
Chilean Spring: from Environmental Violence to a Constitutional Renewal

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ABSTRACT

Chile is going through a major moment in its political history: the drafting of a new Constitution. The social movement of spring 2019 received international media coverage and spurred this political watershed that reconsiders a legislation introduced in the midst of the dictatorship. The urban riots, which initially exploded following the price increase of the metro ticket in Santiago de Chile, do not in themselves explain the political crisis that the country is undergoing. This article focuses on the specific relationship of Chilean society with the environment to better understand the scope and radicalness of this historic social mobilization. The environment is at the heart of the contradictions of the development model all the more so since the exploitation of natural resources causes many inequalities, injustices and environmental violence. In this sense, the riots taking place throughout the country are part of a long history of post-dictatorship social and environmental mobilization. Ecology has gradually brought several different struggles together, explaining the radicalness of the protests that have led to a call for a constitutional renewal.

Keywords: social mobilization, environment, environmental violence, Constitution, Chile

RÉSUMÉ

Le Chili traverse un moment majeur de son histoire politique : l'élaboration d'une nouvelle Constitution. Le mouvement social du printemps 2019, dont l'ampleur a eu un écho médiatique international, a impulsé ce tournant politique qui revient sur un texte produit en pleine dictature. Les émeutes urbaines, qui explosent initialement en raison d'une hausse du prix du ticket de métro à Santiago du Chili, n'expliquent pas à elles seules la crise politique que traverse le pays. Cet article revient sur la spécificité des rapports à l'environnement de la société chilienne afin de comprendre l'ampleur et la radicalité de cette mobilisation sociale historique. L'environnement est au cœur des contradictions du modèle de développement puisque l'exploitation des ressources naturelles produit de nombreuses inégalités, injustices et violences environnementales. En ce sens, les émeutes qui se déroulent dans tout le pays s'inscrivent dans une longue trajectoire de mobilisation sociale et environnementale post-dictature. L'écologie a progressivement fédéré une pluralité de luttes ce qui explique la radicalité des contestations allant jusqu'à la demande d'un renouveau constitutionnel.

Mots-clés : mobilisation sociale, environnement, violence environnementale, Constitution, Chili

During the week of October 14, 2019, several dozen Chilean high school students evaded the fare on the metro in Santiago, the capital of the country, to protest against a fare increase of 30 pesos¹. This amount, which seems trivial, became the last straw that broke a back already hurting with rage. This gave rise to a historic social mobilization, covered by the media throughout the world. It came as a surprise, because no one expected such an uprising from the country known to be the most developed in Latin America, with a stable economy and political system. This becomes the opportunity to recall that Chile has been the laboratory of neoliberalism, and the social upheaval resonates like an angry cry against the misdeeds of the prevailing development model in the world, which reaches its climax in Chile (Gaudichaud, 2017). Chileans protest against social inequality and exclusion, the physical and psychological violence of insecurity and the commodification of everyday life. The violence of the repression also comes as a surprise, with a death toll of thirty-one and several thousand injured, including more than three hundred who lost an eye because of the implementation of new policing methods. Despite these extremely serious events, the demonstrations remained massive for a long time. Another surprising aspect was the almost total absence of the trade unions and political parties. The latter were discredited from the nineteen-nineties onward because of the commitment of the socialist and communist parties to the market economy² and the quarrels of the leaders of the *Frente Amplio*, the left-wing alternative comprised of the alliance of several parties.

Despite this context of repression, and this alienation of traditional political organizations, the massive fare evasion in the metro led to daily riots for four months throughout the country, including a protest on October 25, 2019, which gathered over 1.2 million people in Santiago. This article investigates the part played by the ecology in the structuring and scope of this social movement. How do relations to the environment provide insights into the creation of this historic mobilization? Natural

1. 0,032 euros. The cost of transportation is similar to that of Paris when the minimum wage doesn't reach 350 € per month.

