

# Chilean revolts and the crisis of neoliberal governance

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On Friday 18 October 2019, a long series of mass demonstrations began in Chile against the right-wing government led by president Sebastián Piñera.<sup>1</sup> Despite brutal and continuous police repression, these demonstrations persisted, day after day, with remarkable stamina and inventiveness, right through to 13 March 2020, when the risks posed by Covid-19 led Piñera to ban public gatherings of more than 500 people. It's easy to see why his government and its security apparatus might have welcomed the timing of such 'protective measures' as fortunate. For more than five months, many hundreds of thousands of people had taken to the streets, with a determination that shook the government to its foundations; the government's response, meanwhile, has shed a revealing light on the darker sides of the so-called Chilean miracle.

The decision that triggered the first protests was an increase in subway fares, which led high-school students (already stretched beyond their capacity to make ends meet) to plan systematic fare evasions throughout that October morning. The government, unable to understand the students' outrage, responded to these evasions by deploying the armed forces and announcing a state of exception – a measure that, although the constitution provides for it, is usually reserved for absolutely extreme situations. With the adoption of such an excessive policy the government's real intention became evident, namely, to impose this rise in the cost of public transport as part of an ongoing series of policies designed to intensify its long-standing neoliberal agenda.

The state of exception proclaimed by the government in the autumn triggered something else: in a society that still mourns those who disappeared during Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1989), the army's presence on the streets

precipitates the re-emergence of a traumatic memory related to repression, torture and the abuse of power that characterised the long years of military rule. This is a situation that the army and the political sector defending Pinochet's legacy have not been willing to recognise, let alone redress. Nonetheless, far from returning to their houses in fear, the Chilean people at large, in support of the student demonstrations, took to the streets and confronted military personnel face-to-face, occupying public spaces and cities, in a series of massive meetings (more than two million people on Friday 25 October, for example), that challenged not only the erratic behaviour of the government but its neoliberal strategy *in toto*.

The *real state of emergency*, in this sense, is not the one abruptly dictated by the government, but the one decided by the people's occupation of their streets, which is sustained only by their own tireless perseverance. Huge demonstrations subsequently took place almost every Friday, right through to mid-March 2020, despite the government's strategy of blunt criminalisation. Meanwhile, the main media outlets (newspapers and public television stations), owned by the same small clique that also controls most of the country's economic activity,<sup>2</sup> have been instrumental in disseminating images of horror, riots and looting of supermarkets, showing hooded protesters (*encapuchados*) setting fire to buildings, subway stations and bank offices. Consequently, the official narrative, reinforced by the media, adopts a well-known pattern: the protests are illegitimate and criminal insofar as they do not remain within the official channels of participation – the same channels which have repeatedly proven to be useless over the last thirty years.

It is not entirely clear how far the government itself has been involved in the creation of this climate of

crime and social unrest (since many phone-videos show members of the police force igniting fires in subways stations and supermarkets), but there is no doubt about the government's decision to criminalise the protests and to subordinate the legitimate claims of the Chilean people to questions of institutional order and security. In fact, security has become the decisive marker of the government's discourse, leading to a constant increase in police personnel, expanding the budget dedicated to surveillance and technologies, of repression and a series of new laws rapidly signed off in congress that grant more powers to the police while at the same time reducing basic checks and balances that might guard against impunity and the excessive use of force.

The government made things worse with its deployment of the army the very night after the protests began (19 October 2019) and by the characterisation of the current situation as a war against a 'dangerous enemy' – i.e. students and unarmed hooded protesters. The situation was further aggravated when the government decided, a few days later, to remove the army from the streets and hand over the control of the protests to the *Carabineros*, the police institution disgraced by its historic participation in the crimes of the dictatorship and that is currently under investigation for one of the biggest fraud cases in the country's history. *Carabineros*, without any consideration for their own standard operating procedures and with a total lack of common sense, soon began using rubber-coated steel bullets to repress the demonstrations, causing ocular amputation to more than 400 hundred people; they have also been blamed for multiple cases of torture, illegal detentions, sexual abuse and several cases of rape. To this series of crimes and abuses, one should add the bombastic accusation, by President Piñera and other members of his government, incriminating Cuba and Venezuela for orchestrating an international plot against Chile.<sup>3</sup> A further 'intelligence' report from the Ministry of Interior went so far as to accuse, in December, Korean pop music groups (K-POP) of having a large influence on the social instability in the country.

