inequalities, and unresolved demands for justice represented obstacles in the path toward a fully consolidated democracy.

One of the strongest institutional constraints was the 1980 Constitution, which had not been repealed. The same Constitution, that was imposed and had created a "protected" and "authoritarian" democracy, was designed to limit the power of civilian governments and maintain authoritarian enclaves. By envisaging a weak legislature and a strong executive, the Constitution ensured that the governance, even if democratic, operated within the framework set by the armed forces[142].

Another example is given by Pinochet's continued role as head of the army, which was irrevocable until 1998. With the possibility of becoming a lifetime senator, this position allowed him to maintain considerable influence over political and national security matters. Also, the military was granted special protection through different mechanisms, as proved by *Ley Reservada del Cobre* – which established that the 10% of all copper sale was allocated directly to it. Moreover, the President had limited authority to name or remove military commanders, reinforcing military's autonomy[143].

The binomial electoral system further aggravated these barriers, favouring a political balance between the right and center-left and making it difficult for a minority party to be represented. This system made it difficult for the *Concertación* coalition to pass radical legislative changes[144].

Beyond institutional limitations, initially there has been continuity with Pinochet's neoliberal economic model, deepening social inequalities. The opposition focused more on

[141] Manuel Antonio Garretón, Incomplete Democracy: Political Democratization in Chile and Latin America, trans. R. Kelly Washbourne with Gregory Horvath (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 117.
[142] «The constitution would also grant significant powers to the four commanders of the military institutions, who would be protected from removal from office for four years after being appointed. Together with the president of the Senate, the four commanders would also sit as a new body called the National Security Council, where they would be able to admonish elected authorities should they violate "the bases of institutionality" or compromise "national security". Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile,* p. 53.
[143] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 437.
[144] Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy*, p. 151.

political democratization rather than economic mutation[145]. The *Concertación* government prioritized economic stability and growth in the neoliberal framework, partly due to the economic boom of the early 90s – GDP increased 7.3% in 1991 and 11% in 1992. Still, this growth was highly concentrated in the hands of economic elites, who controlled 61.5% of the total income in these years[146]. Despite some efforts to reduce poverty, major concerns remained about social equity. At the time, over 4 million Chileans were living in poverty, and 900,000 families lacked housing[147].

At the same time, the pursuit of truth and justice for the victims of human rights violations faced many barriers. The *Comisión de la Verdad y de la Reconciliación* – established in 1991 – was aimed at documenting the human rights abuses during the regime. Its finding were exposed in the subsequent Retting Report, which identified more than 3195 cases of deaths or disappearences and 41,626 of torture[148]. The text openly criticised the judiciary for its implicit assent in failing to investigate and prosecute these crimes.

Nonetheless, the response of the military and right-wing politicians to these allegations was one of denial. General Pinochet and the Armed Forces rejected any responsibility: instead, they invoked the "war thesis" to justify state violence[149]. Furthermore, they refused to cooperate in the search for the disappeared, reinforcing the perception of impunity for all the atrocities they have committed. In addition, the persistence of the 1978 Amnesty Law ensured that judicial consequences were limited, protecting military officials from prosecution[150]. The Supreme Court, still dominated by conservative justices, repeatedly transferred human rights cases to military courts, where they were always dismissed[151]. The *Boinazo* crisis of 1993, in which the military staged a dramatic show of force in Santiago following an arrest order for an army officer, reinforced the perception that civilian authorities could not control armed forces[152]. In addition, the emphasis of the government was put on the reconciliation, not on justice.

[145] Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile,* p. 119.
[146] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 120.
[147] Ibid., p. 132.
[148] Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 70.
[149] In the words of Steven Stern: « The war thesis was fundamental. It explained unfortunate events, it displaced responsibilities, and it justified looking away». Ibid., p. 72.
[150] «The regime granted amnesty for certain criminal acts committed between September 11, 1973, and March 10, 1978.50 The stated goal was to foment national unification, but the practical effect was to absolve officials from responsibility in the deaths and torture of thousands of people. This Decree Law, commonly known as the Amnesty Law, contravened international human rights laws and obligations of the Chilean state to prosecute and punish those responsible for human rights abuses» Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 24.
[151] Ibid., p. 76.
[152] Ibid., p. 73.

Figure 13: Demonstration in support of the "Yes" vote, backing General Pinochet's continuation in power in the plebiscite of October 5, 1988 – a clear illustration of the enduring support he retained among segments of the Chilean population (AFP/ Getty Images).

With certain segments of Chilean society still endorsing Pinochet's legacy and victims and human rights organisations calling for justice, this unresolved conflict over historical memory aggravated societal tensions. A division that has continued to be a source of social dissatisfaction also into the twenty-first century, with an increasing number of people wanting a true change, starting from the 1980 Constitution.

Chapter II

2. The Fall of the Berlin Wall and Its Implications on Cuba and Chile

2.1. The end of the Cold War: How to deal with a new era.

Although its roots are much older and its effects are still felt today, the Cold War[1] was a conflict that lasted from 1945 to 1989, pitting two Superpowers: the United States and Soviet Union, representing respectively capitalism and socialism[2]. This geopolitical and ideological struggle, among two opposite worlds, reached its climax with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. «What followed – using the words of Silvio Pons – was the most classic of domino effects»[3].

However, the fall of the Berlin Wall was not an isolated event. It was the result of multiple factors—economic stagnation, ideological transformations, and systemic weaknesses in the Eastern Bloc[4]—all of which contributed to the Soviet Union's decline. Indeed, more than just the collapse of a physical barrier, this event symbolized the end of a divided world and

[1]The term "Cold War" was first popularized by George Orwell in 1945 and later adopted by Bernard Baruch and journalist Walter Lippmann, referring to the absence of direct military confrontation between the two superpowers while they engaged in proxy wars, political maneuvering, and economic competition. Although it never escalated into full-scale war, the Cold War shaped global affairs through nuclear deterrence, ideological battles, and technological rivalries, such as the space race. It saw the creation of opposing alliances—NATO in the West and the Warsaw Pact in the East—and fueled major conflicts such as the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, though its legacies continue to influence international politics today. Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Cold War", https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War.

[2] Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 5.

[3] «Within a few weeks, all the communist regimes imploded, and the Eastern Europeans freed themselves through a succession of 'velvet revolutions' in Budapest, Prague, Sofia, and finally, the only violent event, in Bucharest». Pons, *The Global Revolution,* p. 310.

[4] Firstly, since the 1970s centrally planned economies have been experiencing increasing levels of economic stagnation due to inefficiencies, technology lag, and mounting debt, especially in nations like Poland and East Germany. Moreover, ideological transformations further destabilized the Eastern Bloc, as Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika reforms promoted greater political transparency and openness. Opposition movements, such as Solidarity in Poland, gained traction, while citizens increasingly questioned the viability of Marxist-Leninist rule. Finally, systemic weaknesses in the Soviet sphere exposed the fragility of Moscow's control, such as inflexible political systems, bureaucratic lethargy, and escalating nationalist movements. Unlike previous Soviet crackdowns in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), Gorbachev's unwillingness to use force to interfere indicated that the USSR would no longer impose compliance. To further investigations see Fritz Bartel *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (2022) and Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917–1991* (2014).

announced a new era, defined by American predominance, neoliberal economic expansion, and the challenges of integrating former socialist states into the global order.

Firstly, with the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States emerged as the world's sole great power, opening the so-called unipolar moment[5]. «What we may be witnessing – wrote Francis Fukuyama in 1989 – is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government»[6]. No longer bound by the bipolar structure of the Cold War, the U.S. sought to expand its influence, by advocating for democracy, human rights, and free-market capitalism[7].

During the 1990s, the U.S. prioritized these elements as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. The Washington Consensus became the dominant economic philosophy, which was based on synergy between the U.S. administration and the international financial organizations, namely the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Those institutions advocated for neoliberal economic measures, including privatization, deregulation, and fiscal austerity in former communist and developing nations[8]. To further reinforce U.S. leadership in this field, the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established in 1995 and regional trade agreements like NAFTA (1994) were signed, promoting economic integration and pressuring other countries to take this economic road[9]. However, despite this economic success, the Clinton administration failed to institutionalize long-term global cooperation, particularly in addressing pressing security and humanitarian issues[10].

At the same time, but in the old continent, other repercussions have emerged from the events of 1989. As it has already mentioned, it triggered a political and economic transition in Eastern Europe. In other words, «the fall of the Berlin Wall unleashed the full power of Eastern Bloc peoples to determine their own destiny»[11]. If in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and

[5] Michael Cox, The Post-Cold War World: Turbulence and Change in World Politics since the Fall (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 18.
[6] Fukuyama, "The End of History?".
[7] Pons, *The Global Revolution*, p. 320.
[8] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 213.
[9] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 93.
[10] As Westad underlines, the U.S. largely ignored former Cold War battlegrounds such as Afghanistan, Congo, and Nicaragua, missing opportunities to use its «peace dividend» to combat poverty, disease, and inequality. Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 292.
[11] Fritz Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), p.299

Bulgaria, democratic transitions were peaceful with free elections, in Romania and Yugoslavia they were more violent[12]. Meanwhile, Germany was experiencing one of the most dramatic transformations, completing its reunification process in 1990 – a symbolic and material reconciliation of East and West.[13]. But beyond Germany, a period of extraordinary economic politics was underway. The post-communist states of Eastern Europe started a rapid and often painful passage toward market capitalism and liberal democracy. This transformation was guided by what became known as "shock therapy," a set of neoliberal economic reforms involving privatization, deregulation, and the dismantling of state subsidies[14]. These measures were strongly encouraged—and at times imposed—by Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, and later the European Union, with the broader aim of integrating these countries into the global capitalist economy.

Nonetheless, one of the major impacts can be traced in the dissolution of the Soviet Union which «removed the last vestige of the Cold War as an international system»[15]. Due to economic stagnation and crisis of legitimacy during the 1980s, the monopoly of the Communist Party was formally challenged, and the political pluralism that had timidly emerged in Moscow was fully embraced in the peripheries. The attempted August 1991 coup by hardline communists, intended to preserve the union, had the opposite effect, accelerating the collapse of central authority. Within months, the republics declared independence, and the USSR ceased to exist[16]. After the collapse, Russia emerged as the successor state of the USSR, inheriting its nuclear arsenal, its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and its global responsibilities[17]. The collapse of the Soviet Union had consequences not only for the peoples of the former USSR, but also for the entire network of countries that had depended on Moscow's political

[12] Romania experienced a violent transition, culminating in the overthrow and execution of Nicolae Ceausescu, while Yugoslavia disintegrated abruptly, leading to a series of war through the 1990s. Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism*, p. 300.

[13] Germany was divided after World War II (1945) into West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG), aligned with the Western bloc, and East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR), under Soviet control. By 1961, a Wall had been erected in 1961 to physically divide the two parts. Following its fall on, rapid political changes, economic pressures, and diplomatic negotiations led to German reunification on October 3, 1990. The deal was formalized through the Two Plus Four Agreement (1990) between the two Germanys and the four Allied powers. Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "German reunification," https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-reunification.

[14] A case in point is given by Poland, where the Balcerowicz Plan implemented this approach, characterized by price liberalization, subsidy cuts, high interest rates, privatization, and fiscal austerity. The goal was to stabilize inflation, attract foreign investment, and integrate Poland into the global capitalist system. Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises*, p. 201.

[15] Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 291.

[16] Ennio Di Nolfo, *Dagli imperi militari agli imperi tecnologici: La politica internazionale dal X secolo a oggi* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009), p. 374.

[17] Eric J. Hobsbawm, Il secolo breve, trad. Brunello Lotti (Milano: Rizzoli, 1995), p. 333.

and economic support. For decades, the Soviet Union had acted as the financial backbone of the socialist world, offering subsidized oil, preferential trade agreements, and direct aid to allied states. But with the disintegration of the union and the onset of a severe economic crisis, Russia could no longer afford the geopolitical luxury of sustaining its former allies[18].

The consequences of the end of the Cold War for Latin America were twofold. On one hand, the Soviet Union's dissolution meant the withdrawal of political, military, and economic support for leftist movements and regimes throughout the region, such as Cuba. On the other hand, paradoxically, the United States—despite having "won" the ideological war—gradually began to lose strategic interest in Latin America[19]. With the Soviet threat gone, Washington increasingly turned its attention to other regions considered more pressing in the new global order, such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and later East Asia. The 1990s marked a shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities: rather than maintaining close political oversight in its traditional "backyard", the U.S. focused on promoting neoliberal economic reforms through the aforementioned global institutions like IMF, World Bank, and WTO[20].

This double vacuum – the loss of Soviet engagement and the partial retreat of U.S. geopolitical interest – left Latin America in a unique and precarious position. The region was no longer a central battlefield in a global ideological conflict, but it was still deeply affected by its legacy. Without direct superpower involvement, local governments had more room to maneuver but were also more exposed to the volatility of global markets and domestic unrest.

In this sense, countries like Cuba and Chile offer two contrasting yet complementary case studies of how Latin American nations adapted to the post-Cold War order.

2.2. Effects on Cuba: The Special Period

2.2.1. The loss of Soviet support and economic consequences.

[18] The economic freefall of the 1990s, marked by hyperinflation, industrial collapse, and a dramatic drop in GDP, left the new Russian Federation struggling to maintain internal stability. As Silvio Pons notes, the post-Soviet leadership saw no alternative but to focus inward, abandoning what had previously been an ambitious (and costly) global strategy of support to friendly regimes across the Global South. Pons, The Global Revolution, p. 319.

[19] Indeed, the American security obsession waned and the U.S.'s relations with the region shifted to new and different issues, such as drug production and trafficking, rather than the communist spectre. Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina.,* p. 206.

[20] The Brady Plan of 1989, which was founded on the realization that Latin American nations were unable to make their debt payments on time, is noteworthy. The plan's departure from the conventional debt restructuring approach was intended to reduce it and promote economic changes throughout the continent. Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina.,* p. 197.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented a watershed moment for Cuba. Despite maintaining an autonomous foreign policy throughout the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution had become deeply reliant on Soviet economic and military assistance[21]. This support had enabled the government not only to maintain domestic stability and social programs[22] but also to fund international revolutionary activities, in line with its commitment to global anti-imperialism[23].

During the 1980s, signs of soviet support weakening had already appeared. The economic crisis afflicting USSR led to a reduction in the scale and reliability of aid[24]. Additionally, the soviet reforms – *perestroika and glasnost* – implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev increased the gap between the two former allies[25].

In response, Cuba launched in 1986, the Rectification Process, which was aimed at reaffirming socialist principles while rejecting neoliberalism reforms of those years[26]. Despite these efforts, Cuba's economy remained structurally dependent on its Soviet benefactor—particularly in sectors like oil and sugar exports. Indeed, the USSR purchased Cuba sugar at prices up to three times higher than the global market rate. At the same time, Cuba's dependency on Soviet oil increased significantly, with the Soviet Union supplying up to 92% of the island's oil imports[27].

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[21] Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 201.

[22] For instance, prices for Cuban sugar were higher than those of the rest of the globe. USSR supplied material and technical help for the construction and renovation of several industrial enterprises. Moreover, thousands of Cuban took advantage of educational opportunities in the Soviet Union disciplines including engineering, agriculture, construction, computer science, and food processing. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 271.

[23] During the 1970s, «the combination of sustained economic growth and political stability, backed by Soviet economic support and credit subsidies, allowed Cuba to fulfill many of the most ambitious programs of the revolution». Ibid., p. 290.

[24] As shown by the price of backing also revolutionary forces in Nicaragua. According to Brands, «Moscow was also reconsidering its policies toward the region. The costs of supporting the FMLN and FSLN (not to mention Cuba) had become extremely onerous. The Kremlin was providing hundreds of millions of dollars per year in aid to Nicaragua and $8-10 million per day to Cuba, all as the Soviet economy underwent a slow-motion collapse». Brands, *Latin America's Cold War,* p. 200.

[25] *Perestroika* ("restructuring") and *Glasnost* ("openness") were reform policies introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s to revitalize the Soviet Union's stagnant political and economic systems. « The introduction of market mechanisms, the restoration of private property, and the adoption of explicit earning differentials based on market values, among other measures, were greeted in Cuba with mounting disbelief and dismay, and eventually with public disapproval and open denunciation». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 291.

[26] «It is possible to summarize economic features and policies in this stage as follows: continued collectivization and virtual elimination of private-sector activities, the resulting vacuum to be filled by the state; recentralization of decision making […]; an expanding budgetary deficit and price distortions; promotion of nontraditional exports (such as biotechnology) and foreign tourism combined domestically with a food program to achieve self-sufficiency; tighter control of the labor market, plus labor mobilization, and use of labor brigades and contingents; and increasing egalitarianism through rationing, reduction of material incentives, and expansion of moral stimuli». *Mesa-Lago et al., Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 265.