2. Especially with the creation of an alliance between left and center political parties, called *La Concertación* that the Communist party joined in 2006.

resources are at the heart of the extractivist business model, which produces growing environmental inequalities (I). This explains the multiplication of socio-environmental movements, making the ecological issue a watchword that has allowed the consolidation of previously separate demands regarding identity, status and class (II).

The environment at the heart of the contradictions of Chilean society

The exploitation of natural resources underlying the "Chilean model".

Chile's economy has historically been based on the extraction of natural resources. Nevertheless, the neoliberal shift during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) transformed Chilean society's relationship to the environment. The country then became a laboratory for neoliberalism, a new school of economic thought that emerged and strengthened in the interwar period (Dardot and Laval 2010). Young economists, trained as early as the 1950s by Milton Friedman from the University of Chicago, write the "Ladrillo". This long document proposes a complete overhaul of the State and the economy against the socialist policies implemented by Salvador Allende's Popular Unity (Moulian, 2000). The authoritarian and repressive context created by the Military Junta following the September 11, 1973 coup d'État made it easier to implement.

Thus the Junta promotes the liberalization of trade and organizes the use of land so that each region can be dedicated to a type of extractive activity, in which it is considered to have a comparative advantage (Bustos and Prieto, 2019). The north is to mine various ores, the central regions should concentrate on commercial agriculture, and the southern regions on fish farming, arboriculture, oil extraction and hydropower. Since the nineteen-nineties, the various democratic governments in power after the military dictatorship, both center-left and right-wing, have maintained and deepened this model of economic development. According to its leaders, the country's growth depends on the level of foreign investments, which is why they enacted a series of laws to attract foreign capital. All sectors essential to economic and social life are being

privatized: the health system, education, telecommunications, and transportation, electricity, drinking water and sanitation services, among others. These privatizations are characterized by outsourcing the management of these services, deregulating them and transferring state control to so-called autonomous regulatory authorities.

The legal framework and institutional structure supporting the growth model established under the dictatorship have remained unchanged since then. The 1980 Constitution is still in force, and it is not the only legal document that is. Several laws enacted to better exploit the natural resources, a required condition for extractive activities, are still applied, such as the 1981 Water Code (Bauer, 2015). The latter is an example of the neoliberalization of nature inasmuch as it legally recognizes water as a commodity, as further stated in a constitutional article. The Code grants the owners of water rights the right of free use: water rights can be leased or sold to third parties without having the State establish priorities in its use — for domestic use, for instance. To that extent, the human right to water is neither recognized nor respected in Chile. Meanwhile the Code provides many benefits to mining and agricultural companies in terms of access to water resources. For example, it authorizes mining companies to make unlimited use of “aguas halladas”, i.e., all the water located within their concession’s territory, regardless of the needs of the nearby communities, especially those located downstream of a river.

A few months after the proclamation of the Water Code, the Military Junta established a new Mining Code. The latter recognizes private ownership of the subsoil, independently of that of the soil, making it easier for companies to acquire mining resources. Moreover, in order to attract foreign capital, taxes due are trivial, especially for royalties related to exports. Furthermore, in the farming industry the agrarian counter-reform and the Irrigation Act encourage new entrepreneurs and foreign capital to implement intensive agriculture, mainly intended for export (Faliès, 2015). The State is financing the modernization of the water infrastructure of the large landowners, leading to a real “blue revolution” from which are excluded the few small farmers able to survive the new competitive regime. Finally, in the forestry industry, a

law intended for developing arboriculture establishes many financial benefits to encourage private companies to invest. It has given rise to massive land acquisition in the Bio-Bio, Araucania and Los Lagos regions, thus reproducing the colonial logic of dispossessing inhabitants self-identifying as Mapuche³ (Nahuelpan *et al.*, 2013; Antileo *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, one must refrain from an overly rigorous legal formalism and functionalism, and think that all laws protect the interests of the ruling classes and that their implementation transforms the social world and the geography of Chile (Blomley, 1994). Actually, there are complex local power relations relative to the ownership of natural resources involving extractive companies, State & local representatives, activist groups, national and international NGOs, different local residents' associations, water user organizations, and the inhabitants themselves. The creation of a "soft" national law, of a public action apparatus based on self-regulation by stakeholders and on reducing control mechanisms, encourages conflicts and collusions between stakeholders to define their access to natural resources. Very often, the growth of extractive companies is based on a strategic use of the law, its misuse or its local implementation (Nicolas-Artero 2019). These negotiating power relations result in environmental inequalities.