In order to understand the logic that has enabled this tragicomic series of mistakes, it's essential to remember that Chile has usually been represented both as a neoliberal 'economic miracle' and as the exemplary case of a successful 'transition to democracy'. This nar-

rative has certainly been challenged often enough by social protests, many of them led by high school and university students, during the last decades (2007, 2011, 2018, etc.).<sup>4</sup> However, the October thirty peso increase in the subway fare is consistent with a long-running series of government initiatives that have impoverished the population in favour of the richest people in the country, beginning with a tax reform that exempts the most prominent economic groups operating in Chile (groups to which the President himself belongs), while heavily taxing general consumer goods and basic services, most of which were privatised long ago. Thus, the thirty pesos came to represent thirty years of post-dictatorial governments, framing the historicity of these protests in a different way: it has become evident that people are not only protesting a rise of the subway fare, they are protesting *everything* that has happened during the last three decades. They are protesting this whole period routinely labelled our transition-to-democracy, that is to say, our transition to the post-dictatorial and limited democracy that began in 1990, after Pinochet left office and Patricio Aylwin took over.

The institutional mechanism that lends a strong degree of unity to this transitional period is the duopolic political system that allows control of the government to alternate between two political blocks, without challenging either the underlying economic path or the limits it imposes on democracy. This system continues to operate under the same constitutional constraints inherited from the Pinochet regime. Pinochet's dictatorship has been regularly and rightly characterised as a violent regime in which neoliberalism was first implemented in a Latin American country;<sup>5</sup> the subsequent transitional period, under the alternative administration of Chile's centre-left and then centre-right blocks,<sup>6</sup> should properly be considered as its institutional *continuation*.

By the same token, we should remember how the slogan that mobilised people at the inception of this transitional process, and which led to the massive voting against Pinochet in the plebiscite of 1988, was a promise of democracy as happiness for all ('*la alegría ya viene*', literally, 'happiness is coming'). This future democracy was supposed to bring justice and punishment to the perpetrators who committed crimes against humanity, along with transparent and effective democratic processes, social justice, and a new constitutional framework able to

respond to the social, economic and political demands issued by people exhausted by years of persecution and repression. That is what this promise of democracy meant to us, at the time. The revolts have reminded everyone that the promise of happiness for all was never fulfilled. Genuine democracy, understood as mass empowerment, never arrived. Instead of gaining a new degree of control over their lives and futures, Chile's people have been subjected to ever more suffocating versions of the old neoliberal project.

The secret of the so-called Chilean miracle is plain to see: the dictatorship handed the country over to a new and recently educated neoliberal elite that was able to design both an economic system based on the principles of neoliberal economy, and the juridical framework (constitution, electoral system, configuration of political parties, etc.) necessary to protect the economic order, neutralise political dissidence and contain social unrest.

The neoliberal reaction was, of course, first and foremost a *reaction*. The series of civil wars and dictatorships that have devastated Latin America since the mid-1960s,

despite their anti-communist rhetoric and well-known Cold War orientation, are to be understood also, and especially, as a systematic response to the democratisation processes that opened up from the mid 1950s to early 1960s, processes that were themselves partly enabled by successive waves of industrialisation and ensuing migration from the countryside to the cities. This systematic reaction led to a new concentration of power, wealth and land in the hands of an emerging elite educated in the principles of neoliberalism. Chile was the first country in which openly dictatorial military power established a strategic alliance with the so-called Chicago boys. The main result of that alliance was a change in the composition of the dominant class during Pinochet's dictatorship, since the new policies implemented in that period favoured the financial sector over more traditional industrial ones. In this sense, the Chilean dictatorship was a modernising regime oriented to the dynamics and demands of the global financial sector, at the expense of the classical national-developmental project.



