

Staying Alive: 1970s Southern Cone Exiles in the UK

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This article seeks to contribute to the study of the 1970s dictatorships in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay by looking at one specific aspect of those regimes: exile. It considers exile in the UK, a host country on which research is limited, and claims that the fundamental political ideas that had inspired these exiles did not vanish but were variously reshaped, depending on changing political circumstances, how the exiles interacted with local forms of solidarity, and how they lived through the personal challenges that they experienced during exile.

Keywords: Argentina, Chile, dictatorship, exile, UK, Uruguay.

On 11 September 1973, the Chilean military, led by Commander-in-Chief Augusto Pinochet, overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, establishing a dictatorship that lasted until 1989. Less than three months earlier, on 27 June 1973, the President of Uruguay, Juan María Bordaberry, who was elected in 1971, imposed direct rule by a military junta, signalling the start of the civil-military regime that governed the country until 1985. Three years later, on 24 March 1976, a military junta took power in Argentina. The military ruled there until 1983.

Despite some differences between these three Southern Cone military governments, they all came to be known for the unprecedented harshness of their repression. They targeted both real and perceived political enemies and perpetrated various forms of human rights abuses, including illegal detention, torture, forced disappearance and exile. This article focuses on the last of these – exile.

The far-reaching scope and harshness of repression under these dictatorships meant that people left these countries for various reasons and in manifold ways. Some exiles were deported, but many left because of threats and the general atmosphere of fear, felt even by those not directly involved in politics. Some succeeded in obtaining refugee status, others did not. Given this complexity, this article adopts a broad understanding of exile and considers as exiles those who see their departure as having been triggered by the prevailing oppression. This complexity also means that only estimated figures are available for this exile. Scholars calculate that, in those years, one million people left Chile as exiles (Rebolledo, 2006), while between 300,000 and 500,000 and between 60,000 and 300,000 left Argentina (Yankelevich, 2009) and Uruguay (Fried, 2006) respectively.

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Although these estimates show the considerable size of this exile, research on this aspect of the dictatorships did not take off until the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Until the early 2000s, the scholarly literature on the memory of the dictatorships focused on disappearances and transitional justice (Franco, 2007; Roniger and Sznajder, 2009; Serpente, 2011). But at that time, exiles' voices, which had previously been conveyed mainly through autobiographies and creative expressions (Kaminsky, 1999; Roniger, 2016), began to be the object of a gradually blooming body of more systematic analyses. Pioneering studies in this field were those looking at this exile in Mexico (Yankelevich, 1998, 2002, 2009, 2012; Dutrénit-Bielous, 2001, 2006), and analyses of other host countries soon followed (Markarian, 2005; del Pozo Artigas, 2006; Wright and Oñate Zúñiga, 2007, 2012; Franco, 2007, 2008, 2012; Yankelevich and Jensen, 2007; Roniger, Green and Yankelevich, 2012; Calandra, 2013; Roniger et al., 2018). However, only a few scholars have looked at the UK and they have mostly focused on single Southern Cone countries and specific sub-groups. Noteworthy are the works of Kay (1987) and Gideon (2018), who studied Chilean women exiles; Bayle (2012), who focuses on Chilean academics; and Serpente (2011), who looked at both Chileans and Argentines but included not only exiles but those who left for economic reasons after democratic rule had returned.

This article, by offering a comprehensive picture of Southern Cone exiles in the UK, seeks to plug the gap in the literature and contribute to the study of these exiles that has been expanding in recent years. However, the findings presented here are not expected merely to enrich the repository of empirical information about these exiles' experiences. Since politics was the principle reason for these individuals' exile, the main aim of this research has been to find out how their experiences of exile affected their politics. Adopting this analytical angle means engaging with debates that have only recently begun to be explored in studies of forced migration – those related to political and social mobilisation (Solomos and Però, 2010; Bolzman, 2011; Gideon, 2018; Horst, 2018). The analysis presented here takes into account key insights from this literature – the transnational character of these migrants' politics and the relevance of their agency vis-à-vis their political and historical context – which point to the importance of avoiding generalised views of the 'exile experience' and instead focusing on identifying its nuances and the multiple factors that shape it (Malkki, 1995; Black, 2001; Kushner, 2006; Solomos and Però, 2010).

