

Ivette Hernandez

Interview with Francisco Figueroa: Continuing the Conversation on the Chilean Student Movement

Introduction

This piece of work is an interview carried out with Francisco Figueroa. Francisco was Vice-President of the Student Federation of the University of Chile between 2010 and 2011. He, like other students, was leading the mass student demonstrations in 2011 which demanded a radical reform of the Chilean education system. As a militant of the Autonomous Left he gave in this interview his own political opinion about the process of political construction of the student movement and what challenges the student movement is currently facing in order to create possibilities for a deep social and radical transformation of democracy and education in Chilean society.

In 2011 Chile witnessed one of the largest student mobilizations that the country has seen in decades, a mobilization that international opinion called 'the Chilean winter'. Across the country and during eight months, university students and high school students occupied their universities and colleges and led marches across the main streets of the country to demand a radical overhaul of the Chilean education system. Their demands for a free quality education for all and the end of profit-making in education were increasingly joined and supported by public opinion which believes Chilean education is in crisis and considers this the main issue which has to be resolved in Chile (73% by 2011 according to CERC 2011).

Their demands for a radical reform to education were against a neoliberal economic reform which transformed the Chilean education system in the middle of the 1970s. Such a neoliberal reform, referred to as the "Chilean model", was ideologically designed by a group of Chilean economists, known as the Chicago Boys because of their attachment to Milton Friedman's neoliberal economic theories. After the military coup that toppled the democratically-elected leftist government of Salvador Allende, the Pinochet regime adopted the Chicago Boys' neoliberal economic ideas as their own ideological and economic programme with the purpose of transforming and modernizing welfare institutions and welfare policies through introduction of a free market economy as the main regulating mechanism of health, education and pension systems.

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, a coalition of political parties, known as the *Concertación*, embraced the legacy of Pinochet's neoliberal economic reform, thereby being acknowledged as the second trajectory of the Chilean experiment of a neoliberal state. The governments of the *Concertación* (1990-2010) initiated a development strategy of "growth with equity" as a political programme that stood between social democracy and free-market capitalism and as a "potential Third Way option for Latin America" (Taylor 2006, 5). In the field of educational policies, the development strategy of growth with equity was argued to be the optimal route to make quality education available for all. Such an approach reflected a new focus by the *Concertación* on social democracy and economic policies as "equality of opportunities rather than of outcome" (Keaney 2005, 30) in a mixed educational policy paradigm of "market or choice models and State or integration models" (Cox 2003, 19).

The Chilean experience of neoliberalism or what was known as the Chilean miracle played unquestionably an essential role in influencing international debates on development strategy and in being echoed mainly in the developing world. Yet, the nature and impact of such a reformed second neoliberal trajectory began to be questioned in 2006 when secondary school students mobilised against the lack of equal opportunities for quality education. This mass secondary student mobilisation took place between April and June 2006 when Chile witnessed the appearance of one of the largest social protests that the country has ever seen in the post-Pinochet era. The emergence of this student protest, named as the Penguins' Revolution because of their school uniform, was led by hundreds of thousands of students between 13 and 17 years old, who gradually started to march and to occupy their schools whilst demanding that education was a right and not a privilege. In their social protest, the students demanded structural changes in the Chilean education system by publicly revealing that a reformed template of neoliberalism had failed by deepening inequality of opportunity for quality education that mostly affected students from the most disadvantaged socio-economic sectors.

The Penguins' Revolution was acknowledged as unparalleled in the political context of sixteen years of democratic government of the *Concertación* while their social protests re-legitimized social mobilization by encouraging society to participate and mobilize in what the secondary students defined as "the major restructuring of the Chilean model of education"¹. The Penguins' Revolution also revealed the emergence of new political actors; new political subjectivities and democratic structures of participation that put in question the quality of democracy and participation that the political elites had

consolidated after two decades of political consensus in the post-Pinochet negotiated transition to democracy. In 2011, former high school students marched as university students in the main cities across the country to show society that their movement was a radical one, with their political voices opposing neoliberalism and profit-making in education as the main axes which perpetuate privileges of the wealthy and existing social class divisions.

