

Chile's democratic road to authoritarianism: From neostructuralist bargain to state of emergency

Manuel Larrabure
Bucknell University

Abstract

The ongoing crisis of Latin America's pink tide seems to confirm the warnings of populist decline that first emerged in mainstream political science in the early years of the twenty-first century. At the heart of this view is a sharp distinction between moderate centre-left governments on a supposed path to progress, and a radical left bound towards economic crisis and authoritarianism. Under almost three decades of near exclusive center-left governance in Chile, as witnessed most recently in the October 2019 state of emergency, the result has not been a gradual and linear path to democratic engagement and progress, but rather the undermining of the country's democratic institutions; and with the recent electoral victories of right-wing parties and coalitions, also the return of authoritarianism. This democratic decline is directly attributed to the centre-left's incapacity to adequately meet the demands of the student movement, applying what I call the "neostructuralist bargain" to diffuse the movement's ambitions to directly participate in educational reform. However, the recent emergence of the Frente Amplio coalition suggests a possible answer to the growing reality of authoritarianism in Chile. *Keywords:* Chile, student movement, Frente Amplio, populism, *concertación*, Pink Tide, emergency state.

Resumen: La vía democrática Chilena hacia el autoritarismo: del acuerdo neoestructural al estado de emergencia

La actual crisis de la marea rosa de América Latina parece confirmar los argumentos que surgieron por primera vez dentro de la ciencia política dominante en los primeros años del siglo XXI que advertían sobre un supuesto declive populista. En el centro de esta visión se encuentra una aguda distinción entre los gobiernos moderados de centro izquierda en un supuesto camino hacia el progreso, y una izquierda radical encaminada hacia la crisis económica y el autoritarismo. Durante cerca de tres décadas de gobierno casi exclusivamente de centro-izquierda en Chile, el resultado no ha sido un camino gradual y lineal hacia el compromiso y el progreso democrático, sino más bien el debilitamiento de las instituciones democráticas del país, y con las recientes victorias electorales de partidos y coaliciones de la derecha, también el retorno del autoritarismo. Este declive democrático es el resultado directo de la incapacidad de la centro-izquierda para satisfacer adecuadamente las demandas del movimiento estudiantil, aplicando lo que denominé "acuerdo neoestructuralista" para diluir las ambiciones del movimiento de participar de forma directa en la reforma educativa. Sin

embargo, el reciente surgimiento de la coalición Frente Amplio sugiere una posible respuesta al creciente autoritarismo en Chile, más reciente visto en el estado de emergencia de octubre 2019. *Palabras clave*: Chile, movimiento estudiantil, Frente Amplio, populismo, concertación, Pink Tide, estado de emergencia.

Introduction

Committed to existing institutions and gradual change, they [the center-left] have preserved and enriched democracy. Kurt Weyland, 2013.

How we have to put up with such celebrations of the pluralism of power and liberal society! Nicos Poulantzas, 2000.

Latin America has long been considered a global hub for populism. Indeed, many of its most notable and debated political figures, associated with both left and right wing politics, such as Juan Perón, Getulio Vargas, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Alberto Fujimori have become emblematic examples of the concept. Not long after the wave of left and centre-left governments known as the “pink tide” began to sweep across Latin America at the turn of the century, the debate on populism in the region was reignited. Particularly influential were the contributions made by Jorge Castañeda (2006), Alvaro Vargas Llosa (2007), and Teodoro Petkoff (2005) that became part of the mainstream understanding of what was then Latin America’s new left. According to this perspective the pink tide could be divided into two. On one side was the more radical, “bad” left, that is, those governments that challenged the dominance of the market and United States imperialism, repeating what was deemed by mainstream political science as outdated left politics of the twentieth century. These governments typically included those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. On the other side was the responsible, modern, “good” left that was committed to gradual social improvements through the embrace of markets and globalization. These governments typically included those of Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay.

Along with this categorization came an explanation for the new populist surge as represented by the more radical left. This was to be found in the now well-documented social devastation the region experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, featuring extraordinary levels of poverty, inequality and institutional decay (Gwynne & Kay, 2000; Portes & Hoffman, 2003). It is these conditions, the populist thesis argues, that allowed new leaders to emerge that were able to successfully manipulate and mobilize disaffected popular sectors by using concepts such as “twenty-first century socialism” and “buen vivir”, as well as a Manichean discourse that paints liberal democratic institutions as the root of social and economic injustice (Brewer-Carías, 2010; Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011). A similar Left-wing version of this thesis also exists, one that highlights populism’s capacity to coopt and demobilize grassroots movements

that according to some interpretations were at times on the verge of a full-scale revolution (Webber, 2011; Zibechi, 2015).

From the perspective of the populist thesis, the range of pro-poor programs introduced by the pink tide, particularly the “bad” left, notably conditional cash transfers and participatory governance initiatives, are understood merely as examples of clientelism and patronage that successfully consolidated and expanded the pink tide’s electoral base (Hunter & Power, 2007; Penfold-Becerra, 2011). In other words, the goal of these policies was not to empower the poor and marginalized, as officially stated by pink tide governments, but rather to distract popular sectors from structural economic problems, however differently these are understood by analysts of various political stripes. The outcome, the argument goes, is ultimately the progressive dismantling of liberal-democratic institutions (the concern of mainstream commentators), as well as of grassroots, autonomous organizing (the left wing concern), and in turn the concentration of power in the hands of populist leaders. However, populism’s sustainability becomes particularly sensitive to economic conditions. In times of prosperity, populist promises can be kept. On the other hand, in times of economic decline, populism reveals itself for what it was all along, namely a form of authoritarianism (Weyland, 2013; Mayorga, 2017). In contrast, according to mainstream commentators, the good left was supposed to follow the liberal-democratic path of steady progress as it reaps the rewards of globalization and market freedom.