The article draws on archival research, written testimonies and 40 personal interviews obtained employing the snowball technique – i.e., using referrals made by other interviewees. The interviewees were selected in an attempt to achieve a variety of cases regarding country of origin, gender and pre-exile political involvement. Collecting life stories was functional to the research aim of exploring changes in the politics of exiles as they experienced life in a new society. The use of interviews to collect these stories allowed for the establishment of a dialogue that both made it possible to gather insights into how exiles themselves give meaning to their experiences and helped to reveal unexpected aspects of their stories (Bornat, 2008). The interviews were conducted in Spanish, in particular because, as Eastmond stresses, 'emotions that may be vital clues to lived experience [...] may be lost or distorted in translation' (Eastmond, 2007: 260).

The research shows that although the fundamental ideas that guided the exiles' political and social commitment before exile are still alive, they have been reshaped in manifold ways. The particularities of exile in the UK, including the country's solidarity networks and the political context at the time, as well as the ways in which exiles with different backgrounds related to the former and adjusted emotionally and practically

to life in this country, were key in this reshaping. As recent reflections on the study of forced migrants' politics maintain (Solomos and Però, 2010), not only the institutional context but myriad other factors – ranging from an atmosphere of solidarity to the exiles' emotions – influenced the way in which these exiles' politics were rearticulated. Yet, unlike some views of exile that stress their vanguardist political subjecthood (Horst and Lysaker, 2019), this was not always the case among the exiles interviewed, which underlines how generalisations about exiles are difficult to make. By the early- to mid-1980s, when the political context, both in the UK and in the exiles' countries of origin, was changing, the synergies with the new society that had been generated via participation in support networks became clearer and, together with the exiles' affects, emerged as key factors in their considerations about returning.

The first section of this article focuses on the exiles' departure and their arrival in the UK, highlighting the importance of UK solidarity networks in these processes. The second section deals with the exiles' resettlement in the UK and the different ways in which exiles related to these UK-based networks. The third section looks at the exiles' positions regarding return and the changes in the political context in both the UK and their countries of origin in the early to mid-1980s. The conclusions reflect upon the implications of these findings for current debates in forced migration studies.

The Path to the UK

During the last dictatorships in the Southern Cone, many factors led to people leaving their countries. In Chile, the regime initially gave some the option of going into exile. Many had an 'L' stamped in their passports upon departure, indicating that they were listed as *personae non gratae* in their homeland (Sznajder and Roniger, 2007). But many others left these countries due to the repressive climate generated by the regimes. Some had had their houses raided, others had been in prison or illegally detained, or had friends who had disappeared. Some left because of the certainty that someone would have mentioned their names under torture or because they became aware of the existence of secret blacklists – in Uruguay citizens were grouped into A, B and C categories, with those in C considered subject to immediate detention if found (Schelotto, 2015). For several, it was impossible to find a job after having been dismissed following the coup or to continue their studies after universities were closed down. Many lacked the money for a trip or knew they might be caught before they could escape. In Argentina it had been possible to choose the constitutional 'option to leave', which allowed people to exchange political imprisonment for exile, but after the coup, as the dictatorship refuted claims that political prosecution was occurring, its position was that there was no need for anyone to request this option (Yankelevich, 2009). So leaving was entirely a matter of taking the risk and escaping.

It emerged from the interviews that arrival in the UK was generally preceded by 'serial exile', something Sznajder and Roniger, Green and Yankelevich (2012) identified as a distinctive feature of this exile, as most of the Southern Cone exiles tended to move from country to country before settling down or returning. Neighbouring countries were the initial destination of many exiles interviewed, but political developments in the region significantly shaped their trajectories within it. After the coup in Chile, both Chileans and Uruguayans – who, escaping increasing repression, had flown to Chile in 1970 after socialist Salvador Allende had won the presidential elections – regarded Argentina as a suitable option. But after the 1976 coup there, Chileans and Uruguayans found

themselves trapped in a country where Plan Condor, created to provide cross-border security collaboration between the region's military regimes, was making its presence strongly felt (interviews, anonymous 1, 2018 and anonymous 2, 2018). One Uruguayan exile who later came to the UK describes the uncertainty felt there:

[...] while you were in Uruguay you were part of a network and you knew more or less who was detained, and one could take precautions. But in Buenos Aires you did not have the same information. (Interview, anonymous 3, 2014)

Most interviewees remarked on the random character of the path that brought them to the UK. The efforts of relatives and close friends, connections made during serial exile, information exchanged while in detention and even casual encounters are recalled as critical in setting off the chain of events that led them to the UK. An Argentine exile interviewed, for example, commented it was a couple of English friends he had made while on holiday in Patagonia who helped him out of both prison and the country. A Chilean exile explained she was given an address on a piece of paper by an unknown person and only once in the UK did she learn that this was the location of *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*, an organisation that back then was liaising with international organisations to help those in danger in Chile.

Indeed, underpinning these diverse stories was a network of UK-based organisations working to help those in danger in the Southern Cone, Chileans especially. Two organisations were key in the development of this network: *Academics for Chile* and the *World University Service (WUS)*. The former, created soon after the coup in Chile by a group of British academics, campaigned to bring to the UK Chilean academics who were at risk of or in detention, offering them the opportunity to pursue further university studies (Bayle, 2012; interview with Martin, 2018). As the organisation encountered difficulties in obtaining funds, it approached WUS, which had existed in the UK since the inter-war years and, in 1973, WUS launched a scholarship programme for Chilean refugees. In 1974, the Labour Party came to power in the UK and soon afterwards the government's Ministry of Overseas Development reallocated development aid funds for Chile to support this programme (Phillips, 2010) and started to grant visas and political asylum to Chileans.

In the context of a British left inspired by the social movements of the late 1960s (interview with Pearce, 2018), these initial efforts were coupled with the work of many other civil society actors. Key among these were human rights committees, linked usually to Amnesty International and supported by the World Council of Churches; local solidarity campaigns, organised around the Chile Solidarity Campaign initially; and the Joint Working Group for Chile (JWG), backed by British trade unions. Local authorities and individuals in general also supported these networks and provided different forms of assistance, including practical and moral support for the exiles' adaptation to the new society (interview with Thomson, 2014). For instance, the JWG helped with airport arrivals, local councils assisted with finding housing, and individuals adopted political prisoners to campaign for their release. Letters sent by exiles to WUS show that support went far beyond academic or subsistence needs; these communications refer to issues ranging from persistent concerns about the ability to communicate in English to emotional matters such as coping with suicide, domestic violence and childcare (Warwick Modern Records Centre, n.d., boxes 1–4 [790]).

This network worked well in helping Chileans, but Argentines and Uruguayans benefited less from these initiatives. It was more difficult for them to obtain visas or

refugee status and this significantly limited their access to these schemes and to government services. In part, this was because it was easier for the British public to understand, along the traditional axis of left and right, how a democratically elected left-wing president – Allende – had been overthrown by a dictatorship. In contrast, most of the Argentinean exiles identified with Peronism, a movement in which the divide between left and right is blurred, so garnering support for these exiles was more challenging. The difficulties for Uruguayans were more straightforward – their chances of gaining support were jeopardised by the fact that in 1971 the armed left-wing group, *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Tupamaros* (MLNT, *Tupamaros National Liberation Movement*), held the British ambassador hostage for eight months.

Among these UK-based networks, Amnesty and its human rights committees were the organisations that helped Argentinean and Uruguayan exiles the most. Through its political prisoners adoption programme, which required the active involvement and support of the wider UK population, Amnesty was crucial in tracing the disappeared and putting pressure on the dictatorships to either release them or legalise their detention. For example, the English friends who helped the Argentine exile mentioned earlier (interview, anonymous 12) were part of a human rights committee in Camden, London. In the case of Uruguayans, all of the interviewees mentioned some form of participation in Amnesty's activities, ranging from voluntary work to employment as researchers.

