

Some reflections on libertarians in Chile and electoral participation

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The recent presidential election in Chile, where abstention — more than 50% — was the overall winner, was predictable if not for the emergence of a sector claiming to be revolutionary and left libertarian in the political and electoral scenario. The Red Libertaria (Libertarian Network — RL) firmly and enthusiastically joined the “Todos a la Moneda” platform (Everyone to La Moneda) platform, whose candidate was Marcel Claude¹. This platform brought the *Unión Nacional Estudiantil* (National Student Union — UNE), union sectors such as SITECO (miners’ union) and bank workers together with political currents such as the *Partido Humanista* (Humanist Party), *Izquierda Unida* (United Left), the *Movimiento Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez* (Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Movement) and RL.

As can be imagined, this decision produced a feeling of unease, discomfort and disorientation in sectors recognizing themselves as part of the libertarian movement, producing splits, recriminations and discouragement. But it was not only the *decision itself* to participate in an election that produced this seismic reaction within the Chilean libertarian movement, it was the *manner* in which the decision was made (with accusations of secrecy, the imposition of slogans, a lack of transparency and debate, etc.), as is apparent from a series of statements produced by splinters of the *Organización Comunista Libertaria* (Libertarian Communist Organization — OCL-Chile) (an organization that was the driving force behind RL), by the *Frente Anarquista Organizado* (Organized Anarchist Front — FAO), the *Corriente de Acción Libertaria* (Libertarian Action Current — CAL) and the *Red Libertaria Estudiantil* (Libertarian Student Network — RLE)². The aftermath of this political earthquake will surely be felt for some time to come.

Our aim here is not to question the ways in which this decision was taken (or imposed, depending on who is speaking) and its implications for the libertarian movement in Chile. We believe that is the responsibility of those who are directly, organizationally linked with the political expressions that created RL or those who split from them.

Neither will we occupy ourselves, primarily, with the impact that this decision has on the specific area that recognizes itself as part of the anarchist tradition. Interesting articles to that effect, apart from the abovementioned statements, have already been written by, amongst others, Arturo López and Pablo Abufom.³ Much less will we be setting out to produce an analysis of the “Todos a La Moneda” programme or of the political forces that supported this platform. We are interested, however, in assessing the impact that this decision has on a much wider sector of the people than that represented by this electoral platform and on a much wider sector than those from the libertarian tradition; we will be sharing our thoughts in order to contribute to the debate of a tactical and strategic nature in this process of rebuilding the social movement in Chile.

Libertarians and the question of electoral participation

Libertarians have traditionally been against participation in elections by revolutionaries. This is mostly what distinguished them from the various social democratic currents in the First International⁴. However, there have been rare cases in which anarchists have promoted candidates or

¹ www.elciudadano.cl

² anarkismo.net anarkismo.net anarkismo.net www.elciudadano.cl

³ www.perspectivadiagonal.org and www.perspectivadiagonal.org

⁴ Obviously, this was not the only thing that distinguished “Bakuninists” from “Marxists”, nor should the tactical difference be considered in isolation from other factors of dissent. The debate that led to the breakdown of the First International Workingmen’s Association was rather more complex than “for or against elections”. There were also

participated in elections. The case of the elections in Spain in 1936 is frequently cited, but there are other cases, such as some “protest” candidates in Italy and France in the late 1870s and early 1880s (a tactic defended by Carlo Cafiero in his famous article “L’Action”, which also defines “propaganda by the deed”). In the repressive atmosphere that engulfed Europe after the suppression of the Paris Commune, Bakunin recommended some of his followers in Italy to participate in electoral platforms together with reformist socialists. The French *Fédération Communiste Libertaire* (FCL) also participated, amid crippling repression in France in the mid-‘50s as a result of the war against the Algerian secessionists, in local elections (something that Georges Fontenis himself, principal leader of that group, would later recognize as an error)⁵.

