

The Chilean student movement of 2011-2012: challenging the marketization of education

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Introduction

According to mainstream international analysis (e. g. United Nations 2011), Chile is one Latin America's "best students". The first country in the region to implement drastic neoliberal reforms in the mid-1970s, Chile sustained impressive rates of economic growth and reduced poverty to a third in the last two decades. All this took place in the midst of political stability, regular elections, and a high respect for civic and political liberties by regional standards. In 2011, however, Chile caught the attention of the world not for its macroeconomic numbers but for an unprecedented wave of social protest against the government and the state of its educational system. While the first protests in May of that year brought to the street a few thousands secondary and tertiary students, by August protesters reached an estimated peak of about 200,000 and included not only students but also their families, workers, environmental activists, indigenous peoples, and a heterogeneous mass of citizens disgruntled with the political and economic system. These were the most massive and encompassing protests since those that in the late 1980s helped overthrowing the authoritarian regime of General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled the country between 1973 and 1990 (when democracy was restored). They took place in Latin America's jewel and, while their intensity decreased, they are far from disappearing by October 2012.

In the search for explanations, some observers quickly underscored the similarities between the Chilean student movement and the Spanish *Indignados*. This ignored a crucial difference: while the latter protested against government cutbacks in a climate of economic recession and austerity, the former acted in a context of economic growth, rising employment rates, low inflation, and expanding social programs. Aware of this puzzle, more caustic commentators concluded that Chileans were protesting "because they were full" - presumably of food, hi-tech gadgets, cars, and modernity. But this is too simple to solve the puzzle since there is no automatic link between "being full" and protesting.

In this essay I present three claims regarding the current (2011-2012) wave of student protest in Chile. The first one is that the student movement, despite its apparent discontinuity with Chilean neoliberalism, is actually its unintended byproduct. Specifically, the contradictions inherent in the rapid development of a system of higher education guided by market principles created a large mass of tertiary students with unprecedented organizational skills, communication networks, and grievances - the basic ingredients that nurtured the movement.

However, and this is the second claim, the movement was powerful enough to rebel against its origins and shake two of its most cherished beliefs – namely, that education is a consumer good, and that it is acceptable that private actors profit from educational activities. By doing so, the student movement opened the way for a restructuring of basic aspects of Chilean society well beyond the educational system.

The third claim is that the movement succeeded in minimizing internal divisions despite undergoing rapid numerical growth. I argue that this happened because a highly participative context granted legitimacy to movement actions and kept student leaders aligned with the student masses. In this respect the movement stands in sharp contrast with the practices of Chilean political parties during the last two decades, which are characterized by their elite and non-participatory character. These three claims are based on publicly available information about the movement in the mass media, personal observations, and informal conversations with student activists. They intend to contribute to the debate about this movement rather than providing definitive statements based on rigorous empirical research.

Chile: traditionally mobilized, recently quiescent

The unexpected massiveness of the 2011-2012 protests become less surprising if we consider that until 1973 Chile had a strong tradition of popular mobilization. For instance, since the 1880s the Chilean labor movement became one of the most developed ones in Latin America, and by the first decades of the twentieth century it was politically supported by powerful Socialist and Communist parties. In the 1960s political mobilization expanded from urban centers to the countryside as a result of the efforts of leftist parties and Christian Democrats to capture the peasant vote. But the apex took place during the Socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970-73). In these years, blue collar workers of nearby factories created independent centers of collective democracy (*cordones industriales*). And in a context of scarcity, popular neighborhoods organized groups for assuring the provision of basic food supplies (*juntas de abastecimiento*). They attempted to resist conservative attempts to overthrow Allende through economic sabotage and intimidation (which required the mobilization of rightist militia groups).