Several commonalities with the Southern Cone exile elsewhere have been observed in this section. For instance, as the dictatorships' repression was widespread, exiles' backgrounds and ways of arriving at the site of exile were varied, Chilean exiles were highly successful in garnering support (Wright and Oñate Zúñiga, 2007), and the Uruguayan exiles tended to establish relationships with human rights organisations because they adopted the human rights discourse to raise international awareness (Markarian, 2005). Additionally, in the UK, as in most Western countries that hosted Southern Cone exiles, multiple solidarity and human rights groups emerged to help them (Sznajder and Roniger, 2007).

However, in the UK the support organisations were not initially backed by the government, as was the case in Sweden (Canelo, 2007) and Mexico (Yankelevich, 2009) for instance. Furthermore, they started to take shape before the first exiles arrived, unlike in host countries such as France (Franco, 2008) and Spain (del Olmo, 2007), where they generally followed the initiative of the exiles themselves. It is noteworthy that the organisation of the reception of the exiles was favoured not so much by an auspicious institutional setting but by a general atmosphere of positive attitudes towards solidarity that eventually led to the generation of that institutional framework, which echoes Però's observations on the multiplicity of factors beyond the institutional structure that shape migrants' politics in general (Però, 2008: 76). It is against this specific backdrop in the UK and in the context of the exiles' own trajectories and forms of experiencing exile that their politics would develop and take different directions after arrival.

From Horror to Freedom?

Once in the UK, staying alive was no longer merely about surviving; it was about adapting to a new life. Finding jobs and somewhere to live, learning a new language and providing for their families became paramount for the exiles; new challenges were emerging from their encounters with a new culture while they were still processing their traumas. Participating in exiles' networks was regarded by many as critical in helping to

cope with trauma and emerging needs. But, as is shown next, how they related to these networks varied according to the characteristics of the networks themselves, the persistence of pre-exile political alignments, and different approach to and priorities within life in exile.

Unlike many accounts of exile that focus on loss and trauma, the interviewees placed particular emphasis on the impressions of freedom they had as they arrived in the UK. As one interviewee put it, the feeling was that they were in '[...] a free land [...] you would not find a military guy on the streets, policemen carrying guns that could take you prisoner at any time' (interview, anonymous 4, 2016). They also stressed the 'warm', 'fabulous', 'incredible' reception extended by university teachers and the communities in which they went to live. The teachers' generosity can be seen in the archives examined, which show cases of exiles who were given additional opportunities to sit exams or retake courses when language was a problem (Warwick Modern Records Centre, boxes 1–4 [790]). Access to the British welfare system further enhanced feelings of being welcome. For some, this represented the system they had been fighting for in their own countries (interview with anonymous 5, 2015) or that had had a direct positive impact on their lives. After six years of partial blindness caused by torture, one of our interviewees had eye surgery free of charge: 'I will never forget when they took the bandage off and I could see with both eyes' (interview, anonymous 6, 2017). Scholars have referred to these feelings associated with exile as an experience of a 'new beginning' that gives hope and encourages political action (Horst and Lysaker, 2019).

And yet, at the same time, all the interviewees remarked that they had to reconstruct their lives against a backdrop of trauma and uncertainty. They carried the burden of having left family and friends in danger and of abandoning careers and dreams. Many also bore indelible marks inflicted by prison or torture, and others were coping with the disappearance of close relatives. For some, talking about this past is still painful and memories are hard to recall. One exile admitted to still having difficulties remembering the time when she was kidnapped and she left her son with her neighbours: 'all that part is blurred, I still have issues with that period' (interview, anonymous 7, 2017). For others, coming to the UK meant curtailing both political and life projects. One interviewee explained how she still looks back and wonders: 'how I ended up distorting so much my dreams, my past, to arrive in this sinister place, so far away from everything [...] Because this wasn't what I wanted to do in my life' (interview, anonymous 8, 2014).

