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The Student Movement in Chile

From Dictatorship to Democracy, the Flame of
Revolt

CrimethInc.

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Forty-four years ago today, on September 11, 1973, a military dictatorship seized power in Chile via a CIA-sponsored coup. They murdered thousands of people without trial, tortured tens of thousands, and forced hundreds of thousands into exile in a series of atrocities that some Trump supporters openly fantasize about carrying out in the US. Today, the legacy of the dictatorship persists in the laws it passed and the cutthroat neoliberal policies it introduced, but also in the repressive policing apparatus that serves democracy the same way it served a dictator. And something else persists: a powerful resistance movement. In the latest installment of our series on student organizing, we interviewed an anarchist participant in the Chilean student movement, in hopes of offering a little perspective on what student struggles look like outside the US.

Please trace the origins of anarchist participation in the contemporary student movement in Chile.

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Anarchism boomed in Chile during the first two decades of the 20th century. In large part, the workers' movement spread this ideological current through strikes such as the longshoremen's strike in 1903, the meatpackers' strike in 1905, and the famous miners' strike of 1907 in Iquique. Anarchism began to decline during the 1930s due to the rise of Marxism on one hand and the rise of fascism on the other, while parts of the Left became more and more institutionalized and integrated into the bourgeois electoral system. Over the following decades, anarchism diminished in the workers' movement until, by the time of the dictatorship (1973–1990), it had become a minority position, more readily found in small circles of intellectuals.

In the 1990s, anarchism began its rebirth in Chile alongside the emerging punk scene and the participation of *encapuchados* (masked ones) in university protests and street demonstrations. By this time, anarchism was no longer anchored to the workers' movement; it was being reborn as a part of the counterculture in the streets, squats, high schools, universities, and other informal spaces, among the generations that came of age during the dictatorship while listening to bands like La Polla Records, Los Miserables, Fiskales Ad-Hok, Ska-P, and the like.

There was also the influence of the latter generations of combatant youth during the 1980s. By that time, young people had learned a lot about street combat in the course of resisting the dictatorship, although ideologically this often did not extend beyond opposition to the police. The influence of the heterodox Marxist guerrilla organization MAPU-Lautaro, for example, and the decline of more traditional armed Marxist groups like the FPMR (Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front, the guerrilla wing of the Communist Party) and the MIR (the Revolutionary Left Movement) created a situation in which armed struggle was no longer centralized in the hands of groups that aspired to seize state power. As centralized groups declined, minoritarian groups and positions appeared that organized horizontally and practiced a low level of defensive violence.

of the destruction of property. Those were the most generalized instances of revolt I have seen in my lifetime.

would venture a guess at 500 or 600 people in bloc, on bikes, destroying political and commercial advertisements and confronting luxury cars. The bloc started at Plaza Italia and, instead of heading downtown towards the presidential palace like every other march does, took off the other direction, towards Providencia, the center of bourgeois high society in Santiago, and finally arrived at the enormous Costanera Center mall—the tallest skyscraper in Latin America, a symbol of capitalist wealth. In the first two bike rides, they managed to enter the mall with their bicycles, chanting “Death to the state! *Viva la anarquía!*” and writing graffiti on the walls and windows of luxury stores.

But above all, the days of August 2011 were unforgettable. First, there was the day of double protests (day and night) on August 4, then the two-day strike of the CUT (Workers’ United Center of Chile), supported by the students and by labor unions.

On August 4, it was just students taking action, but with an enormous attendance. Starting at 7 in the morning, barricades went up in various parts of Santiago. During the afternoon, people confronted the police throughout the center of the city. In the end, there was no march—the government didn’t authorize it. Yet it was a day of massive, generalized protest, with *caseroleos* (people banging pots and pans) from their patios or out of their windows. This was unusual, having the support from the majority of ordinary citizens. Even hippies who reject violence were throwing stones at the police in response to the context of indiscriminate repression and authoritarianism.

The days of August were some of the few protests during that period in which violence was regarded as a legitimate tactic by wide sectors of the student movement. On all the street corners downtown, enormous groups of *encapuchados* were waiting for police cars to pass in order to attack them. There were barricades everywhere, and millions of pesos were lost as a result

This set the stage for the new generation of *encapuchados* that had been born in the 1990s to advance a new position and new kinds of action in the massive explosion of protest in high schools in 2006.

The first protests against university tuition hikes under President Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006) had begun to pick up steam in 2004. In 2006, the so-called “Penguin Revolution” broke out. This was the first awakening of students on a massive scale since the protests that took place in the 1980s under the dictatorship. This time, it was a generation that hadn’t lived under the dictatorship, a generation that grew up under democracy yet realized that the ghost of Pinochet was still present—that we were living under the normative framework imposed by Pinochet’s military government and their civil technocrats. We still are today.