Responses to the populist thesis from more critical sectors soon followed. Using an exclusively political interpretation of populism, Roberts (2007) amends the mainstream categorization of the pink tide, removing Bolivia’s MAS from the list of populist regimes. He does so on the grounds that unlike other cases, the MAS is not an example of a typical top-down party, but rather the expression of a bottom-up process that fuses party politics with social movements (see also Levitzky & Roberts, 2011; Wolff, 2019). Michael Lebowitz takes a different approach. He accepts Castañeda’s good/bad dualism, but subverts it, arguing that it is the “bad” cases (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador) that represent a progressive alternative for the region. Finally, more recent scholarship, the work presented here included, has opted to add complexity to the debate by theoretically and empirically questioning the populist/democratic dualism (Anria, 2013; Ciccariello-Maher, 2013; Stavrakakis et al., 2016; Grisaffi, 2019).

However, attempts to challenge the mainstream perspective on the pink tide now have to grapple with recent events that appear to confirm the populist thesis. Following the collapse of commodity prices in 2014, left governments have found it more difficult to sustain the pro-poor programs that for over a decade fueled dramatic improvements in a wide range of social indicators, including poverty, unemployment, and income inequality (Cornia, 2010; Bárcena, 2011; Lustig et al.; 2013; Bulmer-Thomas 2014; Amarante & Colacce, 2018). This confirms the left’s failure to address historic patterns of primary resource de-

pendence, one of its central stated goals. Indeed, according to Ocampo (2017), dependence on primary resources actually increased during the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, as the region responded to increased demand from China (see also Svampa, 2015; Chiasson-LeBel, 2016). According to the populist thesis, this new economic context would therefore explain the recent decline of the left, evidenced in electoral victories for the right wing, massive corruption scandals, new right wing mobilizations, and new forms of authoritarianism in those left wing governments that remain in power. The Venezuelan case is perhaps most emblematic, in which horizons of a “twenty-first century socialism” have been crippled by a collapsing economy and increasing authoritarian tendencies displayed by the Maduro government.

Although the corrosive aspects of the populist dynamic are clearly evident in much of the pink tide, decline of the left in the region is not exclusive to the populist cases. Indeed, decline became evident not only in Chavez’s Venezuela, Morales’ Bolivia or Correa’s Ecuador, but also the cases of Brazil and Chile, where the centre-left, while in power, maintained impeccable liberal democratic credentials. Furthermore, political decline in the region preceded the economic downturn that began in 2014. Indeed, according to the latest data published by Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), between 2010 and 2014 (when political decline first became apparent), most of the key economic indicators (unemployment, inflation, terms of trade, foreign investment, debt to GDP ratio, and balance of trade) did not suggest reason for alarm (ECLAC, 2019). Quite the contrary, from a historical perspective, most indicators were overwhelmingly positive during this four-year period, worsening notably only after 2014, the year marking the decisive end of the region’s “commodity boom” (Ocampo, 2017). Admittedly, after having reached historic highs in 2010, GDP growth did become sluggish thereafter, but steady decline did not begin until 2013/2014. Given this, any account of the pink tide’s decline that relies on the populist thesis will be necessarily insufficient, demanding explanations for the anomalous cases of the good left as well as the precise timing of the region’s economic woes.

If not the pitfalls of populism, then, what explains the decline of the centre left in the region? Using the case of Chile, I argue that the decline of the centre-left can be explained by what in this paper I refer to as the “neoliberalist bargain”, namely the contradictory and necessarily untenable relationship that developed between movements and left governments at the turn of the century. This relationship, as I will outline below, is at the root of what became an era-defining political crisis in Chile, one that put the meaning of democracy at the centre of political contestation. Furthermore, the decline of the centre-left has led to the emergence of new forms of authoritarianism in the country, that is, precisely the opposite of what mainstream commentators argued is the trajectory of the “good” left. This explanation for the anomalous case of Chile, that is, one of the cases of decline that does not fit the populist thesis, not only helps us understand the pink tide’s crisis in its full diversity, but also challenges the

simple division between declining populist/authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, and thriving liberal-democratic administrations, on the other.

Hence, contrary to recent suggestions of a possible continuation in the progressive legacies of pink tide governance (Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017), the emergence of new forms of authoritarian governance from both moderate and radical left experiences in the region suggests a possible new phase of development is emerging. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail, it is worth briefly comparing the current conjuncture in Latin America to that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was at that time that, with remarkable predictive power, Poulantzas (2000) theorized the emergence of what he called “authoritarian statism”, a new form in the capitalist state that sought to respond to the then unfolding crisis of capitalism. Importantly, authoritarian statism was not theorized as a dictatorship in the classic sense (i.e. Pinochet), but rather as “the new ‘democratic’ form of the bourgeois republic” (Poulantzas, 2000, p. 209), one characterized by repression and little regard for formal democratic liberties. The emergence of authoritarian statism was understood by Poulantzas to be the expression of the specific balance of class forces in particular historical periods. Today, in Latin America this balance of class forces has shifted to the ruling class, a direct outcome of new political strategies by economic elites, the economic pressures associated with the end of the commodities boom, and what is the focus of this paper, the limitations of centre-left governance coinciding with the unfinished recomposition of popular forces. However, this is not to say that authoritarian statism is a *fait accompli*. Indeed, the class struggle across the region seems to be sharpening, and the outcome is never easy to predict, as the most recent events in Chile make it clear.