Settling in the UK entailed learning a new language and reconsidering gender roles and social class assumptions, which generated additional feelings of uncertainty. Some of the interviewees still experience uneasiness with the English language: 'the worst thing that happened to me, after the coup, is not being able to communicate as I would like to in this country' (interview, anonymous 4, 2016). However, women were generally the first to learn English because they needed the language to perform traditional household roles, such as attending school meetings and arranging doctors' appointments. This contributed to the erosion of assumed gender roles among the exiles noted also in the studies by Kay (1987) and Gideon (2018). Men took longer to learn English and this affected their chances of finding a job and further displaced them from their assumed role as head of family. The women interviewed stressed how in this period they found an inner strength they were not aware they had. However, different interviewees recalled how these challenges to the established roles led to separation and divorce, adding to the traumatic exile experience.

Furthermore, having the possibility of accessing welfare services was an improvement on their previous standard of living for some exiles but for others this meant a

sharp fall from their privileged life as members of wealthy and well-educated elites, which further challenged largely unquestioned markers of their identities (interview with anonymous 9, 2017). Concerns about the quality of housing, for instance, emerge from several letters sent by exiles to WUS (Warwick Modern Records Centre, boxes 1–4 [790]). Additionally, since the availability of accommodation was dependent on universities, local councils, trade unions and individuals in support networks (interview with Hutchinson, 2013), the exiles tended to be geographically dispersed and subject to subsequent moves after arrival, for instance after finishing university studies or because they wanted to move near friends to find jobs (interviews with anonymous 10, 2014, anonymous 11, 2017 and anonymous 7, 2014). The exiles' instability and sense of isolation was exacerbated by this geographical dispersion, and this was also an issue for other refugees coming to the UK at that time (Robinson and Hale, 1989).

Taking part in the various UK-based support networks that continued to expand was experienced by most of the exiles as a way of coping with the difficulties in adjusting to a new society, an opportunity to stay in touch with their own cultures, and a means of keeping political projects alive. The transnational character of their activities was inextricably linked to the host society, not only because the networks had originally been developed by and had the active participation of UK-based individuals but also because the exiles themselves regarded them as helping with their integration. As has been well documented in studies of exile in other host countries, these organisations' activities comprised not only help to enable the exiles to operate in a new society but also more political activities, such as raising awareness of the dictatorships, collecting funds for the cause and helping those prosecuted in their home countries. The activities were usually organised around cultural events in which South American food, music and dance were central (Yankelevich and Jensen, 2007; Roniger, Green and Yankelevich, 2012). A number of interviewees stressed the importance of dance and music both in keeping them in touch with their roots and in reaching the British public. Where integration was concerned, it went beyond these activities; for instance, the Uruguayans interviewed remarked that they felt they started to integrate into British society while doing voluntary and translation work for Amnesty.

But the level and form of involvement in these networks varied significantly between individuals, especially in relation to three interconnected factors: first, the UK networks' own political positions and connections, which appealed differently to different exiles; second, pre-exile politics, which continued to matter in exile; and third, entrenched divisions, which made some exiles distance themselves from these networks.

The UK-based networks that developed to support these Southern Cone exiles were very closely, though informally, connected, but there was a tacit, albeit apparent, division between solidarity and human rights groups. The human rights committees and their related organisations, such as the churches and Amnesty International, were regarded as more neutral and less political; conversely, the solidarity campaigns and organisations such as the trade unions were seen as linked to a greater extent to more radical parties and movements (interview with Caistor, 2017). The exiles who had been part of revolutionary movements and were interested in continuing their militant work in exile preferred to be part of the latter. One of the Argentinean exiles explained that while he participated in the Argentinean Human Rights Campaign he did not get very involved in Amnesty's work because the organisation was 'let's say "neutral" [...] and we, back then, had more people "from the other side"' (interview, anonymous 12, 2016).

In most cases it was clear to the whole exile community with which party or movement from the country of origin these groups were aligned. According to one Chilean

interviewed: 'as soon as there was a significant group-size everyone separated into their own party' (interview, anonymous 13, 2014). Each of these found support from different sectors in the British political landscape, ranging from Trotskyist groups through trade unions to academics. In the case of Argentines, although the exile community was smaller, in the UK a relatively large number of them had been actively involved in either Montoneros or the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, People's Revolutionary Army). Initially, solidarity with Argentinean exiles was organised around the Argentinean Support Group, established in 1975 (Livingstone, 2018; interview with Wright, 2017). Founded following a trip to Europe by Juan Gelman, the then Press Secretary of Montoneros, the group's focus was on garnering support for exiles' political struggles back home (interview with Roper, 2017) and so was the first point of contact for many of these exiles.