Inequalities, injustices and environmental violence

The development model based on the export of natural resources has enabled a strong economic growth and the modernization of infrastructure. In 2010, Chile became the first Latin American country to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Advocates for the neoliberal economy have called this transformation the "Chilean miracle". While the sustained increase in gross domestic product (GDP) has reduced poverty, inequalities have continued to grow (Angostini and Brown, 2007). Chile is one of the most unequal countries in the world (Gini index: 0.47). Concentration

3. The Mapuche are the most numerous native people in the country.

of economic wealth is one of the aspects of these inequalities: 1% of the population concentrates about 30% of wealth and 16 conglomerates are involved in 80% of the wealth creation. The financialization of the economy and the privatization of the pension system contribute to this concentration of wealth. Indeed, in 2003, seven companies (compared to 23 in 1993) held all the pension funds (45,000 million dollars) whose managers often come from the companies where the capital is invested. The three main businessmen of the country, Andronico Luksic, Eliodoro Matte, and the Angelini family are among the world's wealthiest (Pizarro, 2005).

Social inequalities can be read spatially, on several scales. First and foremost, the extractive specialization of regions has emphasized interregional inequalities (Amilhat Szary, 1997). Average household incomes are very high in the Metropolitan Region, where Santiago is located, as well as in the Tarapaca and Aysen regions, which respectively produce ores and oil, while they are very low in the Coquimbo and Araucania regions⁴. Regionally, development is not equal either. Economic dynamism is mainly evident in the natural resource sites. In addition, living standards differ between metropolitan urban areas and rural ones. The number of poor people is twice as high in rural communities. These inequalities can be measured by differences in per capita income, but are also found in access to health care, education and housing. There is a two-tiered system everywhere: on the one hand, quality services, guaranteed by private companies, reserved for the minority of the well-off population, and on the other hand, precarious (or non-existing) public services, where access is linked to debt for disadvantaged households.

The environmental aspect of these inequalities is not insignificant. Differences in access to natural resources or exposure to environmental risks are strongly linked to other forms of social inequalities (Emelianoff and Theys, 2000). For instance, there are strong inequalities in access to drinking water and sanitation services between urban and rural areas. The 1989 water law inaugurated the privatization of urban drinking water services: in these areas, the coverage rates and the service quality are high. By contrast,

4. Source: <https://www.desiguales.org/regiones>, accessed June 18, 2020.

in outlying districts and villages, access to water is guaranteed by often precarious community organizations that are managed by residents. There is no guaranteed access to water of sufficient quantity and quality. This is due to the sinking of water tables because of the overexploitation of water by agribusiness, mining or urban operators, or the pollution of waterways. Moreover in exceptional cases many isolated households throughout the country are supplied by tanker trucks: this exception often becomes the rule.

These environmental inequalities also manifest themselves in a differentiated exposure to environmental risks and a disparate access to environmental amenities. In cities, the possibility for household members to frequent green spaces that contribute to the well-being of residents, thanks to the proximity to nature, varies depending on socio-professional categories. Residents of underprivileged neighborhoods have less access to these spaces than those in wealthy neighborhoods (Salgado, 2013). Likewise, people are in an unequal position when facing natural disasters. Examples include the destruction of precarious housing during the 2010 earthquake, the floods in Coquimbo and Atacama in 2015, as well as the forest fires in Valparaíso and the south of the country in 2017 (Imilan, Fuster and Vargara, 2015; Pliscoff *et al.*, 2020).

