

¡Fuera Piñera! — Revolt in Chile

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I.

Chile was out of step with Latin American leftward-bending trends in the closing days of the last century and the opening salvos of the present one. Partly, this had to do with the fact that the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1990 so unambiguously terrorized and uprooted the organized Left and its supporting social layers, and partly it was because the spectre of that terror's return continued to haunt the first generation of Chileans after liberal democracy's restoration. The audacity of social experimentation and political bravado from below characteristic of the democratic-socialist era of Salvador Allende (1970-1973) – as often in spite of government attempts at containment as due to Allende's intended or unintended stimulus and encouragement – was replaced over the 1990s and early 2000s by a defeated torpor of post-political technocracy. Alongside a commitment to neoliberal continuity, authoritarian enclaves underpinned the new order, with legacies from the dictatorship enmeshed in the nodes of an ostensibly democratic state structure.

The Chilean elite, in other words, faced little opposition in their managed transition to ortho-liberalism, maintaining the sanctity of market-imperatives aggressively introduced by Pinochet with the help of the Chicago Boys in the mid-1970s. From 1990 to 2010, a centre-left coalition called Concertación formed every government. Concertación's reign was ended by the formation of the government of Sebastián Piñera of Chile Vamos, a coalition of centre-right and right-wing parties, in 2010. Concertación's successor coalition, New Majority, then came back to office with the second presidency of the Socialist Party's Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018), followed by Piñera's return to the presidency for a second term in March 2019.

Lauded as the model student of free-market growth and institutionalized moderation, post-dictatorship Chile was widely understood by the know-all social engineers of international financial institutions and their cousins in esteemed departments of politics and economics to have overcome the destabilizing polarization of the past. For these true believers, Chile had vanquished the twin demons of the Cold War: the authoritarian state and the revolutionary Left.

Irrespective of amendments here and there, the core of the constitution inaugurated under the dictatorship in 1980 remains in place. The dominant ideology, shared by centre-left and centre-right alike, has been premised on the technocratic isolation of state managers and depoliticization of society – the impersonal tyranny of the market projected as the ultimate arbiter of social conflict.

II.

Busy playing handmaiden to capital, centrist governments of different tints ignored obscene levels of inequality. Today, ten Chilean billionaires boast combined assets worth 16 percent of Gross Domestic Product. The Bello columnist for the British liberal magazine *The Economist* offered a telling observation late in 2019: "Some years ago your columnist attended a drinks party of about 60 people in Santiago. A friend whispered in his ear: 'You realise that half of Chile's GDP is in this room'."

Set apart from those in attendance at the cocktail festivities, the working and middle classes live off credit, indebting themselves to pay for the enormous cost of living associated with privatized education, health, pensions, highway, and water services. Hidden taxes on the poor, the burdens they bring reach into every orifice of quotidian life; a particular source of discontent, as we will see, are the high fares on transit. Household debt in Chile is the highest in Latin America at 45.4 percent of GDP; and we know, personal indebtedness of the working classes is an enormous disciplinary whip in the hands of capital, one which keeps workers treading ever harder with the aim of staying above water. One of the bitter ironies of the present scenario is that Piñera made much of his estimated wealth of \$2.8 billion by introducing credit card debt to the plebeian substratum.

In an interview that would come to haunt him, published in the Financial Times on October 17, 2019, Piñera captured the ethos of the Chilean model as seen from the perspective of the ruling class: "Look at Latin America," Piñera said. "Argentina and Paraguay are in recession, Mexico and Brazil in stagnation, Peru and Ecuador in deep political crisis and in this context Chile looks like an oasis because we have stable democracy, the economy is growing, we are creating jobs, we are improving salaries and we are keeping macroeconomic balance . . . Is it easy? No, it's not. But it's worth fighting for."

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III.

The next day the country exploded, with "oasis" becoming a popular meme ridiculing Piñera. The spark was a fare increase on Santiago's public subway system. Santiago has one of the most expensive public transit systems in the world, with an accumulated 40 percent increase in fares between 2010 and 2015 in real terms. Building on an infrastructural bed of militancy first established through high school rebellions in 2006 – affectionately known as the revolt of los pingüinos, given students' black and white uniforms – and university uprisings in 2011, the first actor set in motion was the student movement, which organized a "mass evasion." Demonstrators would not pay the subway fare in a collective act of resistance. Police responded with gratuitous violence, stoking far-flung contempt of their actions among the public and correspondent levels of support for the evaders.

As protests exceeded the bounds of the subway dispute, the president declared a state of emergency, suspending constitutional rights and introducing a curfew, first in Santiago and then later in many of the country's other cities. The military was sent into the streets with heavily armoured vehicles for the first time since 1990. In a further gesture to the Pinochet era, Piñera announced that his regime was "at war" with a powerful internal enemy.

