

Not Falling for It: How the Uprising in Chile Has Outlasted State Repression

And the Questions for Movements to Come

CrimethInc.

November 8, 2019

As of today—Friday, November 8, 2019—the government of Chile has spent three full weeks switching back and forth between strategies of brutality, division, and deceit without yet succeeding in stemming the tide of resistance. The events of these weeks offer a useful primer in strategies of state repression and how to outmaneuver, outsmart, and outlast them.

On October 6, the Chilean government headed by rapacious billionaire Sebastián Piñera announced a new austerity package that would further impoverish struggling Chileans. Unfortunately for the authorities, it was an inopportune moment to squeeze an already restless population. The next day, in Ecuador, thousands of indigenous people arrived in the capital city to protest an austerity package, occupying the Parliament building and clashing with police forces. On October 14, the Ecuadorian government backed down, repealing the austerity bill.

That same day, students swung into action in Chile, organizing a series of mass fare-dodging protests against the hike in public transit costs. These culminated on October 18 in clashes, vandalism, and arsons that damaged 16 buses and 78 metro stations, as well as various banks and several other major buildings, including the headquarters of the Italian energy company Enel. In retaliation, Piñera announced a state of emergency and curfew, hoping to bludgeon the population back into submission.

Speculation has circulated about the arsons to the effect that they were orchestrated or permitted by the security forces. Certainly, police in Chile are well-known for engaging in undercover operations—and US intelligence agencies have engaged in all manner of disruptive activities to delegitimize social movements in Chile and elsewhere. At the same time, all around the world, whenever ordinary people manage to get the better of the authorities, those who take it for granted that the state is the only protagonist of history always attribute this to the work of agents provocateurs. Is it really possible that *all* the arsons of October 18 were the work of police agents? What would the government stand to gain by arranging for the destruction of its own public transit infrastructure? It might seem strategic to attribute the arsons to police agents in order to delegitimize the police in the eyes of the general public, but this could have the unintended effect of mobilizing popular rage against the most radical or confrontational participants in the movement—on the absurd grounds that they must be police infiltrators, no less. Rather

than legitimizing the sort of confrontational tactics that a powerful movement must sometimes employ, this approach implies that what is needed is *better policing*.

Although we should not underestimate the extent to which state forces can act irrationally against their own interests, it is disempowering to assume that popular movements are *not* capable of confrontational tactics. Conspiracy theories about the arsons obscure what was *strategic* about them. State false-flag operations would be aimed at discrediting the movement, not deepening the crisis itself. In this regard, it seems more likely that the reports of suspicious people attacking working-class markets represent genuine undercover police or far-right activity, or that, as some have alleged, police have concealed some of the murders they have carried out by dragging the victims in burning buildings; in those cases, at least, their motivations would be clear. But the authorities stood to gain nothing by dramatically escalating the conflict on October 18 by burning their own metro stations. Whether by smashing the turnstiles or burning entire stations, it was precisely by making business as usual *impossible* that demonstrators made the desperate circumstances of their daily lives a problem for their rulers and set the stage for the movement to expand. Without the vandalism, the movement would never have become the force that it is.

In any case, the next day, October 19, Piñera suspended the metro price increase. The speed with which he did this shows that he knew he had pushed people too far. If he could have waited to suspend the fare increase, he might have been able to announce it later, in order to give demonstrators a feeling of accomplishment and get them out of the streets; instead, having already pushed his luck, he had to suspend it immediately in hopes of discharging popular resentment before the crisis deepened. It didn't work.

For a government, the goal of making concessions is only to trick enough people into leaving the streets that it will be possible to isolate and defeat those who remain. On October 20, Piñera expanded the state of emergency to most of the country, announcing from the headquarters of the army that his government was “at war against a powerful and implacable enemy.” This gesture, and above all the place from which he spoke, was a not-so-coded declaration that he intended to return Chile to the murderous state violence of the Pinochet dictatorship.

Yet once again, the people in the streets did not back down. They continued to demonstrate, even as the military injured and killed people, and they refused to permit the authorities to sow divisions, sticking together with the same cohesion that has given the movement in Hong Kong its long life.

This is why, on October 23, Piñera was forced to announce the suspension of the whole austerity package and the introduction of some minor reforms—what Chileans have been calling “table scraps.”