This unequal exposure to environmental liabilities and risks sometimes gives rise to local mobilizations against the resulting injustices (Laigle and Moreau, 2018). Despite their frequency, the latter remain largely unexamined in the social sciences (Núñez *et al.*, 2019; Stamm, 2016). Yet several recent events eloquently illustrate what inhabitants perceive to be an environmental injustice in that it violently transforms their daily lives and their living spaces, and overwhelms them in increasingly precarious situations. For example, in 2016, a red tide invaded the seas surrounding the island of Chiloé, in southern Chile. It was due to a growing amount of microscopic algae that release a toxin fatal to shellfish, jeopardizing the livelihood of the local population. According to the latter, this phenomenon is caused by the dumping of 4,500 tons of rotting salmon into the sea by the fish farming industry. Moreover, in many valleys, the inhabitants stand up against the construction of dams for agricultural and

hydroelectric companies, because of the impact on the ecosystem, as well as the eviction of residents from the flooded areas whose relocation conditions are much criticized. Inhabitants identifying themselves as native people are challenging the illegitimate territorial appropriation by the Chilean State and foreign companies, which they perceive to be a continuation of the colonial logic.

Finally, several local organizations have named the various highly polluted places dedicated to the industrial development of the country “Zones of Sacrifice”. These areas concentrate hydrocarbons, solvents and heavy metals that degrade the air, soil, water resources and the seabed. At Quintero Bay strong protests took place because of their harmful effects on the health of local residents. On the night of October 4, 2018, Alejandro Castro, the leader of the movement, was found strangled and dead, hanging from the barrier on the Valparaíso railway tracks. This type of environmental violence, which leads to assassinations, death threats or forced exile for environmental activists, is becoming frequent in Chile⁵. In fact, the scale and level of environmental destruction would allow the use of the term ecocide since it can be viewed as a crime. A crime against nature, but also a dispossession of the — often rural — inhabitants deprived of their access to vital natural resources, inasmuch as they are their source of work or because they are vital for their reproduction. In this context, many groups of residents organize to protest against these environmental injustices. Their actions will have contributed to the emergence of a latent national movement of discontent that helps to explain the scale of the riots in October 2019.

When ecology becomes a resource for political protest

Riots as part of a long history of social and environmental mobilization

The Chilean social movement of 2019 and 2020 is the largest in the country’s history since the return to democracy. To understand the magnitude of this movement, it is

5. Interview with Rodrigo Mundaca, leader of the organization MODATIMA against the commodification of water, Paris, November 2019.

important to place the events of October in the long history of post-dictatorship social movements. The specificity of the latter is the diversification of demands and kinds of actions, including, as everywhere else on the continent, growing socio-environmental movements.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, during the dictatorship and the transition to democracy, the protestors requested, first of all, an end to the dictatorial regime and, secondly, justice and compensation for the crimes committed by the military Junta (Doran 2016). Under the first democratic governments, protests were few and far between because of the psychological impact of the climate of terror established by 30 years of bloody dictatorship. Nevertheless, two emblematic struggles rekindle the historic conflict between the inhabitants who consider themselves native people and the State: the opposition against the construction of the Rauco hydroelectric power station in the Bio-Bio region and that against pollutions issued by the Celulosa Arauco Company in Mehuin in the region of Los Lagos. The environmental dimension of these conflicts is important, as the inhabitants contest the appropriation of their historical lands and territories by state-supported companies and at the same time demand cultural and political recognition (Hirt, 2007).

The penguin revolution of 2006 marks the revival of a social protest led by the first generation not to have grown up under the dictatorship. The penguins are high school students in uniform, demonstrating against the implementation of a new transport system limiting their access to this service as well as against the fees required to take final school exams, and further against the municipality-based system of secondary education, a source of educational inequalities. Although during this period environmental conflicts receive little media attention, it doesn't mean they don't exist. Several non-governmental organizations, such as the *Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales (OLCA)* (1995) and the *Programa Chile Sustentable*⁶ (1997), are created by former academics forced into exile to raise public awareness about

6. These organizations are financed by public and private international aid. OLCA receives funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the Tikva Grassroots Empowerment Fund and Germany. Programa Chile Sustentable is mainly financed by the Avina Foundation.

environmental disasters and existing injustices (Carruthers, 2001). As early as 1997 OLCA publishes Pablo San Martín Saavedra's book, *Conflictos Ambientales en Chile*, and in 2006 Sara Larrain from *Programa Chile Sustentable* publishes *El agua en Chile. Entre los derechos humanos y las reglas del mercado*⁷. The latter, highlighting the Chilean specificities of water management, has a significant impact on public opinion.