But while participating in these networks gave the exiles the opportunity to continue with and give new life to their political projects, for some the challenge of changing countries meant that politics had to take a back seat. Some of them completely refrained from participating in these networks' events, while others participated only in more social activities, explaining that they had become disillusioned with other members of their organisations or with the persistence of divisions along party lines.

Having been organised in cells and operating underground meant that in their home countries there had been few opportunities for the exiles to get to know well the movement they were part of. When exile brought these groups closer within a foreign country, some grew disillusioned upon meeting other members. An Argentinean exile commented that she experienced this in Paris before arriving in the UK. She had been part of the secondary students' union limb of Montoneros and when she met the leadership in Paris she realised how far her position was from theirs (interview, anonymous 14, 2014). Others had grown disillusioned with their political groups before departing, so they were cautious when meeting exiles in the UK. One interviewee from Uruguay commented that before leaving the country she heard about plans to reform the Tupamaros at a time when the original leadership was in jail; this made her feel betrayed and led her to distance herself from the organisation. When she arrived in the UK she generally did not get together with other exiles because she 'did not want to get in trouble' (interview, anonymous 15, 2014).

The persistence of divisions was repeatedly mentioned by Chilean exiles in their explanations of why they distanced themselves from exiles' activities. One of them recalled how she did not join in with the activities of the solidarity groups in the area where she lived because the groups were not aligned with the political movement she and her husband had belonged to in Chile (interview, anonymous 8, 2014). Another interviewee saw it differently:

What bothered me was the attitude of Chileans. Because they were all, I don't know ... 'If you are socialist I hang around with you, if you are Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitaria (MAPU, Popular Unitary Action Movement) I hang around with you' [...] I would have participated very willingly and been happy to help, to do a favour to those back there, but with all those divisions [...] it was not possible. The fact that they made it a condition that you had to be member of that party to participate. (Interview, anonymous 10, 2014)

This section has shown that there was considerable variation in the way in which the exiles engaged politically once in the UK. While some continued their participation in

radical political groups, others felt that the pressures of adapting to life in a new society left them with no time for political activities, or they had become disillusioned with politics. So not only did the memories of the first few years in exile include feelings of loss and trauma as well as of freedom and relief, but the forms in which these exiles' politics were rearticulated abroad were also significantly diverse. This highlights that, as others have indicated, the exiles' experience cannot be generalised, not even regarding this specific aspect of how they engage with politics (Solomos and Però, 2010).

Did Exile Kill Politics?

By the early- to mid-1980s, when the British and Latin American political landscapes were undergoing significant changes, both those who had remained more distant from political and social activities related to the exiles' networks and those who had been more actively involved since their arrival reconsidered their politics and its relevance in their lives. Once democracy started to return to the Southern Cone and in the UK the Conservatives replaced the Labour Party in government, the importance of the various forms in which links with the new society had been generated through participation in support networks became clearer and, together with the exiles' affects, emerged as key factors in their considerations about whether to return or remain.

Towards the start of the 1980s, changes in the UK and in the international context affected the political positions of those who had remained more closely linked to the exiles' support networks and committed to their own country causes. Interest in the political situation of the Southern Cone was slowly waning in the UK, as events in other Latin American countries, especially Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution and the subsequent Contra war, gained a more prominent space among the UK's politically committed sectors interested in the region. Thus, it became more difficult for human rights and solidarity groups to fundraise and garner support for these exiles. For instance, the WUS programme officially ended in 1984 but it had been underfunded since 1979, and the JWG was disbanded in the early 1980s (interview with Hutchinson, 2013); Chile Democrático (Democratic Chile), founded later, continued its work but was led primarily by Chileans. This shift was coupled with a Conservative victory in the UK's 1979 General Election, after which the government adopted a restricted approach towards solidarity networks, and, in particular, to one of their key organisations – trade unions. Additionally, the power of the Southern Cone dictatorships began to decline. In the early 1980s, Argentina and Uruguay returned to democratic rule and in Chile repression decreased.