The neostructuralist bargain

Beginning with *el caracazo* in Venezuela, a popular rebellion against neoliberal reforms that ended with thousands of dead civilians to the hands of police in 1989, the region became swept by nothing short of a massive wave of new social movements (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001; Harris, 2003). The *zapatistas* in Mexico, the water and gas wars in Bolivia, the recuperated enterprises in Argentina, CONAIE in Ecuador and the landless workers movement (MST) in Brazil are but a few of the more notable examples. Importantly, this wave of movements broke from more established forms of popular resistance witnessed in the region since the post-war period. Challenging the often bureaucratic and top-down approaches of the labour union movement, traditional political parties and guerrilla organizations, this new wave of movements demanded not only a more just society, but also one that is radically democratic and participatory. In doing so, many of these movements began to articulate new demands and forms of organization that point beyond capitalism, even as they continue to reproduce capitalist social relations, what I have recently called “post-capitalist struggles” (Larrabure, 2019; see also Kay, 2008).

These new movements became entangled in the electoral arena, as they actively or tacitly came to support emerging new leaders that promised a break from neoliberalism. In some cases, notably those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia, new more radical horizons for social change became officially articulated, notably “twenty-first century socialism” and “Buen Vivir.” However, this did not necessarily mean an embrace of social movements by the new leftist governments. The case of the now ruling Alianza País in Ecuador is notable, as Correa’s “Citizens Revolution” was labelled as such to underline the limited role social movements were to play in his coalition (Chiasson-LeBel, 2018). Similarly, Venezuela’s MVR (the predecessor of the ruling PSUV) was formed largely as an electoral instrument, meant to quickly capitalize on the anti-neoliberal sentiments of wide sectors of the country in the late 1990s. By early 2010, this new wave of left and centre-left parties and coalitions, what became known as the region’s pink tide, had formed governments in more than half of the entire region and in nine out of thirteen countries in South America, an unprecedented phenomenon in the region’s political history that, along with the new wave of movements that preceded it, formed what became known as the region’s Left turn. This began a new phase in the region’s political economy.

Although there is no agreement in the literature as to how to conceptualize this new political and economic phase, as Leiva (2008) argues using the cases of Chile and Brazil, it was at least partially motivated by what became known as “neoliberalism”, a new development approach that was first articulated in the 1980s within the highly influential regional development agency, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (see French-Davis, 1985). As discussed by Leiva (2008), at least partially following the central tenets of neoliberal theory, left governments eschewed what were deemed to be outdated ideas of class and national development, developing a policy agenda that, while embracing globalization, attempted to combine growth with equity. However, as Leiva underscores, this model remained highly contradictory as it was based on an export drive to be implemented through alliances with transnational capital and the deepening of labour market flexibility (for more optimistic perspectives on the pink tide, see Silva, 2009; García Linera, 2011; Sadler 2013; Anria & Niedzwiecki, 2016).

Notably, for Leiva, the cases of Bolivia and Venezuela stood as exceptions to the neoliberal trend at the time. This point has been confirmed by subsequent research that demonstrates how the leftist governments in these two countries developed policies, programs and decision-making structures that went beyond the contradictions of neoliberalism, complete with their own set of specific contradictions. Chavista governments have embraced class conflict and created new institutions of popular participation. However these new institutions have had to navigate tensions between grassroots democracy and forms of authoritarianism rooted within the state and the country’s historic dependence on oil revenues (Larrabure, 2019). Similarly, the case of the Bolivian

Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), led by Evo Morales, features mass participation by grassroots communities, combining indigenous practices with those of militant unionism. Indeed, the MAS is to a significant degree the organic expression of the social movements that erupted in the country in the early 2000s and is often seen as expressing a dynamic (albeit often tense) relationship between elected politicians and popular sectors (Roberts, 2007; Wolff in this issue). Nevertheless, as Grisaffi (2019) recently argues, the MAS has been unable to overcome the contradictions between the local demands of the coca-growing unions and global norms restricting cocaine production.

Although the wave of postcapitalist struggles in the 1990s represented a break from the more established patterns of working class resistance, with the exception of the MAS in Bolivia, the new forms of struggle that emerged out of this new context were not able to create original organizational structures able to politically channel popular discontent with neoliberalism on a mass scale, some remaining relatively isolated (i.e. the *zapatistas* in Mexico), while others eventually gravitating towards traditional left party structures (i.e. the *piqueteros* in Argentina). In other words, these new forms of popular struggle remained underdeveloped, unable to directly incur into the state apparatus through an organizational structure that expressed the novelty of their struggles. As a result, popular struggles acquired a historically specific ambiguous character, as they had to negotiate their participation between two inadequate structures of resistance, the well-developed but increasingly ineffective traditional labour unions and parties (see Robinson, 2004; Anner, 2008; Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015), and the underdeveloped but increasingly more relevant new ones.

The arrival of the pink tide and the contradictions in the political economic model it pursued intensified the ambiguous status of social movements. At first, some of the older movements tended to fullier support the pink tide governments, often reducing their levels of militancy and mobilization in the process. Newer movements also went through a transition. What in the 1990s and early 2000s appeared as a steadfast commitment to horizontalism and autonomy in their part, by the late 2000s became a much more complex situation, as many of these new movements found themselves simultaneously supporting and actively undermining pink tide governance for its continued commitment to key aspects of neoliberalism (Spronk, 2007; Levy, 2012; Becker, 2013). What developed in the relationship between social movements and the pink tide in this context was a particular form of conflict management, one that gave the pink tide relative stability for a decade and a half, but one that today has reached its limits.