However, the fact is that in the vast majority of cases anarchists (the political tradition that gave birth to the word “libertarian”) have been hostile to electoral participation and with good reason. One of us wrote in the past that:

*“Anarchists are not in themselves, by definition, against “elections” as a mechanism; if during an election we call for votes to be annulled or for people not to vote, it is because of the context within which this vote is exercised: within the State apparatus, which thereby validates its domination over those of us who are excluded from the decision-making process (...). Our opposition is not to vote in question, but to the State apparatus in all its dimensions.”*⁶

It is therefore not surprising that this decision to join in the electoral work caused a stir and great debate, especially when it showed that it was not something that would apply just this once, but a new tactic in the arsenal of methods that RL would apply ritually in all elections to come⁷.

The electoral ritual and recomposition of the revolutionary bloc

The exception cannot be taken as the rule. That is why the participation in elections of this sector of the libertarian tradition must not be sought in ideology but in the reading that is made of the historical period, understanding however that the situation in Chile in 2013 is not comparable to the post-Paris Commune repression (which severely limited the possibilities for action and intervention of a nascent labour movement), or the context of the 1988 Chilean national plebiscite called by the dictatorship, or the conditions of terror imposed by the dirty war in Kurdistan, much

questions of method, the autonomy of sections to develop tactics, involved questions, and so not all the sector that would later form the “anti-authoritarian” sector (as opposed to the one led by Marx) would move to anarchism.

⁵ Let us leave aside discussion of the ideas of libertarian municipalism developed by American social ecologist and anarchist Murray Bookchin in the ‘80s, which have been particularly influential in the Kurdish liberation movement, as its development responds to totally different elements to those put forward by RL. In quite a nuanced and weighed article, free of all dogmatism, Ulises Castillo addresses the issue of libertarian municipalism:

“I believe there is little point in rejecting in the future what could now be seen as a fiction, that is, intermediate institutions, such as municipalities, that could allow dispersing State power, while at the same time they could strengthen organized political communities, in a process of transition towards a new way of life and socialist organisation of society. Such a possibility should not be rejected out of hand. But it is precisely the current institutional autism, besides the nature of the State in Chile, what denies this possibility that could lead to reinforce this very institutions through giving legitimacy to the representative fiction”. www.perspectivadiagonal.org

⁶ www.anarkismo.net

⁷ www.sicnoticias.cl

less the 1994 elections in post-apartheid South Africa, nor does it come out of a failed strategy of armed struggle.

The period that began in 2006 is characterized by a rise in popular mobilizations and a fragmentation of consensus around the neoliberal model that has been imposed over the past four decades. In this context, libertarian ideas have begun to become increasingly important, mainly among students (proof being the recent electoral victory of Melissa Sepúlveda in the presidential election of the University of Chile Student Federation — FECh), but also among trade unions and, to a lesser extent, in impoverished urban areas. The traditional left, reformist or revolutionary, and many organized sectors of the people, are not indifferent to this line and are feeling somewhat worried about it.

One sector of the libertarian movement suggested that the social movements have reached their height — a thesis which in our opinion is incorrect — and that we must move from a strategy of construction to one of disputing the hegemony of the power bloc, theses — in our opinion — correct although a little hasty and not nuanced enough. These theses were articulated in a confused and elastic slogan, the “democratic rupture”, which basically means that “*you can conquer and tighten through the programmatic vote everything that the popular struggle in the trade unions, in the neighbourhoods, in the communities and in the student movement has not achieved*”⁸. We believe it is necessary to discuss the premises that the slogan derives from, for this is but the expression of a wrong and hasty reading of reality, by means of conceptual elements mechanically taken from other contexts and other experiences, revealing the lack of political maturity that we are still in.

