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Chile

When triumphant neoliberalism begins to crack

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On September 22, 2011, wearing a dark suit, a purple tie and a light blue shirt, president Sebastián Piñera went up to the rostrum of the General Assembly of the United Nations. The head of the Chilean government - and nevertheless a successful multi-millionaire businessman - had a wide smile on his face. In these times of a world-wide crisis of capitalism, he could claim to have a flourishing economy, judged by a growth rate of more than 6 per cent of GDP (at the beginning of 2011). In the course of his short speech before the main leaders of the world's states, he also made a point of referring to the social conflict for education which has traversed his country for several months: "We must win the race for development and the battle for the future in the classrooms" he insisted.

He assured his listeners that his government sought "to guarantee education for all and free education for all those who require it". And if Chile's young people were struggling valiantly, that was just proof of the good health of Chilean democracy, all of them mobilized for "a noble, grand, beautiful cause, to give an education of quality" to the people. The magic of a politician's discourse... Who would believe that they were hearing the representative of a hard Right, back at the head of the state twenty years after the end of the military dictatorship (in 1989) and engaged, whatever the cost, in the continuity of the "capitalist revolution", imposed by fire and blood on the ashes of Popular Unity (1970-73) and the corpse of Salvador Allende [1].

In the popular neighbourhoods, in the innumerable marches which are crisscrossing the towns and cities of the country, in dozens of occupied secondary schools, colleges and universities, such a discourse is seen as one more provocation. The government does not understand what is stirring in society. Or, rather, it pretends not to understand. On the day of this speech at the UN, colourful demonstrations and processions were informing the Moneda (the presidential palace) that the movement for "free, public and quality" education was not dead. On the evening of September 23, Camila Vallejo, one of the leaders of the Confederation of Students of Chile (Confech) remarked, with a certain irony, that the speech of the president was full of "contradictions, incoherence and inconsistencies", at the time when he was refusing any serious negotiation and continuing to deploy his arsenal of repression [2].

A social movement for education of historical scope

Since the first march of university and secondary school students, on April 28, collective action has not weakened. Quite the contrary [3]. Throughout May, the actions of the movement became bigger. On May 12, the first "nation-wide strike for education" exceeded all expectations. On May 21, in Valparaiso, while the president of the Republic was making - as he does every year - his annual balance-sheet before the nation, tens of thousands of people expressed their anger. Progressively, discontent swelled. The popularity of the Chilean *indignados* increased. There were 300,000 in the streets on June 30 and 500,000 on August 9 - young people, old people, the middle classes and the popular classes, together. One of the high points of this growing movement was the nation-wide strike on August 23-24, called by the United Workers Confederation (CUT) and by more than eighty trade-union organizations, protesting about deplorable working conditions but also in support of the mobilized students. The repertoires of collective action that are utilised are varied and often original. In addition to the traditional strategies of the street, the festive and creative aspect is at the centre of the contestation of the youth: carnival, kissing contests, original dances and songs, satirical humour, spectacular actions [4].

But we find also more traditional instruments of contestation: strikes in the universities (the public ones, primarily),

with the support of the teachers, a multiplication of *toma* (occupations) and even hunger strikes, carried out by young people who intend to show the world their determination. A whole generation seems to have the wind in its sails, giving rise to the most important social struggle since the big *protestas* of 1983-84: a generation which did not experience the dictatorship and which was born under the auspices of the pact for neoliberal democratization.

The students have always been important protagonists of the social movement. We could thus go back to the time of the "actors of the secondary" who faced the military regime [5]. The current protests are related to the experiences gained in 2001 (the *mochilazo*) and to the "penguin rebellion" (of school students, so-called because of their uniform) of 2006. This exemplary mobilization made the government of the Socialist president Bachelet tremble and cracked the cement of the political consensus [6]. Those who have revolted in 2011 are partly those who mobilized in 2006. And they learned the price of negotiations without a future, the importance of control of the spokespersons by the assembly of students and the strength of self-organization.

Why are these students protesting? The problems are numerous, the demands are clear: free, public and quality education. "In the secondary schools, the students particularly want their establishments to return to the state sector," notes a researcher. "Transferred to the municipal level in 1990, right at the end of the dictatorship, secondary public education has constantly declined since then, to the benefit of subsidized private establishments. In higher education, the financing of studies is particularly problematic. The universities, public or private, demand fees that are in general close to 300 euros per month [7].