In contrast to the approach of current and past right-wing governments that responded to social movements with a combination of minimal concessions and repression, the pink tide, the MAS and Chavismo exempted, responded with what I here call the “neostucturalist bargain”. In this bargain, in return for economic gains for the most vulnerable sectors of society, movements were

asked to frame their struggles within the logic of gradual, linear progress, as espoused by Western democratic theory (Huber & Stephens, 2012; Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017). This meant that the ambitions of social movements for immediate and direct intervention in their country's economic decisions via radical participatory democracy had to be sidelined. It should be noted that this was not the result of a formal bargaining process between movements and the pink tide, but rather an informal process of political contestation. Each party has their own weapons. For social movements, as will be further discussed in my case study, it is an array of radical and often novel forms of mobilization, but which nevertheless lack fully developed forms of political representation. For pink tide governments, it includes advanced forms of social control through "territorial dialogue" techniques and the mobilization of "epistemic communities", what Leiva (2019) in this issue refers to as "new political technologies."

However, the neostructuralist bargain reflects the pink tide's attempt to do the impossible, that is, to fold the non-linear demands of movements for radical change into a linear logic of gradual progress. The result is therefore precisely the opposite of what supporters of gradual progressivism would expect, that is, the progressive *undermining* of the pink tide. Furthermore, given the ambiguous character of social movements, and their continued lack of adequate forms of political leadership and representation, the decline of the pink tide opened new opportunities for the right wing. Furthermore, there is now more than sufficient evidence to suggest that this new right wing is not one that possesses democratic sensibilities, but rather one committed to often blatant and unapologetic authoritarian practices. Although this is most obvious in the case of the Bolsonaro government in Brazil, forms of authoritarianism have also become plainly evident in the case of Chile. It is in this context that social movements are increasingly seeking political alternatives to the pink tide.

As we will see through the case of Chile, this ongoing search for a new left politics in Latin America expresses many of the insights developed by Nicos Poulantzas (2000). For Poulantzas the state is understood as representing neither solely the domination of capital (the orthodox Marxist position) nor, what is equally one-sided, the possibility of progressive liberation of the oppressed classes via gradual reforms (the social democratic position), but rather the historically specific balance of class forces. Hence, any attempt to build a society decisively beyond neoliberalism would require not only the development of new social relations from below, but also strategic incursions in the part of these same movements into the state apparatus. However, these incursions into the state are only meaningful to the degree that they produce not merely policy reforms, as has indeed been the case with most of the pink tide, but actual transformations in the state's existing institutional composition, particularly as it applies to its democratic character.

In this regard, Poulantzas' thinking reflected an understanding of modern democracy that acknowledged the limitations of its historically specific form,

as typically highlighted within Marxism. As Wood (2007) demonstrates through her magisterial study of ancient Athens, democracy meant not merely “rule of the people”, but their *direct* rule, as citizens were able to exercise power over the economy through their participation in the ancient city’s sovereign Assembly. However, with the development of capitalism, Wood continues, democracy acquired a new form, one in which direct participation became replaced with the liberal institutions of representation, namely parliamentary democracy, universal suffrage and individual rights, thus preventing and delegitimizing the direct participation of the working classes within the economy. While acknowledging the historical specificity of bourgeois democracy, Poulantzas (2000), departing from the traditional Marxist position, saw liberal institutions and the capitalist state more broadly not merely as a tool of the capitalist class, but also capable of expressing working class struggles, albeit in a distorted form. In other words, for Poulantzas, the specific form of the capitalist state was ultimately the expression of the balance of class forces in any given historical period. Hence, Poulantzas ultimately rejected the Marxist-Leninist strategy of ‘smashing’ the state, arguing instead for engaging in a long-term and conflictual process that *combined* direct and representative forms of democracy, what he theorized as a “democratic road to socialism”.

The struggle for education and a new democracy

The research presented here is based on a qualitative case study approach that involves situating a particular activity or event with its related social, historical and economic setting (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). It is sometimes also referred to as an “extended case study” for its ability to extract the general from the unique and connect present, past, and future by building on preexisting theory (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5). My research also utilises both the single and multiple forms of “incorporated comparison”, as outlined by McMichael (1990). Following this approach, I compare the case of Chile to other countries in the region in the context of different phases of political economic development. My data collection tools included semistructured, and non-structured interviews with fifteen key informants within political parties and the student movement, archival work at the University of Chile Student Federation (FECh), and observation at relevant political rallies and marches. All interviews were conducted in Spanish in April 2018 and lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour.

The Penguin revolution

In 2005, Eva Sarmiento,¹ a student at Siete del Santiago, one of the most highly-regarded high schools in Santiago, Chile, was approached by several members of la *Juventud Comunista* (Communist Youth, JC) that had begun organizing students around issues of debt, bus fares, and fees for University-entry exams. Raised by Communist parents, Eva felt a natural attraction to the issues

being raised by the JC's student organizers and decided to join their cause. At that time, the JC were the most radical political force at the high school, having the reputation of being part of the oldest communist party in Latin America, and key allies of president Salvador Allende in his short-lived socialist government (1970-1973). The *Partido Comunista de Chile* (Communist Party of Chile, PCCh) also became one of the primary targets of the brutal repression unleashed by the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) against popular sectors and the left. This meeting between Eva and the JC was merely one ripple in what in 2006 was to become a massive wave of student mobilizations known as the penguin revolution.

Although their dark navy and white school uniforms and diminutive charm had earned the student activists the slightly paternalistic label of penguins, it was not long after they first began mobilizing that the seriousness of their cause became apparent. Indeed, by early 2006, the penguins began a wave of high school occupations that by March amounted to a thousand high schools under student control. Many of these, including Eva's, remained under occupation on a twenty-four-hour basis for over a month. During this period of intense mobilizations, students developed their two central demands: a free students bus pass, and free university-entry exams. However, bigger ideas were brewing, as students began to relate their demands to the macroeconomic situation in the country. "Cobre por el cielo, educación por el suelo" (copper in the skies, education on the floor), as Eva recalled, became an oft-repeated slogan used by students, aimed at highlighting their perceived injustice at the decrepit state of the education system in the context of Chile's rapidly growing copper revenues.