[27] Ibid., pp. 284-285.

This latent dependence became manifest in 1991, when the collapse of the USSR ended decades of economic support. Thus, when trade agreements with former communist nations, subsidies, and economic aid from the Soviet Union were suspended, Cuba suddenly became exposed to the full force of global market forces, without protection[28]. In the words of Castro, «we are the only country turned into an island of Revolution in a world practically unipolar, a few miles from hegemonic imperialism, and surrounded by capitalism everywhere»[29]. This sense of isolation was clearly reflected in his retrospective judgment of the Soviet dissolution, especially under Gorbachev's reforms. As he later declared in a speech: « I think he really wanted to perfect socialism, but he really did things in such a way that it ended in the destruction of socialism [...] someday history will tell the story of what really happened there»[30].

Indeed, the consequences of the disappearance of its major ally were severe. Between 1990 and 1993, Cuba's GDP collapsed by about 40%[31]. The value of the Cuban *peso* fell by 95%, reaching an inflation rate of around 2000%[32]. Imports dropped by more than 75%, leading to the scarcity or lack of fuel, chemicals, raw materials, and other essential items. This, in turn, meant the paralysis of industry and consumer markets, causing the closure of 80% of industry and a decline in the production of nickel, sugar, tobacco, citrus, and fishing[33]. The absence of raw materials and capital goods damaged manufacturing and construction. Without fuel, spare parts, and imported fertilizers, agricultural production dropped. Sugar production – the main pillar of Cuba's export economy – fell by over 60% within a few years. The chain reaction was brutal: with food imports reduced by more than 50%, and domestic production unable to compensate, severe shortages became the norm. Caloric intake among Cubans lowered from an average of 2,845 calories per day in 1989 to just 1,670 in 1993, leading to a rise in diseases associated with malnutrition[34]. The loss of Soviet oil imports – dwindled by 70% – led to a

[28] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 293.
[29] Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura del IV Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba, efectuada en la Plaza General "Antonio Maceo", en la Ciudad Héroe de Santiago de Cuba, el día 14 de octubre de 1991*, accessed March 25, 2025. http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-en-la-clausura-del-iv-congreso-del-partido-comunista-de-cuba
[30] "*Fidel Castro habla sobre Mijaíl Gorbachov*, YouTube video, 0:56, posted by "Más allá de Cuba," October 4, 2024, accessed April 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEyTaAckZHc.
[31] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution,* 293.
[32] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 42.
[33] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 310.
[34] Ibid., p. 337.

nationwide energy crisis, which have made blackouts a routine, and transportation a privilege[35]. Public services like health and education – once symbols of revolutionary success – were under strain. Emigration increased, particularly through illegal means like the 1994 *balsero* crisis[36]. This crisis" of 1994 consists in one of the most tragic episodes of post-Cold War Cuban migration. Pushed by the economic hardship during the "Special Period", tens of thousands of Cubans attempted to flee the island on makeshift rafts (*balsas*) to reach the United States. As described by Yaffe, these migrants risked shark-infested waters and unstable sea conditions in hopes of escaping deprivation and reaching a country where Cuban exiles held privileged immigration status. The crisis escalated following the Maleconazo protests in Havana on August 5, 1994, the largest anti-government demonstration since 1959. In response, Fidel Castro temporarily allowed Cubans to leave without being stopped by police – unless they stole boats or planes – resulting in a mass exodus. The U.S. began detaining rafters at Guantánamo Bay. A bilateral agreement in September 1994 ended the crisis: Cuba resumed coastguard enforcement, while the United States committed to issuing 20,000 legal visas annually, plus an additional 6,000 for those already on waiting lists. The crisis ultimately saw over 45,000 Cubans leave the island.

To all this must be added another burden that continued to weigh heavily on Cuba: the United States[37]. Among the several action[38], in 1992, under Bush administration, the Congress passed the Cuba Democracy Act, commonly known as the Torricelli Law[39]. This legislation prohibited subsidiaries of American companies operating abroad from investing in or trading with the island. The restricted goods included food, medicine and medical supplies – in other words, the 90% of Cuban trade with U.S. auxiliaries. Moreover, the act extended its reach to third countries that provided assistance to Cuba, granting the president authority to deny

[35] Indeed, bicycles became a primary means of mobility in urban areas. In the words of Pérez, «Bicycles took the place of automobiles. By 1994, nearly 700,000 bicycles had been distributed across the island». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 294.
[36] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 57.
[37] Ibid., p. 32.
[38] «Other U.S. measures sought to reduce or end altogether the flow of aid and foreign exchange reaching Cuba. In November 1992, U.S. travel to Cuba was further restricted. Cuban American family spending on travel-related fees charged by the Cuban government was limited to a maximum annual $500. Luggage weight to Cuba was restricted to a maximum of forty-four pounds per traveller, with no paid excess baggage permitted. This last measure was especially harsh, for it served to limit much-needed clothing and miscellaneous consumer goods often carried back to the island by visiting family members». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 299.
[39] U.S. House of Representatives, *Cuban Democracy Act of 1992*, H.R. 5323, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess., introduced May 27, 1992, https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/5323.

economic assistance, debt mitigation, and free trade agreements to those nations[40]. From the U.S. perspective, the law was intended to deliver the final blow to the Cuban regime, with the expectation that its collapse would be a matter of months, not years[41]. Four years later, the Helms-Burton Act – officially the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act – consolidated all prior actions against Cuba, making the embargo effectively permanent until the establishment of a democratically elected government[42]. In terms of economic impact, the U.S. embargo cost Cuba an estimated 15 billion dollars between 1990 and 1995, excluding further losses deriving from Cuba's limited access to international trade and financial systems[43].

This deep crisis triggered what became known as the *Período Especial en Tiempo de Paz*, a set of measures aimed at saving the Cuban revolution from the same destiny of the Soviet Union and other socialist states. Although, it was originally crafted as an answer to war conditions. «I recall – said Castro – that the special period is designed not for a time of peace, but for a time of war». [44]. Contrary to popular belief, the Special Period was initiated 16 months prior to the Soviet Union's collapse, as Gorbachev began scaling down military and economic support to Cuba[45]. The program had a double objective, one short term and one long term. While the first intention was clearly the cuban survival, the second was an economic strategy that would allow Cuban development in a new conjuncture[46].

[40] These clause, in particular, has always been controversial. As written by Pérez, «the trade ban on U.S. subsidiaries operating in third countries constituted an extra-territorial application of U.S. domestic legislation. Argentina, Canada, England, and Mexico were only some of the many countries to denounce the Torricelli bill. […] The European Commission denounced the Torricelli law as a "violation of general principles of international law and the sovereignty of independent nations."In late 1992 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution to register concern "over the promulgation and application by member States of laws and regulations whose extraterritorial effects affect the sovereignty of other States and the legitimate interests of entities or persons under their jurisdiction». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 302.

[41] According to Robert Torricelli – the U.S. congressman after whom the law was named – following the enactment of this law, «the end of the [Castro] government will be measured in months and not years». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 299.

[42] Still, the democratically elected government in question was not defined solely by free and fair elections, but also by its commitment to a market-oriented economy and the return of all properties nationalized after the revolution to their U.S. owners. U.S. House of Representatives, Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996, H.R. 927, 104th Cong., 2nd sess., passed March 12, 1996, https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/927.

[43] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 41.

[44] Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura del acto central por el XL aniversario del asalto a los cuarteles Moncada y "Carlos Manuel de Céspedes", efectuado en el Teatro "Heredia", Santiago de Cuba, el 26 de julio de 1993*, "Año 35 de la Revolución," accessed March 15, 2025. http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1993/esp/f260793e.html

[45] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 38.

[46] José Bell Lara, Tania Caram León, e Delia Luisa López García, *Cuba. Periodo Especial* (La Habana: Editorial UH, 2017), p. 23.

Notwithstanding the tough conditions faced by Cuba, transitioning to capitalism has never been an option, because it would mean the loss of *los logros* – all the «welfare achievements of the Revolution in health, education, public infrastructures and social services»[47]. However, the island, forced to abandon its closed and centrally planned economy, adopted a series of both austerity[48] and liberal measures[49].

Figure 14: Example of official political propaganda exhibited by the Cuban government in Havana, February 1992 (AFP/ Getty Images)

One of the most significant steps in this direction is the legalization of hard currency, announced by Fidel at his annual 26 July discourse in 1993 – the toughest year of the crisis. Using his own words: «socialism must be perfected, but it must never be destroyed; the world hegemonism that has been given to Yankee imperialism should never be given without a shot being fired»[50]. It allowed Cubans to possess foreign currency, particularly U.S. dollars – prohibited since 1979 – and to receive remittances from abroad. Thought to fight the black market, these measures not only shifted the advantages of using the dollar from private citizens to the State but also made possible the opening of the travel industry and collecting money from tourists. «We – said Castro – would have liked to depend less on tourism and for more

[47] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 38.
[48] For instance, were adopted «fiscal measures to reduce the budget deficit and the monetary overhang, such as new taxes and increased public-utility rates, some cuts in state subsidies and other public expenditures, and a rise in prices of nonessential consumer goods». Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 293.
[49] «Liberalising and stabilising reforms included: legalising the US dollar, fiscal adjustment, joint ventures with foreign capital, expanding tourism, converting state farms into cooperatives, opening private farmers' markets, and increasing self-employment, all of which are discussed below». Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 44.
[50] Castro, *Discurso por el XL aniversario del asalto al Moncada*, 26 julio 1993.

than 20 years the Revolution worked for domestic tourism, not foreign tourism. Indeed, if we had the oil of Kuwait or other countries, we would have developed tourism almost exclusively for the enjoyment of the nationals of the country, but the current circumstances force us to develop tourism. In the first place, for the benefit of foreign tourists, and to try to capture those convertible currencies which solve other more urgent problems than tourism»[51].

Simultaneously, state-run dollar shops were opened, offering goods that were otherwise scarce. This move was critical in capturing foreign currency inflows, although it also deepened social inequalities between those with and without dollar access[52]and exacerbated old problems. «Black market transactions – wrote Pérez – continued to flourish and indeed competed with the state-controlled economy. The street value of the peso was subject to erratic fluctuation. The volatility of the peso outside the official economy […] increased, and daily life for the vast numbers of Cubans without ready access to dollars became precarious indeed. For the countless numbers who lived entirely off *peso* salaries and wages, who had nothing to sell and were without the means to deal, lacking friends or family abroad, life was especially difficult. Their purchasing power deteriorated even as the available state supply of goods and services dwindled»[53].

Another significant step was the elimination of the governmental monopoly on employment, manufacturing, and distribution, introducing self-employment – *trabajo por cuenta propia*. Authorizing 158 occupations—mostly in services such as taxi driving, carpentry, and food preparation—this reform allowed, even if limited, private initiative under tight regulations[54]. In agriculture, arable land owned by the state decreased from 75% to 33%[55]. Hence, the government transformed state farms into cooperatives (UBPCs) and granted small land parcels to private farmers[56]. By reintroducing free agricultural markets – even if slightly – food production increased, while the state's burden of distribution diminished. However, the latter

[51] Castro, *Discurso por el XL aniversario del asalto al Moncada*, 26 julio 1993.
[52] Class inequalities increased also due to the opening of remittance flows: «as most recipients were white and better off, with relatives who had left in earlier, more politically motivated waves of emigration and were well established in the United States, or Europe, with adequate resources to send money back to Cuba». Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 44.
[53] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 306.
[54] On the one side, the Ministry of Labour strictly controlled licences, renewing every two years. On the other, workers had to obtain licenses, pay fixed taxes, and could only employ family members. Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 47.
[55] As state land was allocated to individuals, cooperatives, public institutions, and workplaces. Ibid., p. 46.
[56] Most of the land was given to the UBPC, which as cooperatives kept a social character. From 1994 they were put in condition of selling surplus in farmers' markets, stimulating production in an environment of food shortage. Ibid.

still imposed quotas that had to be fulfilled before farmers could sell surplus produce on open markets.

«Who would have thought – Fidel Castro asked rhetorically on the anniversary of the attack on Moncada in 1993 – that we, so doctrinaire, we who fought foreign investment, would one day view foreign investment as an urgent need? » [57]. Hence, Foreign investment – until then strongly condemned– was encouraged through Foreign Investment Act of 1995 and the creation of free-trade zones. This allowed joint ventures particularly in tourism, mining, and telecommunications. So, by 2000, over 400 foreign firms from around 60 countries—notably Spain, Canada, Italy, and France—were active in Cuba, with investments totalling $5 billion. The most significant development was in tourism, where joint ventures led to the rapid expansion of infrastructure, including hotels, airports, and resorts, primarily targeting Western European visitors[58]. However, foreign firms were required to pay salaries in dollars to the Cuban state, which then paid workers in pesos, often at highly unfavourable exchange rates.

By the end of the 1990s, the set of reforms introduced during the *Período Especial* had succeeded in stabilizing the Cuban economy and averting total collapse. To alleviate the crisis, government expenditure rose, reaching 90% of GDP. In particular, between 1990 and 1994, social security and welfare spending soared by 29%. Subsidies for food security and employment protection increased, and – despite the shortages – the prices of necessities were set[59]. Inflation was reduced from 25.7% to 11%[60], GDP began to grow modestly[61], and food production saw a relative recovery. The tourism industry expanded rapidly, becoming the island's main source of foreign currency[62]. Remittances from abroad, joint ventures, and self-employment became the new components of economic resilience. Cuba also started to explore new markets and partner such as China, North Korea and Vietnam[63]. However, the progress was uneven, and all the gains came at a cost: the emergence of social inequalities, a dual economy, and increased dependence on external sources of income.

The island had not transitioned to capitalism, but it was no longer functioning as a purely socialist economy either. What emerged was a pragmatic, state-controlled economy with

[57] Castro, *Discurso por el XL aniversario del asalto al Moncada*, 26 julio 1993.
[58] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*., pp. 307-308.
[59] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba*., p. 58.
[60] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 330.
[61] «According to official data GDP grew by 0.7% or zero per capita in 1994, 2.5% or 1.9% per capita in 1995, and 7.8% or 7.1% per capita in 1996». Ibid., p. 327.
[62] Ibid., p. 329.
[63] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 304

selective openings to the global market—one that tried to preserve the revolutionary ethos while responding to the imperatives of survival.

The next sections will explore how these economic transformations resonated in Cuban society and politics, remodelling class dynamics, state legitimacy, and the daily life of Cuban citizens during the Special Period.

2.2.2. Political and social adaptations: the resilience of socialism.

To survive the devastating consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the *Periodo Especial*, the Cuban government did not merely adjust its economic strategy: it also reinforced and reinvented its ideological narrative. Fidel Castro understood that surviving the crisis would require more than pragmatic reforms: it would demand a fresh commitment to revolutionary *conciencia* and moral duty, the same force that had given it impetus in 1959.

In Fidel's narrative, Cuba – the last stronghold of socialism in a world rapidly succumbing to neoliberalism – was not a victim of history, but a chosen guardian of its socialist legacy, shouldering a global moral responsibility. Scarcity and sacrifice were not signs of failure, but demonstrations of the *conciencia revolucionaria*—a deep awareness of one's historical role and duty. As the material foundations of socialism were shaken, Castro sought to reinforce its ethical and symbolic pillars. Indeed, Fidel emphasized:

> Ideology is above all consciousness; consciousness is an attitude of struggle, dignity, principles, and revolutionary morality. Ideology is also the weapon of struggle against everything done wrong, against weaknesses, privileges, and immoralities. Ideological struggle today occupies, for all revolutionaries, the front line of combat, the first revolutionary trench[64].

[64] In the original: «*Ideología es ante todo conciencia; conciencia es actitud de lucha, dignidad, principios y moral revolucionaria. Ideología es también el arma de lucha frente a todo lo mal hecho, frente a las debilidades, los privilegios, las inmoralidades. La lucha ideológica ocupa hoy para todos los revolucionarios la primera línea de combate, la primera trinchera revolucionaria*». Fidel Castro, "Capítulo VII del 'Informe Central' al 2º Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba," *Partido Comunista de Cuba*, 1980, p. 61.

This ideological resilience found powerful expression in the symbolic rehabilitation of national heroes. One of the most prominent examples was Antonio Maceo[65]. Indeed, in a speech in Santiago, Fidel evoked Maceo's legacy to frame Cuba's contemporary struggle against U.S. imperialism, declaring: «just as you said there would never be peace without independence, we say there will never be peace with the empire without full sovereignty and socialism»[66]. By repositioning the *Baraguá Protest* at the center of revolutionary identity, Castro built a direct ideological lineage between the independence wars and Cuba's socialist perseverance. Thus, Maceo's intransigence became a metaphor for revolutionary purity and moral defiance in the face of adversity[67].