The majority of students thus have recourse to loans to finance their studies, without being really sure how able they will be to pay them back once they enter the job market. (...) Moreover, in spite of a law, adopted under the dictatorship, which stipulates that the universities are non-profit making institutions, many private universities have set up systems making it possible to extract the profits that are generated" [8]. A poisoned heritage, subsequently faithfully managed by the Concertation, a coalition of Socialists and Christian-Democrats that was in government from 1990 to 2010 without interruption.

Until the coup d'état of 1973, Chilean public education was known for its quality and exemption from payment. Today less than 25 per cent of the education system is financed by the state. The rest is paid for by the families of the students: 70 per cent of the students have to take on debt and 65 per cent of them stop their studies for financial reasons. Moreover, the Chilean state devotes only 4.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education, far from the 7 per cent recommended by UNESCO [9].

Furthermore, we find the same logic in all social fields: health, pensions, transport, the media, etc. So the Concertation may be delighted to see Piñera beating records of unpopularity (with only 22 per cent of approval). But if more than 75 per cent of the population supports the demands of the students and livens up the popular neighbourhoods with immense concerts of pots and pans (*cacero/leos*), it is also because they reject twenty years of social-liberal government, which reinforced such an economic model.

The *mea culpa* of the president of the PS, Osvaldo Andrade, recognising that "during the twenty years of the government of the Concertation we were also on many occasions responsible for this abusive policy" changes nothing.

Negotiations, trickery and criminalisation of struggles

On the right, many members of Parliament are anxious about the crisis of governability. In July, Joaquin Lavín, Minister of Education, himself a businessman and a leader of the powerful Independent Democratic Union (UDI) [10],

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was forced to resign. The disorder in the ranks of the ruling classes also shows through in the leading articles of the newspaper *El Mercurio* and through articles by intellectuals, who - until now - claimed to be liberal, even progressive.

Faced with the return of the spectre of class struggles, they describe, like the historian Alfredo Jocelyn-Holt, their "indefinable malaise" and do not hesitate to disqualify violently the actions of the protesters [11].

The student rebellion reveals also the true face of this governmental "new Right", which had not come to power via the ballot box since 1956 [12]. For weeks, the only answer of the executive was repression, with the support of hegemonic media machinery. The spirit of "Pinochetism" is still openly displayed. The government spokesman Andrés Chadwick, former president of the Federation of Students at the Catholic University (authorised by Pinochet in 1978), and the mayor of Santiago, Pablo Zalaquett (UDI), affirmed that the students were not owners of Alameda (the principal avenue of Santiago), the latter suggesting the intervention of the armed forces to prevent the demonstrations of September 11 (the day of commemoration of the coup d'état)... Another example, in the same register: Cristián Labbé, mayor of Providencia (Santiago) and former member of the political police of the dictatorship, announced that he would close the occupied colleges and proposed cancelling the school year in order to penalize the mobilized students.

Repression by the carabineers is permanent. There have been hundreds of casualties, thousands of arrests and even the death of Manuel Gutiérrez (14 years old) assassinated by the police with a live bullet. In this context, a small proportion of students have made the choice of self-defence. Every demonstration is the object of pitched battles, in spite of the protests of the organizers, with burning barricades, stone-throwing and Molotov cocktails against armoured cars, teargas, firearms and mounted police. Several leaders of the movement have been threatened, sometimes with death, as was the case with Camila Vallejo.

Faced with the power of a revolt which is not slowing down, on September 3, the government finally had to pretend to negotiate, gambling on the exhaustion and divisions of the movement. The review *A l'encontre* has retraced the chronology of this trickery. "The student leaders clearly stated that all proposals would be submitted to the decision of the assemblies which really represent their bases. Thus, on September 8, Confech stated its conditions for continuing negotiations. They were, to summarize, four:

1° To push back the date fixed by the ministry for the renewal of grants and loans; economic blackmail of students is one of the weapons used by the government.

2° To suspend the process of framing of laws concerning education, laws which the Parliament must present to the executive.

3° The discussions must be transparent, which implies that they are filmed, so that citizens can take note of the respective positions of the various actors of this conflict.

4° The negotiations must relate to the key question, that of public, free, quality, education, democratic and without profit.