Such vibrant and polarized civil society was beheaded from 1973 onwards by Pinochet's repressive apparatus, which dismantled civic organizations, labor unions and political parties, and prosecuted their leaders. Although popular mobilization resumed in the late 1980s as the dictatorship was crumbling, the democratic governments in place during the 1990s and 2000s (all of them of the center-left coalition *Concertación por la Democracia*) did little to keep civil society activated. The rationale in the early 1990s was that popular mobilization could move the military to stage another coup, as had happened in 1973. As a result, center-left political parties severed their links to lower-class communities (*poblaciones*) and social movements in general. Protest dwindled and electoral

participation rates fell systematically during the 1990s and 2000s. The bottom line is that the heightened mobilization of 2011-2012 looks awkward only if we forget pre-1973 Chile. Otherwise it looks quite consistent with the country's tradition.

However, there are two remarkable novelties in the current wave of protest. First, rather than a top-down creation from established political actors and institutions, it was a spontaneous collective creation of students – and for that reason students reacted vehemently against any attempt of cooptation from the political class. Second, and precisely because they had the political status quo as a counter-model, students attempted to minimize hierarchical structures within the movement, promoting their own version of the “horizontalism” that Marina Sitrin (2006) found in Argentinean movements of marginalized workers. These two features – autonomy from institutional politics and a horizontal style of internal organization – allow conceiving the Chilean student movement as part of the broad mobilization against neoliberalism that has been developing in the Global South during the last decade (see also Motta 2008, 2009, 2011, and Webber 2011).

How neoliberal education creates a student movement

The first claim of this essay – that the current student movement is a byproduct of Chilean neoliberalism – requires a look at the process by which the Chilean educational system became guided by market principles. Pinochet made several changes to Chilean education, which up to the 1970s relied on state funding and centralized administration by the Ministry of Education. He decentralized primary and secondary education, putting municipalities in charge of schools; provided subsidies to private schools, whose numbers increased dramatically; and liberalized tertiary education, favoring the mushrooming of private universities and technical institutes. The combination of these changes resulted in a four-fold expansion of the number of Chileans accessing tertiary education between 1990 and 2010, leading to an increase in coverage from 16% to 40% in the 18-24 age group. Approximately 70% percent of these students were the first ones in their families to reach such level, which was seen as the surest means for upward social mobility.

The expansion in coverage was so welcomed by politicians and citizens alike that the failures of the new education market remained hidden from political debate. However they eventually became visible. First, because state supervision was negligible, the training provided by many of the newer secondary and tertiary institutions was deficient. As employers realized so they became increasingly reluctant to hire graduates from these institutions (who rarely came from the upper classes), frustrating their expectations of upward mobility. Combined with the existence of an expensive private school system only affordable to the upper classes, this created huge disparities in educational quality and economic returns.

Secondly, educational fees soon became very high, making Chilean education one of the most expensive ones in the world (relative to its population's income). State-backed loans expanded and were taken by about 70% of the student population. But since they were below educational fees, families had to finance about three-quarters of educational expenses – one of the highest proportions among OECD countries, to which Chile belongs since 2010. Because such loans had high interest rates, students accumulated impressive debts which were hard to repay. This problem was obviously harder for the sizable proportion which could not afford the entire career span and had to drop out. They did not get an education diploma but frustration and a debt which often endangered family finances. Finally, although profiting from educational activities is illegal in Chile, the owners of many private institutions violated the spirit of the law through intricate procedures. As a result, large sums of money went from the pockets of popular and middle-class families to those of increasingly richer educational businessmen.

In a nutshell, the cost of expanding tertiary education through market mechanisms was disparity in educational quality, lots of debts and frustration, and economic vulnerability for thousands of popular and middle-class families.

The first scream: the 2006 “penguin” protest

Already by the 2000s, one of the unintended consequences of the commodification and subsequent expansion of Chilean education was the creation of a large mass of middle-class students with better organizational capacities than their parents. Also, as they had not grown up in the midst of a brutal dictatorship, they were ready to voice their demands in the streets (a blanket hanging from the wall of an occupied high school building in 2006 thus claimed: “We are the generation that was born without fear”).