Another example may be traced in the *Batalla de Ideas*, initiated in the late 1990s in response to the Elián González affair. This case emerged as a significant issue in Cuba–U.S. relations. In November 1999, five-year-old Elián was rescued off the Florida coast after surviving a failed migration attempt in which his mother died. Despite U.S. immigration law requiring his return, he was initially kept in Miami by relatives, supported by the Cuban exile community and political lobbies. Fidel Castro and the Cuban government launched a national campaign for Elián's return, framing the event as a struggle for national sovereignty and parental rights. Between December 1999 and June 2000, over 100 rallies and mass mobilizations were held across Cuba, with millions participating. Elián became a symbol of Cuban resistance, and his image saturated the media both on the island and in the U.S. The case ultimately ended with Elián's return to Cuba in June 2000[68].

[65]Antonio Maceo (1845–1896) was a prominent leader in Cuba's wars of independence against Spain and is regarded as a national hero. Known as *El Titán de Bronce*, he became a general in the Cuban Liberation Army and was celebrated for his strategic brilliance and solid stance on full independence. He played a crucial role in both the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and the War of Independence (1895–1898), before being killed in battle in 1896. (Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Antonio Maceo," accessed March 25, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonio-Maceo).

[66] Fidel Castro, *Discurso*, 14 octubre 1991.

[67] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 303.

[68] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, pp. 70-73.

Figure 15: Fidel Castro embraces and kisses Elián González during a celebration marking the fifth anniversary of González's return to Cuba. Havana, April 22, 2005 (AFP/ Getty Images)

Started as a whistleblowing campaign, it expanded into a broader cultural and educational mobilization. On the one hand, the Battle developed new revolutionary heroes from the youngest, poorest, racially diverse segment of society and organized them into a Citizens Army. On the other, its political message was transmitted in an accessible way, by staging events that blended cultural performance with festive atmosphere. These events became instrumental in reinforcing *cubanidad* – a shared national identity – through live national broadcasts that enhanced local traditions and artistic expression. These included performances by dancers, musicians, singers, and children's artistic groups. The period also witnessed a revival of *repentismo*, a rural tradition of improvised musical poetry. In just seven months, eleven mass marches were organized, and eighty-four *Mesa Redonda* programs were developed[69]. Hence, the Battle of Ideas – fixed by Castro in the sentence «men may die, but ideals will never die»[70]– attempted «to consolidate socialist principles and redefine 'progress' in revolutionary Cuba»[71], by investing in the core sectors of the revolution: education and politics.

On the political front, the Cuban state responded with reforms that preserved the core of its centralized, one-party system while adjusting to new exigencies. Several turnovers were made in the membership of both the Central Committee and the Council of State. In addition, single

[69] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p.72.
[70] Castro, *Discurso*, 14 octubre 1991.
[71] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 69.

state authorities took over the Party Secretariat's operations. In 1992 constitutional amendment marked a turning point: it modified the concept of exclusive state ownership to allow for mixed property[72]. Yet, these changes were framed not as concessions, but as pragmatic adjustments to ensure the survival of socialism. The Communist Party maintained its central role, as Article 5 of the reformed Constitution enshrines[73], and political participation continued to be channelled through mass organizations, such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) or the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). These bodies tried not only to expand the existing community, but also to increase public participation in official policy-making procedures. Regarding the latter, examples include the People's Councils and the Transformative Workshops, which mobilised social support throughout the collaboration with grassroots organizations[74]. Hence, rather than weakening state control, the crisis led to a recentralization of authority and a reaffirmation of its own moral legitimacy.

About the social sphere, this stage of Cuban Revolution was characterized both by the emergence of new realities—such as a new consumption pattern and dual economy—and by the deepening of existing problems that tested the limits of Cuba's egalitarian ideals.

One of the deepest social impacts of this period was the radical transformation of everyday practices and habits. As basic goods become scarce, Cuban were forced to modify their relationship with material needs, developing new modes of living. This survival logic gave rise to what became known as *la cultura del resolver*, which is referred to all the ways invented by people to get along or make do. It is in this context that self-employment – *cuentapropismo* – emerged not as a sign of entrepreneurial prospering, but as a subsistence strategy. As Helen Yaffe notes, «many Cubans sought *inventos* [invented solutions] to resolver [resolve problems]; they sought and invented various endeavours to earn additional incomes to maintain their families, with or without licences[75]. The *lucha* could mean taking informal or precarious work, working different jobs, or operating in the black market.

[72] *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba* (1976), revised edition (1992), trans. and ed. by the National Assembly of People's Power, art. 14, accessed March 24, 2025, https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/cub127553E.pdf.
[73] As stated by Art. 5: «The Communist Party of Cuba, Martian and of Marxist-Leninist, the organized vanguard of the Cuban nation, is the superior leading force of the society and the State, organizing and guiding the common efforts aimed at the highest goals of the construction of socialism and advancement toward the communist society». *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, art. 5.
[74] At the end of the century, Havana implemented Neighbourhood Transformation Workshops as a form of local participatory development, aiming to engage residents directly in solving issues affecting their communities. These workshops brought together community members, local authorities, and external partners to collaborate on initiatives such as infrastructure repair, environmental improvements, social services, and microeconomic activities. By 2002, there were 20 such workshops operating across the capital. Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 65.
[75] Ibid., p. 244.

Amid material scarcity and ideological fatigue, the Periodo Especial also witnessed a notable resuscitation of religious life in Cuba. Afro-Cuban spiritual practices like *santería* developed, and churches—both Catholic and Protestant—began to be full of *creyentes* again[76]. According to Pérez, «not perhaps since the early 1960s were existing value systems subject to as much pressure as they were during the 1990s», prompting a spiritual reawakening across the island[77]. In this context, Fidel Castro came to recognize religion as a necessary social adhesive—a source of community and moral resilience in the face of growing hardship and vacuum left by international events. Thus, the state officially renounced atheism in 1991, and religious believers were invited to join the Communist Party and participate fully in the revolutionary project[78].

Alongside these adaptive actions, the legalization of the dollar, introduced in 1993, led to the creation of a dual economy that exacerbated existing inequalities and introduced new ones. In this new ecosystem, sectors operated in hard currency with the traditional peso economy, creating visible disparities. Whereas a handful benefited from the market openings, many people saw a decline in their level of living. Thus, access to dollars, through tourism, remittances, or informal markets, became a key social divider[79]. Even though the state preserved universal access to education, healthcare, and food rations[80], differences in consumption capacity became more evident. Prostitution rose, particularly in the areas closest to dollar transactions of foreigners, around hotels and restaurants. By 1993, black market transaction had reached $14.5 billion, increasing by 12,5 billion over 4 years[81].

[76] Cfr. Ivor L. Miller, "The Formation of African Identities in the Americas: Spiritual 'Ethnicity'," *Contours* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2004); e Loris Zanatta, *Fidel Castro. L'ultimo re cattolico* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009).
[77] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 297-298.
[78] As written by Pérez, «after 1991, it was possible to be both religious and revolutionary». Some years later, in 1998, the visit of Pope John Paul II sealed this new rapprochement between Church and State, while the reintroduction of Christmas as a public holiday the year before signaled a shift in the Revolution's cultural narrative. Religious ceremonies returned to public life, Caritas Cubana expanded its charitable activities, and foreign clergy were again permitted to serve on the island». Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 297.
[79] «An estimated 60 percent of the population was reported to have access to some source of hard currency, through remittances from abroad, or by way of the tourist sector, or through black market transactions. However, as Cuba moved ever deeper into the realm of the dollarized economy, the gap between those with access to dollars and those without grew steadily wider. Workers paid in pesos often had difficulty gaining access to goods and services in dollars, made all the more egregious by the fact that vital goods and services in dollars expanded far more rapidly than those available in pesos. By the late 1990s, the estimated income disparity between the highest paid and the lowest paid had increased from 4:1 to 25:1». Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 312.
[80] Also, the quality of public services has deteriorated alarmingly, first and foremost education, as it will be seen later. «In May 1994 the Minister of Education reported that 21,000 teachers had quit in 1993 (7% of the total) in search of better jobs and payment in dollars». Ibid., p. 325.
[81] Ibid., p. 311.

These facts coexisted with the official narrative of social justice, creating a tension between the symbolic equality of socialism and the material differentiation emerging in daily life.

2.2.3. The emerging role of Hugo Chávez and ALBA.

Following the severe dislocation of the *período especial*, Cuba began to reconfigure its international strategy, shifting from reliance on the Soviet bloc to forging new forms of regional solidarity. This turn was not only driven by economic necessity, but also by a return to the revolutionary ideals of Latin American unity and anti-imperialism. However, as previously highlighted, this internationalism emphasized medical cooperation over military struggle[82].

It was in this context that the 1994 meeting between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez[83]—still a former military officer and political outsider—marked the beginning of a profound ideological alliance. This early openness toward Chávez, who had not yet come to power, was not accidental. Fidel had always viewed Venezuela as a key knot in Latin America's emancipation, deeply tied to the legacy of Simón Bolívar[84]. Indeed, the Cuban leader immediately recognized Chávez as the embodiment of Bolivarian ideals and welcomed him not just as a guest, but as un *compañero de lucha*. At the same time, Chávez saw in Castro a political role model—a father figure and even a kind of Caesar of socialism and dignity, as he would later describe him[85]. The connection between these two figures was not only political and personal—it was historical. In his discourses, Fidel actively sought to link the Bolivarian

[82] Grenon, *Cuban Internationalism and Contemporary Humanitarianism*, p. 204.

[83] Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) was a Venezuelan military officer and politician who served as President of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013. After a failed coup attempt in 1992, he later won democratic elections and launched the Bolivarian Revolution, a political project aimed at building "21st-century socialism". Chávez nationalized key industries, expanded social welfare programs funded by oil revenues, and adopted a strongly anti-U.S. foreign policy, aligning with Cuba and promoting regional integration efforts such as ALBA. His leadership left a polarizing legacy of social inclusion and economic instability. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Hugo Chávez," accessed March 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-Chavez).

[84] Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) was a Venezuelan military and political leader who had a central role in the independence movements of Latin America against Spanish colonial rule. Known as *El Libertador*, he led liberation campaigns that resulted in the independence of modern-day Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Panama. Deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals and revolutionary movements in Europe and North America, Bolívar envisioned a united and sovereign Latin America, free from foreign domination. Indeed, his enduring legacy continued to be a symbol of anti-imperialism and Latin American unity, resonating in the region's political discourse. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Simón Bolívar," accessed March 27 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Simon-Bolivar).

[85] Hugo Chávez, "Intervención del Comandante Presidente Hugo Chávez durante acto de firma de acuerdos entre la República Bolivariana," Todo Chávez, accessed March 27, 2025, http://todochavez.gob.ve/todochavez/2686-intervencion-del-comandante-presidente-hugo-chavez-durante-acto-de-firma-de-acuerdos-entre-la-republica-bolivariana.

Revolution to the Cuban one, framing them as two expressions of the same emancipatory struggle in Latin America. Speaking at the Central University of Venezuela, on February 3, 1999, Castro stated that:

> Yes, this is our hemisphere, and we are speaking here, no less than in Venezuela, no less than on the glorious land where Bolívar was born, where Bolívar dreamed, where he conceived the unity of our countries and worked for it[86].

Chávez was depicted as the one who could carry forward the revolutionary flame in a new century, in a context no longer marked by the Cold War but still defined by imperialism and inequality. Both the Cuban and Bolivarian revolutions were mainly bulwarks against U.S. hegemony in Latin America, denouncing neoliberalism as a tool of economic domination and social exclusion. The two leaders coordinated diplomatic actions at regional summits, like the Ibero-American Summit, consistently opposing U.S.-backed free trade agreements, military bases, and interventions[87].

Once Chávez was elected president in 1999, this symbolic affinity translated into concrete cooperation. The two leaders developed, along a deep personal bond, a strategic alliance, exchanging Venezuelan oil for Cuban social services. The first step of this bilateral relationship was the *Convenio Integral de Cooperación* Cuba-Venezuela, signed on October 30, 2000, in the Palacio de Miraflores[88]. Under this framework, Cuba committed to sending thousands of doctors, health workers, and educators to Venezuela, while Venezuela provided Cuba with subsidized oil and energy products. Through *Misión Barrio Adentro*, launched in 2003, Cuban doctors began offering free healthcare in Venezuela's poorest neighbourhood, often for the first time in those communities[89]. Then, the scope of cooperation expanded to other fields, such as

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[86] In the original: «*Sí, este es nuestro hemisferio, y estamos hablando aquí, nada menos que en Venezuela, nada menos que en la tierra gloriosa donde nació Bolívar, donde soñó Bolívar, donde concibió la unidad de nuestros países y trabajó por ella*». Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba, Fidel Castro Ruz, en el Aula Magna de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, el 3 de febrero de 1999*, Gobierno de la República de Cuba, accessed April 4, 2025, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1999/esp/f030299e.html.

[87] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 163.

[88] This agreement established a model of economic and commercial cooperation grounded in principles of mutual benefit, integration, and reciprocal solidarity. Unlike traditional trade ones shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics, this initiative emphasized shared development and sought to redefine inter-state relations prioritizing social needs over market logic. Germán Sánchez Otero, "Fidel, Chávez y el destino de Nuestra América," in Yo soy Fidel, ed. John Saxe-Fernández (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), p. 179.

[89] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 162.

education, agriculture, and so on[90]. All these programs reflected a shared commitment to social justice and mutual aid, prefiguring the values that would later be institutionalized within the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America.

Thus, in 2004, this partnership expanded into ALBA – *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de América*. It was a political and economic bloc sculpted in principles of solidarity, social justice, and resistance to U.S. neoliberalism. However, ALBA cannot be reduced to a reaction to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)[91]. It was a revolutionary alternative, embodying the ideals of the greatest Latin American revolutionaries, such as Bolívar, Martí, and Guevara.

Figure 16: President of Venezuela Hugo Chavez and President of Cuba Fidel Castro meet leftist leader Evo Morales in Havana to promote the ALBA. April 29, 2005 (Getty Images)

In 2005, Cuba joined Petrocaribe, a Venezuelan energy cooperation initiative designed to provide oil under preferential terms to Caribbean and Central American nations. This project had another hidden goal, a political one: it sought to support governments willing to uphold sovereignty and regional integration in the face of strong opposition from Washington. The same year, Evo Morales won the presidential elections in Bolivia. He was not only the first

[90] An example may be provided by Misión Robinson, which was a massive literacy campaign supported by Cuban educators, leading to the beginning of cultural and sporting exchanges between the two countries. Sánchez Otero, "Fidel, Chávez y el destino de Nuestra América," pp. 188-189.

[91] The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was a proposed agreement initiated in 1994 under U.S. leadership to create a hemispheric free trade zone encompassing 34 countries in the Americas (excluding Cuba). It aimed to eliminate trade barriers, expand market access, and promote investment across the Western Hemisphere, following neoliberal economic principles. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Free Trade Area of the Americas," accessed March 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Free-Trade-Area-of-the-Americas).

Indigenous president, but also an historic ally of both Fidel and Chávez. This moment consolidated the emerging progressive bloc in Latin America[92].

Shortly thereafter, on April 28–29, 2006, the first ALBA-TCP tripartite summit was held in Havana, bringing together Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and Evo Morales. This summit brought the redefinition of ALBA as ALBA-TCP, *Tratado de Comercio entre los Pueblos* – building a structured political-economic project, not a symbolic alliance anymore[93]. Through ALBA-TCP. Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia pledged to work together not only in economic terms but as partners in a broader civilizational struggle for justice, sovereignty, and Latin American unity.

This new phase of Cuban internationalism, based on solidarity, regional integration, and ideological affinity, allowed Havana to reassert its leadership in Latin America despite the *período especial*. Through ALBA and its various mechanisms, Cuba transitioned from a position of economic vulnerability to one of political influence, exporting not only doctors and teachers, but also a revolutionary vision of development and sovereignty. Filling the vacuum left by the dissolution of the USSR, Socialist Cuba found in the Pink Tide a fertile ground for revitalizing its international mission. As Helen Yaffe suggests, Latin American populations became key beneficiaries of Cuban development aid—initially delivered as emergency assistance, then institutionalized as service exports. This not only reinforced Cuba's regional presence but also enabled a wave of diplomatic normalization: relations were restored with Guatemala (1998), Honduras (2002), Nicaragua (2007), El Salvador and Costa Rica (2009)—leaving the United States as the only country in the hemisphere still diplomatically estranged from Cuba[94].

For Fidel, this was not merely diplomacy—it was the continuation of a historical mission. As he declared in 2006 during his speech in the occasion of the presentation of the UNESCO International José Martí Prize to Hugo Chávez, «*nada ni nadie podrá impedir el futuro luminoso de los pueblos de América Latina y el Caribe*»[95]. ALBA, in this sense, was both a practical alliance and an ideological compass—a Latin American attempt to redefine globalization from below.