Again, Chileans knew better than to settle for this. That same day, Chile's trade unions declared a general strike. On October 25, the largest demonstration in Chilean history took place, bringing 1.2 million people into the streets of Santiago to show that they supported this movement that had originated in massive public criminal activity and continued in defiance of the express orders of the government.

This was a massive defeat for Piñera—it showed that he could neither resolve the situation by brute force nor by petty bribery. This is why, on October 26, he promised to lift the State of Emergency and to swap out some of the ministers in his government—though not to relinquish power himself. He also changed his rhetoric, congratulating Chileans on a “peaceful” demonstration and suggesting a distinction between law-abiding families and criminal hooligans.

Let's review: when Piñera couldn't suppress the movement by police violence, he played for time by suspending the fare increase—while declaring martial law and mobilizing the army. When didn't work, he shifted to a new strategy of divide and conquer, flattering the majority of Chileans by suggesting that their concerns were legitimate while demonizing the brave demonstrators who launched the movement.

Now that things seem to have plateaued—not to say calmed down—Piñera is trying, yet again, to return to his original strategy of brute force. On November 7, he introduced an array of bills to increase the penalties for militant protest tactics including self-defense against police and concealing one's identity against state surveillance. Congratulate the movement on its victories, but crack down on the means by which it won them.

Over 7000 people have been arrested and many thousands injured; despite their obvious loyalty to the uniformed mercenaries of the state, prosecutors admit to over 800 allegations of police abuse, torture, rape, and battery. Piñera has expressed his “total support” for the conduct of the police and military throughout this sequence of events, but he is saying that all this brutality is not enough—in addition to arresting, beating, shooting, and killing people, he wants the police and military to be able to imprison additional massive numbers of people for long periods of time.

Make no mistake, the movement in Chile would not have gotten off the ground if not for the students organizing mass illegal activity. It would not have spread countrywide if not for the vandalism, arson, and acts of self-defense against police attacks. It would not have created a crisis that demanded a response if not for looting and disruption. To make a distinction between the “law-abiding” participants and the “criminals” in the movement is to say that it would be better if the movement had never taken place—it is an attempt to ensure that no such movement will ever take place again.

We have seen this many times before. The movement against police and white supremacy that burst into the public consciousness with the riots in Ferguson only got off the ground because the original participants openly attacked police officers, burned down buildings, and refused to divide into “violent” and “nonviolent” factions. Democracy itself, the system via which Chile, the United States, and so many other nations are governed, began in blazing crime; if not for criminal revolutionaries, we would still be living under the heel of hereditary monarchs.

Once again, the movement in Chile faces a crucial juncture. If the majority of the participants accept Piñera's flattery and congratulate themselves on being “peaceful” and “honest” in contrast to those who are “criminals,” this will enable him to push through draconian measures to ensure that it will never be possible for Chileans to defend themselves against austerity measures again. On the contrary, what is needed is for the tactics of the “criminals” to spread to every honest citizen, to every person who sincerely wants peace. Neither Piñera nor anyone else who aims to rule by force will ever create peace; it can only arise when their totalitarian aspirations are thwarted.

To understand what Piñera wants, we need only look at what has happened in Egypt. Since regaining control of the country with the military coup in 2013 and introducing new measures like the ones Piñera is proposing, military strongman al-Sisi has crushed protests of all kinds. He now aspires to rule until at least the year 2034. Those who make only half a revolution dig their own graves, as the saying goes.

So the stakes are high. Demonstrators in Chile must permanently delegitimize the instruments of state power such as the police, the courts, and the army, making it impossible for them to maintain order by any combination of brutality, concessions, and prosecution. This is the only way out of the nightmare of neoliberal austerity.

This is how movements win against oppressive governments: by a winning combination of confrontational direct action, solidarity across different demographics and tactics, persistence, and strategic innovation. The movement in Chile has demonstrated this already.

To support our comrades in Chile, we have arranged the translation and design of our texts *The Illegitimacy of Violence*, *the Violence of Legitimacy* and *What They Mean When They Say Peace*, both of which treat these issues. We wish them strength in the struggle ahead. May every Piñera fall.

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Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

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