Instead of its own version of a democratic-bourgeois revolution, during the 1970s and 80s Latin America was subjected to a revolution led by capital itself. After the Cuban Revolution and the intensification of the containment strategies that precipitated the 1973 coup in Chile, it became apparent that the socio-political and economic transformation of the region would no longer depend on a sequence linking urbanisation, industrialisation, proletarianisation and democratisation. Instead the new path towards 'modernisation' would be opened up by deregulated financial markets and new forms of speculative investment. The new business sector, which does not understand its performance in national or territorial terms, does not respect traditional legal constraints either. This is why Chile's contemporary configuration also permits the proliferation of notorious cases of corruption, cases that have been systematically disclosed over the last decade, involving prominent economic groups and indeed the whole political 'class'.<sup>7</sup> The so-called ethical imperatives of the traditional entrepreneur that Weber theorised as a key factor for capitalism's inception no longer play any significant role in a deterritorialised capitalism whose main imperatives are dictated by the flexible process of accumulation for accumulation's sake, without regard for the ever deepening precarity suffered by vast sectors of the population.

Chile certainly deserves its unenviable reputation as the exemplary case of an early implementation of neoliberal policies enabled by an authoritarian government. Once an effective opposition, both internal and external, had been mobilised to stifle Allende's moderate but progressive government, by 1973 Chile seemed to offer the perfect scenario in which to activate, in a sort of controlled social experiment, a whole series of measures whose principal goal was the total deregulation of the economy, i.e. the removal of production, wealth creation and wealth distribution from anything resembling popular interference or control. The recipe has since become familiar all over the world, and includes: privatisation of state-owned factories, of the health insurance system and of retirement plans, downsizing of the state apparatus, decentralisation of state administrative capacities, reduction of taxes on profits, wealth and imports, deregulation of international exchange, sharp reductions in public spending, loosening of the credit system, etc. Once it was safe to do so, the package also included a

move away from overtly dictatorial repression, with the eventual elaboration (in 1980) of a constitution and a legal framework that secured, limited and supervised the national exercise of democracy. This framework was designed above all to prevent the political system from falling back into the hands of a government responsive, as Allende's government had been, to the demands of the people themselves – hence the relentless demonisation of this government both as totalitarian or undemocratic, and as responsible for fiscal disorder and economic chaos.

Through the 1990s, when most Latin American governments were implementing similar policies amid social unrest, Chile's governing class could point to steady economic growth and development, in keeping with procedures and criteria recommended by the World Bank and IMF. Some sectors of Chilean society duly celebrated the transitional period by placing all hopes on such growth and the trickle-down policies associated with it. The truth however was more complicated, and the situation more fragile. Much of the prosperity enjoyed by some sectors of Chile's economy depended on a growing global demand for copper, driven in large part by China's manufacturing boom; the resulting rise in commodity prices made it easier for our transitional governments to postpone genuine economic reforms, while simultaneously deflecting attention via a human rights rhetoric that depoliticised each and every socio-economic claim in favour of a generic conception of abstract 'justice'.

It was during these transitional years that neoliberalism was intensified and perfected, with the final privatisation of water systems, the highway system, the public transport system, the total subsumption of higher education to the private sector, and the increasing dominance of the financial sector. Chile, a dependent and weakly diversified economy geared to the extraction of copper and other raw materials, remained a paradise for international capital. Its natural resources and labour market were exposed to predation by a deregulated legal system that offered little or no protection to the most impoverished and most vulnerable members of the population. Chile, in short, seemed to have done everything necessary to secure its 'modernisation' and socio-economic development.