Politically, the current student movement has taken a step further by developing and widening new forms of cultural politics that challenge traditional ways of representation, the market system and the neoliberal state. They began to politicise their spaces, social relations and subjectivities in very different ways from those of traditional political parties. Students themselves recognise that their movement is a political one which has begun to sweep across society with alternative forms of participatory democracy. It is recognised that the student movement is depicting its own transformation as a social movement by occupying and appropriating politics as a common space. Education in a neoliberal society has also played an unquestionable role in expanding opportunities and the conditions in which students have encountered each other, and in which they have learnt to expand their solidarity. A neoliberal education has also taught students that socio-economic exploitation is not just about labour, as it is an exploitation which began at their schools with the type of education they are receiving. Indeed, it is the revolution students have brought onto the table in a post-Concertación Chilean society in 2011.

Continuing the conversation on the Chilean student movement

I (Ivette Hernandez): What motivated you to get involved and participate in the student movement? Did your family or school experience influence your social and political participation in the student movement?

F (Francisco Figueroa): Well, in reality nothing of what you have mentioned above. Indeed, it has been a very particular way towards politics; I could say it was a very *sui generis* experience. I came to be involved in politics at university. My family is not a politically active one even though I could describe them as one quite diverse in its thoughts and ideas but my family has never influenced me in that way. For example, my closest family, I mean my parents are rather conservative. On the other hand, I studied in a Catholic college. Even though this college did not have a strong presence of priest at the college, it did not have any interest in systematically encouraging its students to discuss social issues. Consequently my political and social commitment came from my own experience as a university student. I considered myself a left wing person but I realised that what I have considered as the left was quite exhausted. For example, when I came to university I was surprised because I saw that the left which has

been historically recognised as inheritor of the armed struggle was a pure aesthetic issue as it just represented itself. In addition, the communists, who represented the more traditional form, did not manage to achieve a kind of more legitimised representation. Student militants from the coalition of political parties, known as the Concertación did not exist at a social level for a while as they took a very clear option for being part of the state while the coalition was in government between 1990 and 2010. Hence in this way they did not have any type of relevant social tie but rather worked through clientelism at the university. I started to collaborate with the federation of university students in the area of communications as I studied journalism. In 2005 and 2006 we faced big university student protests and secondary student demonstrations respectively. At this moment I began to be interested in social militancy. Such a decision mainly came from my own volunteering job at the FECH² and a friendship that I established with some comrades who were militants in the Surda³. They were organizing autonomous political groups called *colectivos*. So I joined the communication team who supported the biggest secondary student mobilisations in 2006 and from then on I never got out of it.

I: Did you have any other former experiences at school like debates, chats with your classmates who encourage your political commitment?

F: It did not happen at the institutional level. I had this kind of debates with my closest circle of friends but it did not have a big influence. The university as such influenced me as an institution, even beyond social relations I established. The idea of the University of Chile did interest me very much as I knew this institution constituted a quite challenging space. Indeed, it has a very interesting academic environment as lecturers and professors encourage this challenging atmosphere. Therefore the university became a real storm of incentives, regarding the political concern in many perspectives. For example, it originated from both the purely academic relation that I had with the university to social links I established with students organisations. A lot happened at the university between 2005 and 2006. These two years were really important for our generation. They were not as glamorous as 2011. In these days, to become a student leader did not entail such a public recognition like in 2011. Indeed, many rejected such a leading responsibility. But I think these two years were key years to revive the student movement that was very much asleep and quite fragmented. In short, we lived an experience which has been sufficiently important for our generation. To some extent it allowed us to express ourselves maybe with bigger responsibility in the following years.

I: What analysis do you make of the student protests in 2005 and 2006? How do you connect both student protests which were led by different social actors?