On September 15, the Minister of Education, Felipe Bulnes, challenged two conditions: non-postponement of the date, October, for the end of the semester; and refusal to interrupt of the procedure of framing a law on education. As for the publicity of the negotiations, it is limited to indicating that the official report of the discussions will be placed at the disposal of the public. On September 15, the vice-president of Confech, Francisco Figueroa, announced the rejection of the minister's proposals and indicated that a national mobilization was planned for September 22.

On September 19, President Sebastián Piñera announced on national television that 70,000 secondary school students had lost their year because they had paralysed lessons for four months. A kick in the teeth."

[13] Despite everything, about 180,000 people took part in the mobilization on September 22. And a week later, 150,000 demonstrators marched again. This capacity to hit back was hailed by other sectors of the social movement, starting with the College of teachers.

A new structure of political opportunities for social transformation

According to the United Nations Development Programme, although Chile has succeeded in reducing poverty, it figures among the fifteen most unequal countries in the world. Following on the shock therapy imposed by the dictatorship (1973-1990), Chilean society, moreover, had to be held in the grip of the pact of transition. Over the last twenty years of "authoritarian democracy", society - fragmented, atomized - seemed to have integrated into its genes this model and its institutions: in spite of reforms, the constitution of 1980 which consecrates the neoliberal theory of the "subsidiary role of the State" is still in force. Parliament is locked into an electoral system (known as binominal) which ensures an almost perfect sharing of power between the Concertation and the Right. In parallel, the legal, media and economic fields are bastions of ultraliberalism and conservatism.

Certain critical thinkers talk about the construction of a triumphant neoliberalism (Juan Carlos Gómez) or mature neoliberalism (Raphael Agacino) long-lasting, largely stabilized, among other factors by mechanisms of consumption on credit, by a society of spectacle under the direction of a media duopoly and thanks to the eviction of the popular classes from the space for participation in politics, from the *polis*. A caste of professionals passes briskly from the administration of the state to the management of companies, all dependent in one way or another on a handful of big families (such as Luksic, Angelini, Paulman and Matte). This social order does not exclude social explosions, but makes their emancipatory potential much more complicated [14].

Nevertheless, with the historian Sergio Grez, it is possible to affirm that the year 2011 will go down in history as the "reawakening of social movements after more than two decades of lethargy" [15]. If we look again at the sociology of the politics of the conflict, there is no doubt that a structure of political opportunity has opened up for the mobilizations, used to their advantage by a new generation which, from a conflict in the field of education, has managed to constitute itself (in the course of a brusque change of scale), as an unavoidable actor on the national political scene [16]. What are the factors which explain this qualitative and quantitative leap? We can cite the economic situation of students in a profoundly uneven period of growth, where the worship of individual success is in permanent contradiction with the conditions of daily life of the great majority.

More broadly, the crisis of legitimacy of the entire political system has been a key factor, reinforced by the provocations of the government. Some of the principal student leaders are certainly linked to organized parties, such as Camila Vallejo, a highly mediatised figure and a member of the Communist Party or Giorgio Jackson (president of the Federation of Students at the Catholic University), who is a member of the Concertation. However, dissident sectors of Confech (in particular in the provinces), organizations of secondary school students, as well as the libertarian and Trotskyist fringes of the movement, criticize the aim of the CP and the Concertation to direct the movement towards an institutional solution. But overall, the reference to horizontality, the refusal to be instrumentalised and the importance of decisions taken in mass meetings explains the duration and the autonomous dynamics of these struggles.

Lastly, a final essential element: the convergence of different revolts under the smooth surface of a model of accumulation which seemed until then to be "triumphant". In fact, the present conjuncture is part of a broader evolution. A molecular accumulation of partial, scattered, conflicts took place, with an acceleration from 2006-2007 [

[17](#)] First of all let us remember the mobilizations of workers, in spite of an ocean of precariousness and of flexibilisation [\[18\]](#) and a CUT partly co-opted by the Concertation.

