

Abstract

From October 2019, widespread protests in Chile have aired understandable frustrations and, more perplexingly, vicious violence. There are those who appreciate past compromises in fostering democracy and poverty reduction, and others who see only inequality and stagnation. Baffled academic communities have been unable to foreground consultative proposals for constructive change.

Chile's Social Outbreak: Not a Student Movement

Andrés Bernasconi and Pete Leihy

In recent months, mass protests have paralysed cities and countries around the world. Normally sedate, Chile, Latin America's leader in economic development for the past 30 years, has been wracked by protests and violence. On October 10, 2019, coordinated and simultaneous attacks struck 118 metro stations in the capital, Santiago. Twenty-five stations were burned, and seven were completely destroyed. While such massive, concentrated attacks suggest a mastermind, no evidence of such a single actor or agency has been found so far.

Following those events, protesters throughout the country have taken their anger and multiple frustrations to the streets in massive protests and marches. This time, rather

than budding politicians from universities and schools fronting protests, masked gangs run riot. For three months now, violent fringe elements with unknown political agendas have set upon damaging shopping malls, small businesses, supermarkets, and churches. Riot police are overwhelmed and law enforcement is incapable of curbing the looting. Center-right President Sebastián Piñera ordered a state of emergency at the beginning of the crisis, allowing the military to undertake public order and security, but withdrew them after seven days. With dozens of denunciations of human rights violations by the police and the military during the most acute phase of the crisis in October and November, Piñera has been wary of local and international distaste for shows of force.

A New Anger

While the initial spark of these events was secondary school students jumping metro turnstiles en masse following an announced increase in the adult fare equivalent to US\$0.40, mainstream student political involvement in an organized form has been conspicuously absent from these mobilizations.

This is unusual, given that the previous two great episodes of massive street demonstrations had been initiated and led by student organizations. In 2006, secondary school students closed down Chile's schools for several months, protesting against the quality of public education and the growing privatization and market orientation of the system. In 2011, it was the turn of college students, protesting against growing student debt, among other grievances.

The situation is different now. The scale and rage of the unrest are totally unexpected and the lack of a clear unifying cause is highly disconcerting. Three kinds of hypotheses have been advanced by political analysts and social scientists. First, this is a crisis of unmet expectations. After decades of high and steady growth, the economy has stalled and the "promise" of upward mobility under neoliberal capitalism is not being met. The massive lower-middle classes feel alienated. Second, the growing inequality of income and, therefore, of opportunity, is felt across the whole spectrum of social rights, from education to healthcare and pensions. The wealth of the few feels to many like a slap in the face. Finally, there is an insurmountable generation gap. Those who lived through, and fought, Pinochet's dictatorship, now in their fifties and older, value a democracy rebuilt over 30 years, for all its flaws and lags. Those raised a generation later in a democratic, middle-income Chile, do not identify so thankfully with the existing social compact and its roots, and would rather start anew and install a fresh vision of society. That the business-friendly 1980 constitution promulgated by Pinochet (and much adjusted since) still stands is not a new complaint, but now Chileans find themselves faced with the urgency to come up with a constructive, concrete alternative, beyond simply airing their resentment.

Campuses Called into Question

Universities, whose infrastructure has also been burned, are as dumbfounded as others. Student politics and academia used to be reliably at the vanguard of social movements in Latin America. It was a privilege to be a university student and to intellectualize new generational perspectives. But something seems to have changed, as higher education has become more common. Rather than a space for reflecting on society, higher education now appears to be a display case of inequality, mismanagement, and irrelevance. As society's institutions are called into question, universities are not exempt from contempt.

Indeed, in Chile university students feel like they betray the cause if they come to school to think and debate. No, the proper, morally legitimate arena for the student to make her point is the street, marching and chanting with the people. Students stopped coming to class after October, and it remains uncertain whether they will show up in March, when the new term begins. Moreover, the paper-and-pencil national university entrance test, twice postponed due to the outbreak, was boycotted and sabotaged by secondary school students breaking into testing halls and disrupting from outside. For the first time in history, an entire test booklet with questions and their answers was leaked through social media ahead of the exam, forcing test administrators to cancel that test for good.

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These are hard and uncertain times for Chilean higher education and youth. Yet, amid crowd-sourced chaos, we have to remind ourselves that academic communities are still capable of fostering idealism, debate, and reflection. ▲