

An Eye for an Eye in Santiago

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“Look! Our cameras are filming you.”

“Ojo!”, or “look!” in Portuguese, is a Chilean expression for “attention!”. And those who arrive in downtown Santiago quickly see government posters demanding attention with the message “our cameras are watching you,” a failed threat to the thousands of informal market buyers who fill the streets near the Central Station.

The official poster ironically refers to two central questions about the “estallido”, the social explosion that has set the country on fire in recent weeks. First because it is impossible to read the word “eye” in today’s Chile without thinking of the almost 300 demonstrators injured in the eyes by the police, many with permanent injuries. Banners and graffiti all over the city say things like “living in Chile costs the eye” or “the government wants to make us blind”, denouncing the intense police repression that has also led to 24 deaths so far, hundreds of reports of sexual violence in police stations and thousands of injured people.

In addition, the threat of surveillance on the government’s billboard refers directly to the so-called “controlled democracy” in the country. Chile has had the same constitution since the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and all its legislation has as its main characteristic the maintenance of the anti-democratic neoliberal model that has led the majority of the population to a situation of limit. Virtually all of the country’s common goods have been privatized, the rate of family indebtedness is the highest in the world, an immense majority of the elderly live on miserable pensions, education and health care are completely commodified, and the cost of living is one of the highest in Latin America.

The “estallido” began with the declaration of the increase of the Santiago metro tariff by thirty pesos at the end of October. Thirty pesos are now equivalent to about 16 cents of Real, and it was this increase that led a group of young people from the poor district of Maipú to carry out an action of evasion of the tariff that was violently repressed. Popular support for the young people lit the wick and led to a wave of mobilizations that spread to and even reached small towns in the interior. The slogan “it’s not thirty pesos, it’s thirty years old” reached towns in the interior that never dreamed of subway works, but reflected the general feeling of popular dissatisfaction. It is impossible not to remember the phrase “it’s not only 20 cents” that took Brazil in the June 2013 rounds.

President Sebastián Piñera, who weeks earlier had declared Chile an “oasis” in the face of the mobilizations in Latin America, initially reacted with an arrogance typical of authoritarianism and declared that the country was “at war”, instituting a state of emergency with curfews and controls over circulation throughout the country. But instead of intimidating the population, the government’s repressive measures led to an increase in mobilization that placed the Chilean political regime in the greatest defensive since the mobilizations that culminated in the end of the civic-military dictatorship. It then took palliative measures, such as a derisory increase in pensions, which also failed to reduce the mobilization that was expanding more and more.

The target of the Chilean demonstrators is clear, they are fighting against neoliberalism. This economic model is in the mouths of the people of Santiago, both in the large demonstrations and assemblies of neighbors as well as in buses and bars, and understanding this political origin of the problems of the Chilean system seems to have spread as deeply as the spontaneous revolt that breaks the country's routine. The idea that Chile was the cradle and will be the coffin of neoliberalism politicizes the process in an impressive way, leading working families to occupy the streets of their neighborhoods and generating a cultural change of enormous proportions in a country marked by the stimulus of individualism, competitiveness and meritocracy.

This change is very much commented on. The teenager Mascota, a "Mascot" in English, is a Maipú secondary schoolboy who refuses to say his real name but is assertive on the subject: "before people didn't know their neighbours, they didn't care about the problems of others, and now we know that we have to take care of ourselves and help ourselves". Cristian, a Universidad de Chile fan who was marching with opposing football fans in Dignity Square, is categorical: "The union was the best thing that happened, we lost a lot fighting among ourselves and now we're fighting against just one enemy, the government". Alfredo, an elderly Uber driver whose retirement does not cover his monthly expenses, also has no doubts: "Our people have had a very wrong education, nobody has learned to think about others, but now people are back together. And the government only heard the protests because they were violent".

This new spirit generates even funny scenes, such as that of the guy who stopped the car next to an assembly of neighbors and quickly received several offers of help with the "broken" car or the out-of-tune singer who performed on a bus and did not get any applause, but received coins from almost all passengers at the end. In the neighborhood of Quatro Alamos, people regain the community spirit by holding collective dinners in the middle of the streets while in the neighborhood of Andes del Sur, across town, neighborhood leaders gather to debate law theory on the issue of the new constituent process.

Neighborhood assemblies and councils are new expressions of popular organization that are coming together across the country, debating both their demands on local problems and on national issues. The thousands of people who now build these spaces see themselves as part of a process that can really change their lives, and even if a national organization of assemblies and councils is not yet consolidated, this seems to be the way to consolidate this new way of doing politics that is emerging in Chile. And the dilemmas presented by this construction are the most important that the new and old social movements must resolve.