The penguin revolution caught the ruling centre-left Concertación government, then led by president Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), completely by surprise. After all, the economy was booming, boasting the fourth highest growth rate in South America (6.3 percent) (World Bank, 2019), continuing a pattern of strong growth since 1992, shortly after the Concertación took office.² In addition, as with the rest of the region, poverty and inequality were rapidly declining, in part the result of pro-poor programs such as Chile Solidario, the most important poverty reduction program in the country, combining psychosocial support, preferential access to social services, and a small cash transfer subsidy for targeted families (Hoces de la Guardia et al., 2011). Indeed, during this period, political leaders and development experts worldwide often lauded the Bachelet government for its achievements in these areas, making the country the poster child for progressive, moderate development. Furthermore, the Concertación possessed the credentials of having led the transition to democracy through their opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s. In other words, the Bachelet government was the epitome of the "good left", and the "Chilean miracle" became the example to follow.

However, the student strike revealed what lay underneath official statistics, namely a contradictory growth model in which rising consumption and real

wages depended on growing inequality and unsustainable levels of personal debt. It also revealed the profound neoliberal character of the education system under the *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza* (LOCE), created by the Pinochet regime and passed in 1990 with the approval of the Concertación, as part of the terms set out for a return to democracy. Under this system, students at all levels faced an education that was among the most expensive in the world, radically biased towards the private sector, and deeply class divided (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002; Aguayo Ormeño, 2011; Fontaine, 2011). The Concertación's complicity in maintaining the dictatorship's vision of the education system over its twenty years in power can hardly be overstated. In 1981, 78 percent of secondary students attended the public system, a figure that dropped to 50 percent by 2004. This trend continued into the Concertación's last government so that, by 2008, enrollment in subsidized private schools actually surpassed that of public ones (Burton, 2012). The same trend was also evident in postsecondary education (Aguayo Ormeño, 2011).

In addition, the penguin revolution highlighted what can be considered nothing less than a sociopolitical time bomb, one rooted in a profound democratic crisis in the country. As outlined by Venegas (2016), since the return to democracy in 1990, Chile has experienced a gradual erosion in levels of democratic participation and engagement. Chileans, particularly youth, have carried with them a growing sense of lack of political representation, political inefficacy and a negative perception towards political parties. As a result, a wide range of indicators, including electoral participation, affiliation to political parties and support for democracy have reached historically low levels, in some years ranking among the lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean (Venegas, 2016). Indeed, electoral participation among youth 24 and under in the 2005 presidential elections was between 20 and 23 percent, down from as high as 80-90 percent in 1988, the year of the democratic plebiscite. In other words, under the Concertación, beneath the appearance of a well-functioning, modern democracy was really a crumbling edifice of political dissatisfaction and frustration, literally the opposite of what the supporters of the good left suggested.

In this context of profound dissatisfaction with the existing institutions of liberal democracy, the penguin revolution began to develop an alternative vision of democracy, one that began to dramatically reshape the left in the country. Although the JC had initially taken the leadership in the movement, and was the dominant political force in the traditional student centres, students also organized themselves through the then newly created Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios, based on direct participation and the use of rotating spokespeople (Gómez Leyton, 2006). This is very different from the traditional way democracy is practiced within the institutions of liberal democracy, such as parliaments, parties and most unions, in which, once elected, political leaders can make decisions without consulting the base. In addition, the assemblies brought together students of diverse political backgrounds, allowing competing political visions to coexist (Valdebenito, 2009). Penguin democracy

therefore also challenged the PCCh's own organizational structure, widely understood as top-down and sectarian (Roberts, 1995; Furci, 2008). The result was a radicalizing dynamic among the student base, as JC's leadership became questioned and indeed challenged by new emerging left currents.

Eva is an emblematic case. Although raised in a PC household and recruited by JC at her high-school, she began to see the JC leadership as insufficiently radical, often attempting to demobilize the student base through appeals to realism. But for Eva, this was not the moment for realism. As she recalls, during the national student strike on March 30, 2006, which drew over a million people to the streets, she and a group of student activists decided not only take to the streets but also cut off one of the main roads in the city, thus radically elevating the conflict. She recalls not knowing exactly why they suddenly decided to cut off the road. To paraphrase her, it was almost as if it was part of their DNA. For Eva, these kinds of radical actions taken by her and other students clashed with the more conservative approach of the PCCh leadership, namely to engage the Bachelet government in dialogue. This posture was consistent with the PCCh's historic political strategy of gradualism and alliances with the centre-left (Leiva, 2012), and according to Eva it contributed to the watering down of the movement's demands.

The result of the negotiations was a gradual end to the conflict, with the Bachelet government granting partial economic and political concessions to the students. Specifically, as Venegas (2016) outlines, the government promised to fund half a million lunches for the school system, unspecified improvements to student transportation, and grants for university-entry tests for students most in need. Politically, the government established the Presidential Advisory Board for Quality Education, through which reforms to the education system were sought. Students demanded 50 percent plus one representation in the board, but this demand was rejected and finally only fourteen of eighty-three members in the board were students. The rest were mostly politicians and academic experts. The outcome of the work done by the advisory board was the drafting of a new law to replace the LOCE. However, the new law, *Ley General de Educación*, made only the most marginal modifications to the LOCE, and was therefore rejected by the student movement upon its passing in 2009. Nevertheless, the movement could do little about it, having been effectively demobilized and lacking any political forces within the state. In other words, the neostructuralist bargain was struck: with the granting of small economic gains and establishment of symbolic forms of participation, the *Concertación* managed to curb the students' democratic struggles from below that sought to have a direct say in the future of education.