Majoritarian anti-dictatorial sentiment was galvanized, and the population came alive, violating the curfew and the state-of-emergency attempts to squash assembly and mobility rights. A motley amalgam of popular classes and the massively indebted and downwardly mobile middle class erupted in unison. A dialectic of movement massification-state repression swept the country over a two-week period. The revolt far transcended a 30-peso fare increase. As one viral slogan has it: It's not about 30 pesos, it's about 30 years!

A whole order of polity and economy – seemingly so well-entrenched – had been called into question. Virtually no official institution in the country retained any credibility among the populace. The curtain was drawn back on the actually-existing flaws of Chilean neoliberalism; its entire edifice had

once again been made to rest openly on military and police coercion.

Demands in the streets converged around the necessity of a ground-up Constituent Assembly, while a socio-economic agenda outlined the need for nationalization of resources such as water, copper, and lithium, alongside social services such as transportation (as noted, formally public, but obedient to market diktats) and the private pension system, plus a significant hike in the minimum wage.

Mass marches and pot-banging ran alongside riotous insurrection of a scale unprecedented in recent Chilean history. A class logic targeted subway stations, supermarkets, malls, high-end retail outlets, and energy company headquarters for looting and burning, while small stores were protected. Barricades were erected in cities and running battles with the security forces displayed a ferocity of anger from below decisively at odds with Chile's officialist self-image. By some estimates 1.2 million marched in Santiago in what was until then perhaps the largest demonstration in the country's history, and across the national territory an incredible two million joined in marches out of a total population of 18 million.

The recent revival of popular feminism in Chile - as in much of the rest of Latin America - converged with the combativeness of students, indigenous movements, and labour (especially dock workers).

Political parties were marginal to the unfolding of the quasi-insurrection in October 2019, including those parties on the Left. The only ones with any credibility among the poor and disenfranchised are the traditional Communist Party and the much newer Broad Front - a coalition of various currents of Chile's new Left, itself an outcome of the 2011 process of mobilization initiated by university students. While militants from these parties were heavily involved in the unrest, the anti-party sentiment of the mobilized seemed to extend to them as well, making it impossible for either one to provide leadership or coordination.

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IV.

Since the end of November 2019, the government has seemingly regained initiative, despite Piñera's historically unprecedented disapproval ratings. The president was able to draw parties from across the parliamentary spectrum - spanning the Broad Front on the Left to the Union of Independent Democrats on the ultra-Right - into a special commission to discuss a way of ending the conflict, particularly around the issue of the proposed Constituent Assembly.

As Felipe Lagos-Rojas explained recently in *New Politics*, the Broad Front ultimately withdrew from negotiations with the government, but the party's leader, Gabriel Boric, nonetheless signed on to The Agreement for Peace and a New Constitution, the accord which eventually came out of the talks. Boric's genuflection to political "responsibility" provoked numerous resignations from the party base, as well as some high-profile exits, most dramatically, that of Jorge Sharp, the mayor of Valparaíso - Chile's second city. While the Communist Party didn't participate in the talks, and initially protested their legitimacy, the Communists lent their ex post facto endorsement of the agreement once the ink had dried.

In stark contrast, the movements at the heart of the uprising have overwhelmingly rejected the deal, both because of its backroom, closed-door nature, and the fact that it guarantees only a plebiscite between two forms of Constituent Convention, neither of which would constitute a sovereign Constituent Assembly with the widespread grassroots participation and authority necessary to

substantively remake state-society relations. The agreement is also silent on police and military impunity for human rights abuses committed in recent months (22 dead, many serious injuries, including many cases of blindness, and hundreds of detainees), and has nothing to say on the socio-economic demands of the movements.

V.

Few witnesses to the country's current upheaval and antagonism could avoid recalling earlier moments in Chilean history. In the participatory assemblies and pitched street battles of late-last year, the stirrings of what might be thought of as a renewed fidelity to those who fought and were defeated in 1973 were visible to those paying some attention. The present marks an ideal backdrop for reflection once again upon that earlier series of eruptions from below, when the lower orders sought to remake society in their image – the era of Allende's Popular Unity government.

And while it's the case that Piñera seems to have survived this round, the enormous demonstrations on International Women's Day on March 8, 2020 suggest new rounds are shortly to follow. Even if the figure cited by the 8M Coordinator, of two million participants in the Santiago march alone, is probably an overestimation, it's obvious that the popular feminist movement, developing so rapidly in the country over recent years, has reached yet a new height. It's also clear that the depth of politicization coursing through the events of March 8 – in Santiago, as well as in many other parts of the country – reached a new profundity. Political figures from the ruling Right, and even oppositional figures from the Centre-Left, no longer dare to show their faces on International Women's Day. The demand of the moment is nothing short of the president's resignation: ¡Fuera Piñera!

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P.S.

• Spectre. April 15, 2020:

<https://spectrejournal.com/fuera-pinera/>

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