[92] Luis Suárez Salazar, "Fidel Castro: aportes a las luchas de Nuestra América," in Yo soy Fidel, ed. John Saxe-Fernández (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), p. 271.
[93] Ibid., p. 272.
[94] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 189.
[95] Suárez Salazar, "Fidel Castro: aportes a las luchas de Nuestra América," p. 272.

2.3. Effects on Chile: The Consolidation of Neoliberalism

2.3.1. Transition from military regime to democracy

The decade of the 1990s coincided with the wave of democratization across Latin America, as military regimes that had dominated the continent for much of the 20th century began to fall apart. With the end of the Cold War, the region was no longer a field of battle for superpower rivalry, which accelerated democratic transitions, weakening the support for authoritarian governments. As Zanatta underlines, countries like Chile, Mexico, and several Central American states, some for the first time in their history, have initiated this process. Elections, pluralism, and the protection of individual rights became the pillars of Latin American political regimes, with the sole exception of Castro's Cuba[96].

However, it remains crucial to highlight two factors: firstly, this wave of democratization did not signify a return to state-centered economic policies. Instead, as it has been mentioned before, it unfolded under the shadow of the Washington Consensus, the paradigm promoted by international financial institutions under the aegis of the United States. As U.S. foreign policy pivoted from anti-communist containment to neoliberal globalization, support for authoritarian regimes waned[97].

In the second place, the democratic trend was far from being complete. The consolidation of democracy across Latin America faced significant structural and social obstacles, which became especially evident in the Chilean case. Although democratic institutions were formally reestablished, the authoritarian legacies persisted, preventing radical and meaningful transformation of the economic and social order established by the dictatorship[98].

In this paragraph it will be analysed how Chilean democratization coexisted with – and was subordinated to – the continuity of neoliberalism and the limits imposed by the past regime.

As discussed earlier, the 1988 plebiscite, mandated by the 1980 Constitution, represented the watershed in Chile's political history. Notwithstanding the regime's use of censorship and

[96] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, pp. 219-220.
[97] In addition, «once implemented, moreover, neoliberal reforms helped discourage conservative authoritarianism from making a comeback. Macroeconomic stability continued to go wanting in some countries during the 1990s, but in most cases, inflation fell, and the economy no longer seemed to teeter on the brink. The establishment of this equilibrium removed what had traditionally been a chief stimulant to *golpismo* in Latin America, depriving the generals of the dramatic circumstances that they had long exploited to seize power. Similarly, the fact that many entrepreneurs benefited handsomely from the reforms showed that democracy could be good for business and reduced the possibility that economic elites might support resurgent authoritarianism». Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 222.
[98] Zanatta, *Storia dell'America Latina Contemporanea*, p. 220.

fear tactics the opposition – united in the *Concertación por el No* – won with 54.71% of votes[99]. One year after Patricio Aylwin became the first democratically elected president after the dictatorship. As he declared in his inaugural address, Chile was entering a new era «through paths of reconciliation among all Chileans, based on mutual respect, the unrestricted rule of truth, the validity of law, and the constant pursuit of justice»[100]. His government marked the onset of the *Concertación* era, a coalition of center-left parties that – from enemies to allies – would rule Chile until 2010. The *Concertación* developed a form of coalition-based presidentialism, based on a strong presence of political parties[101].

Figure 17: Demonstration for the "No" campaign against dictator Augusto Pinochet in Santiago, Chile, on October 7, 1988 (Photo by Rafael Wollmann/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images).

However, the new government had to come to terms with the *amarras* enshrined in the 1980 Constitution and imposed by the former regime. Among the most significant constraints were the binomial electoral system, appointed senators and the autonomy of the army whose commanders could not be removed by the president and kept a tutelary role through the National Security Council[102]. These mechanisms effectively created a structural veto that

[99] These percentages are records in Chilean history, «the official returns were: 43.01 percent voted ''yes'' for Pinochet, and 54.71 percent ''no,'' with a registration upward of 90 percent, 2.39 percent abstaining». Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy,* p. 139.

[100] Patricio Aylwin, "El discurso con que Patricio Aylwin reinauguró la democracia," Gobierno de Chile, March 11, 1990, accessed March 27, 2025, https://www.gob.cl/noticias/el-discurso-con-que-patricio-aylwin-reinauguro-la-democracia-1/.

[101] Mireya Dávila, Alejandro Olivares Lavados, e Octavio Avendaño, "Los gabinetes de la Concertación en Chile (1990–2010)," Revista Española de Ciencia Política 64 (2013), p. 70.

[102] Borzutzky explains that «the electoral system established by the Pinochet regime was known as *sistema binomial mayoritario*. In this electoral system, each party can present up to two candidates and each district elects two representatives. Voters choose one candidate, and the winners are determined by the total vote received by each list. The list with the largest number of votes gets one seat and the second seat was elected from the second list that has at least half of the number of votes. Its purpose was to transform the nature of the political party

prevented the ruling coalition from enacting key reforms, even when it had electoral majorities. The military retained financial independence through guaranteed revenues from CODELCO, while the Amnesty Law of 1978 ensured impunity for human rights violations[103]. The constitutional mandate that made Pinochet Senator for Life – after losing in 1988 – further symbolized the lasting influence of the dictatorship within the democratic framework. Thus, in the words of Borzutzky, the «Chile's transition to democracy needs to be understood as the product of a struggle between the authoritarian structures of the 1980 Constitution and the desire of many Chileans to remove those structures in order to live in a democratic society»[104].

Hence, Aylwin, like many succeeding Chilean presidents, deemed necessary a constitutional reform in order to break free from these structural limitations. Still, every proposals – such as eliminating of nominated senators or reforming the electoral – were blocked respectively by the Right in Congress and the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), the most conservative faction of the right[105].

Considering all these factors, the *Concertación* chose a gradualist and pragmatic approach: instead of seeking a radical rupture with the military past – being also unable to do so – it prioritized institutional and economic stability. This cautious stance could be seen also as the result of the collective trauma of 1973. The fear of polarization was deeply intertwined in Chilean society, leading to a political culture that prioritized moderation and consensus over confrontation and transformation. According to Garretón, Chile cannot be define a consensual democracy for a constitutive lack: «the absence of this consensus can be explained, on the one hand, by the minority veto and the de facto powers, and, on the other hand, by the lack of debate on the crucial issues, or a debate that is drowned out by demands for economic or political stability. Last, there is still trauma over disagreement, conflict, and confrontation, which are

system from the traditional three-thirds (one-third right, one-third Christian Democratic, and one-third left) that had existed in Chile until the 1970 election into a two-party system. Furthermore, it was meant to give the right a permanent veto power. Additionally, congressional districts were designed to achieve an overrepresentation of the rural areas that were supportive of the regime, and an under-representation of the urban areas where the opposition was stronger». Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, pp. 59-60.

[103] «In order to secure and prolong the power of the Armed Forces into the future, the constitution made them nationally independent from both the Executive and Congress, by establishing that the Armed Forces would obtain its resources directly from the revenues of the Chilean Copper Corporation (CODELCO) which exploits and sells Chile's copper, and which is the most important source of hard currency earnings for the country». Ibid., p. 61.

[104] Ibid., p. 59.

[105] Yet, some progress was made at the local level. One key agreement between government and opposition was the restoration of democratic control over Chile's municipalities, until then governed by mayors appointed under Pinochet. The 1992 municipal elections, although partial, marked a significant step. The *Concertación* won over 52% of the vote, while the Right secured just above 30%, confirming the coalition's popular support and the growing legitimacy of electoral democracy. Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, pp. 418-419.

demonized and pathologized. Yet conflict and debate must take place for a basic societal consensus to be reached»[106].

Its action was marked by a double imperative: to ensure political stability and to maintain the neoliberal economic framework inherited from the dictatorship. The result was what many scholars have described as "neoliberalism with a human face", a model that combined democratic legitimacy with neo-liberal economic policies[107]. The human component implied that economic growth was not the sole goal: the administration promised to address the social debt and to repair the safety net. Even if the *Concertación* governments invested in social and redistributive programs, as it will be examined later, they avoided tackling the structural roots of inequality, nor did they reverse the privatizations, labour flexibilization, or regressive tax structures of the previous era.

Thus, the Chilean transitional process has triggered diverging interpretations about its nature and implications. One prevailing view – shared by moderate sectors of the *Concertación* and international observers – suggests that democracy can only consolidate within the framework of a market economy. From this perspective, Chile's trajectory is seen as a «double transition» toward both democracy and neoliberalism, a model widely praised for its stability and efficiency. However, a contrasting position, mostly from critics on the left, argues that the democratic shift was fundamentally constrained by its entrenchment in the neoliberal system, preventing any substantive transformation of political and social relations. From this standpoint, the passage is not only incomplete but potentially illusory, blurring the line between the authoritarian past and the democratic present[108].

While the country achieved political stability and gained international praise for its model of governance, this came at the cost of preserving a deeply unequal socioeconomic order. The long-term consequences of this compromise would become increasingly visible in the following decade, as economic growth coexisted with widening social disparities — a dynamic that will be explored in the next section.

[106] Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy,* p. 152.
[107] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002,* p. 419.
[108] Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy*, p. 143.

2.3.2. Economic growth and rising inequalities.

In the aftermath of the transition, Chile faced several economic problems that can be grouped into four main categories: a significant percentage of the population living in poverty; an inadequate level of investment; a low amount of savings; and a heavy external debt[109]. Indeed, during the last years of the dictatorship, inflation rose due to Pinochet decision to increase public spending in a last and desperate attempt to gain electoral support[110]. The surge in inflation – up to 21.4%, combined with high levels of domestic and foreign debt, produced multiple challenges for the incoming democratic governments[111]. Moreover, social indicators revealed a severe crisis, with poverty rates reaching 48.6% in 1987, alongside persistent income inequality and a substantial housing deficit[112].

To address these issues, the first democratic government led by President Patricio Aylwin implemented a series of reforms aimed at maintaining macroeconomic stability while introducing social policies. The *Concertación*'s motto was to «grow with equity»: on the one hand, embracing the market economy as a reality; on the other, acknowledging the *deuda social* left by Pinochet[113]. This idea can also be inferred from the words of the Minister of Finance Alejandro Foxley in 1993, who defined the new economic program a "social market economy". Indeed, it maintained the principal features of the 1984 -1989 neoliberal model – such as capital openness, an export-oriented economy, and emphasis on the private sector – but increased the state's role in redistributive policies, labor protection, and business regulation[114].

In the context of social pressure and institutional constraints, the government sought both to stimulate growth and to implement its redistributive agenda. Economic expansion was prioritized as a mean to restore stability and rebuild investor confidence. Despite a temporary slowdown in Aylwin's first year due to fiscal adjustments the Chilean economy rebounded

[109] Drake and Jaksić, *The Struggle for Democracy in Chile,* p. 276.
[110] Collier and Sater, A History of Chile, 1808–2002, p. 420.
[111] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 94.
[112] «Unfortunately there are no data on either the Gini coefficient or the labor share in gross national income after 1983–84. But the economic policies of 1974–89 appear to have a regressive impact on income distribution. A study based on nonpublished data estimates that the poorest 40% of the population had an average share of 10.5% total income between 1959 and 1973 (14 years under the Alessandri, Frei, and Allende administrations), but this share declined to an average of 9.1% between 1974 and 1989 (15 years under Pinochet). Conversely, the wealthiest 20% of the population increased its income share from an average of 57.3% to 62% in similar periods (Marcel and Solimano 1994». Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 98.
[113] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002,* p. 409.
[114] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 106.

strongly in the following years[115]. Aylwin completed the privatization processes already underway, such as that of the LAN-Chile, without reverting to the state entrepreneur of the previous regime[116].

The constant growth experienced during this period was the result of multiple factors: firstly, the coordination between fiscal and monetary policies reduced the inflation after 1991 and a fiscal surplus beginning in 1990. Second, investments surged, averaging 21.6% of GDP, reflecting a renewed confidence and structural reforms. In addition, exports – especially nontraditional ones – expanded at an average annual rate of 9.3% and were diversified beyond traditional sectors such as copper[117]. Lastly, the Chilean commitment to grow with equity received strong financial support from international institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank[118].

For what concerns the redistributive agenda, the first step consisted in passing a progressive tax reform in 1990, negotiated with conservative opposition parties. The measure increased business and personal income taxes, allowing the administration to increase the social spending – by 18% – without generating imbalances. Hence, these resources were eventually directed toward expanding social programs in education, healthcare and housing[119]. Social spending under the *Concertación* primarily targeted the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. In particular, attention was given to female homemakers, young people, and indigenous communities. Subsidies for low-income households were increased, and the minimum wage was raised. Additionally, various programs were introduced to enhance the quality of education and broaden access to healthcare services[120]. Finally, labor legislation was reformed to restore rights suppressed by the dictatorship, such as the right to form a union, to

[115] Chile's GDP dwindled from 9.9% in 1989 to 3.3.% in 1990, before rebounding to 7.3% in 1991. Overall, between 1990 and 1993, the average annual growth rate stabilized at 7%. Ibid., p. 121.
[116] However, it was followed by further privatizations in sanitation, ports, and highways under President Frei, reflecting the continuity of the market-oriented model, even under democratic rule. Collier and Sater*, A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 420.
[117] During the early 1990s, Chile carried out a diversification of the economy, especially as a response to the decline in international copper prices, which limited gains in the mining sector despite increased output. Other sectors experienced significant expansion: construction, communications, and services all recorded high annual growth rates, driven by investment in infrastructure and financial services. Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies,* p. 122.
[118] Ibid., p. 121.
[119] Pilar Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity': The Limits of Chile's Free-Market Social Reforms," International Journal of Health Services 27, no. 2 (1997): 207–215, accessed March 28, 2025, p. 209 https://www.jstor.org/stable/45130538.
[120] A concrete example of these efforts is the creation of the Solidarity and Social Investment Fund (FOSIS), designed to support initiatives aimed at promoting productive employment among the poorest sectors of the population. Ibid.

strike and to collective bargaining[121]. The reforms of 1991 increased employment protection and granted unions more weight in the bargaining process[122].

These new set of social policies implemented under *Concertación*'s administrations yielded tangible results, particularly in the context of sustained economic growth. Between 1990 and 1993, the minimum wage rose by 24% in real terms, while household purchasing power increased by 70%, and average incomes grew by nearly 18%[123]. These gains were accompanied by the creation of hundreds of thousands of jobs – more than 600.000–pushing down the unemployment rate from 7.2% to 4%. However, the most emblematic outcome was the substantial reduction in poverty: from 38.1% of the population in 1989 to 27.7% by 1992[124].

Despite all the achievements, income inequality not only persisted but also deepened during the same period. What accounts for this apparent paradox? On the one side, poverty reduction was largely driven by Chile's economic recovery, which created jobs and improved wages[125]. On the other, many components of the society – namely farmers, rural migrants, elderly, undertrained women and youth – have been excluded from the benefits of this growth. As David Hojman illustrates, between 1989 and 1992, the share of national income received by the poorest 40% of the population declined from 10.5% to 10.2%, while the income ratio between the richest and poorest quintiles worsened from 17.0 to 18.3%[126]. Although the absolute income of the poorest improved due to overall growth, their relative position within the income structure deteriorated.

This trend must be attributed also to the nature of government spending. Even if it had implemented programs aimed at the most disadvantaged, only a minimal portion was effectively redistributed to the bottom quintile, producing negligible impact. For instance, FOSIS receives less than 1% of the total social budget, a figure far too low to generate long-term impact[127].

[121] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity,"p. 210.
[122] Sebastian Edwards and Alejandra Cox Edwards, Economic Reforms and Labor Markets: Policy Issues and Lessons from Chile, NBER Working Paper No. 7646 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2000), accessed March 28, 2025, http://www.nber.org/papers/w7646.
[123] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity,"p. 210.
[124] David E. Hojman, "Poverty and Inequality in Chile: Are Democratic Politics and Neoliberal Economics Good for You?" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 38, no. 2/3 (Summer–Autumn 1996): accessed March 30, 2025, p. 77 https://www.jstor.org/stable/166361.
[125] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity," p. 211.
[126] Hojman, "Poverty and Inequality in Chile: Are Democratic Politics and Neoliberal Economics Good for You?," p. 74.
[127] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity," p. 211.

The critical flaw in the government's redistributive strategy lay in its hesitation or inability to alter the structure and the core social reforms implemented during the dictatorship. Neither Aylwin nor Frei proposed significant changes to the privatized systems of health, education, or pensions. A continuity that reflected both the political attention of the new democratic leadership and a prevailing consensus that privatization had solved the chronic fiscal deficits of the old welfare state[128].

As shown by the level of inequalities, choice came at a cost. By maintaining the segmented nature of social service provision – where access and quality depended mainly on income – the state failed to ensure universal guarantees of social rights. Thus, while the *Concertación* succeeded in stabilizing democracy and reducing poverty, its unwillingness or inability to challenge the institutional legacy of authoritarian neoliberalism left inequality deeply entrenched in Chilean society.