The change underway became evident in 2006, when a protest campaign by secondary students (the “penguins”, as they were called for the colors of their high-school uniforms) jeopardized the government of Michelle Bachelet - a leader of the Socialist Party. Mobilized across the whole country through marches and building occupations, the “penguins” demanded then end of the municipal administration of schools as well as changes in school curricula. Yet they did not succeed. Divided and debilitated after months of activity, they demobilized before entering into negotiation with the government. The political class quickly crafted an agreement that only superficially addressed the movement's demands, including an ad-hoc education committee with few student representatives that was unable to advance any significant reforms

The “penguins” learned two important lessons from this experience: first, to be critical about attempts by politicians to institutionalize and co-opt the movement's demands; and second, that mobilization should continue while negotiating with authorities. As Camila Vallejo – one of the most visible leaders of the 2011-12 movement - put it in an interview: “this [the 2006 experience]

left a mark in the student movement that makes us aware of the cooptation strategies by the political class" (Ouviña 2012:15).

Challenging the educational market: education as a right and the struggle against profit

Having reached tertiary education by 2007-2009, the old "penguins" took again to the streets in 2011. Now the contours of the target were clearer than in 2006. The movement did not face in the Executive a gentle leftist woman any longer (Michelle Bachelet) but a center-right president (Sebastián Piñera). A billionaire businessman, Piñera had not fulfilled his campaign promises of selling his companies before taking office. Thus he could be easily portrayed as the very essence of unleashed neoliberalism, providing a clearer target for the movement's demands. Joaquín Lavín, the education minister until July 2011 (when he was replaced precisely due to student protests), also helped: he was one of the founders and stockholders of a private university suspected of having violated the anti-profit legislation.

As in 2006, the initial demands in 2011 were relatively narrow – they revolved around the subsidy to student transportation and delays in the provision of fellowships. But as months passed they escalated, ranging from the provision of free education to all Chileans and an effective punishment of actors profiting from education, to proposals for funding public education such as a tax reform and an extension of state ownership over the vast copper resources of the country. The movement also grew numerically, from a few thousands in the first marches to hundreds of thousands in the winter of 2011 (this point will be addressed below).

Against profit

Despite being, to a large extent, an unintended byproduct of the expansion of the educational market, the movement challenged that market by shaking two of its basic assumptions. The first one was the appropriateness that private actors profit from educational activities. Although as mentioned above this is illegal in Chile, many educational institutions were making profits by resorting to intricate practices – for instance by creating real estate agencies that rented buildings to universities at unusually high prices. The movement was decisive in spreading the belief that one of the reasons why Chilean education was so expensive (and families had to struggle so much for affording it) was that a few educational "entrepreneurs" were becoming rich out of it. This cognitive connection was essential for creating the sense of injustice that energized the movement. Additionally, this was a severe blow to the philosophy of Chilean market society, according to which market actors motivated by profit do good not only for themselves but also for society as a whole.

The spread of this belief against profit was also helped by the timely unraveling of corporate scandals. In May 2011 it became public that *La Polar*, an important

retail company, was abusing their clients by making one-sided debt renegotiations which were ultimately detrimental to them. The event, which ended with the arrest of top company managers, was interpreted by many as an example of the hazards of badly supervised markets. Comparable scandals involving the poultry industry as well as educational institutions (such as the private *Universidad del Mar*) also contributed to a heightened public awareness about malpractices in profit-making environments.

Recognizing that profit was illegal, the government attempted to address the movement's demand by creating an entity (the *Superintendencia de Educación Superior*) in charge of supervising tertiary educational institutions and guaranteeing the transparency of their resources, contracts, advertising practices, and board members. The movement, however, does not trust that the *Superintendencia* will be willing to stop illegal profit-making practices in the education sector because it is believed that some high-level government officers have personal stakes in such practices. Even if willing, the new institution does not have the capabilities to do so. As Camila Vallejo, one of the most visible movement leaders' recently argued, it is 'a paper tool'.