At the same time, the so-called Chilean miracle has to be understood in its relation to a pervasive understanding of the country's exceptional history, one that

links this apparent economic success to a political one: the success of a country that had gone through a paradigmatic and peaceful transition to democracy, after the bloody but necessary defeat of communism. Hypotheses about the Chilean republican tradition, about the incorruptible character of its leaders, about the growing prosperity of its economy, and about the infinite set of natural and human resources it enjoys are part of Chile's foundational fiction, one that has shaped the country's self-representation since its modern inception.

It would be quite easy, of course, to unveil this exceptionalist myth for what it is, by referring to the brutal history of inequality inflicted on the country's popular sectors, the number of military interventions throughout its history and the security policies deployed again and again against the civilian population, not to mention the 'anti-terrorist' and pro-corporate policies implemented during these same years against the Mapuche people in the southern part of the country. The extremely unequal distribution of income, the concentration of wealth and property in the hands of the few, and the blatant nepotism of the dominant classes (constituting a sort of 'caste' that has been in power since the beginning of the nineteenth century),<sup>8</sup> all testify to the real conditions that have led to the series of social demonstrations and revolts of the last five months. Nevertheless, what really explains the situation of the country over the past thirty years is not only the class division inherited from the nineteenth century, nor the legacies from the dictatorial regime, but the determination of the governing sectors to preserve the juridical framework that defines and limits its democracy. This constitutional framework, first instituted by the Pinochet regime and then confirmed during the ensuing transitional administrations, dramatically defines the limits of democracy by confiscating political agency from civil society and granting it instead to the duopolic formation that allows for superficial changes in the composition of government while ensuring continuity at the level of basic policy. A durable agreement seems to have been reached about how to lead the country, on both sides of an apparent 'political divide', while allowing members of either side to take turns implementing the measures required.

The constitution of 1980, carefully articulated and put in place by Jaime Guzmán (an extreme right-wing ideologist, a reader of Carl Schmitt and Juan Donoso

Cortés, with clear links to the Opus Dei, and the final architect of Pinochet's institutional order),<sup>9</sup> was partly a reaction to the more democratic constitution of 1925, but principally it was designed to safeguard the sacred right to private property, a right that had been directly challenged by Allende's Agrarian Reform plans. But Guzmán was not only interested in preventing attacks on private property by state-oriented expropriation policies: he was equally interested in shaping a political system of equilibriums that would prevent the poor majority from advancing radical redistributive reforms. While some overtly repressive measures were scaled back after Pinochet left office, Guzmán's carefully designed electoral system (a variation of the D'Hondt system) has been preserved. This is a system that secures a non-proportional representation of the two blocks that dominate Chile's congress, while requiring, at the same time, two-thirds of the votes in the congress to pass any legislative initiative.

The veneration of this electoral system is the key to understanding neoliberal governmental strategy in Chile, which is anything but democratic.<sup>10</sup> This system not only regulates but also defines the political composition of congress and, more importantly, defines the general rules of engagement in Chile, from municipal and local elections to the presidency. It is not an exaggeration to say that the electoral system operates as a control mechanism that neutralises direct elections and any expression of the popular will, under the guise of proportionality and institutional equilibrium. Thanks to it, the whole system of political parties is articulated around the two dominant groupings, in a way that not only prevents other non-affiliated parties from truly participating in the electoral process but that also neutralises civil society and social movements in general, depriving them of all political legitimacy.

The preservation of Chile's properly 'juristocratic' limitations is one of the things that distinguishes it from some other Latin American countries, those that by the late 1990s began to embark on the reformist agenda that came to be known as the *Pink Tide* – an agenda characterised by new distributive policies, new constituent processes, official recognition of originary peoples and cultures, and a strong anti-neoliberal rhetoric. While Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, and several other countries were doing their best to bid farewell to neoliberalism (a farewell that unfortunately turned out to be only transit-

ory), Chile was ruled by a centre-left administration that did not hesitate to embrace the most radical neoliberal policies.