2.3.3. The scars of the regime.

Despite the formal return to democracy in 1990, the wounds inflicted by Pinochet's regime have become visible scars in Chilean society. After 17 years of dictatorship, the legacy of the dictatorship extended beyond the economy, touching political institutions, the society and the legal system.

With regard to the abuses of the regime, the numbers speak for themselves: according to the official numbers provided by Chile's Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, 3.000 were killed, while 40.000 tortured[129]. Despite numerous testimonies and evidences, efforts to prosecute those responsible were long delayed. This was mainly due to institutional and legal protections inherited from the regime, including the 1978 Amnesty Law and the 1980 Constitution[130].

[128] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity," p. 214.
[129] Estimates suggest that unofficial numbers of people killed may be high as 25.000, while the ones of tortured is near 100.000. Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 10.
[130] Ibid., p. 63.

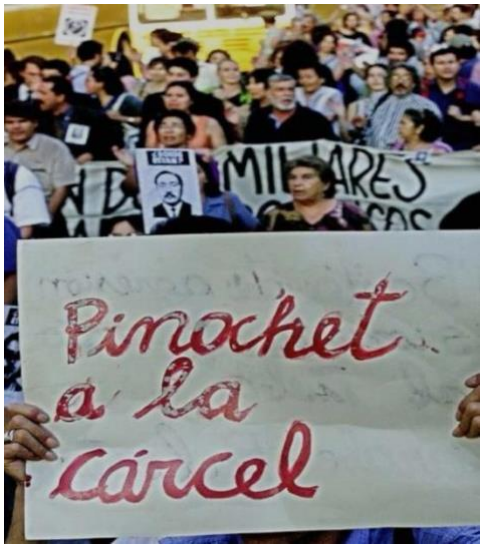

Figure 18: Protesters march through downtown Santiago demanding justice for Pinochet-era crimes, January 8, 2001 (AFP/ Getty Images)

For this reason – in contrast to Argentina's model of justice[131] – the Chilean transition was marked by a choice of reconciliation over accountability, chasing truth rather than justice. Especially the early democratic governments, firstly the one of Patricio Aylwin and later of Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, embodied this cautious approach: while Aylwin publicly acknowledged state crimes in 1991 and expressed moral responsibility, his administration could not pursue criminal trials[132]. Frei continued along similar lines, favoring democratic consolidation over institutional rupture, and maintaining the military's autonomy.

A concrete case in which Frei's different approach becomes evident is the 1995 ruling by the Supreme Court against General Manuel Contreras, former head of Pinochet's secret police, for the assassination of Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier in Washington D.C. in 1976. When Contreras resisted arrest, the army staged a show of force, reminding the country of the military's enduring weight in post-dictatorship Chile. Although Contreras was eventually imprisoned, Frei publicly assured the military that further prosecutions—particularly against Pinochet—would not be prioritized[133].

[131] Unlike Chile, where the military retained significant political influence well into the democratic transition, Argentina distinguished itself by actively pursuing justice for the crimes committed during its "Dirty War" (1976–1983). Following the restoration of democracy in 1983, Argentina held the Trial of the Juntas in 1985, becoming the first country in Latin America to prosecute top-ranking military leaders for human rights violations. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Dirty War," accessed March 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Dirty-War-Argentina).
[132] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 408.
[133] Weeks, "Waiting for Cincinnatus," pp. 731-732.

Thus, even after formally leaving the presidency, Pinochet's presence in the society persisted. Until 1998, he held the position of Commander in chief of the Army, which gave him the capacity to control armed forces and to threaten civilian authority to not cut ties with the past through public policies or judicial actions[134]. By March of that year, he became a lifetime Senator, a role that granted him immunity from prosecution, and was proclaimed by the Army as Commander in Chief *Benemérito*[135].

Figure 19: General Augusto Pinochet is sworn in as senator-for-life at the Chilean Senate in Valparaíso, March 11, 1998. (Photo by JAIME RAZURI/AFP via Getty Images)

Continuing to be popular, the turning point arrived from the international sphere[136]. In 1998, Spanish lawyer, Baltasar Garzón, requested the extradition to Spain for interrogation and trial, and Pinochet was arrested while on a trip in London[137]. Immediately, the Chilean army responded with a public statement through which backed their former chief, while human rights and political activists loudly called for the suspension of his parliamentary immunity to allow

[134] Borzutzky, *Human Rights Policies in Chile*, p. 66.
[135] «The new title meant that, although Pinochet would be a senator for life after retiring as army commander, in the eyes of the army he would always be seen as Commander in Chief. […] Even though Pinochet was retiring from the army, the institution still supported him fully». Gregory Weeks, "Waiting for Cincinnatus: The Role of Pinochet in Post-Authoritarian Chile," Third World Quarterly 21, no. 5 (2000), p. 732.
[136] Actually, the initiative can be traced back to the precedent legal initiative led by Juan Garcés, a Spanish lawyer and former advisor to Salvador Allende. Witness to the 1973 coup and its aftermath, Garcés dedicated himself to documenting the dictatorship's crimes and later sought to hold Pinochet accountable through international justice mechanisms. In 1996, he filed a "popular action" before Spain's *Audiencia Nacional*, invoking the principle of universal jurisdiction for crimes such as genocide, terrorism, and illegal detention (Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: The New Press, 2013), p. 598.)
[137] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 434.

for prosecution[138]. Although he was ultimately released on health grounds, this event symbolically cracked the impunity shield and promoted national and international demands for justice, triggering a chain reaction that led to the adoption in 2000 of a new Code of Criminal procedure[139].

Figure 20: An elderly supporter of former Chilean dictator Pinochet weeps in Santiago November 25, 1998, after Britain's House of Lord rejected Pinochet's claim to sovereign Immunity (AFP Photo/Antonio Scorza).

Figure 21: Thousands of Pinochet supporters gather outside a hospital in Santiago on March 3, 2000 awaiting the return of General Augusto Pinochet after his release from detention in the United Kingdom. (AFP Photo/Matias Recart)

And yet, fundamental elements of the dictatorship endure. The 1980 Constitution remained – and still remains – in place[140]. Although widely considered the most important amendment to the 1980 Constitution, the 2005 reforms failed in removing the authoritarian logic that structured the original document, such as the concentrated presidential powers and the role of the Constitutional Court[141]. Hence, scholars such as Javier Couso argue that these

[138] Weeks, "Waiting for Cincinnatus," p. 734.
[139] Hugo Rojas Corral, "50 Years After the 1973 Coup in Chile: Analysis of Processes of Transition to Democracy and Transitional Justice," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 22, no. 3 (June 7, 2024), p. 610.
[140] «Among other things it provided for an extremely strong eight-year presidency […], a Congress with more limited powers than before […], and various institutional mechanisms to entrench military influence over future governments. Moreover, the transitory dispositions (very numerous) were to remain in effect for nearly a decade». Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, pp. 388-389.
[141] «The 2005 amendments are considered to be the greatest steps toward democracy in Chile, reducing the presidential term from 6 to 4 years, reducing military influence in politics—by transforming the National Security Council into an advisory body to the President, eliminating appointed senatorial seats, and giving the President the power to dismiss the commanders-in-chief of the armed forces and the national police—and removing the

modifications have been largely superficial, leaving intact the "protected democracy" aimed at neutralizing democratic impulses[142].

A polarized memory landscape continues to divide Chilean society: the narratives of victims coexist, uncomfortably, with those of former supporters and beneficiaries of the regime. Thus, the legacy of the dictatorship has inhibited the emergence of a shared historical truth[143]. How can it be that Chile – one of Latin America's most "advanced" democracies – still operates under a constitution enacted by a dictator? The question highlights the lasting tension between formal democratic structures and the deep scars left by authoritarianism.

Figure 21: Supporters of Pinochet outside Santiago's military airport on March 3, 2000, following his return to Chile after being released by British autorities (AFP Photo/ Matias Recart)

Figure 22: Supporters of former President Salvador Allende and human rights activists demonstrate in Santiago on September 14, 2003 to commemorate the victims of Pinochet's dictatorship (AFP Photo/Victor Rojas).

current electoral system from the constitution in order to open the process to future reform». International IDEA, "Constitutional History of Chile," ConstitutionNet, accessed April 1, 2025, https://constitutionnet.org/country/constitutional-history-chile.

[142]Javier Couso, "Trying Democracy in the Shadow of an Authoritarian Legality: Chile's Transition to Democracy and the Pinochet Constitution of 1980," Wisconsin International Law Journal 29, no. 2 (May 9, 2012), p. 414.

[143] Rojas Corral, "50 Years After the 1973 Coup in Chile," p. 607.

Chapter III

3. Comparison Between the Two Models after 1989

3.1. Similarities and Differences in Political and Economic Responses

3.1.1. Political Transition and Institutional Changes

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 pointed to the end of the bipolar world order, compelling also a profound redefinition of political paths in Latin America. In this context, Cuba and Chile, despite having both authoritarian regimes at the time, experienced diametrically opposite paths of political transformation in the years following the Cold War.

In Cuba, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered a deep crisis. The Cuban regime, largely built around the economic, and geopolitical support of the USSR, faced the forenamed *Período Especial*, a phase of severe economic contraction and social suffering. As stated by Castro in a speech two years later:

> The loss of the socialist camp and the USSR, the disappearance of the latter state, was a terrible blow, a terrible blow, a blow that I wonder if there is any other country or any other revolution that could have endured as we are evidently enduring it, and if there would be solutions for such a tremendous tragedy. We have to rebuild everything that we lost in that universal catastrophe; that is, we have to rebuild what the socialist camp and the USSR meant for us[1].

[1] In the original: «*La pérdida del campo socialista y de la URSS, la desaparición de este último Estado, significó un golpe terrible, un golpe anonadante, un golpe que me pregunto si hay algún otro país o alguna otra revolución que habría podido soportar como evidentemente lo estamos soportando nosotros, y si habría soluciones para una tragedia tan tremenda. Tenemos que reconstruir todo lo que perdimos con esa catástrofe universal; es decir, habría que reconstruir lo que significó el campo socialista y la URSS para nosotros».* Fidel Castro, "*Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura de la Asamblea de Balance del Trabajo, Renovación y Ratificación de Mandatos del PCC en Ciudad de La Habana, efectuada en el Palacio de las Convenciones," November 7, 1993, Sitio Fidel Soldado de las Ideas*, accessed April 7, 2025, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-la-clausura-de-la-asamblea-de-balance-del-trabajo-renovacion-y

Politically, however, the regime strengthened its core institutions. Rather than initiating democratization or structural political reforms, Fidel Castro centralized control even further. The Communist Party reaffirmed its monopoly on power in the 1992 constitutional reform, removing references to the USSR but keeping intact the one-party system. According to Article 5 of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, the Communist Party is defined as «the superior leading force of the society and the State», responsible for organizing and guiding efforts toward socialism and communism[2].

Albeit limited economic reforms – such as the legalization of the U.S. dollar and foreign investment in tourism – political liberalization was avoided[3]. Political pluralism remained prohibited and civil liberties were curtailed, while the security apparatus was expanded to prevent dissent. Using the words of Pérez, «the primacy of the Communist party in a one-party state was not open for debate»[4]. As a result, the ruling elite was deaf to every suggestion of the civil society to boost political engagement, since there were insufficient of political opportunities[5].

Figure 22: Banners displayed in the streets of Havana during the IV Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, October 12, 1991 (Photo by AFP via Getty Images).

The regime opted for survival, while preserving its revolutionary legitimacy and anti-imperialist identity. «I say it – Castro declared – because I believe we're going to resist, because

[2] *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, art. 5.
[3] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, pp. 305-306.
[4] Ibid., p. 313.
[5] Benigno Aguirre, "Culture of Opposition in Cuba," *Cuba in Transition* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Latin American Network Information Center, 1998), p. 337.

I believe we're going to survive, because I believe we're going to win»[6]. Fidel framed the global events not as a defeat of socialism, but as a challenge that only reinforced the need for continuing to resist and «to defend socialism»[7].

By comparison, Chile was already going through a negotiated transition to democracy by 1989. The conclusion of the Cold War fell within the context of the plebiscite of 1988, which had rejected Pinochet's continuation in power, leading to democratic elections in 1989 and the establishment of a civilian government in 1990. However, this change was neither revolutionary nor entirely liberatory. It was a pacted process, rooted in the 1980 Constitution imposed by the military regime, which ensured the continuation of the two most important elements of the previous dictatorship: the armed forces and the neoliberal economic model[8].

The post-1989 Chilean democracy was constrained by what has been previously called authoritarian enclaves: according to Garretón, they are «those elements of the previous regime that persist in the democratic regime»[9]. In the Chilean case, examples may be found in appointed senators, military tutelage, and restricted constitutional reforms[10]. Nevertheless, democratization seemed to function: elections were restored, political parties re-emerged, and civil society re-occupied its place – yet always within the framework inherited from the dictatorship.

Furthermore, the *Concertación* accepted the neoliberal order «as a reality»: in other words, as a structural condition for both domestic stability and international credibility[11]. This ensured the continuity of political and economic elites that had developed under Pinochet, due to the policies he implemented. One of the clearest examples is given by the privatization of state-owned firms, which created a new and strong business elite, left standing during the transition to democracy. Another evidence may be found in the fact that Pinochet removed all local leaders democratically elected in 1971 to appoint trusted mayors until 1990. These

[6] In the original: «*Lo digo porque sé que vamos a resistir, porque sé que vamos a sobrevivir, porque sé que vamos a vencer*». Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura del IV Congreso de la FEU, celebrado en el Palacio de las Convenciones, el 20 de diciembre de 1990*, accessed April 8, 2025, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-la-clausura-del-iv-congreso-de-la-feu
[7] Castro, *Discurso pronunciado en la clausura del IV Congreso de la FEU*.
[8] Rosalind Bresnahan, "Introduction: Chile since 1990—The Contradictions of Neoliberal Democratization," *Latin American Perspectives* 30, no. 5 (September 2003): p. 6, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3184956.
[9] Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy*, pp. 47-48.
[10] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 408.
[11] Ibid., pp. 408-409.

strengthened elites' position, particularly in areas such as the media, business, and state institutions[12].

Pinochet's Constitution has remained in force throughout the post-dictatorship period. Over time, his heritage began to create discontent and social unrest, particularly among younger people. A series of major protest waves – from student mobilization in 2006, 2011, and 2016 to the mass uprising of 2019 – revealed a wide perception that the 1980 Constitution was a barrier to social justice and to democratic participation.

Figure 23: Demonstrators rally at Plaza Italia in Santiago on October 25, 2020, in support of rewriting Chile's dictatorship-era constitution, as the country awaits the results of a historic referendum. (Photo by Martin Bernetti/AFP via Getty Images)

This paved the way for a plebiscite in 2020, in which 78.12% of Chileans voted in favor of drafting a new constitution. Even if subsequent attempts to adopt a new constitution were unsuccessful, the very fact that such a process was initiated highlights a growing societal demand for a deeper democratic transformation[13].

With regard to the points of touch between Cuba and Chile – despite their ideological divergences and international alignments – both countries reveal a thread of continuity in terms of constitutional structure and elite presence in the post-Cold war context. They preserved the institutional skeleton established under authoritarian rule. On the one hand, Cuba maintained its 1976 Constitution with minor amendments. On the other, Chile continued to operate under

[12]Felipe González and Mounu Prem, "The Legacy of the Pinochet Regime in Chile," in *Roots of Underdevelopment: A New Economic (and Political) History of Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Felipe Valencia Caicedo (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), pp. 383-385, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38723-4_13.
[13] González and Prem, "The Legacy of the Pinochet Regime in Chile.", pp. 389-390.

the 1980 Constitution passed during the military regime. In both scenarios, these statutory structures helped preserve the continuity of elites — the revolutionary leadership in Cuba and the neoliberal one in Chile. As described, elites adapted to new contexts while maintaining control over political and institutional life.

However, the contrasts cannot be overlooked. Cuba remained a one-party authoritarian regime, explicitly rejecting every political liberalization and maintaining tight control over civil society, media, and opposition. The Communist Party retained absolute authority, with no mechanisms for electoral competition or power alternation.

In contrast, Chile, although limited by institutional *amarras*, moved – even if slowly and imperfectly – toward democratization. Competitive elections, multiparty politics, and a revitalized civil society became part of the political landscape, even if constrained by the legacy of Pinochet's rule.

3.1.2. Economic Models

In the post-Cold War period, both Cuba and Chile faced significant international economic hardships, but their approaches to tackling these pressures were different. Their economic strategies were due to not only their internal political structures – as it has already been examined – but also their positioning in the new international order.