The ultimate problem is that the movement does not trust the government. An indication of this is the frequent criticism that governmental proposals have "small characters" (*letra chica*). Borrowed from the jargon of commercial contracts, this expression refers to clauses written in small characters that hide aspects which are detrimental to the client. In this case the expression was used to indicate subtleties in the wording of educational reform projects which in practice significantly attenuate their impact. Another indication of distrust is that the movement does not accept demobilization as a condition for negotiation with the government – as they learned in 2006, demobilization destroys the leverage they need for effective negotiation.

Education as a right – not a consumer good

The second assumption that the movement challenged is perhaps more basic to the workings of an educational market – namely, the appropriateness that people pay for education. The movement argues that the Chilean system creates enormous inequalities between those sufficiently rich to access and complete studies in high-quality educational institutions and those too poor to do so. For eradicating this injustice, which flies in the face of the supposed meritocracy of the system, the movement claims for the provision of free and high-quality public education for all citizens. Therefore, education becomes a right rather than a consumer good. Students claim this is not impossible in Chile, as shown by other middle-income countries that have such a system (nearby Uruguay to put an example).

During the first months of the conflict the government remained silent on this issue. Instead, it announced several proposals that increased significantly the economic resources funneled to the public education and reduced the interest rates of educational loans. By mid-2011, however, Piñera claimed that "the

education has a double goal. It is a consumer good (...) and also it has a component of investment". This revealed what many suspected – that the government was in favor of an educational market in which people pay for accessing education. Later on Piñera and his ministers defended the idea of a "teaching society" – in which private actors partake in the educational business – against that of a "teaching state" – in which the state is the main or sole educational provider. And to the movement's claim regarding free education for all citizens, the government responded that it would be unfair to use public resources to provide education for the upper classes – which can afford it by themselves. Movement leaders retorted that if education depended on market mechanisms, even partially, it will continue reproducing segregation and inequalities. Therefore, the disagreement is not about the amount of resources for public education but about the basic views on the matter.

Interestingly, despite expressing views that were very different from those of the government, the movement used similar rhetorical weapons: technical arguments and numbers. They understood that they had to dispel the stereotype that portrays students as merely emotional and capricious children pursuing impossible goals. For doing so they spent much time trying to understand the workings of Chilean education, looking at international experiences in order to develop solid proposals, and criticizing governmental ones on technical grounds. Thus, the movement usually backs its arguments with quantitative analysis and international comparisons that highlight the deficiencies of Chilean education.

The students also developed original ways of collecting information for showing the injustices of the system. For instance, given the ambiguities of official figures about the number and amount of educational debts, a group of engineering students at the *Universidad de Chile* developed a webpage (<http://yodebocl.tumblr.com/>) where students can upload the information regarding their indebtedness state and may also offer a narrative or their story. Although the approximately 5.000 students that uploaded their information do not represent the whole population of indebted students, the numbers are still indicative of the burden that some of them face. The average student debt reported in this website is over twenty thousand dollars, which is equivalent to about twenty five average monthly wages in Chile.

Solving the tension between internal unity and growing support

For most movements, more supporters mean more diversity and therefore more opportunities for divisions. Thus, any movement that brings to the street large numbers of people faces the challenge of maintaining internal unity and solidarity while growing. If we take the number of protestors as an indicator of movement size, it is clear that the movement became massive in a few months - as noted above. How did they manage to maintain internal unity despite this growth? In the remainder of this essay I address this puzzle. First I argue that

potential internal divisions were minimized thanks to the creation of highly participative environments within the student body and a horizontal style of leadership. This granted legitimacy to movement actions and prevented the oligarchization trends described one century ago by political sociologist Robert Michels (1959)¹. I also argue that the numerical growth of protesters resulted from the resonance of student demands in (a) the population at large and (b) specific mobilized groups - such as workers and environmental activists - that also share with the student movement a broad dissatisfaction with neoliberalism.

