

Project Cybersyn

10.04.16

On September 11, 1973, a military junta violently took control of Chile, which was led at the time by President [Salvador Allende](#). Allende had become president in a free and democratic election. After the military coup, General [Augusto Pinochet](#) took power and ruled Chile as a dictator until 1990.

The military regime dissolved the congress, took control of the media and went about dismantling the socialist and democratic institutions that Allende's government had built.



In the midst of this takeover, the military discovered a strange room in a nondescript office building in downtown Santiago. The room was hexagonal in shape with seven white fiberglass chairs arranged in an inward facing circle.

This “operations room” (or: opsroom) was the physical interface for a complex system called Cybersyn. It was an ambitious project in technology and design meant to help Chile’s socialist economy succeed.

Allende hoped to show the world that Chile’s version of socialism would be different than the communist and socialist experiments in other countries. The constitution would be preserved and the press would not be censored. Civil liberties would be protected. The government began by increasing employment and wages as well as implementing agrarian reforms.

Allende’s biggest challenge (and the challenge of all socialist revolutions generally) was to turn private business into public entities. Eventually, the government took control of around 150 enterprises, including some of the largest companies in Chile.



Chilean workers marching in support of Allende in 1964.

But this enormous takeover presented a problem: the government had to manage all of this new industry, and make sure factories in Chile were able to keep producing enough goods for Chileans to buy.

[Fernando Flores](#), a Chilean advisor to Allende, had an idea for how to

manage the Chilean economy. He wanted to use a relatively new science called Cybernetics.

[Cybernetics](#) began to become popular around WWII. As humans developed new kinds of machines, they became interested in developing systems for controlling those machines. Cybernetics looks at how to design intelligent, self-correcting systems.

In England, in the 1960s, a business consultant named [Stafford Beer](#) was applying concepts of cybernetics to business management. He believed a business could be thought of as an intelligent system. If the goal of a business is to sell more product, or work more efficiently, one could (using the principles of cybernetics) design the system to work toward that goal.

On Cybernetics / Stafford Beer



Flores thought that Stafford Beer could use Cybernetics to help model and manage Chile's economy, and Beer was thrilled at the chance to apply his ideas on such a grand scale. Beer arrived in Chile in 1971 to begin on this project, which they called "Cybersyn."