Regarding the first point, the social mobilization has not reached either in objective or subjective terms, its maximum limit. The possibilities of mobilization are still wide, and the need to mobilize social sectors beyond certain enclaves of students or workers (minorities, no matter how “strategic” they may be) is still the order of the day. This mobilization, which should be extended, unified from below, qualified in terms of militancy and its combativity, is the focal point for the reconstruction of a popular movement with class independence and the ability to challenge the hegemony of the power bloc, a task still in the making. Under the current weak condition of the labour and popular movement, electoral participation (and defeat), instead of opening a space in which to contribute to the unity and struggle of the people, as was the intention of those who promoted Claude’s candidacy, they have contributed to weakening efforts to accumulate the forces of rupture. Such a tactic, in order to make sense, can only be employed where a state of accumulation of forces exists which, regardless of the outcome, means raising the morale of the struggle, strengthening the organization of the people and the workers, and does not involve ceding either the initiative of mobilization to the reformists, the hesitant or the clearly reactionary. In other words, ending up bringing up the reformists’ rear.

Under current conditions, this “electoral adventure” threatens, at best, to stop the processes of construction and political and social mobilization for months and, at worst, to subject the independent left areas of influence to friction and splits, which as we know take a huge toll on the construction process and the convergence of revolutionaries. As set out in a discussion paper on the line taken by RL written by Arturo López, “*in the context of the social formation of the capitalist State in Chile, (...) any reform that enables partial but substantial transformation*

⁸ www.perspectivadiagonal.org The article in which the thesis of democratic rupture has been set out with the greatest conceptual clarity is by Felipe Ramírez www.perspectivadiagonal.org

*of the current pattern of accumulation and its institutional armour demands uninterrupted and permanent organization of the social forces of change. Therefore the elections in this case do not help create awareness, they confuse. They do not promote the struggle; on the contrary, they paralyze it after a mirage. It does not aim directly at the achievement of conquests but drifts, replacing the popular mobilization with an obscure parliamentary game*⁹.

Regarding the need to move from the construction to the fight, this is a correct thesis, although a little hasty and not nuanced enough. While the process of construction/fight should be seen as a dialectical unit, there does exist emphasis depending on the moment in question and today's Chile still bears the deep scars of the strategic defeats experienced in the period 1973–1990. We must not sin by being too overly optimistic on the state of construction or the militancy of the popular movement; the presence in some representative positions in trade union or student unions is not a yardstick to measure the state of the whole people. *The rooting in social movements remains extremely low* and we cannot substitute an objective reading of the reality with desire, even where one sector of the libertarian movement exaggerates its own importance and popularity.

But what is certain is that we must recognize the objective limitation that there has been in the development of a revolutionary strategy in Chile. Going from building popular power (“poder popular”) as a slogan to construction in fact and for this power to enter into open conflict with the status quo was too big a step. We need to identify the limitations, the breaking points, the strengths from which to build. Thinking about strategic possibilities in this period requires not only realism, but also a healthy dose of political creativity if we are not to reproduce a political scheme (i.e., the electoral ritual) which, although marketed as “novel”, is in reality old hat and fails to capture the imagination of a people who remain indifferent, while sending a mixed signal to those who are already in struggle. Voter turnout appears to be a rather good demonstration that what really reached its limit was the imagination of the revolutionary and libertarian left.

Electoral boycott and the construction of popular power from below

Abstention, as we have said, was the big winner of the last election. In itself, this does not mean anything from the point of view of accumulating forces for our bloc. No-one, least of all the revolutionary left or the anarchists, can claim abstention as a sign of political support. In fact, in the first round, stirring calls for abstention from popular and revolutionary organizations were scarce, largely due to some confusion and discouragement produced by the launch of Claude's candidacy. It was difficult to recover from this impact because in a country like Chile it is understood that you are only involved in politics when you are voting or proposing candidates; if not, you are assumed to be staying out of the situation... A narrow view of politics on the one hand and little practical and organizational ability on our part with which to launch an active boycott of these elections did the rest.