Participation breeds legitimacy

Abundant opportunities for participation and a horizontal style of leadership minimized trends toward division in the Chilean student movement. Participation, in turn, depended on internal organization. The movement is coordinated by the CONFECH (*Confederation of Chilean Students*), which is composed by representatives of the student associations of about thirty public and private universities. Representatives are elected in periodical elections by the corresponding student population, therefore allowing a fluid rotation in leadership positions. One illustration of such fluidity was the 2011 election of the FECH – the student organization of the *University of Chile*, one of the most influential ones. The movement flourished during 2011, when the FECH was led by Camila Vallejo, yet this did not assure her reelection - she was defeated in the late 2011 elections by current FECH president Gabriel Boric.

One of the most notable aspects of the movement is its way of reaching decisions. Because it opposes the non-participatory and heavily elitist nature of contemporary Chilean politics, its most visible figures conceive themselves as spokespersons rather than movement authorities. This means that major decisions have to be backed up by rank-and-file student bodies. Typically, after meeting with government authorities to hear the latter's reform proposals, movement representatives summon students to regional and national assemblies. Proposals are presented and discussed until they arrive at a decision (which so far has almost always consisted of a rejection). This is a slow process due to the time needed for convoking and celebrating assemblies, but it confers legitimacy to the movement's decisions since all interested students have the opportunity to voice their concerns. Besides the general CONFECH assemblies, which take place in rotating locations across the country, each university periodically holds general student assemblies as well as specific assemblies at the faculty or college level (which often take place on a weekly basis during student strikes).

¹ According to Michels, organizations that need to coordinate the actions of large numbers of people show a tendency to concentrate power and decisions in the hands of a small clique of leaders – even if their ideology dictates the opposite. These leaders (an “oligarchy”) end up moving away from the needs of rank-and-file members and pursue their own personal objectives.

Besides the assemblies, students have engaged in intense consciousness-raising work within campuses. These involve debates on the strategy of the movement and problems of the education system, presentations by intellectuals and activists on varied social and political subjects, film festivals, and artistic performances. These activities have been more intense during strikes since students are freed from normal academic routine. Students have also gone beyond campus walls and sensitized the general population about the cause of the movement in buses, squares, and streets.

It is important to note that the internal organization of the student movement shares some similarities with those of other Latin American experiences such as the Zapatista insurgency in Mexico, the Landless Movement in Brazil, the communal councils and urban land committees in contemporary Venezuela (Motta 2011), or the self-organized groups of industrial workers in Argentina (besides obvious differences in historical settings and groups mobilized). These other movements also faced the challenge of coordinating the actions of many people under extreme circumstances (in many senses more extreme than those of Chilean students) without resorting to the old formula of a supreme leader or a vanguard party. All of them found an alternative formula: allowing common people to create their own destinies through a collective process of assembling, thinking, and voicing concerns and opinions regarding problems and potential solutions. For people used to follow the dictates of some encumbered or enlightened political leader, this was a powerful and transforming experience. The movement could therefore be felt by activists not as a reified entity outside them but as their very creation – a creation instantiated in every assembly or protest action (see Motta 2009 for a general reflection on this point).

Students and beyond

High legitimacy favored by extensive participation allowed the movement to grow without corrosive fragmentation. Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the movement is precisely how it succeeded in garnering a broader base of support than any previous movement since the restoration of democracy two decades ago. Of course, partially this resulted from the increasing support within the student population. While in its beginnings the movement was essentially confined to students from the most reputed universities of the country, they were soon joined by students from smaller private universities, high-school students (including those from some private schools), and technical education students.