To begin with Cuba, it adopted, from the early years of the Revolution, a socialist model, based on the principle of collective ownership of the means of production, a centrally planned economy and the leading role of the revolutionary party[14]. Following this economic design, Cuba considers the economy a political domain to be organized in line with ideological principles and collective goals. However, this model was challenged in the 1990s, when the new conjuncture exposed the vulnerability of the Cuban economy[15].

In Cuba, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the abrupt cessation of trade, aid, and preferential agreements that had long sustained the island's socialist economy[16]. Due to its rigid centrally planned structure, Cuba's economy was among the most deeply integrated into the Soviet bloc. This profound dependency, combined with the enduring impact of the U.S. trade

[14] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Socialism," last modified February 6, 2024, accessed April 10, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/money/socialism.
[15] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 293.
[16] Ibid., pp. 291-292.

embargo, triggered a national crisis. As a result, the country entered the *Período Especial*, a period characterised by GDP drop, food and fuel shortfall, blackouts, and social issues.

To ensure regime living, the Cuban leadership introduced selective economic reforms including: the dollarization of the economy; limited self-employment – *cuentapropismo*; and the promotion of joint ventures in several fields. Indeed, «by the year 2000 – wrote Pérez – the number of foreign firms engaged in joint ventures in Cuba had increased fourfold since 1989, from approximately 100 to 400, operating in nearly thirty-five sectors of the economy»[17]. Amid the most symbolically significant changes, there was the development of a two-tier healthcare and tourism system, which openly contradicted the revolutionary ideal of universal and equitable access to public services.

Regarding tourism, the state began investing heavily in tourist infrastructures, building luxury resorts and making available beaches and districts exclusively for foreigners, who possessed dollars.

Figure 24. Tourists watch from a yacht as a Cuban war frigate is deliberately sunk off the coast near Varadero, July 16, 1998, as part of a government plan to create an artificial reef for diving tourism (Photo by Adalberto Roque / AFP via Getty Images).

While this generated huge revenues for the regime – in 2000 they represented 40% of the total earnings from goods and services solely[18] – it also created visible fractures between tourists and Cubans, between those with access to hard currency and those without. Income disparities exploded: while state workers like teachers or surgeons earned under 12 U.S. dollars per month, those in the tourist economy – such as bartenders, taxi drivers, or hairdressers – could earn ten or hundred times more, primarily through tips or informal transactions. This distortion in

[17] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*., pp. 307-308.
[18] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 50.

incentives led many qualified professionals to abandon their posts vital sectors to take informal or manual jobs that guaranteed access to dollars[19].

As Loris Zanatta underlines, writing about the apartheid that tourism brought up, Fidel Castro reframed this economic opening not as a retreat, but as a necessary response to inefficiency. He reluctantly justified the promotion of tourism by stressing Cuba's need for hard currency and the island's natural appeal. Notwithstanding the ideological unease that tourism provoked, he reassured the nation that this would not weaken revolutionary values. On the contrary, tourists would be exposed to the moral strength of Cuban socialism and perhaps even transformed by it[20]. Throughout this optic, Castro managed to bend revolutionary rhetoric to necessity, even if in the practice contradictions and inequalities spiked.

However, these changes were strictly regulated by the Partido Comunista de Cuba, which was the core of the state control over the economy. In Castro's own words, «there has been no doubt here that the revolution has a leadership, that the revolution has a leader and that the leader of the revolution is the party. I don't think anyone has questioned that idea; it is a fundamental principle»[21]. Hence, the state had the interest of retaining full control over key sectors, because in this way the measures «would not develop a momentum of their own that would gradually reintroduce capitalism»[22]. Moreover, as Fidel himself acknowledged in his 1993 speech to the National Assembly, the Cuban leadership was aware of the precedents set by other socialist countries. In justifying the economic reforms, he explicitly referred to China and Vietnam, suggesting that their paths demonstrated how it was possible to «open certain spaces» within a socialist framework without surrendering ideological principles[23].

About Chile, it entered the last decade of the century as the perfect example of a neoliberal economy. Under Pinochet, the economic policies of the Chicago Boys dismantled the Keynesian model and reduced the state to a regulatory apparatus serving market needs. The regime – coherently with neoliberal principles – privatized state enterprises, liberalized trade

[19] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, pp. 335-336.
[20] Zanatta, *Fidel Castro. L'ultimo re cattolico*, pp. 150-151.
[21] In spanish: «*no han existido dudas tampoco aquí de que la Revolución tiene una dirección, de que la Revolución tiene un jefe y que el jefe de la Revolución es el Partido. Creo que nadie ha cuestionado esa idea; es un principio fundamental*». Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros, en la clausura del VI Congreso de la Unión de Periodistas de Cuba, efectuada en el Palacio de las Convenciones, el 24 de diciembre de 1993, "Año 35 de la Revolución"*, accessed April 12, 2025, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1993/esp/f241293e.html
[22] *Cuban Economists on the Cuban Economy*, ed. Al Campbell (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), p. 36.
[23] Castro, *Discurso en la clausura del VI Congreso de la UPEC*, 1993.

and capital flows, and minimized the role of the state in welfare provision[24]. Seen as a kind of laboratory of neoliberalism in the region, Chilean state was restructured to serve the logic of capital accumulation, shifting from provider to enabler – guaranteeing property rights and enforcing contracts as among the fundamental provisions to protect[25].

However, after the transition, successive governments of the *Concertación* coalition chose to maintain the neoliberal economic model almost intact. Despite the spectrum of political ideologies, ranging from socialism to centrist Christian democracy, it is clear that both *Concertación*'s progressive and conservative factions aimed at maintaining Chile's neoliberal architecture. This convergence can be explained by multiple factors, beyond the already cited pursuit of macroeconomic stability as a precondition for democratic consolidation. Notably, the post-authoritarian transition was heavily constrained by the institutional architecture inherited from the military regime. Any attempt to significantly alter the economic framework would have encountered firm resistance from powerful veto players, including the business elite, conservative sectors, and the armed forces. As a result, the Concertación – in its 20 years of government – adopted a pragmatic stance, choosing steady reforms within the existing model[26].

The democratic governments encouraged foreign direct investment, privatized the pension system, and used market mechanisms to govern education and healthcare. As Garretón explains, this process gave rise to a «double transition» – to both democracy and market capitalism – in which the latter was prioritized. «The so-called Chilean model – writes Garretón – has been lauded in international economic circles precisely for having completed the double transition, which makes it ‘‘successful’’ and ‘‘exemplary” »[27].

Although, evident are the limits of Chilean democratic consolidation: if formal political pluralism was achieved, the structural inequalities fixed in the economic model were not challenged.

[24] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 8.
[25] Ibid., p. 64.
[26] Peter M. Siavelis, “From a Necessary to a Permanent Coalition,” in *Democratic Chile: The Politics and Policies of a Historic Coalition, 1990–2010*, ed. Kirsten Sehnbruch and Peter M. Siavelis (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), p. 37.
[27] Garretón*, Incomplete Democracy*, p. 143.

Figure 25: Graffiti against inequality and elites cover a wall in Santiago during the 2019 social unrest, when deep-rooted inequalities inherited from Pinochet's neoliberal model erupted into mass protests across Chile. (Photo by Martin Bernetti / AFP via Getty Images)

While Chile was internationally celebrated, critical scholars have pointed out the contradictions inherent in this narrative. For instance, the Chilean trajectory is best captured by Rosalind Bresnahan's definition: «a democratic promise unfulfilled»[28]. The gap between image and reality, between international praise and domestic dissatisfaction, reveals a hybrid outcome: Chile has neither experienced the economic success advertised by neoliberal proponents, nor been the participatory democracy envisioned by the mass movements that fought for it. In this sense, the Chilean state remained neoliberal in substance, even as it became democratic in form.

In both cases, then, the post-Cold War period did not bring about radical economic transformations, but rather a reinforcement of the models established during the Cold War era: state socialism in Cuba and market capitalism in Chile. Both countries preserved the economic legacies of their respective authoritarian regime – present in Cuba's case and past in Chile's, albeit for different reasons.

On the one hand, in Cuba this continuity was primarily ideological, grounded in the imperative to remain faithful to the revolutionary project and to defend socialism in the face of external pressures. A stance repeatedly reinforced through Castro political discourses: «the Revolution will never renounce its principles; it will never renounce the conquests it has brought to our people; it will never renounce its ideas and objectives; […] The right to build the social, economic and political regime of our people's choice will not be surrendered before

[28] Bresnahan, "Chile since 1990," pp. 6-7.

anything or anyone! The Revolution cannot be destroyed either from within or from without»[29]. On the other, Chile's adherence to the neoliberal model was structural and political. Indeed, the persistence of market supremacy was framed not as an imposition but as a rational path toward modernization, stability, and global integration: in other words, as «a necessary precondition […] for democracy to exist»[30]. As a result, both nations moved forward by deepening – rather than abandoning– their inherited economic paradigms.

At the same time, the contrast lies in their degree of openness and flexibility. On the one side, Chile actively embraced globalization, integrating into international markets and signing numerous free trade agreements with several countries and organizations, such as South Korea, New Zealand, and the European Union[31]. On the other, Cuba remained largely insulated, in part due to the U.S. embargo, but also by government's policy choices. Investment in Cuba was allowed only in joint ventures with the state, and private enterprise was limited and revocable. This dual economy — with sectors like tourism operating in dollars and the rest of the population using on pesos — created profound internal inequalities[32].

3.2. Consequences for the population at the onset of the new century

After considering the political and economic continuity of Cuba and Chile in the wake of the Cold War, it is important to assess how these models affected the everyday lives of their citizens. Despite the relative macroeconomic stability that both countries enjoyed, their approaches to distributive justice, social policy, and service delivery produced different results. This section examines three key indicators of social well-being in this order: healthcare, education, and inequality.

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[29] In the original version: «*La Revolución jamás renunciará a sus principios; jamás renunciará a las conquistas que trajo a nuestro pueblo; jamás renunciará a sus ideas y objetivos;*[…]*¡El derecho a construir el régimen social, económico y político que nuestro pueblo elija, no se depone ante nada ni ante nadie! La Revolución no podrá ser destruida ni desde dentro ni desde fuera*». Castro, Fidel. *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en el Acto Central por el Aniversario 42 del Asalto a los cuarteles Moncada y "Carlos Manuel de Céspedes", en la Plaza de la Revolución "Mariana Grajales", el 26 de julio de 1995*. Accessed April 12, 2025. http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-el-acto-central-por-el-aniversario-42-del-asalto-los-cuarteles

[30] Garretón, *Incomplete Democracy*, p. 144.

[31] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 421.

[32] According to Yaffe, «the dual currency divided the economy into two parts. Which branch any Cuban operated within depended on whether their income was exclusively from a state salary paid in CUP or they had access to dollars or CUC». Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 45.

3.2.1. Healthcare

At the beginning of the new century, the healthcare system of Cuba and Chile echoed the pillars of their respective political and economic models. Although both countries achieved strong health outcomes compared to regional standards, they did so through radically different manners: Cuba via centralized system anchored in revolutionary ethos, and Chile by way of market-oriented structure derived from neoliberal reforms.

For Cuba, healthcare was not only a public service but one of the main pillars of the revolutionary project. Following the 1959 revolution, the Caribbean Island established a universal and free health system, aimed at eradicating inequality in access and ensuring medical care as a social right. «Health care before the revolution – writes Pérez – was distributed unequally and favoured Cubans of means and especially those living in Havana and provincial capitals»[33]. The initial improvements were accompanied in the 1970s by further institutional consolidations such as the collaboration with the World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization and the creation of the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) in 1976 [34]. In the same year, the approval of a new Constitution formalized this right in article 50, highlighting its strong public dimension. As stated in the Constitution:

> Everybody has the right to health protection and care. The State guarantees this right: by providing free medical and hospital care by means of the installations of the rural medical service network, polyclinics, hospitals and preventive and specialist treatment centers; by providing free dental care; by promoting the health publicity campaigns, health education, regular medical examinations, general vaccinations and other measures to prevent the outbreak of disease. All population cooperates in these activities and plans through the social and mass organizations[35].

The number of hospitals constantly grew, training for healthcare professionals was decentralized through provincial medical schools, and medical education remained free of

[33] Despite the initial deterioration of health immediately after the revolution, during the 1960s the situation improved. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 276.
[34] C. William Keck and Gail A. Reed, "The Curious Case of Cuba," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 8 (August 2012): e13–e22, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.300822.
[35] *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, art. 50.

charge, reinforcing the idea that medicine served both the public good and the revolutionary ethos[36].

All Cuban social achievements, such as those in the field of health – declining mortality rate, rising life expectancy and reducing infant mortality rates[37] – were affected by the *Período Especial*. The crisis led to a shortage of medicine and a resurgence of infectious diseases. Thus, the entire model started to face material limitations: hospitals suffered from equipment scarcity, dual currency distortions led to disparities in the quality of care – with the phenomenon of medical tourism[38] – and the outmigration of doctors in search of better pay became a recurring issue.

An illustration of the difficulties faced by the healthcare is provided by *Cuba and the Cameraman*, a 2017 documentary directed by Jon Alpert. The latter returns to Cuba every few years since the 1970s and captures, among other things, the life of Cuban during this period. Particularly, in one scene, Alpert visits one of the main hospitals in Havana which is deteriorated and faced shortages of medicines. As well as the clinic in the district of Vedado where medical instruments are obsolete and the health personnel does not have sufficient means to sanitise them[39].

Figure 26: A pharmacist attends to a customer in a Havana pharmacy facing medicine shortages, reflecting the severe economic crisis Cuba endured in the late 1990s after the end of Soviet aid and the tightening of the U.S. embargo. (Photo by Robert Nickelsberg/Liaison)

[36] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 277.
[37] For instance, the infant mortality rate fell from 39.6 per 1000 live births in 1963 to 15 in 1984. Ibid.
[38] Cuba, during the crisis, increasingly turned to medical tourism as a strategy to generate foreign currency. By the mid-1990s, thousands of foreign patients were traveling to the island annually to access affordable and high-quality medical care. In 1996 alone, over 7,000 international health tourists reportedly spent $25 million on Cuban medical services, making this sector a significant source of revenue amid the economic downturn. Kirk and Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism*, p. 48.
[39] *Cuba and the Cameraman*, directed by Jon Alpert (2017; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix), documentary film, 1h 53m.

Nevertheless, the government did not dismantle the public health system but attempted to reinforce it. Indeed, to mitigate the drawbacks on the population, Cuban health expenditures increased by 13% between 1990 and 1994, as well as the doctor to patient ratio[40]. Additionally, infant mortality lowered from 10.7 per 1000 in 1990 to 7.2 in 1999 and life expectancy increased[41].

This strategy, based on the state's commitment on social expenditure, was not administrative, but deeply ideological. Medicine in Cuba has always been a field of ideological and moral investment, a duty that the government has in relation to its own people. Doctors were defined guardians of the revolution, appointed not only domestically but also through medical internationalism abroad[42]. As Fidel Castro stated in 2002:

> Our country's effort is framed within the ideals and objectives that these institutions represent, but it has also been stimulated by what constitutes an essential duty of all those who assume responsibilities before their peoples and before their nations, which is to work for the welfare of their compatriots, and among these efforts health, together with education and culture, constitute fundamental duties[43].

Conversely, the Chilean healthcare system at the beginning of the new century embodied the transformations implemented during the Pinochet regime: in other words, the neoliberal reforms promoted by the Chicago Boys. As it has been explored earlier in this study, these reforms were aimed at minimizing the role of the state in social service provision, promoting individualism and market competition. Consequently, the healthcare system was reorganized into a dual structure: on the one side, there was the public scheme, *Fondo Nacional de Salud* (FONASA); on the other, private insurers known as ISAPREs, supplying primarily higher-income individuals[44].

The two systems coexisted with each other, producing a highly unequal scheme, where the access to quality care depended on income level. Although the theory behind the joint system

[40] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 59.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Kirk and Erisman, *Cuban Medical Internationalism*, p. 53.
[43] Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas, el 3 de diciembre del 2002*, accessed April 16, 2025, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-la-escuela-latinoamericana-de-ciencias-medicas
[44] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 422.

suggested that individuals had the possibility of freely choosing between public and private coverage, in practice, a person's income largely determined which plan they selected[45]. Additionally, the decentralization of health services in the 1980s was followed by a decline in state funding, which in turn coincided with a drop in the quality of both medical treatment and hospital infrastructure[46].

After the return to democracy in 1990, *Concertación* governments faced the challenge of reforming a healthcare system profoundly shaped by the dictatorship's legacy[47]. Rather than eliminating this structure, the new administration increased investments in public health infrastructure – the FONASA – intending to improve its efficiency. During the first years of 1990s, efforts included the rehabilitation of public hospitals, the construction of new facilities, and targeted programs to reduce waiting lists in high-demand services[48].