Although the *Concertación's* partial concessions successfully appeased the movement, its handling of the student crisis cost the centre-left coalition a heavy political price, paving the way for the victory of billionaire businessman Sebastián Piñera in the 2010 general elections. This was a particularly meaningful political turn, as it became the first right wing government to rule Chile

since the return of democracy, raising the question of whether a right-wing government, formed by a coalition of parties with well-known historic ties to the Pinochet regime, could be expected to rule with sufficient democratic sensibility. However, the Piñera government responded to the crisis in the country through unapologetic authoritarian measures, shattering the thesis of gradual democratic progress that was supposed to take place under the stewardship of the good left.

As outlined by Pavez (2013), the Piñera government systematically isolated the opposition within congress, preventing legislative compromises of any kind. Particularly notable in this strategy was the dramatic increase in the use of vetoes by selected congressmen. This was a major break from the elite negotiation approach to governance that the Concertación had developed for twenty years. On the streets, the Piñera government engaged in heavy repression of the movement, including banning marches, blocking students from the use of public transit on selected days, and use of mass detentions. The public statement made on one of the heaviest days of police repression (August 4, 2011) by Camila Vallejo, the most prominent student activist at the time and member of the Communist youth, was poignant: “This appears to be a state of siege, I imagine this is what it was like 30 years ago in Chile during the military dictatorship” (El País, 2011).³ Amidst the crisis, Piñera himself also triggered a major dispute with the judiciary after the use of repeated intimidation tactics when attempting to pass a highly punitive law against student mobilizations (Segovia & Gamboa, 2012).

The 2011 student revolt

Responding to Piñera's authoritarian approach and lack of action in educational reform, in 2011, the Penguins, now turned University students, reignited the student movement, turning it into the biggest social mobilizations in the country since the return to democracy. The student movement expressed a renewed commitment to radical action from below, organizing massive marches, student strikes, and carnival-like takeovers of whole sections of Santiago through the use of flash mobs, dance-a-thons, and mock suicides. In addition, new alliances were forged with the labour movement, indigenous communities and supportive sectors of civil society, expanding the movement beyond the educational sector (Núñez, 2012). In comparison to 2006, the movement's demands had become more radical, nothing less than free and public education. These two central demands were coupled by a bold implementation plan, namely the nationalization of the copper industry, and a constitutional reform via a constituent assembly. In other words, the movement demanded a total overhaul not only to the education system, but to the neoliberal edifice built in the country since the dictatorship.

Once again, students' commitment to new more direct forms of democratic participation became evident. A testament to this is the wave of secondary

schools and university building occupations that began in June. As Marco Ramirez, executive member of the students federation (FECh) in 2018 and one of the student activists that led the occupation of the National Institute at the University of Chile in 2011 recalled, 500 students actively participated in the occupation, not only occupying the space on a 24-7 basis, but also engaging in a process of self-management. With the help of supportive professors, Marco recalls, students developed and implemented their own curriculum in areas as diverse as math, biology, and history. Decisions were made via general assembly, as well as smaller representative bodies elected at the faculty level. The democratic process involved a combination of consensus, as well as secret vote. Although struggling to maintain itself by the end, at times facing heavy police repression, the occupation and self-management of the National Institute lasted nearly eight months. Hence, at the peak of the crisis, students had created the beginnings of a second democracy in Chile, one that stood in sharp contrast to the kind of democracy practiced in the existing institutions of the state.

The radical and participatory character of the movement continued to create a rupture within the country's left. Although traditional left forces, such as the PCCh, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT) and the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECh), unquestionably played an important role in the movement (Guzmán-Concha, 2012), a new left was now under construction. Throughout the country and in particular in the most important universities in the capital, a new autonomist political movement began to sweep student elections. Emblematic of this political shift was the result of the 2011 FECh elections in which Gabriel Boric then member of the Izquierda Autónoma defeated Camila Vallejo (PCCh) for the position of president. Vallejo continued to be the most visible and charismatic of student leaders at the time and was even voted 2011 person of the year by readers of *The Guardian* (Oliver, 2011).

Izquierda Autónoma had developed a sharp critique of the PCCh for its continued top-down practices and for historically being too close to the centre-left. In the process, it developed an innovative radical left politics that attempts to blend grassroots democracy from below with state action from above. As Gonzalo Winter, elected deputy for Movimiento Autonomista in 2018 explained, this political strategy rejects twentieth-century revolutionary politics for containing what he sees as a problematic Christian morality that demands purity and nothing less than an epic and swift rupture with capitalism.⁴ twentieth-century revolutionary politics, and its rejection of the state as an effective terrain of class struggle, Winter continues, ultimately leads to depoliticization, one of Pinochet's central goals. However, autonomists also reject the idea that the state can solve everything, emphasizing the need for community forms of power to exist. Ultimately, the autonomist vision, according to Winter, is one of participatory democracy everywhere, thus avoiding the emergence of leaders such as Stalin and Fidel Castro that, as Winter put it, "speak in the name of the people". He does not mention Poulantzas, but his work, particularly the last

chapter, *State, Power, Socialism*, would not sit uncomfortably in Winter's existing collection.