But the wave soon went beyond the student population, and environmental activists as well as unionized workers joined the cause. Environmental activism in Chile had a noticeable awakening in the last few years as a result of the approval of plans for building electric power stations in Southern Chile that threatened natural resources and indigenous communities. Student protests provided environmental activists an opportunity for linking their demands to a cause – such as the evils of the current education system – that was more

tangible for the Chilean population at large than environmental problems. This was especially true for the population of the capital city Santiago, who cared little about environmental threats in distant parts of the country. Besides their differences, the student movement and environmental activism converged in their broad criticism to the social costs of neoliberalism.

The labor movement also established links to the student movement, especially through the high-school teachers union and mining workers unions. The historically strong Chilean labor movement was weakened during the military dictatorship by several means - first by illegalizing its activities and imprisoning or jailing its leaders, and then by promulgating a labor code that imposed restrictions to the creation of labor federations. Combined with structural changes in the labor market this explains the systematic decrease in unionization rates, that currently stand somewhere between 11% and 15% and puts Chile as one of the least unionized OECD countries. While the specific demands of the labor movement obviously differ from those of the student movement, both share a general criticism towards the inequalities promoted by neoliberalism. Additionally, the goals of the student movement resonate among the many industrial and service sector workers whose children are first-generation tertiary students. These parents know better than anybody else the economic burden that results from taking educational loans.

More generally, since a large proportion of Chilean families have or expect to have tertiary students among their members, and since they cannot afford educational expenses without taking loans, at least one of the problems highlighted by the movement – the expensiveness of upper education – resonates widely across the population. This helps explain the massive presence of parents, grandparents, and entire families (children included) in some student protests. In recognition of this, and evidence of their creativity, the movement organized some family-friendly protests in public parks filled with musical performances and other activities.

Of course, in the current mobilization against neoliberalism in the Global South, the Chilean student movement is not the first to find commonalities with other domestic movements. For instance, the mobilization that led to President de la Rúa's demise in Argentina in late 2001 was also composed by a heterogeneous number of groups which included recently displaced industrial workers, long-term unemployed, and retired people among others. The same can be said about the mobilizations that ousted Sánchez de Losada in Bolivia. While such broad alliances are ultimately based on the fact that neoliberalism imposes heavy costs on a variety of social groups, their activation often requires a more contingent condition - disillusion with the unfulfilled promises made by the current government, as was the case in Chile with Piñera's earlier promise to reform the education.

Tactical variety

The wide variety of protest tactics employed by the student movement also deserves mention. The traditional public march in the largest cities of the country was the backbone of the protest. It served to show the massive support the movement had garnered and forced the government to spend much energy on dealing with it. In Santiago, the country capital, most marches took place in the *Alameda* street, the main central avenue on which several state buildings are located – including the presidential palace. Marching in the *Alameda* not only symbolizes the centrality of the movement's demands but also increases its visibility given the large concentrations of passersby.

Marches were complemented by four other tactics. Perhaps the most notable one was the public deployment of collective artistic performances. These ranged from kiss-ins in public squares (*besatones*), bicycle rides around the presidential palace, giant puppets, marches in underwear, and performances based on classic pop songs such as Michael Jackson's "Thriller", which was carried out in front of the presidential palace by perhaps more than one hundred students. Similar to the emotions aroused in the Argentinean *Santiagazo* of the mid-1990s (Auyero 2004), such tactics created a sense of carnival and festivity that was central for keeping up the morale of students in the midst of the seriousness of their demands and the uncertainty regarding governmental responses. And by revealing the creativity of students, artistic performances possibly aroused the sympathy of those bystanders that were not impressed by more sober traditional tactics. In this respect, the Chilean student movement is aligned with creative protests in other parts of the world – from the human microphones and hand signals of the current Occupy Movement, to the smart-mobs that protested against President Estrada in the Philippines in 2001.

Another tactic was the temporary occupation of buildings. They ranged from university and high school buildings to headquarters of leftist and rightist political parties, television channels, and even the state agency in charge of certifying tertiary education institutions. In many cases police forces ended up evacuating the buildings through indiscriminate repression methods. Some students filmed such practices with their cellular phones and uploaded them in the internet, forcing authorities to investigate police excesses. Occupations served as pressure means because they threatened the financial situation of some educational institutions (for which state subsidies are tied to student attendance) and created uncertainty amongst academic and government authorities.