As democracy was returning in the Southern Cone, the dilemma of whether to go back forced exiles to examine closely their family and political priorities. Yet some of them said that they had never considered returning to be an option, which echoes Malkki's point (Malkki, 1995) that the idea that exiles are constantly longing for return is not necessarily accurate. While most interviewees remembered that in the first few years they had always had their suitcases at the ready, in the hope of returning, others say they had been pragmatic and had tried to adapt to the new situation quickly, with a few taking exile as an opportunity to forget about their past. For three Argentineans interviewed, this included a rejection of their country as a whole. One interviewee, who had left at a very young age and had family members among the disappeared, explained that the idea of return was too painful: 'my father saved my life and then lost his' (interview, anonymous 14, 2014). This also meant that her interaction with exile communities was

minimal. She left Paris precisely because she was tired of the nostalgia in these communities – ‘I didn’t want to live in that vale of tears’ – and she found that in London people cared less about where you came from. Another Argentinean interviewed explained how she developed feelings of hatred towards her home country due to the atrocities she had suffered in prison (interview, anonymous 16, 2016). Similarly, another recalled how he experienced a gradual process of disillusionment, which started before his departure and became more concrete during exile:

A situation of huge rejection kicked in, against all that happened to me. I wanted distance [...] a mix of disappointment and almost hate, right? Because I felt that what happened there was not detached from what we are as a nation. Like there was something in Argentina that had produced what happened. So, in reality I actually distanced myself from Argentines [...] (Interview, anonymous 17, 2018)

For one group of exiles, the importance of family and political factors in their decisions to return had already been tested in the late 1970s. Back then there was a politically motivated attempt to return en masse on the part of Montoneros and the Chilean Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement), as a form of counter-offensive. Some exiles in the UK joined this mass return, but many refused for both political and personal reasons, either considering the attempt doomed to failure or having at that point prioritised their families or professional careers. The attempt indeed ended in failure, as those involved were captured or killed immediately on arrival. But not taking part had political consequences, as the movements then expelled these members, considering them traitors and, as in the case of one of our interviewees (interview with anonymous 18, 2018), condemned them to death. This resulted in these exiles refraining from continuing with their political activities.

Family and political factors played a decisive role with regards to returns, even for those who were less involved in politics in exile. When democracy returned to their countries of origin, some interviewees felt that they had spent too many years abroad to return, and they had families and jobs in the UK. In particular, they noted that they did not want to put their children through a similar dramatic experience to the one they had endured when they had to leave their countries (interview with anonymous 4, 2016). This was especially the case with Chileans, since their country’s dictatorship was the longest of the three. But politics also mattered. Some tried to go back and, once there, saw in the societies they encountered how their dreams and political projects had been defeated – their countries led by individuals with no commitment to the ideals that had inspired them – and they decided they did not want their children to grow up in that environment (interviews, anonymous 7, 2014 and anonymous 15, 2014).

Furthermore, after years in the UK, the exiles had not only started families and established themselves in careers but had found new channels for their political ideas. The different forms in which they participated in the exiles’ networks had created important synergies with the host country’s landscape of political and social organisations. Being part of an exile community and the very experience of different forms of political and social participation had various effects in the reshaping of the politics and social engagement, both of those who remained actively involved in politics and those who did not.

For instance, in the early 1980s, as the solidarity networks that had developed to help the South American exiles were directing their attention towards new concerns

in Latin America, several of the exiles became involved in these new activities, widening their horizons beyond concerns with just their own countries. And although the networks' focus on South American politics decreased, the awareness that had been raised during the peak years of exile activities meant that even at the outbreak of the Malvinas/Falklands war between Britain and Argentina it was easy to find UK-based groups with which to protest against the war and the dictatorship, as one interviewee explained (interview with anonymous 6, 2017). Also, for many, the studies they pursued in the UK opened their minds: 'your conscience broadens' (interview, anonymous 10, 2014). Studying development-related subjects was a requirement for accessing WUS scholarships, which contributed to these exiles realising that there was oppression in other places also and many ways in which it could be fought.