However, a significant change came under President Ricardo Lagos[49]. A former exile and outspoken critic of the dictatorship, Lagos adopted a more assertive position within the *Concertación*. Upon taking office in 2000, Lagos faced not only economic challenges but also the enduring shadow of Pinochet, who had become increasingly vulnerable following the legal actions led by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. Exploiting this opportunity, he abolished the position of lifetime and designated senators and negotiated with the military leadership to officially renounce their role as constitutional guardians[50].

For what concerns health, his government proposed the plan AUGE – *Acceso Universal con Garantías Explícitas* – which officially came into force in 2005. The program was thought to improve the segmented system, universalizing access to care for a prioritized list of high-impact medical conditions, regardless of a patient's insurance provider or socioeconomic status. Moreover, AUGE was designed to operate identically across the public and private

[45] For instance, «ISAPREs require high premiums from women of childbearing age, rendering ISAPREs unaffordable for many Chilean women who traditionally earn substantially less than their male counterparts. Therefore, traditionally, the ISAPREs are overwhelmingly populated by men». Carrie Gilbert, "Chilean Health Reform and the AUGE Plan: Lessons for the United States in Implementing PPACA," *Annals of Health Law* 21 (Spring 2012): p. 40.
[46] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, pp. 397-398.
[47] «A 2001 study, for instance, showed that infant mortality in the poor Santiago district of Independencia was seven times higher than that of affluent Vitacura». Ibid., p. 422.
[48] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 129.
[49] Ricardo Lagos (n. 1938) is a Chilean lawyer, economist, and politician who served as President of Chile from 2000 to 2006. A prominent figure of the center-left *Concertación* coalition, Lagos was known for his strong stance against Pinochet, his role in the democratic transition, and his commitment to social and economic reforms. During his presidency, he focused on infrastructure development, and reducing inequality, while maintaining stability. (*Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Ricardo Lagos," accessed April 2025,* https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ricardo-Lagos).
[50] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, pp. 441-442.

sectors, meaning that both FONASA and ISAPREs were required to reimburse at standardized rates[51]. This, however, generated tensions. Indeed, the Chilean Medical Association opposed the plan, fearing it would limit clinical autonomy, when the ISAPREs were concerned about subsidizing the public system via risk compensation mechanisms[52].

Despite the plan AUGE, the neoliberal skeleton of Chilean healthcare was not destroyed – as many later would advocate – and inequalities persisted. For example, one of the unintended consequences of AUGE was that waiting times for non-AUGE conditions increased dramatically, in some cases reaching years for non-urgent specialist or hospital services. Furthermore, out-of-pocket expenditures remained high, particularly due to pharmaceutical costs not fully covered by the public system. Hence, access to comprehensive care remained stratified, with lower-income populations disproportionately reliant on an overburdened public system[53].

Thus, these reforms ameliorated the most superficial deficiencies but did not dismantle the primary market logic, as shown by the intact dual structure of FONASA and ISAPREs. As a result, the fundamental problem of unequal access to healthcare services continued, proving that without deeper structural reforms, even well-designed social policies can reinforce the boundaries set by the neoliberal framework rather than overcoming them.

To sum up, the Cuban and Chilean healthcare systems embodied not only contrasting institutional designs but also different philosophies of public welfare. On the one hand, Cuba defended a universalist model grounded in revolutionary ideals. Prioritizing equity and access, even in the context of a deep economic crisis, means that the state assumed full responsibility for the population's health. On the other Chile developed a segmented system where state intervention was limited and healthcare operated along the logic of competition. Hence, Chilean reforms, even with the introduction of AUGE, did not break with the authoritarian tradition. Ultimately, even though both systems tried to respond to their populations' needs, Cuba approached healthcare as a right to be protected at all costs, whereas Chile treated it as a service to be optimized within market constraints.

[51] Gilbert, "Chilean Health Reform and the AUGE Plan," pp. 41-42.
[52] Ibid., p. 45.
[53] Thomas J. Bossert and Pablo Villalobos Dintrans, "Health Reform in the Midst of a Social and Political Crisis in Chile, 2019–2020," *Health Systems & Reform* 6, no. 1 (2020): e1789031-2, https://doi.org/10.1080/23288604.2020.1789031.

3.2.2. Education

In post-Cold War Latin America, education became one of the most useful reading key to understand both state priorities and societal cleavages. This was evident in Cuba and Chile, where schooling mirrored not just a system of knowledge transmission, but also the respective visions.

In the rhetoric of the Cuban Revolution, education – alongside health – occupied a privileged place. According to Pérez, «nowhere was the quest for an egalitarian society more fully attained than than in the area of education»[54]. Indeed, only after two years since the Revolution, in 1961, the Cuban government launched a national literacy campaign, reducing illiteracy sharply within just a few years[55]. The pivotal role of education was many times underlined by Castro. «Without education – stated Fidel– there really can be no revolution. And the Revolution will achieve more progress and more success the more it works in the field of education, the more competent technicians, administrators, teachers, revolutionary cadres, it has. And therein lies the crucial point»[56].

Soon after, education at all levels was made free, universal, and guaranteed by the state. Over the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba expanded its educational infrastructure and developed a decentralized training system for teachers and technical professionals. School programs were tied to «advances of science and technology, the Marxist and Martian ideology, the Cuban progressive pedagogical tradition, and the universal one»[57]. Schools were seen as mechanisms of ideological formation, where it was possible to develop the basis of what Fidel called *conciencia*. The 1976 Constitution crystallized this approach in Article 39, particularly in paragraph (b):

[54] Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 273.
[55] Ibid., p. 251.
[56] «*Es que, sin educación, realmente no puede haber Revolución. Y la Revolución alcanzará tanto más avance y tanto más éxito, cuanto más trabaje en el campo de la educación, cuantos más técnicos competentes, hombres, administradores competentes, maestros, técnicos, cuadros revolucionarios, tenga. Y en eso está lo fundamental*». Fidel Castro, *Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura del Congreso Nacional de Alfabetización, en el Teatro "Chaplin", el 5 de septiembre de 1961*, accessed April 17, 2025, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-la-clausura-del-congreso-nacional-de-alfabetizacion-en-el-teatro
[57] «[The state] bases its educational and cultural policy on the advances of science and technology, the Marxist and Martian ideology, the Cuban progressive pedagogical tradition, and the universal one». Ibid.

> Education is a function of the State, and free of charge. It is based on the conclusions and contributions of science, and on the closest relationship between study and life, work, and production.
>
> The State maintains an extensive system of grants for students, and provides multiple facilities for study for workers, so that they may reach the highest possible levels of knowledge and skills.
>
> The law specifies the formation and structure of the national system of education, as well as the scope of compulsory schooling, and defines the basic general training that every citizen must acquire, as a minimum[58].

During the harsh years of the *Período Especial*, although the decline in education spending[59], the Cuban government implemented innovative solutions. Early childhood education was preserved through community-based programs such as *Educa a tu Hijo*, a non-school modality that engaged families and local networks[60]. However, the crisis triggered a loss of qualified teaching staff who migrated toward better-paying sectors. Indeed, between 1993 and 1999, 8% of teachers left education for tourism[61]. Textbooks were scarce, teachers underpaid and overburdened, and classrooms overcrowded, especially in Havana where some classes held up to 50 students. While Cuba once printed over 50 million schoolbooks annually, this number dropped to 19 million, triggering chronic shortages[62]. To address these issues, the government created brigades of young teachers who maintained continuity in primary and secondary education. The *Escuelas de Formación de Maestros Emergentes* were also established in Havana. Thus, Cuba made an incredible effort to preserve the *logros* of the revolution in the education field[63].

Despite the obstacles of the 1990s, Cuba managed both to preserve its educational system and to strengthen it in the following years, making it one of the most admired in the Global South. The government's reinforced public investment, allocating 10-11% of GDP to education in 2000 – one of the highest in the world at the time [64]. In addition, it reached one of the highest

[58] *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, art. 39.
[59] State expenditure in education decreased of 18%. Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 59.
[60] Bell Lara, Caram León, y López García, *Cuba. Periodo Especial*, p. 28.
[61] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!*, p. 59.
[62] Zanatta, *Fidel Castro. L'ultimo re cattolico*, p. 171.
[63] Bell Lara, Caram León, y López García, *Cuba. Periodo Especial*, p. 28.
[64] UNESCO, *Education for All: The Quality Imperative* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2004), p. 51.

literacy and school enrolment rates in Latin America, with illiteracy near zero by the early 2000s and almost universal access to both primary and secondary education[65].

From Castro's perspective, education was «an essential antidote against human tragedy and social disaster»[66], a belief that has always guided Cuban policy and explains its success in education. These accomplishments were not only the result of state investment or centralized planning, but also of the social prestige of the teaching profession and the collective commitment of communities.

Figure 27: A group of Cuban children gather at the entrance of their primary school in Havana, beneath a plaque of Lenin—symbolizing how Cuban education, while widely accessible, has long been a vehicle for ideological indoctrination under the revolutionary state. (Photo by Adalberto Roque / AFP via Getty Images)

However, this official narrative often masked the growing contradictions of the Cuban education system. While Castro continued to praise the revolutionary school model and its role in forging the new Cuban, reality told a more complex story. For instance, the use of television as a substitute for qualified instructors – publicized by Castro as an exceptional educational innovation – reflected more the urgency of improvisation than genuine pedagogical reform. As Zanatta notes, the system was increasingly dogmatic, relying on old ideological notions while failing to prepare students with skills for economic development[67].

[65] Ibid.
[66] Katiuska Blanco Castiñeiro, "Fidel, el monte en la piel," in *Yo soy Fidel: Pensamiento y legado de una inmensidad histórica*, ed. John Saxe-Fernández (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), p. 39.
[67] Zanatta, *Fidel Castro. L'ultimo re cattolico*, pp. 171-172.

In contrast, Chile's education system became one of the most neoliberal in the world, reflecting the measures introduced under Pinochet. In particular, in 1981 the military government passed an education reform. The latter, analysed by Martin Carnoy, modified the entire landscape. As part of a broader decentralization effort, the reform transferred decision-making authority from the national government to municipalities, allowing private schools to compete directly with public ones[68]. Additionally, it introduced a national voucher scheme: public funding was given to every student, who can use it at both private and public schools. The voucher plan was originally proposed by Milton Friedman, and it was designed to introduce market dynamics into public education by granting families vouchers to spend at the school of their choice – public or private. The goal was to enhance school quality, reduce public spending, and booster competition in education. Friedman's model has since influenced education reforms in several countries – such as Chile and Sweden – seeking to balance budget constraints with demands for higher educational standards. Through it, education was reframed as a consumer choice rather than a public right[69].

Several were the consequences on Chilean society. Public expenditure on education declined from 3.9% to 2.9% of GDP, and voucher real value diminished, meaning that wealthier municipalities were able to allocate significantly more funding to their public schools compared to poorer ones[70]. Similarly, parents in affluent areas who opted for private education could afford to supplement the state voucher with additional fees, a possibility more limited for low-income families. Thus, access to high-quality education became dependent on family income and location. Moreover, it triggered a major shift in school enrolment trends. In 1979, 82% of students attended public schools and only 14% were enrolled in private ones. By 1994, enrolment in municipal schools has dropped to 57% , while private schools rose to 34.5[71].

With the return to democracy, *Concertación* governments preserved the existing framework, also because of the limited policy arena they had, focusing on technical improvements rather than structural transformation. Notwithstanding their inefficiency, the policies increased public education spending, expanded grants and credit systems for university students, and launched of targeted programs for disadvantaged schools, such as the *Programa de Mejoramiento de la*

[68] Martin Carnoy, "National Voucher Plans in Chile and Sweden: Did Privatization Reforms Make for Better Education?" *Comparative Education Review* 42, no. 3 (August 1998): p. 317, accessed April 18, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1189163.
[69] Ibid., p. 309.
[70] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 91.
[71] Carnoy, "National Voucher Plans in Chile and Sweden," p. 318.

Calidad y Equidad en Educación (MECE) and *P900*. These programs' objective was to reduce the achievement gap by channelling resources toward the most underperforming schools, especially in marginalized areas. Furthermore, the creation of the *Estatuto Docente* codified teachers' working conditions and re-established a framework for their labor rights and professional development, re-legitimating their profession, which had been heavily undermined during the dictatorship[72].

In the early 2000s, despite the democratic transition and attempts to reduce inequality, the structure of the Chilean educational system remained quite the same. On the one side, some of the above-mentioned improvements were achieved; on the other, these reforms failed to tackle the root causes of inequality and educational stratification. Education was widely perceived as a service, whose students were effectively excluded from quality education, not because of formal barriers, but because of spatial, financial, and symbolic constraints. As the OECD itself confirmed in its 2011 report, Chile had become the most educationally segregated among OECD countries, with school composition mirroring class and cultural divisions. Students from low-income families were often confined to under-resourced schools with peers from similar backgrounds, lacking exposure to broader social networks or academic opportunities[73]. According to Bellei, Valenzuela, and De los Ríos, Chile's education showed signs of *hipersegregación*: the Duncan dissimilarity index for the poorest 30% of students was 0.54 at the fourth grade and 0.50 at the secondary level[74].

This tension erupted in 2006 with *Huelga de Pingüinos* or Penguin Revolution: the movement takes its name from the black-and-white school uniforms worn by Chilean secondary students, which resembled the appearance of penguins. This visual identity became a powerful and unifying symbol of the mobilization, through which free bus passes were demanded, at least initially. Students organized themselves in the Metropolitan High School Student Assembly, founded on direct participation and pluralism. Then, their claim expanded, and thousands of students demanded free and quality public education, as well as the end of

[72] Guy Burton, "Hegemony and Frustration: Education Policy Making in Chile under the Concertación, 1900–2010," *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 4 (July 2012): p. 39, accessed April 18, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23239005.
[73] OECD, *Lessons from PISA for the United States: Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en.
[74] Cristián Bellei, Juan Pablo Valenzuela, and Danae De los Ríos, "Segregación Escolar en Chile," in *Fin de ciclo*, ed. Sylvia Martinic and Gregory Elacqua (Santiago: UNESCO and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2010), p. 216.

fees to take university's exams[75]. The movement began with peaceful demonstrations that escalated into unrest. Students seized hundreds of schools, including prestigious institutions such as the *Instituto Nacional* and involving over 250 schools, universities such as the *Universidad de Chile* and the *Pontificia Universidad Católica*[76]. Among the principal leaders were German Westhoff, César Valenzuela, Juan Carlos Herrera and María Jesus Sanhueza[77]. The latter also featured in the documentary *One Fine Day*, directed by Klaas Bense, which highlighted how both individual and collective initiative could shape national discourse – as exemplified by the 2006 student movement.

Nonetheless, the Penguin movement was important in waking up political engagement in students that had been largely dormant during the transition. To coordinate their action and expand their support's base, they strategically utilized mass media. This approach not only ensured that the public was continuously informed about the movement's developments but also drew significant media attention to their cause. Indeed, according to Cristian Cabalin, by May 2006 media attention on education had surged, with nearly 1,000 articles published in June alone. The students' ability to shape the political agenda marked them as agents of change, and although their immediate impact was limited, their long-term influence was substantial[78]. Consequently, the government, under President Michelle Bachelet, responded by renouncing aspects of the *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza* (LOCE)[79], reorganizing the Ministry of Education, and promising structural reforms[80].

Five years later, the 2011 protests – known as the Chilean Winter in an allusion to the Arab Spring – were conducted by university students and revived demands for the dismantling of the neoliberal education system, stressing the need to strengthen public education and expand access for low-income students. At the front line of this movement were well-known student

[75] Manuel Larrabure and Carlos Torchia, "The 2011 Chilean Student Movement and the Struggle for a New Left," *Latin American Perspectives* 42, no. 5 (September 2015), p. 255.
[76] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 451.
[77] Swarthmore College, "Chilean High School Students Strike to Win Education Reform, 'Penguin Revolution,' 2006," Global Nonviolent Action Database, accessed May 5, 2025, https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/chilean-high-school-students-strike-win-education-reform-penguin-revolution-2006.
[78] Peter M. Siavelis, "From a Necessary to a Permanent Coalition," in *Democratic Chile: The Politics and Policies of a Historic Coalition, 1990–2010*, ed. Kirsten Sehnbruch and Peter M. Siavelis (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), pp. 223-224.
[79] The *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza* (LOCE), enacted by Augusto Pinochet on March 10, 1990, designed to institutionalize the neoliberal education model in Chile. The law promoted the privatization of schooling and enabled public funding for private institutions through a voucher-based system. Cfr. "*Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza," Universidad de Chile, https://uchile.cl/presentacion/normativa-y-reglamentos/ley-organica-constitucional-de-ensenanza (accessed April 2025).*
[80] Collier and Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808–2002*, p. 451.

leaders such as Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, and Gabriel Boric, who served as president of the University of Chile's student union. Under their leadership, education turned into a central topic of national political debate[81].