Let us recall also the struggles of the copper workers, in particular the *subcontratistas* (those who work for sub-contracting companies), who in 2007 conducted very bitter strikes. In 2010, the Ministry of Labour recognized the loss of 333,000 working days loss because of strikes in the private sector, that is to say an increase of 192 per cent compared to 2000. In the public sector the legal profession, health workers and teachers mobilize regularly. This is also the case of the activists who fight against discrimination and for the right to sexual diversity (LGTB). The cycle of protest took on an unusual dimension, in February 2010, with the uprising of a whole region, the southern province of Magallanes, against the rise in the price of natural gas. The government had to retreat. The recent actions of ecologist collectives have also succeeded in defeating the Right. That was the case in August 2010, in Punta del Choro, against the construction of a thermoelectric dam. More recently, the Hidroaysen mega-project in Patagonia brought more than 30,000 people into the streets. We should also mention the urban struggles for housing and for "the right to the city". And, of course, the indomitable resistance of the Mapuche people which reached peaks of combativeness in 2010, in particular following the hunger strikes of several indigenous political prisoners [\[19\]](#).

One of the challenges for the social movement is to successfully bring about an even vaster desectorization, in order to articulate all its forms of resistance. Such a convergence showed its potential at the time of the protest on May 21. Gradually, people have understood that to win free education means attacking capitalism frontally. In addition, young people know that they are confronting the founding principles of the dictatorship. One of their slogans is: "it will fall, it will fall, Pinochet's education". The question from now on is really to build radical alternatives and not to reform, around the edges, the authoritarian heritage [\[20\]](#).

Untimely bifurcations and the preparation of alternatives: towards a constituent assembly?

Under the impact of this historical mobilization, Chilean society has abruptly become repoliticised, has reoccupied this deserted *polis*, at the same time as it was occupying public squares, avenues, places of education. It is an untimely bifurcation (a formula of Daniel Bensaïd), which will mark the coming years, "calling in question the certainties, the values, the norms, the institutions and the ways of doing things which appeared to have acquired "natural" characteristics for millions of citizens subjected to the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism" [\[21\]](#). Now, it is how to change the Constitution, the pressing need for a constituent assembly, the urgency of a referendum on education and the renationalization of copper [\[22\]](#) which are being raised in the discussions in mass meetings and in demonstrations. There is a need to open doors and windows for a real democratization to be felt. The objective remains difficult to attain, and we should not underestimate the ability of the government to keep the situation in hand. The movement is on the brink of exhaustion after five months of struggle. Repression is intense. The end of the school year is approaching and as we write, there is still no concrete perspective on the horizon.

How, faced with the oligarchy in power, to obtain - now - free education? How to impose a constituent process "from below", democratic, with the participation of the social movements, as was done recently in Bolivia, to bring down the institutions of "Pinochetism"? That means first of all the development of a formidable relationship of forces, which is not yet on the agenda, but is in the process of being built. The - considerable - absence of mass workers' struggles and the shilly-shallying of the trade union movement weigh enormously in the balance. Because a profound change in class relations will necessarily involve a conscious and determined intervention by the workers' movement, in the broad sense of the term. Without that, the students remain deprived of an essential motor force for social transformation. In addition, the electoral and institutional agenda may prove to be a double-edged sword: municipal elections in 2012 and presidential and parliamentary elections in 2013 will push the parliamentary political parties to "surf" on the onrushing wave of the student movement, often to try to channel it, but also - on the right - to mobilize

the conservative electorate.

The challenge for the mobilized youth, in this new cycle, is to win in the short term structural reforms on the basis of its own demands (such as free education), while preparing the next actions for a constituent assembly alongside other sectors in struggle. The projected laws of the government provide no answer to the problems of quality, of the municipalisation and the commoditisation of secondary and university education. It is important to avoid the mobilization ending in a demoralising fashion and thus to draw up perspectives. In the medium term, the question that is posed is the construction of a political alternative which does not exist yet in the country [23]. Although horizontality, local and regional experiences and the practice of self-management are vital strengths to cultivate, they do not replace the essential collective construction of a political instrument, completely independent of the Concertation and its satellites. An instrument able to unite scattered resistance and the mobilized popular classes, around a coherent anticapitalist, Latin-Americanist and ecosocialist project.