F: I think there is a certain continuity even though it does not show itself very clearly. In my opinion, student struggles show continuity between what

happened in the last decade and what we have seen in 2006 and 2011. The student struggles in the 1990s were in short the fight against the legacy of dictatorship; I mean they were against authoritarianism and the lack of public finance in the system of higher education. It was not a real political struggle which questioned the ideology of the model of education. The latter did happen in 2005 and 2006 after a period characterized by a low level of student demonstrations. In 2005, university students demonstrated and marched against a law regulating student fee loans which was proposed by the government of Ricardo Lagos. Such a law attempted to unify the access to university student fee loans by placing banks as the main operator at both private and public higher education institutions. Such a law proposal faced very strong opposition on the part of the university students. The university student movement and Rectors' opposition broke down since both actors did not manage to force the government into a U-turn. Nevertheless, the movement managed to keep the already existing state fee loans system, known as the solidary credit fund, out of a unique university student fee loans system. In a way, the movement achieved to keep this solidary credit fund out of private bank hands because it was believed that the former represented in other words, "a more solidary funding policy". In 2006, secondary student demonstrations came to take the frontline while the university students were in a rather secondary position as a result of a very exhausting period of demonstrations in 2005. The secondary student demonstrations in 2006 were already the precedent to what was about to happen 2011. It was the student protests in 2006 that managed to call the attention of society on pending and broken promises from the period of democratic transition. Although secondary students protests expressed economic demands pointing at the lack of infrastructure they made a step forward from structural demands towards demanding the elimination of the Organic Constitutional Law on Education, known as the LOCE, and furthermore exposing issues such as profit-making in education. On the one hand it was the first time student struggles addressed this kind of demands. And on the other, such student demands raised a lot of sympathy from the public as this demand made a lot of sense to people who are considered to be middle class. Precisely such a group of people were promised social mobility and meritocracy through education. So student protests in 2006 interpreted the aspiration of this middle class that had not been delivered. In addition, it is important to highlight that student demands in 2006 were negotiated by the Concertación in a very authoritarian political way. Indeed, this student mobilisation ended up with the declaration of a General Law on Education (LGE). The LGE has similar economic and ideological principles as the LOCE promulgated during Pinochet's regime. It was a rather contradictory matter that such a law was promulgated by a government that defined itself as in favour of listening to its citizens. Yet, it imposed a political negotiation with the right wing political

parties. I acknowledge that 2006, as I told my friend the other day, represented the turning point, the moment we lost our innocence.

I: What is happening nowadays within the university student movement regarding private and public universities?

F: I have to say that the social character of this actor has been widened in the student movement. It is because university students from the new private higher institutions (a traditional private education sector also exists), represent 70%. That is, 70% of enrolment in the higher education system belongs to the new system. It includes new private universities, professional institutes, and centres for technical training. These youngsters are currently facing the hardest contradictions of this education model. I mean, they are facing student fee loans with very high interest rates; they also have restrictions to create their own student organizations in order to exercise their citizenship as university students. This does not usually exist at these private institutions. Their universities show usually a huge deficit of quality education. It is interesting that precisely these universities are often involved in an illegal and more savage money-making deals taking advantage of legal loopholes, even though the law prohibits profit-making in education at these private institutions. Indeed, student demonstrations in 2011 brought a novelty regarding a new synergy between this new actor I mean the novelty in the student movement and the oldness that had begun to retreat concerning its relevance and demands that had historically shaped the flags of the student movement. In fact, student demonstrations started in 2011 with a conflict which did receive less media coverage. Nevertheless, this student conflict became a relatively strong point of reference for university students. This conflict was about the resistance led by students at the Universidad Central against its sale. The latter is a private institution with very particular characteristics since it has a stronger democratic tradition than the usual private universities. Students rejected the sale of their university to an investment group run by the Christian Democrat Party. This struggle became quite referential for student at private universities. They started to march in 2011; most of them did not have their own federations and student organizations but they marched with their demands and worries about the huge levels of debt they are facing and illegal profit-making that their institutions were involved in. Even though the student protests in 2011 were led by students who came from traditional universities, the demands from 2011 re-present an actor who is broader minded than students from traditional universities. Certainly, the demand to an end of profit-making in education is basically a demand which belongs to these new emergent social actors.

I: How many private universities are currently incorporated in the Confech⁴?

