CHAPTER TWO

JAMES PETRAS AND THAT ‘LONG PETAL OF WINE, SEA AND SNOW’

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The first time I met Salvador Allende was in 1965 in the bar of the US Senate building. At that time he was a senator, and I was a graduate student writing my doctoral dissertation and was deeply involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the US. Before leaving San Francisco for Chile, the organizers of an upcoming demonstration had asked me to tape an interview with Senator Allende expressing his support for the anti-war movement in the US. Allende’s support was particularly important for the struggle in the US because the mass base of our movement was basically composed of students, middle-class professionals and very few workers. We felt it would be important for morale to have the international support of a leftist presidential candidate who received over a million votes, mainly from the working class, peasants, and the trade unions.

(Petras, 1998)

Although the work of James Petras has encompassed many different countries, it is not farfetched to claim that Chile has decisively shaped both his insights about social processes and commitment to popular struggles; indeed for more than four decades, that ‘long petal of wine, sea and snow’1 called Chile has been at the centre of his formation and maturation as a revolutionary intellectual.

His numerous contributions to our understanding about the interconnected dynamics of capitalist development and class struggles which over the past half century have shaped Chilean society are impressive. However equally admirable is that while engaging in analysis of the highest scholarly and political caliber, Petras has also consistently displayed three traits worthy of emulation, particularly at the present moment. Witnessed at first from afar as a mere student and later observed directly as one of his long-list of collaborators and co-authors, perhaps more than any other living intellectual

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1 Pablo Neruda, “Cuando de Chile.”
James Petras has embodied these three qualities that define activist scholarship:

1. the unfailing courage to submit to ruthless criticism ‘everything under the sun’ even if it means going against the grain of the cherished myths of the ruling elites, mainstream academia and even the Left itself;²
2. a genuine commitment to hear grassroots activists and militants not as ‘data’ but incorporating them into an on-going dialogue as a way of ‘naming the moment’ and defining effective lines of action;
3. a permanent concern with locating specific events transpiring in concrete social formations within the broader development of capitalism on a world scale and the struggle against imperialism, and to do so without reductionism, teleological thinking or loss of finely grained uniqueness of the phenomena studied.

This chapter sketches how these traits have been embedded throughout Chile’s sharply different historical periods into his analysis of the changing interaction among structural transformations, politics, mass mobilizations and class consciousness.³ With different degrees of saliency, one can spot these traits coalescing in his initial study in the late 1960s of the factors behind the crisis of Chile’s old import-substitution industrialization corporatist model of domination and the resulting emergence of class conscious peasants, urban and rural workers and urban squatters. They are present when examining the election of Salvador Allende and transformative aspirations under the brief Popular Unity government of the early 1970s as well as his work on the bloody closure of a pre-revolutionary period through imperialist intervention and state-terror enthusiastically endorsed by Chile’s dominant classes. Later, they re-emerge and are renewed in his writings covering Chile’s long, brutal counter-revolution that laid the foundations for capitalist transformation under the seventeen year-long military dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973–1989). They are

² In his “Letter to Ruge,” written in 1843 when he was only 25 years old, Marx expresses a conviction which was to orient his life, a conviction that James has also lived though his work. Marx’s letter states: “But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”

³ This is a preliminary approximation based on a re-reading of a limited selection of his writings on Chile. A fuller account would entail interviews with James and asking him to reflect on his own personal and intellectual trajectory.