Additionally, a few high-school students carried out hunger strikes that lasted several weeks – fortunately without deaths. Hunger strikes kept the government and society at large on tenterhooks, and led top officers – such as the Health Minister – to voice polemic opinions about strikers that put the government in an uncomfortable situation. Finally, in a few occasions the bystander population supported the movement through *cacerolazos*, or the noisy banging of pans and pots at prearranged times - typically at night. The *cacerolazos* were surprisingly

intense in the upper-class neighborhoods of Eastern Santiago, suggesting that some of the better-off sectors of society supported the movement despite their traditionally rightist preferences.

Conclusions

The current Chilean student movement represents just an example of a broader mobilization against three things: the organization of societies around market principles, the political class that promote the policies that reproduce such organization, and the corporate world that profits from it. Since the 1999 Seattle protests or the 2001 World Social Forum, to mention two important milestones, this mobilization has become ever stronger. This happened not only in Latin America (particularly in Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela) or even the Global South, but also in the more developed areas of the world (as shown by the recent Occupy Movement, who has been most active in North America and Western Europe). No doubt that there are enormous differences between, say, the Spanish *Indignados*, the Argentinean *piqueteros*, and the Chilean students. Each is shaped by unique domestic conditions and each sustains specific claims that are related to such conditions. But their common themes – i. e. a struggle against exploitation and inequality, a deep distrust in the current state of representative democracy, the experimentation with new forms of political action and consciousness, and a commitment to horizontality in social relations - are remarkable.

This essay described some features of the student movement that since early 2011 is shaking Chile. Chile is an interesting case for studying anti-neoliberal protests because it was the first Latin American country in which political elites applied neoliberal policies in its purest forms – as was the case in the 1970s when the Pinochet dictatorship resorted to Milton Friedman's advice. Sustained protest against neoliberalism in Chile was unthinkable in the highly repressive 1970s, but perhaps surprisingly, it did not ensue either in the decade and a half after democracy was restored. This historical asynchrony may explain its intensity when it finally emerged – as a foretaste in 2006, and in full force in 2011.

In this essay I presented three claims regarding the Chilean student movement. First, the student movement is the unintended byproduct of the expansion of tertiary education. Such expansion, which took place under an educational market system during the last three decades, created both the critical mass of organized students and the frustrations and inequalities that fueled mobilization. Second, rebelling against its origins, the movement challenged two basic assumptions of the educational establishment: that tertiary education is a consumer good (instead of a citizen right), and that it is acceptable that private actors profit from the provision of educational services. Finally, I argued that the closeness of movement representatives to the mass of students, as well as the extensive opportunities for internal participation, granted the legitimacy

needed for minimizing the divisive tendencies in a context of rapid movement growth.

These claims are highly speculative and may be refuted by further systematic empirical research. However, they point to the capacity of grassroots movements for challenging not only the political and economic institutions of one of the “best students” among Latin American nations, but also – through the questioning of profit in education and the properness of paying for education - the moral foundations of current capitalism.

At this moment (October 2012) mobilizations continue but have decreased in intensity compared to one year before. Marches are convoking lower numbers of people, some sectors of the public opinion have withdrawn their initial support to the movement, and persistent mobilization has exhausted the energies of many students that wish to return to “normal times”. It is very unlikely that the current government will promote the major reforms demanded by the movement. However, the movement has already changed many people’s conception about how the educational system should work. It has spread the belief that individual difficulties for accessing, affording, and finishing tertiary education result to a large extent from the built-in injustices of the educational market. Since many of the currently mobilized students will soon become voters for the first time thanks to a recent electoral reform, 2011-2012 will likely become a watershed in the way politicians frame educational reforms. But it is uncertain whether all Chileans will have access to high-quality and free education in the medium term.

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