F: There are about nine or ten private universities. It is an interesting point since in 2011 we attempted to open the Confech to incorporate also students

from private universities. We did not succeed. This happened because we had two rather conventional attitudes. In the first place, a sector of students who recognise themselves as far left wing people were against the incorporation of these students. They argued that their incorporation would mean the legitimisation of the private education system. In my opinion, it was an elitist position disguised in a leftist rhetoric. A second opinion was represented by a more political sensitivity which neglected incorporation of student federations from private universities. This political position saw students from private universities as an actor beyond the control of more traditional political actors. It was a more regulatory argument. In 2011 we could not manage their incorporation. At the beginning of 2011 we were able to incorporate students from Universidad Central as they had their own federation and they were also mobilised. In 2012, the Confech opened to incorporation of some private university student federations.

I: Did you aim to incorporate students from private universities in 2011?

F: Yes, we did. It was an objective we had in mind. We, the Autonomous Left colectivo aimed to incorporate these students if we were able to organize a mass national movement. We thought if we were able to raise an important student conflict it would be quite important to incorporate students from the private education sector as an actor with real power in this student struggle. We thought it would mean that 2011 would represent a year of a different qualitative advancement for the student movement. It entailed embracing their more sensitive demands. As many of their demands were corporate ones we aimed to politicise them to avoid the political class using them to strengthen the economic model. Such a political decision was adopted by many student federations like the University of Chile, the Catholic University of Chile and so on. It was above all a political decision. These student federations agreed that the existence of two different separated student movements could strengthen their more corporate demands. The latter was quite convenient for the current government administration as the right wing government of Pinera aimed to reform and improve failures of the model in order to preserve the essence of the model itself. We even came to imagine that these businessmen put the private university student movement in their pockets. Indeed, the government aimed to do it when it proposed student loans with low interest rates in 2012. By taking into account such political analysis we aimed to open the Confech or the Confederation of Chilean Students to incorporation of private universities. This happened in 2012.

I: How do you think education could contribute to the political involvement of students who marched in 2006 and 2011 to demand structural reforms in education?

F: Education itself... I sincerely think that student demonstrations were possible despite Chilean education. It is expected that education should encourage such political involvement through citizen-

ship education at schools or a more democratic university. Yet, these opportunities have been taken away for a long time in the Chilean education system. Therefore, there is no possibility to raise such issues in our current education system because education itself discourages such democratic debates. In my opinion, education could have contributed with the material conditions in order to expand numbers of mobilised social actors. We could also say that education has contributed to expanding a mass university after Pinochet's reforms. So, the more mass university we have the more mass student movement we face. It was what happened in the decade of 2000. In the decade of the 1990s and before the university student movement was very elitist as it represented the most prestigious public universities. Politically speaking it was a conservative student movement. Indeed, hegemony of the Christian Democratic Party in the student movement was broken in the recent decade of the 1990s. It was followed by a short hegemony of the traditional left; I mean the socialist party and the Communist party. This hegemony was broken in the current decade by hegemony of a social left with its more diverse character. So the "radicalisation" we have seen in the student movement is a new phenomenon. In my opinion, the latter should be understood as a result of the mass expansion of the higher education sector. At present we see that the Confech and student federations have been exceeded by a new student who had not been incorporated in traditional systems and the state in which student movements had been historically organised. Thus, education has facilitated the material conditions to see more than 10,000 students, but as it happened in 2011 when we had 200,000 students who marched on the main streets across the country.

I: Yet, lack of opportunities to learn citizenship at schools also entails opportunities to create other ways of political participation. It seems that there are no formal spaces to strengthen participation and autonomy. What do you think?

F: Yes, you are right. There is a strong rise in students' participation and a renovation in their approach towards struggle and political action. These new emergent ways of political and social participation come as an answer and to counterattack the mistrust of institutions and traditional politics. We can see today changes in organizational principles of student federations; the emergence of dynamics of a more participatory democracy and a stronger legitimisation of assemblies in the secondary student movement. All of this happened as a result of a huge mistrust towards political parties and authorities. Students have begun to counterbalance this mistrust by opening more spaces for participation in order to have more control over their own decisions. I would say the other side of the coin of decomposition of political class and institutions is an increase in student participation through these new forms I mentioned before. It is the answer to your question. The absence of opportunities for learning citizenship in the formal education system has allowed creation of something that is clearly a positive phenomenon.