Meanwhile, the centre-left also began to reorganize itself. Facing a legitimacy crisis, in an attempt to rebrand itself, the Concertación began to court the PCCh. With the 2013 elections looming, the Concertación dissolved itself and was replaced with the Nueva Mayoría (NM), a broad centre-left coalition that now included the PCCh for the first time, the Concertación 2.0 so to speak. This was a massive about-face of Communist student movement leaders, including Camila Vallejo, who in a student paper published in 2010 outright rejected the idea of joining even critical elements within the Concertación, stating that “nobody can fully trust the Concertación” and that “no youth that considers itself on the left would ever trust the Concertación 100 percent” (archives). Under the leadership of Michelle Bachelet, and with the added legitimacy of having the PCCh as part of the coalition, the Nueva Mayoría won the 2013 elections. The NM became responsible for delivering on four specific campaign promises that appeared to directly respond to the student movement: free post-secondary education, a new and more progressive tax code, a new constitution, and a more progressive labour code (Bachelet, 2013). However, the limits of the NM's capacity to meet the student movement's demands soon became clear.

The NM implemented free education, but the system remained under the neoliberal constraints of the existing *Ley General de Educación*. As a result, rather than having universal access to free education, students could access free education through an individualized voucher system that reproduces the market-driven, consumer model of education. Indeed, after its implementation, Marco called the new system, the “perfection of neoliberal education”. In addition, constitutional reform was achieved via a highly controlled top-down process of consultation, not through a participatory constituent assembly, as demanded by the students. The outcome of this process was the introduction of proportional representation into the electoral system, certainly not an insignificant change. Finally, as for the new tax and labour codes, their content became so diluted as to become almost unrecognizable to the original proposals, arguably favouring the dominant classes (Landerretche Gacitúa, 2014; Doniez & Kremerman, 2015). In short, a neostructuralist bargain had once again been struck, albeit on a grander scale. Hence, consistent with the Concertación's response to the movement in 2006, small changes on a gradual path to progress became the answer to the movement's demands for radical and immediate change.

Frustrated with this outcome, students and allied sectors responded with a new political initiative, the formation of the Frente Amplio (FA), a political coalition comprised of a variety of left-wing parties and groups, many of them emerging organically from the student movement. The coalition includes radical left forces, notably autonomism, but is presently dominated by social democratic forces, notably Revolución Democrática (RD) whose strongest inspira-

tion is Allende's Unidad Popular government. RD worked closely with the NM government, playing an important role in policy debates within the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC). However, the political grouping broke its ties with the NM in 2014. To paraphrase Andrés Dibán Dinamarca, RD's national executive in 2018, the RD discovered the NM's conservative soul overpowered its progressive one.

The Frente Amplio ran a strong grassroots campaign during the 2017 general elections and against all predictions its presidential candidate, Beatriz Sánchez (RD), received over 20 percent of votes in the first round. In addition, twenty-one of her coalition candidates were elected into office, including one elected as senator. This result put Sánchez just shy of Alejandro Guillier, the NM candidate, a historic result that gives the country a viable alternative to the right-wing and centre-left parties and coalitions that have dominated Chile since 1990. The rapid rise of the FA has also reframed radical politics. While this space has traditionally been held by the PCCh and its strategy of alliances with the centre-left, this space is now in the hands of the FA that promotes mass participation from below and bold structural reforms, not only to education, but to the key pillars of neoliberalism in the country, notably the copper industry, the pensions system, and ultimately the existing Constitution. The FA's politics, at least to this point, therefore points beyond the neostructuralist bargain.

However, the results of the election marked the return of Sebastián Piñera to the presidency, as he comfortably defeated the NM's candidate. In comparison with his first administration, initially Piñera appeared to take a more democratic and cooperative approach to governance, launching a new initiative to policy-making, the so-called *acuerdos nacionales* (national accords), in which a number of key policy decisions would be made through discussions with broad sectors of the opposition. However, this initiative was revealed to be an attempt to coopt his political competition, and the social demands and movements represented in them. Hence, amidst the discussions taking place under the working tables he organized, Piñera and his government proceeded to revert a series of progressive reforms initiated under the NM government, often using highly questionable authoritarian methods.

One such method is the appointment of ministerial delegates that effectively give Piñera control over public ministries in which these are deployed, facilitating ad hoc modifications to existing legislation. Another method is the selective use of the Constitutional Tribunal, which reviews the constitutionality of proposed legislation. A notable case in this regard was the decision taken by Chile Vamos, the political coalition Piñera leads, to send to the Tribunal one of the legislative proposals developed by the NM that aimed at ensuring the public character of post-secondary education. Comprised of a conservative majority, the Tribunal ruled as unconstitutional two of the key articles that sought to eliminate profit from the sector, thus trumping almost a decade of democratic deliberation and public debate. Similar forms of what one might call "adminis-

trative authoritarianism” were employed by the Piñera government in the areas of taxation, women’s reproductive health, and public safety (López, 2018).

However, by October 2019, Piñera’s tactics reverted back to the outright repressive forms of authoritarianism that he first employed in 2011, and have indeed surpassed anything witnessed in the country since the dictatorship. In late October 2019, as a response to high school students mobilizing against a transit fare hike, Piñera decreed a state of emergency in almost the entire country, with thousands of military personnel patrolling the streets. Furthermore, dozens of neighbourhoods were put under a military-enforced curfew. Many neighbourhoods came under the direct control of the army and air force. Freedom of movement in Santiago was suspended for several days. To date, the turmoil has claimed the lives of twenty-two civilians, five of these as a result of direct action taken by the police or military. Thousands more have incurred serious injuries, including 180 to the eyes, as a result of the arbitrary use of non-lethal weapons, a serious human rights violation, according to UN observers (El Mostrador, 10 November 2019). Today, as a new iteration of the student movement emerges, in Piñera’s Chile, democracy appears to exist only on paper, with the formal institutions of liberal democracy proving incapable of containing Piñera’s authoritarian assault on the popular classes. With more demonstrations being organized by Unidad Social, the new umbrella organization for the popular upsurge, further conflict in the lead up to the 2021 election appears certain. In other words, in Chile, we are witnessing the rapid sharpening of class struggle on the side of both elite and popular forces, the outcome of which will be decisive in determining the form which the capitalist state will adopt. On the one side is authoritarian statism and on the other a new movement of democratic assemblies from below, the new *cabildos populares*, and their growing demand for a constituent assembly (Soy Chile, 2019). Importantly, unlike during the student-led mobilizations of 2006 and 2011, these popular forces now have a political organ, the Frente Amplio, that at least in theory expresses their interests. An alliance between the two could set the stage for a new democratic project, one in which the institutions of the capitalist state, rather than undermining the direct participation of the popular classes, can be transformed so as to express the popular collective will.