At that time, in 2006, the Organic Constitutional Law on Education (LOCE) created under the dictatorship was still in place. It secured a precarious education for the poor and a luxury education for the rich, creating a brutal class divide that manifested itself in the scores on university selection exams. At the same time, Santiago was wracked by generalized discontent generated by the introduction of a new urban bus system (“*transantiago*”)—a total disaster that had grave consequences for those who had to commute through the modern and bourgeois parts of Santiago.

Throughout the whole process of student rebellion, the question of the legitimacy of violence as a means of political expression came to the fore. The different responses to that question capture all the different positions you could find in this ideologically heterogeneous movement. A new generation of anarchist and Marxist youth differentiated themselves in those debates, emerging in the student protests and the traditional annual demonstrations of May 1 and September 11.

Violence has always been controversial as a method of struggle, but the contradictions within the current student move-

ment center around this question. To put this in historical context, we can contrast these contradictions to the debates of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. In the 1970s, the chief conflict in both the workers' and students' movements was about the dichotomy of reform versus revolution—for example, the MIR invoking the need for armed struggle versus the democratic reformism of the Community Party (PC). In 21st century protests in Chile, by contrast, the groups that utilize violence don't just confront the police—they oppose every structure that centralizes political, religious, economic, or social power. This is why demonstrators sometimes target banks, pharmacies, governmental buildings, churches, fast food chains, and the like.

This is the consequence of the transformation from the dictatorship to the current model of Chilean society. Demonstrators are no longer simply arguing over whether reform or revolution is the best way to abolish the dictatorship. The tension between those who utilize violence against state power and property and those who seek to express themselves through the established legal channels is much more complicated.

One of the reasons for this is that social protest in Chile in the 21st century is heterogeneous and diverse. Many political tendencies cannot even agree on what it is they are disagreeing about. You have reformist sectors like the Communist Party, *Revolucion Democratica*, older groups like the MIR, and the whole institutionalized Left involved in the game of bourgeois electoralism; then there are Trotskyists of all kinds—Guevarists, old school Marxist-Leninists, neo-Marxists; and finally, there are all kinds of anarchists, including insurrectionary anarchists, individualists, anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-punks, and nihilists. This makes contemporary social protest in Chile complex. Yet with respect to violence, certain polarities emerge. In the moments of confrontation, two positions arise concerning these acts: those who support *encapuchado* violence against the social order (be they Marxist, anarchist, or otherwise) and those who react

Anarchists hosted workshops that went beyond demanding access to bourgeois jobs and a more “just” education. They proposed a libertarian notion of education outside the relations of authority and domination. The dynamics in these spaces were different than the dynamics inside squatted social centers, for example. The occupations of universities and high schools are almost universally anti-capitalist but diverse in terms of particular ideologies.

Anarchists were always a minority, both in the occupations and in the streets. Yet the marches were so massive—involving 300,000 people by August 2011—that although they were a minority, there were still A LOT of *encapuchados*. In terms of quantitative damage, they were genuinely a thorn in the side of the authorities, and the police were often overwhelmed.

Do you want to close with any stories from student struggles in Chile?

The first mass march of 2011 took place as a protest against hydroelectric dams in the south, in Patagonia, a project of the corporation HidroAysen. The government approved the controversial project; in response, there was an enormous, spontaneously organized march in front of the presidential palace, La Moneda. It ended in a big riot.

The pacifist and conciliatory sectors tried in vain to restrain the *encapuchados*. They ended up just leaving the march. By about 10 pm, almost all the reactionaries had left and only insurrectionary people remained on the streets. Looking down Alameda, the main boulevard through downtown Santiago, one could see various banks in ruins and hear the sounds of glass breaking from the storefronts of companies and institutions. A McDonalds was left in flames. It was beautiful.

The “*encapuchado* bike rides” (think: “black bloc bike rides”) were also beautiful. I believe three occurred between 2011 and 2013. They were promoted through social networks and by word of mouth. The police didn't dare try to enter the bloc. The first two of those bike rides drew lots of people—I

mural-painting projects, books, fanzines, communiqués. There were also instances of resistance and confrontation when the police finally evicted the occupations.

How does the cost of education affect students in Chile? Does it shape who can go to school? Does it shape the politics and priorities of students? Is there anything that anarchist organizing can do about this?

In Chile, education is the driving force that reproduces and perpetuates class inequality and the domination of one class over the others. Beyond the economic aspect, there's also the way that education serves as a form of domestication—being made to memorize things rather than think for oneself. There's more math than anything else, with little time for history, and the history that they do teach you is a linear history comprised of events and dates that don't require any actual thinking or questioning. All classes are indoctrinated to place blind faith in capitalism and authority.

What can anarchists do about this? Not much. The truth is that the demand for free education from the state is an institutional struggle of reformists, even though some more radicalized sectors take on this demand because they see it as a preliminary step toward a generalized struggle against capitalism. However, anarchists focus more on generating spaces of conflict and radicalization. The objective is revolt, not reform.