I: At this point I would like to turn my attention to teachers. Why in your opinion do teachers look so absent at a time of student demands for free education for all?

F: I think there are several reasons for this, although I believe the most important is a structural one. As municipal or governmental education has been significantly reduced, the working conditions of teachers have also become more precarious because of what is called labour flexibility. As a consequence the number of teachers organized in unions has decreased a lot. Thus the current working conditions of teachers in this model of education have resulted in a weak Teachers Union. I think this is the most important reason for the absence of teachers beyond the political choices the Teachers Union has taken. Of course, these political decisions have also played a role but on a different stage. The teachers' movement was a very important actor in the decade of the 1990s. It was a much politicised teachers' movement. At times it became more politicised than even the student movement. For example, teachers raised a big mobilisation in 1997. Nevertheless they have lost a lot of their strength because of the economic problems they face; precisely due to the historic debt the state has with the teachers and more precarious working conditions for teachers. These elements have undermined their capacity to lead further political struggles. Nowadays, teachers demands are more corporate ones and one can see them fighting for adjusting salaries at the end of the year. Yet, there have been a few occasions in which they have demanded the right to free education. In 2006, there was an attempt which came from a social alliance among secondary students, teachers and university students. Yet, such a social alliance did not succeed. I think it was due to the lack of initiative and a less affirmative position from teachers that played against this alliance. I would like to say that precariousness in education likewise affects teachers; they have also become victims of this model. As they did not receive good teacher training courses at universities they could not provide a good quality education at their schools. While we acknowledge that it is the reality in our education system the right wing parties and the government have come up with the idea that bad quality education was the fault of teachers. Teachers could not oppose adequately this powerful argument at that moment. They were then strongly criticized by public opinion, if we could say that such a thing like public opinion exists. There were spaces in which they were strongly criticized; however they did not have the same legitimacy as the student movement. What we would have needed in 2006 was a more affirmative and proposing teachers movement rather than a movement entrenched in economic and corporate demands, which make only sense to a few unionised teachers but not to society.

I: How do you imagine an educational reform to reduce the already existing social class inequalities and segmentation in the current education system?

F: We think we have to consider two purposes education is expected to accomplish. Firstly, we need to understand how we finally become a developed country. It is an unresolved problem that entails redefining what we mean by development. In our opinion, development should be understood as a productive capacity of a society to resolve all kinds of inequalities such as social inequalities, gender, ethnic and cultural inequalities as well. There is no development if both productivity and inequalities are not addressed. We think that knowledge plays a key role in particular in societies which are becoming more advanced and complex. Since 2011, our main slogan has been "knowledge will be the copper of the 21st century." We believe that Chile's wealth is no longer coming from beneath the earth. It is in our heads and minds, in our capacity to innovate. We believe that innovation not only represents technological progress, but it also entails creation of a new knowledge, one relevant to the needs of society. It is the main driving force for development and education plays furthermore a fundamental role in terms of broadening capabilities to produce knowledge and to democratise it. It means that access, distribution and use of knowledge are going to define the type of development we will have; the relationship among different social groups and even the relations between our country and the region and other far away countries as well. In other words, it is about how we tackle dependency of our country and the context of Latin America regarding knowledge created in already developed countries. In this way knowledge and citizenship became fundamental in this process and from here we could start interpreting what role education has to play in this. Education has to be democratic at its different levels; we should encourage the culture of citizenship in classrooms and at universities. We also have to engender social equality. We consider the latter implies the demand of the universal right to education by eliminating and exposing the principle of subsidiarity. We know that a targeting policy approach has resulted in high levels of inequality and social exclusion. This social exclusion is in contradiction to any effort to bring about more equality of communication and social cooperation. These are fundamental conditions for development. We do not have such conditions in the Chilean experience. As a result we can see youngsters from different communities and socio-economic backgrounds who are unable to communicate with each other as they do not talk in similar linguistic codes. It is a barrier to build a project for society. We believe that a targeting approach on social expenditure undermines the idea that community itself is entitled to equal rights. Furthermore, such an approach is even going beyond this, as it suspends the idea that an individual is entitled to universal rights. Consequently it is not a right as, in our opinion, "rights are universal or they are not." One can access to social services programme after an official document confirms one person is entitled to and can do so for a fixed time. In Chile we say that "if you are walking and your coin falls you are now under the line of poverty but if you picked it up again you