Conclusion

According to mainstream political science, the rise of the pink tide at the turn-of-the-century presented the Latin American left with two options. The first was the path taken by the centre-left, that is, the embrace of neoliberal globalization coupled with the application of responsible social policies of inclusion. This path was supposed to lead to continuous progress, characterized by economic growth and the embrace of liberal democratic institutions. The second path was that of radical left whose outdated allegiance to notions of anti-imperialism and socialism were a sure path towards authoritarian decay, as

populist leaders successfully manipulated the masses for their own self-empowerment. However, this thesis of liberal progressivism on the one hand and populist decay on the other is nothing short of a fantasy.

As we have seen through the case of Chile, what best characterizes centre-left governance is not a self-reinforcing logic of democratic progress, but rather the precise opposite, that is, the progressive undermining of democratic legitimacy. Central to explaining this democratic decay is a specific political mechanism, which I have called the neostructuralist bargain. In this bargain, political conflict is temporarily diffused, as governments grant vulnerable populations economic gains, while buffering the state from the demands of social movements to have direct participation in the economy. Taking advantage of the ongoing recomposition of popular sector struggles and the left in Chile, the centre-left successfully applied the neostructuralist bargain in the face of the student movement. The result was reforms that were water-downed or simply ignored, a response that deepened democratic scepticism in the country and opened the door to new and increasingly egregious forms of authoritarianism expressed in the right-wing governments of Sebastián Piñera. What the case of Chile therefore reveals is the profoundly ideological basis of the populist thesis. Although appearing to defend democracy and progress against authoritarian decline, the defenders of the good left obscure the fundamentally undemocratic and elite driven character of neoliberal democracies. Indeed, it is this type of elite authoritarianism, and not a dictatorship, that the Pinochet regime sought to build in the first place through his neoliberal revolution. That his Constitution, even after almost thirty years of “democratic” rule, is still in effect today is a testament to his victory.

Highlighting the decline of the centre-left in Chile is in no way meant to deflect criticism from the crisis of the radical left. Indeed, little could deflect from the tragic situation Venezuela, perhaps the most radical of the radical left, is currently living through. The example of Chile rather demonstrates that, unlike what is argued in mainstream political science, authoritarianism and democracy are not mutually exclusive forms of governance. Indeed, it would be revisionist to the extreme to overlook or gloss over the democratic achievements that until recently best characterized the Bolivarian revolution (see Weyland, 2013). Although in deep decay now, not more than a few years ago, Venezuela boasted a wide range of new grassroots democratic organizations and institutions that, contrary to the theorists of populism here noted, operated with a certain degree of autonomy from the state. Similarly, it is impossible to overlook the profound democratic decay that has accompanied thirty years of democratic governance in Chile, and the authoritarian tendencies that continue to plague its institutions. Hence, as argued in this paper, the current Latin American crisis cannot be understood via a simple division between populists and moderates, but rather through an analysis of the balance of class forces, one that, as we have seen through the case of Chile, suggests the possible emergence of authoritarian statism, a topic that desperately requires further inquiry.

Also crucial will be to follow the trajectory of Frente Amplio, and the movements the leftist coalition claims to represent, in the lead up to 2021 presidential elections in Chile. This will be particularly important in relation to the latest mobilization of October 2019. With the centre-left still in disarray, and the credibility of the country's democratic institutions shattered even further following the October state, the FA has a genuine chance of taking power in the country. Not only would this represent a break in the rightward trajectory that the region is currently witnessing, it could also represent the beginnings of a left beyond the neostructuralist bargain, that is, a left that more fully articulates the radically democratic demands and practices of social movements through a political organ capable of transforming the state.

Manuel Larrabure is assistant professor in the Department of International Relations at Bucknell University. His current research focuses on the crisis of the “pink tide”, and the rise of the new right in Latin America.

Address: Department of International Relations, Academic West, Bucknell University, One Dent Dr, Lewisburg, PA 17837, United States.

E-mail: mel027@bucknell.edu

Notes

- 1 Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees except for elected politicians and political party representatives.
- 2 It should be noted that although chronologically the Concertación preceded the pink tide, and was therefore conditioned by different historical factors (most notably Chile's transition to democracy), its governance model nevertheless had to adapt to the pink tide's arrival and the specific social, political and economic pressures the region was then experiencing, the sudden emergence of the student movement being a particularly important example of this. In other words, although possessing different origins to those of the chronological pink tide, the Concertación nevertheless eventually came to face similar pressures and analytically speaking can therefore be placed within debates about the region's new left, as indeed has been routinely done since the early 2000s.
- 3 Amnesty International also accused the government of excessive use of force, citing cases arbitrary detention, inappropriate use of tear gas and possible mistreatment of detainees (Fuentes, 2011).
- 4 The Movimiento Autonomista was created in 2016 out of a split within Izquierda Autónoma. Boric and Winter are two of their most notable members.

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