The exiles who had held their more radical ideas for longer in exile gradually accepted the defeat of the revolutionary strategy, as in their countries the focus of the opposition to the dictatorships became that of a return to democracy. Some started to regard their previous politics in a different light in exile. One interviewee, for example, stressed that his first-hand experience of how systems of social democracy functioned showed him how democratic coalitions could work in finding progressive solutions (interview with anonymous, 9). For those who established close links with the UK trade unions, this took the form of joining the workers' struggles in the host country (interview with anonymous 19, 2018).

These observations seem to indicate a general de-radicalisation of these individuals' pre-exilic ideas, yet the view of the exiles themselves is that exile did not cause them to change their fundamental convictions but rather helped hone them. Several exiles expressed their disillusionment with politics in general, but most located the cause of their disengagement or political moderation more in the changes in the international context after the fall of the Berlin Wall and their experience of revolutionary politics itself, and not so much in their exile experience. In fact, many stressed that despite the difficulties in adapting to a new culture, including language barriers and challenges to their original markers of identity, they found in the UK fertile ground to continue exploring and experimenting with their political beliefs. Some actually feel not only that their political ideas were reinforced over time but that they stayed more true to them, especially when they compared themselves with those who returned.

Conclusions

This article has considered one aspect of the repression of the 1970s Southern Cone dictatorships: exile. It has sought to contribute, from this angle, to a growing body of literature that is committed to the reconstruction of recent history in these countries, the analysis and memories of which are still controversial and disputed. It has analysed the case of the UK as a host country, which has up to now received little attention from researchers and, since politics was the principal reason the exiles left their countries, the focus has been on how this experience affected their politics. The article has examined the interplay between the emotional and practical challenges of exile and the context of reception in the UK, and the way in which these experiences resonate with current debates in the field of forced migration, in particular the study of these migrants' political and social engagement.

The generally non-linear path that led the exiles from Argentina, Chile and Uruguay to the UK was underpinned by the development of a solidarity network in the host country. Upon arrival, many exiles felt overburdened by trauma and the practical urgencies that adapting to a new culture entailed. For many, this resulted in their distancing themselves from their previous engagement with politics but for others, participation in these networks, even if just in the form of social events, provided them with a space in which to cope with these challenges or to continue with their political projects. Divisions and differentiations in these networks led to further disengagement from politics but also constituted a key factor in how exiles channelled their political ideas in the UK. The diversity and nuances of the different actors that were part of these networks, ranging from academics to revolutionary parties, opened up a variety of avenues for the exiles to reshape their politics.

The findings have shown that while the exile experience in the UK was similar to that in other host countries, there were also distinctive aspects. One salient element was the importance of an atmosphere of solidarity that transcended and preceded the institutional structure that later emerged across civil society and government to support these exiles. This echoes scholars' criticisms of approaches to forced migrants' politics that focus on the importance of institutional opportunities in shaping these politics (Solomos and Però, 2010).

It emerged also that exile and political engagement in this period were experienced in diverse forms. Feelings of loss and trauma were mixed with those of freedom and gratitude, and while for some participating in exiles' network activities was critical to their coping with the difficulties of adapting to a new life or to continuing with their political projects, for others political engagement decreased or was redirected through new channels that did not necessarily concern their own countries. This confirms that the exile experience cannot be encapsulated in universal stages, as Malkki (1995) noted, and at the same time calls for a reconsideration of the type of politics that exile triggers in individuals, which does not necessarily lead to more engagement as some analysts have argued (Horst, 2018; Horst and Lysaker, 2019).

For those who remained more actively engaged, transnational politics was the main pivot around which they were organised. This emphasises that, although this may be facilitated nowadays by recent developments in communication technologies, this is a typical form of politics among exiles than integration with the national politics of the host country (Solomos and Però, 2010). Furthermore, when the exiles' political engagement was redirected away from an exclusive focus on their own countries, only a few of them engaged in UK politics and most continued with a broader interest in international issues.

At present, exiles themselves maintain that their fundamental political convictions remain intact, despite in many cases their having withdrawn from political participation completely. Their view is that they have honed their convictions and adapted their political concerns to different contexts and personal changes. Their politics may have taken myriad forms, but they have stayed alive.

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