moved upwards and you lost your subsidy." This approach on social expenditure has been positioned as a prudent and efficient way to implement social policies. Nevertheless, Chilean experience has shown that this approach on social policies has deepened social inequalities and social exclusion. These policies have to be eliminated as "the rights are universal or they are not".

I: Would selection at schools be eliminated in this educational reform?

F: Yes, it would be eliminated. The selective process of students is a trap. Nowadays many high schools claim they have the best students. Yet, it is too easy as private high schools have students who come with better opportunities to learn because of their socio-economic backgrounds while some prestigious municipal high schools also select their students. The selective process in our education system has deepened its social segmentation by constraining essential features of education regarding interchange of abilities and sensitivities. We finally had ghettos at schools, deepened social segregation and social problems which already exist in society because of that very policy. We faced a similar problem at the university level because an unrestricted access to higher education does not change anything. I think the mechanism of access does not solve problems derived from a socially segmented education system. I mean societies with similar problems of inequalities and unrestricted access to universities have been unable to reduce their serious problems of university drop-outs. What figures and numbers show us are that those students who came from families which have books at home are graduated at universities. We believe that access to higher education system has to change but we do not think that such a reform could resolve problems of inequalities. Such a task needs to engender equal learning opportunities for all. It means that the right to be educated should be understood as a provision of a universal right without a selective process. Moreover, access to higher education system should effectively depend on student interests, talent and merit. Nowadays this idea of meritocracy is a big lie, because what plays a key role in accessing university are socio-economic conditions rather than merit. Indeed a survey shows this. In short, meritocracy is not what is seems to be and merit might be a relevant factor when all have equal conditions to function and to be educated.

I: Francisco, you pointed out in 2011 that current model of education aims at producing reduced elites. So, what other type of social class do you think education is currently bringing forth?

F: The current education model is very basic. To be able to understand the model better one has to observe Chilean business people and how they envision the Chilean society. They see society and the labour force in a very simple way. It is a labour force ready to bear the precariousness of the labour market by accepting labour flexibility as a necessary solution. Such a model of labour force attempts to install a new kind of precarious work, while workers are left with total resignation without will or capacity

to challenge the authorities. The latter has much to do with the type of education students have been receiving. It was already addressed by the rock band "Los Prisioneros" in the 1980s. In one of their most famous songs, "El baile de los que sobran", they talked about an education generating resignation. Yet, it does not represent an old way of resignation. It constitutes a new way by which the labour force accepts this new order based on precariousness and labour flexibility. In addition, we have an elite of technocrats who believe that their specialized knowledge represents the truth, to the extent that they can withdraw knowledge from public deliberation. We think that the technocracy issue is an extension of authoritarianism but with new credentials and with a new discourse. Nevertheless, this elite shares its essence with authoritarianism because it excludes production of knowledge from the common interest, the general interest of society and the collective capacity of society to think about its future through common decisions. It basically represents the idea of experts, a reduced elite who take these decisions. However, this idea was shattered in 2006 when experts who have defended the system started to explain failures of the model. It was a very interesting phenomenon. At this point it is worth emphasising that the so called public elite universities such as the University of Chile or the most important private university, the Catholic University of Chile, are producing these elites and attempt to separate these elite from public concerns. It is what has been proposed to us. It constitutes a dominant discourse at these public universities, the best public universities in Chile. I think the whole idea is profoundly a class based idea.

I: Could you explain a bit more the social class composition of students who marched in 2011?

