**The end of the neoliberal economic model - or an international conspiracy?**

Starting in the late 1990s, when Chile was completing its first decade of democratic rule, many intellectuals began to criticize the market-friendly economic model put in place by the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). Pointing to the absence of a state that could guarantee social services and a safety net, those people criticized the overly individualistic basis of the market-friendly economic model. Chileans were treated more like consumers than citizens. Though the center-left Concertación/Nueva Mayoría coalition (in power between 1990 and 2010 and 2014-2018) introduced many state-centered reforms and changed the constitution to eliminate authoritarian enclaves left in place by Pinochet before he left office, Chile still retains key features of an extreme market-friendly economic model.

Yet, Pinochet is to most Chileans today what Darth Vader was to Luke Skywalker. It is a force to be reckoned with, but it is more part of the past than the future. Chile was able to build a well-functioning democracy despite the authoritarian straitjacket legacy. Since 1990, poverty rates have declined from about 40% to less than 10%. The middle class is bigger than ever before in the country’s history. Inequality remains high, but it is the lowest on record. In late 2017, Chileans voted for the second time in less than a decade for a right-wing candidate for president. Thus, the claim that Chileans are discontent with the economic model and want a radical change is just not consistent with the facts. Chileans are better off today than at any time before in their history. Unlike Trump’s “Make America Great Again,” Chileans do not have a mythical past to look back to with nostalgia.

Though satisfaction with democracy has fallen in recent years — as elsewhere in Latin America — Chileans still value it more than any other form of government. When asked about what countries they want Chile to look up to, people often mention northern European countries. There is little admiration in Chile for Fidel Castro’s Cuba, Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela, Mauricio Macri’s Argentina or Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil.

Over the past 30 years, Chileans know the country has made much progress, there is growing wealth and living conditions have improved. But most Chileans are also very much aware that consumer rights are weak, they suffer from widespread abuse by oligopolies in several industries, access to quality education is expanding very slowly, and access to quality healthcare remains largely unequal. Chileans have seen the promised land, but they have not been let in. Just as a frustrated passenger consumed by rage is willing to tear apart the waiting room at an airport, many Chileans had a weekend of rage demanding that they be finally let through the gates.

Many protesters talked about the accumulated discontent with Chile’s economic model. “It is not the 30 pesos (US$4 cents) of the subway fare increase, but 30 years of abuse,” was a common phrase.  Yet, the polls show that Chileans want a combination of better public services and more competitive markets rather than a full abandonment of the market-friendly system.

By Sunday night, the government, criticized for its slow response and wavering decision to decree a state of emergency and, at the same time, refrain from letting the military take full command of the streets to stop looting, chose to respond with an untimely and unwise counterattack. President Piñera claimed that Chile was “at war with a powerful enemy that respects nothing.” Though he did not specify the enemy, one could read between the lines and see the government trying to blame Venezuela’s Maduro regime. Since Piñera has been an outspoken critic of the authoritarian government of Venezuela, there are good reasons why Venezuela would want Chileans to revolt against Piñera.

The way in which the looting — especially the destruction of subway stations in Santiago — took place has raised suspicions about the ‘spontaneity’ of the protests. Seeking to regain ground, the government will now try to blame political enemies — including the far left in Chile, which has thrown its support behind the peaceful protests while not-so-strongly condemning the violent ones — rather than hearing the underlining message of the discontent.

GLOSSARY

1. Put in place: Puesto en marcha
2. Dictatorship: Dictadura
3. Guarantee: Garantizar
4. Consumer: Consumidor
5. Citizen: Ciudadano
6. Coalition: Coalición
7. Enclaves: Enclave
8. Retain: Conserva
9. Key features: Características claves
10. Reckon: Calcular, considerar
11. Straitjacket: Camisa de fuerza
12. Poverty rates: Tazas de pobreza
13. Right-wing: La Derecha
14. Better off: (estar) major…
15. Wealth: Riqueza
16. Improve: Mejorar
17. Aware: Estar consciente
18. Consumer rights: Derechos del consumidor.
19. Weak: Débil
20. Widespread abuse: Abuso extendido
21. Oligopolies: Oligopolios
22. Quality education: Calidad de la educación
23. Quality healthcare: La calidad de la salud.
24. Unequal: Desigual
25. Let in: Entrar, ingresar
26. Rage: Ira
27. Willing: Dispuest@
28. Tear apart: Destrozar
29. Protester: Protestador
30. Discontent: Descontento
31. Fare: Tarifa
32. Increase: Aumentar
33. Abuse (n): Abuso
34. Poll: Encuesta
35. Public services: Servicios públicos
36. Waveing (adj.): Vacilante
37. Decree: Decretar
38. Refrain: Abstenerse
39. Looting: Saqueo
40. Claim: Declarar
41. Revolt: Revuelta
42. Blame: Culpar
43. Condemn: Condenar
44. Underlining: Enfatizar