Does the road appear still long? Admittedly. But the dynamic that is underway has just traced a horizon of the possible, something that was still unsuspected six months ago in Chile. In old Europe, the *indignados* of several countries are inventing and experimenting as they combat the austerity and the arrogance of those in power. At a time when the commoditisation of education is underway everywhere in the European Union, the Chilean example can provide arguments to those who are opposed to it. In the Arab world, revolutionary processes are trying to deepen their conquests. Chilean youth in revolt are also responding, indirectly, to this faraway echo. And above all, the "Chilean May" has joined the different popular rebellions which have swept across the whole of Latin America in the last ten years. Argentinean, Mexican and Colombian students are now taking the mobilizations in Santiago as an example. Chile seems in this way to have finally found the pulse of its sister countries, across the Andean cordillera.

October 1, 2010

[1] To follow up this analysis in terms of capitalist and neoconservative "revolution": Manuel Gárate, *La "Revolution économique" au Chili. A la recherche de l'utopie néoconservatrice 1973-2003*. Doctoral thesis in History and Civilizations, EHESS, Paris, 2010, on line on <http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr>.

[2] "El discurso de Piñera en la UNO y el movimiento estudiantil", *Elmostrador.cl*, September 23, 2011.

[3] For a many-sided analysis of the movement, see the articles which we put together with Mario Amoros in the dossier *Lecciones de la rebelión estudiantil* (www.rebellion.org/apartado.php?id=411).

[4] See for example, the dance of the "education thriller", parodying a classic of Michael Jackson: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR12Vi6Bvrl&feature=related.

[5] See the documentary by Pachi Bustos, Jorge Leiva, Marcela Betancourt and Rene Varas: *Actores secundarios*, (80 min, 2004).

[6] See the documentary by Simón Bergman: *La Rebelión de los Pingüinos* (23 min, 2007).

[7] The minimum wage in Chile is approximately 280 euros per month.

[8] A. Mallet, "Les indignés chiliens", *Opalc.org*, August 17, 2011.

[9] V. De La Fuente, " En finir (vraiment) avec l'ère Pinochet", www.monde-diplomatique.fr August 24, 2011.

[10] Far-right, close to *Opus Dei*, the strongest force in Parliament and the heavy artillery of the government.

[11] See the response of S. Grez in: "¿Inasible malestar?", *The Clinic*, N°413, Santiago, 29 September, 2011.

[12] See: F. Gaudichaud, "Au Chili, les vieilles lunes de la nouvelle droite", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Paris, May 2011 and "Chili: Tremblement de terre politique et retour des Chicago boys", *Recherches Internationales*, Paris, July 2010.

[13] <http://alencontre.org/ameriques/amelat/chili/chili-laube-nouvelle-des-mouvements-sociaux-et-la-mobilisation-du-22-septembre.html>.

[14] JC. Gómez Leyton, "Protesta social y política en una sociedad neoliberal triunfante", *Observatorio Social de América Latina*, Year VII, N°20, CLACSO, Argentina, 2006.

[15] S. Grez, "A nuevo amanecer de los movimientos sociales en Chile", *The Clinic*, N°409, Santiago, September 1, 2011.

[16] C. Tilly and S. Tarrow, *Politique(s) du conflit. De la grève a la révolution*, Presses de SciencesPo, Paris, 2008.

[17] E. Barozet, "De la démobilisation au réinvestissement local. Mouvements sociaux locaux et territoires au Chili", *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, N°66, 2011 and C. Pulgar, "La revolución en el Chile del 2011 y el movimiento social por la educación", www.lemondediplomatique.cl September 2011.

[18] The labour code comes from the period of the dictatorship. Only 5.9 per cent of workers (2009 figure) are covered by a collective agreement, the rule being the individual contract.

[19] 20. See the articles which we put together with Mario Amoros in the dossier *Pueblo Mapuche: Cinco siglos of Resistencia*: www.rebellion.org/apartado.php?id=152.

[20] R. Agacino, "Anticipando el futuro", *Rebellion.org*, 1 September, 2011 and J. Massardo, "La significación histórica del movimiento estudiantil", *Rebellion.org*, 25 August, 2011.

[21] S. Grez, "Un nuevo amanecer de los movimientos sociales en Chile", *Op. Cit.* See also : P. Mouterde, "En plein hiver chilien : les promesses d'un printemps social et politique *Alainet.or*, August 29, 2011.

[22] Chile has the biggest reserves of copper in the world, a resource that is today mainly in the hands of foreign concessions (www.defensadelcobre.cl).

[23] 24. "La alternativa ausente", Editorial of the review *Punto Final*, N°743, 30 September, 2011.