This decision to participate in the elections, which becomes even more difficult to understand (from a libertarian logic or rationality) given, as we have said, the fact that libertarian ideas are having an increasingly important echo in increasingly large sectors of the people and the delegitimization of the ruling bloc and the public institutions has reached a historic point. Instead of

⁹ www.perspectivadiagonal.org (emphasis in the original)

contributing with tools to help forge a political alternative outside the political arena deftly devised by the bloc in power (with the aim of numbing and confusing the real terrain on which the class struggle is fought), it contributed to legitimizing the institutions within the small but significant circle of influence it had, and so strengthened the dissociation between the “political”¹⁰ and the “social”, even though the opposite was originally intended¹¹. Even the name itself of the electoral platform, “Everyone to La Moneda”, to some extent expressed this fetishism of “political power”, this “statolatry” that Poulantzas describes as endemic to the middle classes, which see the State as arbitrator, neutral, law-abiding, the result of a social contract that goes beyond the class struggle, the source of all power¹², when in fact the contest for of power, for hegemony, is in the hands of the bourgeoisie in all walks of life, in much more everyday areas.

On this point, the anarchist critique continues to be powerful and relevant when criticizing the logic of the “democratic-representative” State, which is reflected in the electoral game through the creation of:

“an artificial space, ad-hoc and fictitious, within which the political sphere is supposedly handled, within which the administration of power takes place (...) this is where the anarchists’ core critique on this form of exercising the political should be: because in our view, power must be exercised by those concerned, in everyday spaces, in all areas of our existence (...) That is why popular power must face up to it in the same way, taking back control of our own lives fully. (...) Non-participation in bourgeois elections cannot be considered one of the political bases of revolutionary anarchist militancy, but rather it must arise naturally from our strategy of construction within the working class”¹³.

This is why we argue that, from the perspective of the recomposition of a revolutionary bloc as well as from the strategic perspective of building popular power from below, the most successful tactic, albeit by no means an easy one, at the present time and in light of what is to come with Bachelet’s new coalition government, was an electoral boycott. What would a policy of active abstention have meant in the current situation?

- denouncing the siren song of “New Majority”¹⁴ that urges us to participate as responsible “citizens”, and secondly, the illusionism of those sectors of the radical (and libertarian) left who try to convince us that, despite not calling for a vote in the second round, the path of electoral participation in the existing institutions remains valid for the period;
- calling for organization at every level: schools, high schools, universities, workplaces, neighborhoods and communities, around local demands of the people and the workers, proposing in place of the rhythms of bourgeois politics our own alternative for building from below;

¹⁰ Equated with “state”.

¹¹ www.elciudadano.cl

¹² Nicos Poulantzas, “Fascismo y Dictadura”, Ed. Siglo XXI, 2005, pp.282–284.

¹³ www.anarkismo.net

¹⁴ *Nueva Mayoría*, the coalition supporting Bachelet and consisting of the Socialist Party (PS), the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the Party for Democracy (PPD), the Social Democrat Radical Party (PRSD), the Communist Party of Chile (PCCh), Citizen Left (IC) and the Broad Social Movement (MAS).

- calling to accelerate the processes of political and social convergence into some federative reference point, while respecting the vitality and specificity of the grassroots organizations, helping to unify and amplify the voice and political opinion of those of us who opt for the construction of popular power in its various expressions, horizontally coordinating the different popular, grassroots initiatives. A daunting task but one that has to be taken on without easy solutions, with the perspective that the task of recomposing the popular and revolutionary movement is a slow, prolonged task, for which there are no possible shortcuts, which requires laying foundations in order to develop extended levels of confrontation and organization that can erode the current neoliberal hegemony.

Political forecasts for the post-election period

RL argued that “Everyone to La Moneda” would not be a purely electoral space, but a construction pole (i.e., from above) for the struggle of those below. The fact is that after the elections, the political landscape for the revolutionary left, in terms of what it was intended to achieve in levels of unity and organization, has not substantially varied compared to the period before the elections — the same sectors are still working in the same spaces as before. Indeed, the libertarian sector and their circle of influence as well as the radical left to which the candidacy of Claude tried to appeal, is now more fragmented, rife with new mistrust and suspicions. In the same election platform, internecine quarrels and disputes have exhausted the strategic goals of the space, a fact undoubtedly exacerbated by the bitter taste of defeat.