Despite the permanent mobilization of the outskirts of Santiago, the symbolic epicenter is the former Plaza Italia, now renamed Plaza de la Dignidad and where the great demonstrations converge. Keeping a constant element of uprising, and always singing "las balas que takón van a volver" (the bullets that were thrown at us will return), the confrontation against the repression in Dignity Square happens every day, and the tension between demonstrators and the police leads to injuries and arrests at every moment. The tear gas often makes the square's air unbreathable, being felt blocks away, and the "pacos" become even more violent at dusk.

The "pacos" or the "yuta" are pejorative forms widely used by the population to refer to the carabineros, the Chilean military police. These police have a highly developed repressive apparatus, with the widespread use of armoured vehicles in ostensible policing and a history of violence dating back to the Pinocheti dictatorship. It should be remembered that even after the end of the dictatorship in 1988, the dictator Pinochet remained in charge of the Armed Forces until 1998 and after that he became a senator for life. In other words, the forces of the dictatorship are still very present in Chilean society and the "pacos" are a strong expression of this.

In addition, police and military personnel have a differentiated pension system and are not governed by the hated system of Pension Fund Administrators (AFPs), the Chilean private pension system that leads to a total reduction in the income of retirees. While repressing those who fight against the AFPs, the “pacos” and “milicos” also fight for the maintenance of their privileges before the rest of the people. Not by chance, one of the symbols of the youth that goes to the streets in the crash is Matapacos, a drawing of a dog with a scarf on its neck inspired by a royal dog that accompanied the demonstrations a few years ago.

But the main symbol of this popular uprising is the Mapuche flag, which along with the national flags is present on all sides of the city. It is a very strong symbol if we take into account the genocidal campaigns against the Mapuche people for centuries and even today, with the militarization of the Wallmapu region in the far south of the country. The Mapuche flag represents the resistance not only against the government of Piñera, but against a whole colonial and neo-colonial model that has formed a profoundly exclusive and violent society against its various peoples.

The role of women and the feminist movement is also central. The green handkerchiefs of the struggle for the right to abortion are quite present in all demonstrations and on the streets, and the companions play a leading role in all aspects of the blast. From neighborhood assemblies to the front line of resistance to repression, women of various ages represent what is most dynamic and advanced in the process, transforming this social struggle into a struggle evidently also against patriarchy and its expressions in state violence. The performance “A rapist on his way”, by the feminist collective LaTesis, is today reproduced in streets and squares all over the world and demonstrates the universal character of this mobilization.

An enormous challenge lies ahead of the Chilean popular movement at this time. Two weeks ago, President Piñera gave an ultimatum of 48 hours to the political parties offering an agreement for a new constituent, one of the most important agendas of the campaign, and the so-called Social Pact was quickly signed or supported by the vast majority of Chilean parties, from the UDI right wing to sectors of the Frente Amplio (New Left formation).

What for some was a breakthrough for others was a betrayal. There were important party ruptures (such as that of Mayor Jorge Sharp of Valparaiso, who broke with his Social Convergence party, a grouping of the left of the Frente Amplio) and a situation was reached that seems to counter the feeling of the streets with the parliamentary majority. The Pact was signed at dawn, while the repression continued in the streets, and its supporters ended up taking away their bet from social mobilization to invest in an institutional calendar. For him, a plebiscite on constitutional change will only take place in April and will begin a constituent process that may take years to complete.

This institutional solution was proposed at the most critical moment of the Piñera administration until then, and there was even speculation about the possibility of its downfall (something that would be unprecedented in the country) when the Social Pact was signed and reoriented the direction of the process towards the resumption of political stability. The Chilean bourgeoisie promised to hand over the rings so as not to lose their fingers, but has not yet delivered any measures that would signal any concrete change in the axis of the population’s problems, the economic system.

The agreed quorum criteria for votes in the new constituent process are two-thirds of the votes, a high number that may bar important social advances if the right maintains its voting pattern in future elections for constituent deputies planned for October 2020. Another problem is related to issues such as the guarantee of gender parity in the constituent process, the mode of participation of indigenous peoples and the mechanisms of investigation and punishment for human rights violators during demonstrations.

An important sector has bet on the Social Pact as the way out of a new Constitution, defending it as an unthinkable victory for years, but it seems that the mobilization and politicization of the Chilean people has already opened space for much more forceful victories. Nothing has been resolved, and the struggle that will take place in the coming months will be decisive for these victories to be won.

In any case, what is evident in the current Chilean scenario is that the next popular victories will only be achieved with the organization and permanent mobilization of the assemblies of neighbors, the “cabildos” and the militant organizations. In this “eye for an eye” struggle, the only way to popular victory is in the streets.

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