Talk about the cultural element of student resistance.

This can include murals, book and propaganda fairs, literature distribution (*feria*), art shows, and workshops. All of this takes place often, but it reached a high point in 2011. For example, there were workshops about subjects indirectly connected to the student movement—such as the laws that endure from Pinochet's dictatorship, the logic of market-based education, and the solutions that the movement proposed, like establishing new educational laws that would eliminate the privatization of education.

against it. For the institutional sector of the student movement, for example, *encapuchado* violence (what would be referred to as “black bloc” in North America) is an obstacle because it does not focus on “public opinion” and erodes confidence in the powers that the reformist groups seek dialogue with.

In and of itself, the student movement is a social-democratic and reformist movement that doesn't seek to abolish the state, social classes, property, the capitalist mode of production, or patriarchal domination. Based in bourgeois institutions, it presents violence as counterproductive because rather than rupture, the student movement as a whole seeks an accord with power.

On the other hand, anarchists (who make up a large part of the *encapuchados*) do not seek a dialogue with power. Anarchists seek direct confrontation; they aren't petitioning for free education from the state. These differences explain why disputes between institutionally coopted organizations and insurrectionary anarchists often escalate into physical confrontations.

In 2011, when the demand for “free education” became widespread, protest marches drew unprecedented numbers. Consequently, *encapuchado* violence, police repression, reformist organizing, and all of the tensions between these phenomena reached a peak, as did the student movement itself. The result was recurring physical confrontations involving “pacifists,” reformist students, and militants from institutional left parties over the question of violence and their different goals and positions.

The events of 2011 were a sort of climax resulting from all the accumulating lessons people had been learning since the 1990s. The scale of school occupations and student strikes was something new, but anarchists were hardly the only ones involved. For the most part, the occupations and strikes were intended to press for reformist demands, rather than to take power or as a step towards generalized insurrection. Anarchists made the

most of the situation to propagate our ideas, address the newly mobilized students, and carry out actions. No doubt, this was a period of time in which anarchism grew—both in terms of *encapuchado* participation as well as the number of collectives, squats, books published, workshops, dinners, discussions, benefit shows, prisoners, and so on.

Of course, there are plenty of students who are neither Marxist nor anarchist, who simply adhere to the cause of public, free education yet nonetheless don the mask in order to confront repression. In 2011, just as in 2006, the police repression was so intense that reformist students and students who were not ideologically aligned also confronted the police—not with the intention of taking the offensive, but rather from the position of believing in rights, that is to say, reacting against what they considered to be “illegitimate” violence towards a legal movement that shouldn’t be repressed because it was democratic.

On the other hand, certain Marxist tendencies like Guevarists, Leninists, and Trotskyists legitimize *encapuchado* violence, but only in the service of their agendas—only in certain contexts, only as long as it is “approved of by the masses,” only as long as it’s not “individual action,” only when it is framed within the class struggle. One can identify many anarchists, even within anarchist organizations, who have more individualist positions and who believe in war against society in general (social war), beyond the class struggle. Other anarchists, such as those aligned with libertarian communism or more collectivist currents, also understand *encapuchado* violence as an expression of class struggle, but without as many conditions as Marxists. They don’t have as many problems with individual action if it is situated in a context of collective protest.

The debate around violence has even produced violence between the student demonstrators. Many times in many marches, in the middle of the confrontations between *encapuchados* and the police, anarchists and *encapuchados* have

had to face legalist, reactionary tendencies trying to stop them, which almost always ended in physical confrontations between these two kinds of demonstrators.

What are the different anarchist tactics and strategies for participating in student movements?

Anarchists are involved in the student movement, but without making demands of the state. They participate with the goals of radicalizing the student struggle, propagating anti-authoritarian ideas, and joining in street confrontations. Many anarchists try to politicize their social surroundings at their high schools and universities, above all the comrades more identified with Bakuninism and libertarian communism. The more nihilist, insurrectionary, and individualist tendencies focus more on participating in street violence in the context of mass marches.

Right now, confrontational tactics are used wholly in the service of institutional petitioning, to put pressure on the government. They have no revolutionary goal, because the student movement itself doesn’t have any revolutionary goals.

Regardless, they were important because within the school occupations there were relations of solidarity, activities to benefit the strikes, benefits for prisoners, political forums and discussions, and the like. Lots of kids whose politics didn’t go beyond “free education” or “an end to education for profit” became radicalized by taking part in those activities. Furthermore, although the school occupations and strikes were directed towards a reformist goal, they were expressions of rebellion that defied the authorities and exceeded traditional forms of protest.

This was pretty interesting, especially in 2011. The occupations of universities and high schools served as spaces for libertarian book fairs, punk shows, and discussions; for the months that they existed, they were liberated spaces, where solidarities and horizontal relationships developed outside the dictates of capitalism and convenience. There were potlucks, collective