Starting in 2011 everything speeds up (Garcés, 2012; Salazar, 2012). In May, in Aysén, in the south of Chile, strong altercations take place between the residents opposed to the HidroAysén project and the police. The project aims to build five hydroelectric power stations to provide electricity to the mines in the north using high-voltage lines. From the outset, it elicits strong opposition, but in 2011 the mobilization becomes national and joins the student movement. Indeed, on May 12, a few days before the presentation of the annual budget by conservative president Sebastián Piñera, the Confederation of Chilean Students calls for a national demonstration to put pressure on the future educational measures. On the day of the announcement, demonstrations break out in several cities across the country, giving rise to a first-of-its-kind student movement whose motto becomes "access to free, high-quality public education". With the support of various professional striking sectors, this will then lead to demands for constitutional change. The student movement is also joined by the *pobladores* movement, structured around the right to housing and to the city, and the movement of those displaced by the 2010 earthquake, criticizing the inadequacies of the "reconstruction policy" (Pulgar, 2019).

Certainly motivated by this climate of protest, but also strengthened by new activist experiences, Chileans multiply their actions of mobilization, which become diversified and consolidated from 2011 onward. In 2012, several local collectives organize the first "plurinational march for water and territories".

7. In English: Environmental Conflicts in Chile; Water in Chile: Between Human Rights and Market Rules.



*Video 1. Demonstrators at the March for Water marching on Alameda Avenue in Santiago de Chile on March 22, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0FHVXwY-is&t=1s>). Sources: *Movimiento por el agua y los territorios.**

It leads to the creation of the National Coordination for the Defense and Recovery of Water, which organizes a yearly national march demanding a new Water Code and a new Constitution, in order to nationalize water resources. In the following year are added to this movement calls for a national strike on the part of the Coordination No + AFP⁸ which fight against the for-profit pension system. In 2016, this Coordination gathers more than 150,000 people onto the streets. From then on, the scale of the mobilizations keeps growing. The year 2018, in turn, is marked by a massive strike by women called "the feminist wave". In the context of the worldwide #MeToo movement and the Latin American movement "Ni una menos", several denunciations of sexual harassment and abuse of feminine teachers and students lead to strikes and the blocking of 32 universities between April and June (Alvarez et al. 2019). In the same year, the National Institute for Human Rights produces a digital mapping of socio-

8. AFP stands for "Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones". These are private companies that manage pension funds.

environmental conflicts. 117 conflicts are identified: 38% in the energy sector, 28% in the mining sector, 26% concerning other sectors, and 9% related to environmental degradation⁹. Similar mapping initiatives concerning water conflicts have been carried out by the *Programa Chile Sustentable* and the *Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y de la Vida*. These conflicts reveal the magnitude of local mobilizations against environmental injustices, a major event being the mobilizations in Osorno due to oil spills in the drinking water supply (Fuenzalida and Quiroz, 2012). However, while these maps make certain conflicts visible, they do not show all the existing environmental inequalities against which the inhabitants do not necessarily protest, or at least not in a confrontational and publicized manner (Nicolas-Artero, 2015).