Considering all this, it should not be surprising that on Friday 15 November 2019, Chile woke up to news announcing a 'Great National Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution' (*Gran acuerdo nacional para la paz social y una nueva constitución*). After almost a month of sustained civil unrest, when the government's weakness was evident, the full congress had met during the night and reached an agreement that both promised a new constitution and called on the people to end the protests. This agreement preserved the usual duopolic consensus, along with the distance separating this consensus from popular demands. Instead of trying to respond directly to these demands, and to the very concrete proposals made by a vast array of grassroots organisations,<sup>11</sup> the political parties in control of congress once again opted to preserve the existing balance of power. The real message sent by the Agreement was perfectly clear: in Chile, politics should and must only be exercised through institutional channels, by professional politicians. Politics must always respect the familiar balance among established political parties, and it must always proceed in accordance with the interests of those few economic groups that finance the campaigns and salaries that sustain these parties.

Today, in late March, after more than five months of protests, people are showing signs of exhaustion and despair. The indecisive management of the Covid-19 situation by the government has so far proven to be both criminally negligent and politically motivated, given its clear determination to quash the protests. In mid-March people were obliged to suspend their protests, but this was as a result of Covid-19 rather than in response to any concessions extracted from the government. The government has once again deployed the army on the streets, invoking the new state of emergency posed by the pandemic. The President currently enjoys approval ratings of less than 7%.

The woeful response of the government stands in stark contrast, meanwhile, to the impressive creativity shown by different grassroots groups during this time, from student boycotts and feminist mobilisations (with the performance piece *Un violador en tu camino*, 'A Rapist

in your Path', quickly gaining a global audience),<sup>12</sup> to the unexpected solidarity of fans from different football teams, combining to form a solid and coherent movement against the government. In the current situation it seems that anything could happen, from a dramatic *coup d'état* on the pretext of a 'national emergency' to an eventual renewal and intensification of the protests.



Despite the recent suspension of protest, what remains clear after so many days of protest is that most people do want another constitution, a genuinely new one. The majority of the population demands a constituent assembly, a mechanism that should include gender proportionality and the recognition of indigenous peoples. The new constitution envisioned by most of the Chilean people is indeed properly *impossible* within the narrow confines of the nation as it stands; the simple incorporation of women, immigrants, Mapuche people and other minorities already demolishes the fictive ethnicity (Europe-oriented, heteronormative, patriarchal and Christian) that has fed the identity and image of the country.

The government and the political parties have likewise been clear in their positions about a new constitution. The centre-left block may be open to a constitutional commission, made up of members of congress along with some representatives chosen from the civil society, selected by the same electoral system that favours the established parties. The government, supported by the right, is adamantly opposed to any kind of constituent assembly, a measure which they associate with the reformist governments of Venezuela and Bolivia – places

that for them represent nothing but chaos, anarchy, socialism and the past. Instead they propose a plebiscite to decide whether a new constitution is indeed necessary or not (as if nothing had happened in the last months), and in case the answer is 'yes' they are adamant that it must be undertaken within congress, i.e. within the same representational mechanisms that have neutralised politics in Chile for the last thirty years.

Although many leftist intellectuals still insist on reading the protests according to the hegemonic logic of articulation (via political parties) and representation, I think they are best understood as something else, as genuine revolts that go beyond the heavily-occupied political space of the nation-state and the ongoing subsumption of life by capital. The protests that began in October have dramatically and irreversibly undermined the legitimacy of Chile's neoliberal administration. They have exposed the Chilean myth for what it is, and restored the people's own capacity for self-organisation. For many of us who have been following the protests day in and day out, they exemplify the logic that Jacques Rancière derives from the famous mass secession of the Roman plebs – the moment when the plebs are said to have undertaken a kind of general strike, the moment when by leaving the city and their well-defined place in it for the relative freedom of the Aventine hill, they privileged their own potential and their own capacities, in violation not only of patrician commands but of the whole established institutional order.<sup>13</sup>

In Chile we need to take full stock of the radicality and singularity of this unprecedented series of disruptions. They are revolts defined less by a class identity than by an existential condition. The people on the streets do not respond to a party strategy, nor to a programme; they are there, protesting, since this seems to be the very last thing they can still do. The left consistently fails them, and the right consistently oppresses them. There is no apparent exit.