F: The Chilean university student has always been a mesocratic movement. I mean a middle class movement. I will not talk about middle class because something like this does not exist in Chile, but I choose to call it middle strata of society, people who have access to some services. Nowadays we could understand it as access to loans and credit cards. It is a very contradictory issue because they are a social group that is expected to meet its economic and professional aspirations. They do not represent a more radical position. Historically speaking the middle class has always played, in Chile and in the Southern Cone, a key role in challenging and transforming social and political conditions during either very conservative periods or more progressive governments. The secondary student movement however is quite different as it is represented by all social classes. Since it is more diverse we have seen in the last decade secondary student demands that called for solutions to structural problems in education. In my opinion, such a feature has entailed addressing political issues which are common to the majority of secondary students. Even though the university student movement is a movement with a more perceptive political discourse it has been more reduced on a social basis. Nevertheless, such a social scope has been expanded now due to the fact that

access to higher education has been expanded. It is no longer an elite student movement as it was in the last century. It has become a mass student movement although the Chilean higher education system does not have a similar level of access to stand out at world level. Yet it is very different to what happened in the 1980s or at the beginning of the 1990s when about 13% of high school students had got access to universities. Today, that number has increased by 46% although half of them drop out before completion. Indeed, this high drop-out rate is another problem the university student movement has placed on the table. Mass university expansion and high levels of university dropout have tumbled many ideas of famous experts, like Joaquin Brunner, who said in 1985 that a mass expansion of higher education system will mean the disappearance of a university student movement as it will become a corporative student movement. A very elitist vision indeed, I mean like many of these people who were militants of MAPU before 1973. He commented that the student movement as we knew it will be finished. Students who marched in 2006, 2011 and 2012 however have been showing him and other experts how wrong they were when they made their very deterministic conclusions.

I: This student movement is revealing new political and social subjectivities to construct and to do politics. How do you characterize these new social and political subjectivities?

F: I am not used to thinking about what you have just asked from a sociological perspective. I prefer addressing this notion in a different way to see if I can respond to your question. Traditional political identities, their dynamics and ways of doing politics have been in crisis for a while. I think that the democratic transition was possible on the one hand by disarticulating the social movement and on the other Pinochet's regime itself was able to throw traditional forms of doing and constructing politics into a crisis. For example, articulation between the working classes movement and its own politics or links between political parties and some specific social groups were destroyed. Furthermore, there was no political will to reconstruct this in the decade of the 1990s. It was because the democratic transition itself depended on political disarticulation of social actors, mainly against grass-root movements. As a result, new subjectivities which arise in these social sectors are mainly characterised by resignation and conformism we have never ever seen before in the history of Chile. By speaking in quite relative terms, Chile used to have, on the contrary to other Latin-American countries, a more or less important left. Today this scenario is quite different. Since 2000 some more affirmative elements of this crisis started to emerge [...] they started to express something more positive. I could say they were linked to more spontaneous ways of doing politics and less involved in traditional political organisations. These new forms of politics also addressed some elements of rebelliousness which seemed to be neutralised in those institutionalized forms of politics because the latter often lost this element of

rebellion, of total negation and the affirmation of something totally different. I think that these new political subjectivities started to germinate a bit in the current student struggles. Yet, if these subjectivities are not transformed in objectivities, or if you prefer in concrete historical structures, we could finish being betrayed and co-opted like the social movement of the 1980s.

I: In which way do you think these new political subjectivities impact society?

F: I think it is too soon to talk about or analyse how the student movement has impacted society. I can only give you my opinion which is based on my own experience and the national contingency more than anything else. Firstly, the conclusion that the idea of the social actor had disappeared in Chile after the end of Pinochet's regime was wrong. Indeed, the Chilean experience was used to defend this idea. Today we could be defeated again but what is clear is the history has not ended here. Nobody could deny the existence of a new social actor that could emerge with a desire to transform our current system. It had an impact on society. For example, the student movement was widely supported by society both in their demands and their ways of protests. Such a support shows how people disagreed with this idea of privatization in all spheres of their lives. This support also talked about legitimisation of these new ways of doing politics which were not contained in the current political system. This last point is quite powerful as Chilean society has been characterised as very conservative in its democratic transition period. Indeed, passiveness of social actors allowed a very restricted democratic transition. This has not yet changed in Chile and I think is too soon to come to a conclusion but it was fractured and undermined. It was not only because of the tremendous support the student movement received by society. So what happened? Many local conflicts which used to be expressed by formal mechanisms such as negotiations between their representatives and authorities were now taken to the streets; people set up barricades and called for big demonstrations. It happened in Aysen and Freirina in 2012 [...] I think students impacted society to an extent that many sectors of society began to wake up from their apathy. The same happened on August 4th, the day of maximum repression in 2011. There happened a looting and burning of a department store chain known as La Polar. This department store chain was in the national news as it had been cheating many people. It was quite interesting to see that people did not condemn the looting and destruction. In my opinion, this silence said basically "this is something like justice". In other words, if nobody does justice, then these things happen. It is a clear symptom that something is happening in Chile.