Ecology, the bond of mobilization

When the first high school and university students massively evaded the fare on the metro, it was believed to be a protest movement limited to the capital. Very quickly anger arose throughout the country, including in cities where there is no metro. The signs read "It's not thirty pesos, but thirty years", revealing widespread dissatisfaction with the economic model introduced by the dictatorship and reinforced by elected governments. Very quickly, the damages in several metro stations then help to justify the establishment of the state of emergency and the intervention of the Army in the streets. Several cities are under siege and the protestors in the hands of the Army. The violence perpetrated recalls the darkest hours in Chilean history. In spite of this, however, as some protestors say, Chileans are no longer afraid and have nothing left to lose. In demonstrations in Santiago and elsewhere, there are several million protestors of all socio-professional categories. Demands are also growing: free education, the right to housing, the right to abortion, an end to the for-profit pension system, but also, and above all, water recovery, an end to "Zones of Sacrifices" and extractivism. To that extent, there is solidarity with the demands of the native peoples,

9. Source: <https://mapaconflictos.indh.cl/>, accessed June 18, 2020.

with a strong environmental focus, as evidenced by the now historic photograph of a person waving the Wenufoye flag on the statue at Plaza Italia, during the demonstration of October 25, which has since been renamed Square of Dignity.



Picture 1. A demonstrator waving the wenufoye flag over the statue in the Plaza de Italia in Santiago de Chile on October 25, 2019. Source: Susana Hidalgo (<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50239591>).

Environmental concerns seem to have acted as a bond bringing together the different demands. As we have seen, the inequalities decried by Chileans are the result of an economic model based on the exploitation of natural resources. In this sense, the relation to the environment, the base of the Chilean economy, produces this unequal society, which is why the protests against this “model” are gradually converging on environmental injustices and the legal framework that produces them. Thus, in Chile, as in many Latin American countries, there has been an “ecoterritorial turn” in the struggles (Svampa; 2012). The particularity of these demands is that unlike the others, they are detached from any identity, status or partisan concern. They affect the entire population and any social category. Environmental demands are not the monopoly of NGOs, ecological political parties, or self-righteous social classes (Biskupovic, 2015) but rather cross-cut social classes and struggles: the population as a whole has appropriated them easily. The demands often come from local rural and urban organizations, created by residents affected by environmental inequalities that are part of local conflicts or produce local green-friendly initiatives. Existing political organizations with identity-based, statutory or partisan demands have also adopted them.

Furthermore, the existence of socio-environmental conflicts throughout the country, particularly in rural areas, helps to explain the dissemination of the mobilization throughout the country. This social movement is not only urban; it goes far beyond Santiago. In the country’s mining regions, for example, one modality of action has been to block the roads that bring ores to the harbors. Further south, in the Elqui Valley, on November 12, 2019, residents organized a march on the road that leads from the mountain villages to the coast, gradually joined by the inhabitants of the surrounding villages¹⁰. Their slogans spoke out against extractivism and its impact on living conditions and the environment.

10 . <http://www.diarioeldia.cl/region/cordillera-mar-masiva-llegada-manifestantes-desde-valle-elqui-serena>, accessed June 18, 2020.



Picture 2. Mural painting, located at the entrance to the city of Vicuña and carried out by the Kintral collective, representing the appropriation of water by agricultural and mining companies in the Elqui Valley. Photo credit: Chloé Nicolas-Artero

Finally, environmental demands gather the plurality of existing movements because of their radicalism. They attack the roots of the extractivist development model, which is to say the Water Code, the Mining Code and the 1980 Constitution. This radicalism, far from producing a situation of isolation, has instead succeeded in bringing together the majority of the organizations and the mobilized population, forming a consensus around the urgent need to modify the Constitution in order to draw up a new development model.

Conclusion

Chile's historic mobilization cannot be understood without taking into account the specific relationship of the society with the environment. The contradictions of the

development model are structured between the exploitation of natural resources and the inequalities, injustices and environmental violence it produces. These worsen the daily living conditions of thousands of inhabitants, in addition to situations of social exclusion and burdensome precarity. Despite the initial fear of becoming involved, the disaffection with regard to politics and the vicious trap of debt and daily work, since 2011 different social movements have emerged and created feedback in terms of politicization and activist experiences. Socio-environmental conflicts are also increasing. The demands raise awareness among the whole population that the neoliberalization of the environment is at the root of the "Chilean model". The urgent need to contain it makes the ecological question a common and unifying banner for the different movements. It explains, to a certain extent, the magnitude of the social mobilization of 2019-2020 and its radicalism, resulting in the organization of a plebiscite to draft a new Constitution.

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