RL itself unequivocally recognizes that the very poor electoral performance of the platform is a failure: “*The vote of 2.8% is well below expectations, even the most pessimistic*”¹⁵. The defeat, however, is not only electoral, as RL seems to understand it — it is strategic, deeply political, the expression of the inability to create a project that was suited to the current conditions in Chile, outside and in opposition to the rituals of the self-legitimation of representative democracy and the institutions of the State (bourgeois State, incidentally). While we cannot overinflate the size of the critical population based on the magnitude of the recent social mobilizations, neither should we confuse the need to build a political alternative with the intervention in the (neoliberal) State institutions: *the logic of the recomposition of the popular movement has tended to look for alternatives in direct action, in grassroots, horizontal self-organization*. That, above all, is the real contribution that libertarians can bring to the people’s struggle today. Paradoxically, voices are appearing from the “libertarian” area calling for electoral participation in the worn-out, discredited institutions, which is without doubt a setback.

The political period that is beginning in Chile bodes great complexities for the ruling classes and the popular movement. The bloc in power needs to reorganize an increasingly worn-out political system and it will operate — and the people know it — with the carrot and the stick. It will try to co-opt the popular and workers movement in order to legitimize the adjustments that will be required by that reorganization, now counting explicitly on the consent of the obsequious political leadership of the Communist Party. We also know that those who do not submit to the rules of the “republic” will be subjected to all the repressive State force reserved for those who refuse to just put up with things and go on reproducing the exploitation, discrimination, inequality, injustice, corruption and destruction of the socio-environmental bases of collective life. The

¹⁵ www.sicnoticias.cl

fringes of the independent left, be they communitarians, Marxists, libertarians or socialists, can no longer continue to be self-absorbed: they have to increase their links with the labour and popular movement, multiply their efforts to accelerate the process of political and social convergence and create the political conditions to regain the initiative and open the way through the cracks that affect the political domination imposed by Capital starting from the neo-liberal counterrevolution in 1973.

These are not easy tasks. The unity that libertarians have been so insistent on today becomes not only necessary, strategic, but urgent. The debate has never been about unity — it is about what is understood by unity, how it is developed, how it is built. That is where Chilean anarchist communism has made a great contribution when the *Congreso de Unificación Anarco-Comunista* (Anarchist Communist Unification Congress — CUAC), in 2002, raised a slogan which is now more than ever relevant: *Unity from Below and in the Struggle*. This is understood to mean “*programmatically construction from organizational experiences and experiences arising from real, existing struggles*”, that contributes to “*strengthening the popular organizations, the true subjects of revolutionary struggle (...) emphasizing the first-hand political role of the same people organized in the task of maturing their position and improving their capacity for combat*”¹⁶, as Paul Abufom eloquently points out.

These debates concern the whole people, especially its organized, struggling fringe. How to project the demands of the popular movement towards an alternative that provides a clean break with the current system is an urgent task that can only be taken through a debate that is profound and public, collective, democratic and informed, in which differences are respected and discussed in the search for common ground and agreement, getting to know and respecting differences, forging consensus and not imposing it. Many issues remain to be resolved at this juncture for revolutionaries: how to approach the fight for reforms beyond reformism; how to articulate those struggles in a comprehensive and liberating socialist project; how to build processes of unity without giving up class independence; how to advance the construction of popular power but avoid cooptation; how to qualify these struggles with more political debate and not hide our political credentials as if we were ashamed, how to forge mass movements without fear if our positions are not always in the majority. All this, of course, goes beyond the subject of this article. In this collective, theoretical and practical debate that the whole revolutionary left must engage in, however, we believe that anarchist communists have a key role to play and a very specific, unique contribution to make.

¹⁶ www.perspectivadiagonal.org

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