Referring to another set of revolts that were animated by a mixture of mass enthusiasm and despair (the 1979 uprising in Iran), Foucault evoked that 'play of sacrifice and hope for which each person, and a people collectively, is responsible', and which enables 'a people to confront an army, a police', and to disrupt the course of history.<sup>14</sup> Undertaken under severe pressure, as a sacrifice made for the sake of life and survival itself, such revolt should be

understood first and foremost as a direct reaction to an existential threat. Furio Jesi makes a similar suggestion, reflecting on the Spartacist uprising:

Every revolt is a battle, but a battle in which one has deliberately chosen to participate. The instant of the revolt determines one's sudden self-realisation and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity – everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy.<sup>15</sup>

Jesi makes this point in order to distinguish the normative aspects of the modern notion of revolution from the more spontaneous and more elusive 'logic' of revolt. In the lived experience of such revolt what matters is less party principles or class identities than an almost visceral reaction to oppression, as the people involved come to realise that nothing could be worse than waiting any longer, waiting passively for an inexorable end, within the confines of the situation as it is.<sup>16</sup>

This is what has characterised the Chilean revolts, animated by a deep desire to end the oppressive and exploiting order that has been imposed upon the people under the cover of a progressive and globalising rhetoric. As many of their participants have recognised, what animates such revolt resonates to some extent with a version of what Giorgio Agamben calls 'destituent power',<sup>17</sup> a power of refusal that delegitimises the dominant order altogether and all at once. Such power acquires in these revolts an immediate material connotation, one that opens directly onto a demand for another kind of political practice and for another relationship to the political. Such destituent power is not concerned with institutional renovation or with the creation of a new order, it is instead motivated first and foremost by a logic of rejection and an end to 'business as usual'. And although invocation of such destituent power might appear to be in tension with people's desire for a constituent assembly and a new constitution, the truth is that Chile has never produced a democratic constitution – this still remains unthinkable, and perhaps not only in Chile, since the old liberal model of the social contract is clearly a fiction designed to confine political participation within clear institutional boundaries. The call for a new constitution

in the context of our protests is precisely the expression of an impossibility. It's a demand to expose the flagrant illegitimacy of the actually-existing social contract in Chile, as forcefully as possible.

Although Piñera's government clearly seeks to exploit the repressive opportunities offered by the pandemic, it's still too early to say whether the consequences of Covid-19 will reinforce or dilute the recent mass challenge to Chile's neoliberal project. But what's already clear is that things can no longer continue as they did before. What has been most immediately at stake in the revolts in Chile, as in some other places, is not merely the victory of a class, or the continuation of a policy; what is at stake is the very survival of humankind. It's no longer enough to frame the alternative in terms of 'socialism or barbarism'. The immediate choice is rather one of 'revolt or devastation'. We will see which of these two prevails, soon enough.

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## Notes

1. I am grateful to my dear friend Erna Von Der Walde for encouraging me to write on these events.
2. See María Olivia Mönckeberg, *El saqueo de los grupos económicos al Estado de Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones B, 2001), and *Los Magnates de la Prensa: Concentración de los medios de Comunicación en Chile* (Madrid: Penguin Random House, 2011).
3. We should remember, by contrast, how Piñera's government has been proactive in supporting the repeated coup attempts in Venezuela and the recent coup d'état in Bolivia.
4. On an earlier series of revolts in the country, see Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, 'The Chilean Winter', *Radical Philosophy* 171 (January 2012), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-chilean-winter>.