Figure 28: Chilean students march through the streets of Santiago on May 11, 2016, protesting the slow pace of education reform (Photo by Martin Bernetti / AFP via Getty Images).

The resonance of these movements culminated in the *estallido social* of October 2019, a wave of national protests triggered by a rise in metro fares but rooted in long-standing discontent and inequalities, many of which had already been denounced by previous student mobilizations. The complaints raised during the Penguin Revolution and the 2011 Chilean Winter re-emerged with greater intensity. Protesters demanded a more inclusive and equitable social contract, making education one of the central pillars of it. Gabriel Boric, one of the key figures of the 2011 student movement, became a symbol of this generational continuity when he was elected president in 2021, embodying the maturation of demands that originated in classrooms and student assemblies[82].

[81] Larrabure and Torchia, "The 2011 Chilean Student Movement," p. 261.
[82] Jon Lee Anderson, "Can Chile's Young President Reimagine the Latin American Left?" The New Yorker, June 13, 2022, accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/13/can-chiles-young-president-reimagine-the-latin-american-left

Figure 29: Protesters gather in Santiago's Plaza Baquedano during the Estallido Social on November 1, 2019. The demonstration features prominently the Mapuche flag alongside the Chilean one, symbolizing the convergence of social and Indigenous demands for justice and recognition.
(Photo by Jeremias Gonzalez/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Hence, these mobilizations made clear that Chile's model had failed to deliver equality of opportunity to its youth – an issue that subsequently gained weight in the debates of the Constitutional Convention. The Fundamental Rights Committee, which addressed education, sought to emphasize its public character and universal accessibility. Nevertheless, after a year of deliberations, the draft for a new Constitution was ultimately rejected in the plebiscite held on September 4, 2022[83].

Thus, the Cuban and Chilean education systems were characterized by two different societal projects and ideological commitments. Cuba, rooted in revolutionary socialism, viewed education as a universal right and a cornerstone of national identity and equality. Its system was centralized, state-funded, and deeply ideological, achieving remarkable literacy rates, widespread access, and a strong sense of public mission despite material constraints — especially during the *Período Especial*.

Chile, by contrast, applied the principles of its neoliberal model, seeing education as a product to sell at the best price. The decentralization and privatization introduced by the dictatorship, and mainly preserved by democratic governments, produced a highly stratified system. Educational outcomes became closely tied to socioeconomic background, generating what scholars have called hypersegregation.

[83] Carmelo Galioto, "Belonging to No One, to Everyone, and for Whom? Learnings from the Disputes about the Public Dimension of Education in Chile's Constitutional Convention," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13537.

Whereas Cuba focused on ensuring broad and equal access to education – sometimes limiting diversity and innovation – Chile emphasized efficiency and individual choice, which led to educational disparities. These contrasting approaches highlight how education can function either as an engine for social integration or as a mechanism that perpetuates existing social divides.

3.2.3. Inequality

The final dimension of comparison – one that also frames the previous analysis of healthcare and education – is inequality, mainly income disparities. Indeed, inequalities both determine access to these social services and indicate ideological and institutional choices. In the two cases of this study, income inequality may be seen as a red thread through which assess the extent to which post-Cold War societies favoured particular groups.

The Cuban government has always aimed at suppressing income inequality through socialist policies, including universal social services and state control over employment. These measures succeeded in maintaining a relatively egalitarian income distribution, with a maximum wage gap of 4.5:1 in 1987[84]. Nevertheless, the *Periodo Especiál* and its consequences triggered an erosion of the 1959 revolution's revolution.

As previously discussed, the policies adopted in response to the crisis divided the economy in two sections. As the U.S. dollar entered in the economy through tourism, remittances and joint venture, income disparities widened between the ones with access to a hard currency and the ones without. By 1995, the income gap between the lowest-paid state workers and top earners in the informal sector had exploded to 829:1[85].

The dollar became salvation for half the population, while the rest was condemned to poverty. According to Zanatta, the societal stratification in Cuba began in that moment: in the second half of the decade, the richest 9.3% earned more than 600 *pesos* a month, while the bottom 19.3% survived on less than 50[86]. This division is also portrayed in cinema, most notably in the already mentioned documentary by Jon Alpert. In one striking scene, the director speaks with a Cuban citizen who contrasts the living conditions of those working in

[84] Mesa-Lago et al., *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies*, p. 335.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Zanatta, *Fidel. L'ultimo re cattolico*, p. 151.

the tourism sector with his own. «In this country – the man says – a tourist is worth more than a Cuban. That's the truth of Cuba»[87].

Graphically, as shown in the World Inequality Database, this phenomenon is illustrated in the severe drop in both average and median income levels between 1990 and 1995.

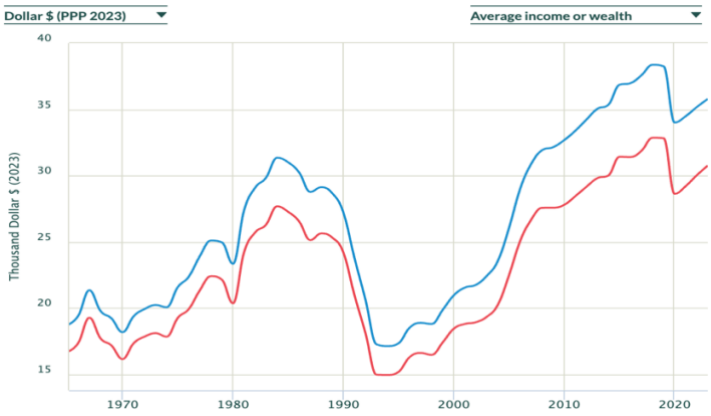

Table 1: Evolution of Average and Median Income in Cuba, 1974–2023.
In red: median income. In blue: mean income (Source: World Inequality Database)

While in the 1980s Cuba had rather maintained egalitarian income levels, by 1993 – the toughest year of the crisis – both indicators reached their lowest point. This divergence is reflected in the gap between the mean and median income curves in the graph: while both fell initially, the blue line – mean income – began to recover slightly before the red – median income – signalling the emergence of a polarization. The mean was being pushed upward by a relatively small group of dollar earners, while most workers remained tied to stagnant *peso* salaries[88].

These economic disparities led also to a gendered, racialized, and spatial fragmentation. A case in point is provided by the rise of *jineterismo* – a combination of informal hustling and sex work involving relationships with foreign tourists – which became common in Havana and other tourist zones[89]. In response to the strong emergence of a sex-tourism industry, Fidel downplayed the reality, labelling *jineteras* as voluntaries and prostitution as a form of

[87] In spanish: «*en este país vale más un turista que un propio ciudadano. Esta es la verdad de Cuba*». *Cuba and the Cameraman*, 1:22:00.
[88] World Inequality Database, "Evolution of Average Income, Cuba, 1974–2023," accessed May 7, 2025, https://wid.world/country/cuba/
[89] Yaffe, *We Are Cuba*!, p. 60.

aggression imposed by the capitalist world. As Zanatta notes, when reality contradicted the revolutionary ethos, the myth was adapted rather than the policy: prostitution was tolerated because it kept many families afloat[90].

Once again, the rupture between revolutionary ideals and everyday realities revealed contradictions. Meanwhile the official narrative continued to portray Cuba as a moral and egalitarian society, the lived experience of many Cubans reflected precarity, and a quiet normalization of informal and unequal survival strategies.

In Chile, the dynamic was in many ways the opposite: rather than seeking to eliminate inequality through socialist planning, from the dictatorship of Pinochet onward, it enacted a market-oriented model that institutionalized inequality as the reverse side of economic liberalization. Once democracy returned, the *Concertación* administration implemented a new set of social policies, which achieved tangible results, particularly in the context of sustained economic growth, as seen in the reduction of unemployment and poverty[91].

However, income inequality persisted and deepened. The share of national income received by the poorest 40% declined slightly, while the income ratio between the richest and poorest quintiles worsened. Although absolute income increased, the relative position of the most vulnerable deteriorated. As for the first case, the World Inequality Database captures graphically the tendency of Chilean inequality. While both indicators increased steadily over the decades, in particular after the return to democracy in 1990, the persistent gap between the mean income and median income lingered.

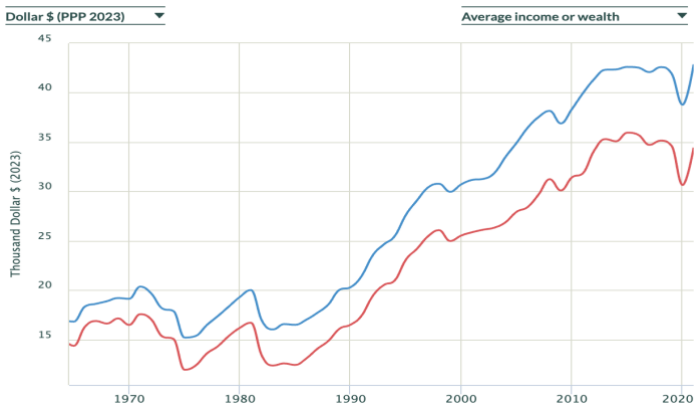

Table 2. Evolution of Average and Median Income in Chile, 1970–2023.
In red: median income. In blue: mean income. (Source: World Inequality Database)

[90] Zanatta, *Fidel. L'ultimo re cattolico*, p. 163.
[91] Vergara, "In Pursuit of 'Growth with Equity,'" p. 210.

From the 1990s, both income indicators grew significantly in real terms, reflecting macroeconomic expansion and declining poverty. Even though, the consistent distance between the two curves indicates that higher-income groups benefited disproportionately – the ones that gained from the economic legacy of Pinochet. The mean income was consistently pulled upward by the wealthiest deciles, while the median, reflective of the avarage Chilean, lagged behind, revealing that the gains of growth were not equally shared[92].

This trend countinued into the new century. In spite of having preserved economic growth and expanded social programs, the Andean country was unable to tackle income inequality. Indeed, as it entered the 2000s, Chile had a Gini index of 52.8%, among the highest in Latin America. Today, despite moderate improvements, Chile remains one of the most unequal countries in the OECD, with the most recent data showing a post-tax-and-transfer Gini coefficient of approximately 44%[93]. This underscores the persistence of structural inequalities in Chilean society, notwithstanding the overall socioeconomic progress.

Moreover, inequality in Chile has been the common denominator of all the unrest that crossed the country in these years, culminating in the above-mentioned *Estadillo Social*, when students and workers jointed together and took the streets demanding structural reforms, including a new social contract and a new constitution. The slogan *«No son 30 pesos, son 30 años»* captured the most the collective frustration over three decades of economic growth that failed to deliver social justice[94].

[92] World Inequality Database, "Evolution of Average Income, Chile, 1970–2023," accessed May 7, 2025, https://wid.world/country/chile/

[93] World Bank, "Gini Index (World Bank Estimate) – Chile," *World Development Indicators*, accessed May 8, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CL-OE

[94] Madeleine Reeves, "Comrades with Benefits: Ideals, Solidarities, and Ambivalences in the Making of a Cuban Medical Internationalism," *Sociologica* 17, no. 1 (2023): 49–74, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/16817.

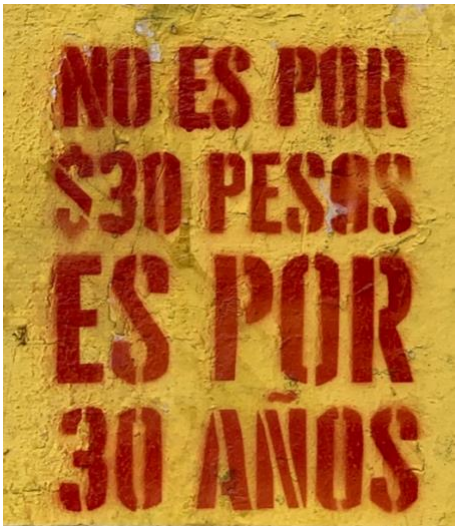

Figure 30: Stencil on Avenida Providencia in downtown Santiago.
Photograph by Terri Gordon-Zolov.

Taken together, the Cuban and Chilean experiences reveal how different ideological models – socialist on one side and neoliberal on the other – produced distinct but persistent forms of inequality in the post–Cold War period. If in Cuba, income disparities emerged as an unintended consequence of economic survival, because of the influx of hard currency, informal labor, and spatial hierarchies, in Chile, inequality was inherent to the democratic transition itself, through the continuity of market-driven reforms and privatized social services. While Cuba's inequalities were tolerated in silence due to the presence of the revolutionary regime, those of Chile became increasingly contested, culminating in mass mobilizations that demanded a new social pact.

To conclude, the comparative analysis suggests that neither socialist egalitarianism of Havana nor neoliberal economic growth of Santiago is sufficient alone to guarantee equality: what matters is the political determination and institutional capacity to redistribute not only resources but also power in effective ways.

Conclusion

As this thesis has attempted to underline, the cases of Cuba and Chile offer two examples of different trajectories in the same geographic area and timeline, each one shaped by it own ideology and historical experiences. Despite their differences, both nations faced the challenge to find a place in a new order, after the end of the Cold War: a world characterized by neoliberal hegemony and global economic integration.

Cuba, unexpectedly, did not collapse. Deprived of its Soviet lifeline and drowned into a severe economic crisis, Havana lived one of the most dramatic social and political chapters of its revolutionary history, justifying, even if limited, transformations and adaptations. However, the Special Period exposed the fragility of Cuba's model, forcing the government to impose pragmatic economic reforms while trying to preserve the ideological heart of the Revolution. What emerged was not a transition to capitalism, as many international scholars had anticipated, but a blended system: selectively open to the global market yet grounded in socialist values. But what is the price of this resilience? An elevated one: severe shortages, growing inequality, increased emigration, and deep personal sacrifices suffered by the population throughout the 1990s and beyond. The survival of socialism, though it may be a political victory, it was a human and social struggle.

Chile, in turn, was widely acclaimed as a success story, a country that had achieved what few others had: a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy and astonishing economic records for the region. At the same time, this narrative covered up a more complex reality. The legacy of Pinochet's authoritarian neoliberalism continued, enshrined in the nowadays presence of 1980 Constitution and in the foundations of the Chilean economy and society. While poverty declined and democracy was restored, inequality deepened, and large segments of society remained excluded from the benefits of expansion. Still today, Chile remains among the most unequal countries of OECD. The continuing presence of military influence, the limits to institutional reform, and the resistance to redistributive change left unhealed wounds that resurfaced decades later. The massive social uprisings that shook Santiago, starting from the Penguin revolution, passing through the Chilean Winter, until the *Estadillo social* in 2019, were the eruption of frustrations long silenced, proofs that the Chilean transition, while peaceful, was far from being completed.

Hence, the post-Cold War period revealed not only the expensive resilience of Cuba's revolutionary project, but also the fragility of Chile's democratic consensus. Both countries' study demonstrates that the end of bipolarity did not produce a singular path toward global convergence, as Fukuyama would argue, but rather gave rise to contested and divergent models of survival and transformation. In addition, the result of this thesis suggests that neither socialist egalitarianism nor neoliberal economic model alone are sufficient to guarantee equitable outcomes. Thus, decisive is ability of politicians and institutions of redistributing power and resources in meaningful ways: lessons that remain crucial for both states as they continue to face the pressures of a still unequal and unstable society.

Executive Summary

This thesis offers a comparative analysis of Cuba and Chile's political and economic paths following the end of the Cold War, analysing how each country responded to the collapse of the bipolar system in 1989. Through a historical-institutionalist approach, it evaluates the roots, the economic and political reforms, and the social outcomes that followed in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The first chapter reconstructs the background up to the 1990s. It examines Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union and its role in international socialist solidarity, alongside the impact of U.S. hostility. Parallelly, it analyses Chile's transformation under Pinochet's dictatorship, the imposition of neoliberalism, and the subsequent transition to democracy through the 1988 referendum, highlighting the role of civil society and institutional fractures during democratization. The second chapter focuses on the aftermath of the Cold War. The collapse of the USSR triggered Cuba's "Special Period," an economic crisis that forced pragmatic adaptations without abandoning socialism. The chapter also addresses Cuba's renewed internationalism through alliances with Venezuela and ALBA. In contrast, Chile entered the 1990s by consolidating neoliberal policies within a democratic framework, achieving macroeconomic growth but also reproducing inequalities and carrying the legacy of state violence. The third chapter compares both countries' responses. It identifies institutional continuities and ruptures, economic model adaptations, and their implications for the population. Central areas such as healthcare, education, and inequality are considered to highlight how each system addressed social needs under differing ideological premises. Cuba maintained universal social services despite economic hardships, while Chile experienced significant disparities due to market-based reforms, especially in education and health.

The conclusion argues that Cuba and Chile, despite opposite ideological paths, both reveal the limits of their respective systems. Cuba's resilience came at high human cost; Chile's democratic success masked structural fragilities. Neither socialism nor neoliberalism alone proved capable of ensuring equitable outcomes.

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