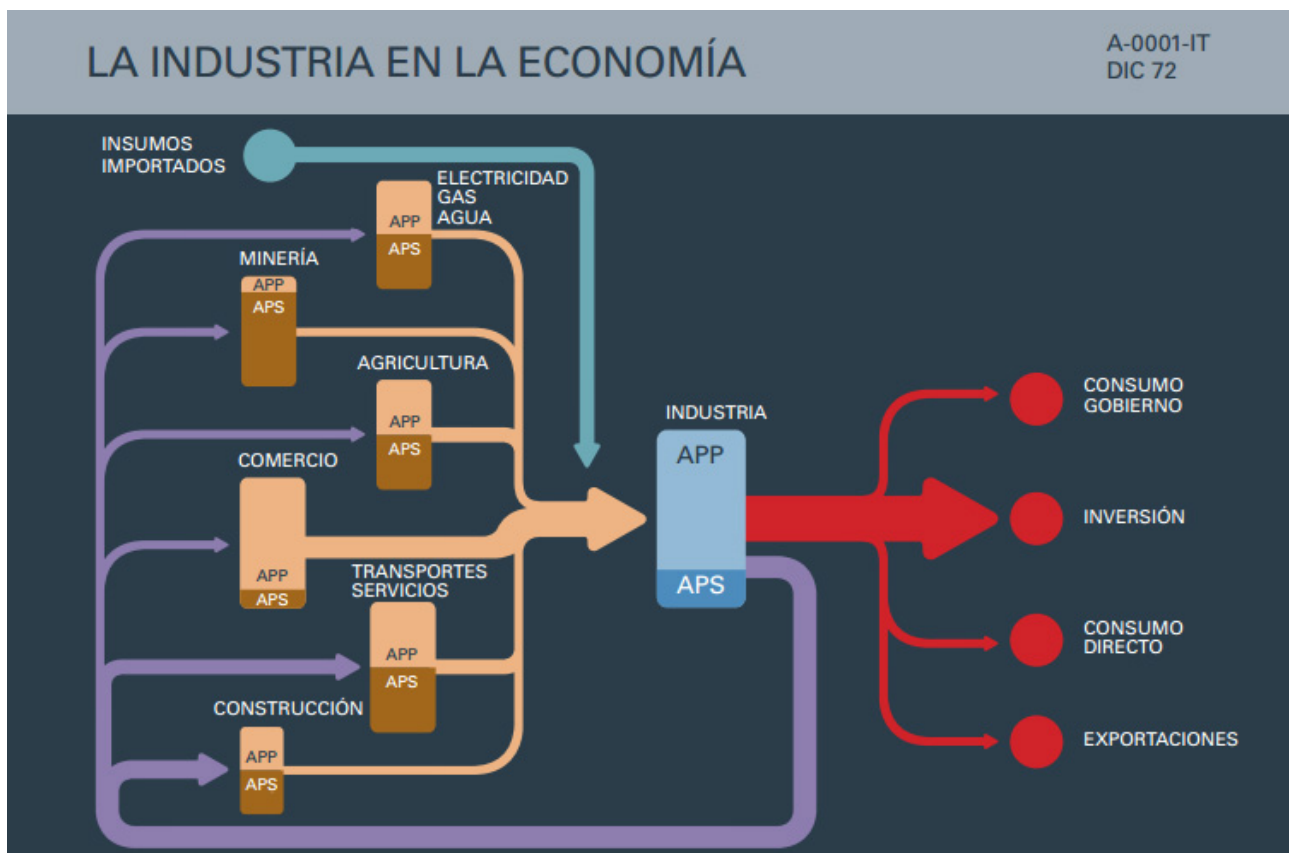


Image used with permission of Gui Bonsiepe

Stafford Beer first set about making a cybernetic model of Chile's economy

that mapped out how all of the different parts of the economy connected within the larger system. Beer also wanted to enable the different parts of the Chilean economy to communicate easily with each other and thought computers could help accomplish this.

Stafford Beer and the team he had assembled set about creating a computer network that would connect all of the factories in Chile. This was a really novel concept for the time, but there was a problem: it was the 1970s—there weren't many computers in Chile. Stafford Beer was only able to get one computer to create his network.

Teletype Model 35ASR



Their solution was to use telex machines. A telex is like a typewriter connected to a phone line. So if one factory had a telex, they could type out a message, and send it to another telex. The messages might contain data about shortages in raw material or how many workers were showing up to their shifts. This data would be entered into the computer and analyzed, and subsequently, decisions could be made about how to address problems.



Image used with permission of Gui Bonsiepe

Stafford Beer also wanted this complex cybernetic system to have a physical interface. And that brings us back to the bizarre hexagonal room discovered in the wake of the government overthrow.



Image used with permission of Gui Bonsiepe

The room, conceived by Beer along with designers from Chile's industrial design group, was meant to be for workers and higher level bureaucrats alike. Each chair had an ashtray, a place for your whiskey glass and a set of buttons that controlled the display screens on the walls.

The room was an immaculate piece of design, but it concealed a clunky technology. The buttons on the chairs were connected to wires in the floor which were connected to slide carousels that displayed pre-made slides. In some ways, the room seemed to anticipate a future that hadn't arrived yet.

While project Cybersyn was coming together, things were not going well for the Allende government. In the midst of the Cold War, with Latin America becoming a battlefield, the U.S. had been actively working with people in Chile that opposed Allende. Internally, unemployment was going up and inflation started to skyrocket.

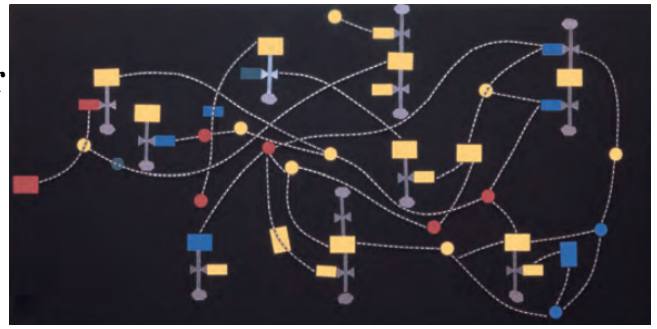


Image used with permission of Gui Bonsiepe

Salvador Allende's Last Speech with English Subtitles



Then, just three years after Allende was elected, came Chile's September 11. While the presidential palace was being bombed by a military junta supported by the CIA, Allende gave his final radio address to the country. "Long live Chile, long live the people, long live the workers," he said. Salvador Allende took his own life that same day.

It is estimated that during Pinochet's rule about [38,000 people were imprisoned and most of those prisoners were tortured](#). Close to 3000 people were executed, [another 1200 people went missing](#), and around 200,000 people were exiled to other countries.

Project Cybersyn never got up and fully running. The operations room was finished but never put to use.

Cybersyn's technology was unlikely to have been up to the task of helping Chile's socialist economy succeed. But with the United States doing everything in its power to make Allende's vision of socialism fail, maybe no technology was up to the task.

Sonidos Ineditos del 11 de Septiembre de 1973: Bombardeo de la M...



In 2000, the CIA acknowledged its role in supporting the military coup and bringing about the failure of the Allende government. Fernando Flores spent three years in prison after Pinochet took power. Stafford Beer continued to lecture about cybernetics until his death in 2002.