I: How do you think democracy and citizenship should be taught in a country in which there still forced silences about the times of dictatorship?

F: Yes, I think it is a problem but I do not think it is the most important. In many public universities there are issues that are slowly getting out of being a

taboo. Yet, it does not mean problems are resolved. I think we need to focus on current taboos that exist at this present moment [...] There are issues on the dictatorship, human rights, and the historical memory that have been worked on at the Universidad de Chile. But although they have been worked on we still have a very conservative and authoritarian mentality. I think that the anti-dictatorship discourses or to think of the problems as coming from Pinochet's reform are very convenient to ignore what problems we are facing in the present. It is very convenient and I think an education for democracy has to deal with myths and mystifications that exist at the present time. An education for democracy is not only about what happened in the past, it should also address what is still happening today. Issues about inequality, lack of legitimization of the political system. These issues have been naturalised and they are not being considered as a problem when we think about teaching democracy and citizenship. It happens at the Universidad de Chile so you could imagine what happens in other universities, the big majority of universities.

I: To close this interesting interview, would you like to add anything else?

F: Yes. I think we should weigh up the student struggles in the last years in Chile. We have to wait but I think we have to develop a more critical approach in order to ask more from the social struggle we are involved now. This analysis has to be critical because in spite of a series of new elements which we have mentioned like new forms of action, new forms of linking the common issues there is still not any real impact on a political change. We have to be very cautious to avoid a similar experience to what happened in the 1980s. There was a very important social energy and a high level of autonomy of the political class. It happened not because the political was decomposed but because it was materially destroyed by the dictatorship. But finally all this energy was used in a very conservative political project. I think we have not resolved this problem yet. It is not going to be resolved by the student movement but it is a problem we need to keep in our minds with all the potentiality it has. I emphasised it is important bearing in mind the potentiality of the recent student struggle in Chile. It was able to put issues on the table that are so advanced for the Chilean experience. It is because this student struggle denaturalizes issues that were hidden due to the consensus imposed by the de facto powers in this country. The targeted approach on social investment, a subsidiary state, and profit-making in education were not defeated in 2011. Yet, their legitimacy was fractured and undermined in the country and abroad. What the student movement does is to crack the myth of Chile, as a successful neoliberal country. I think it is also interesting to see this abroad as Chile was a laboratory in the 1980s. Nowadays there are many countries that have started using some ideas from the Chilean experience. Some Latin-American countries of the Pacific have started to do a series of reforms which have the same pattern. For example, Peru, Colombia, Mexico; all of

them are more conservative governments but we also see that more progressive governments are considering implementation of some of the solutions applied in Chile as they believe that these policies could have an impact on some indicators. There are some indicators that the elites like to keep on showing to the international organisms. But these indicators do not show a correlation in a more egalitarian and harmonious development of the country. So, I think we have to keep in mind the Chilean experience and how the achievement of a successful neoliberal model was not such a great one. In other words, the sale of the Chilean model cannot be made so easily anymore; I think that the cost of selling the myth rose.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Spokesperson of the Secondary Student Assembly (AES) & the National Assembly of Secondary Students (ANES). Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnxXyzvjTbk&feature=channel>
- ² FECH: Student Federation from University of Chile.
- ³ Surda was a left movement born in the early nineties. It was mainly based on state universities across Chile.
- ⁴ The Confederation of Chilean Students