

Chile despertó: momentary impressions from the revolt

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Evadir, no pagar: otra forma de luchar

18/10/2019 17:30

It's Friday afternoon, and Plaza de Armas metro station in the centre of Santiago has one remaining entrance open. Lines of people walk in and out of the long entrance passage, their faces expressing vague surprise at what has almost come to be the new norm over the past week. The concourse is packed with around a hundred protesters, who jubilantly chant "evade, don't pay: another way of fighting back" (original above). Some hold the turnstile gates open, as an endless line streams in through the exits without paying. Neither those passing nor the protesters can hold back a constant collective grin, as a line of dead-serious *carabineros* (police) stand in full riot gear to one side of the turnstiles. Occasionally, the chant switches to "*el que no salta es paco*" (whoever doesn't jump is a cop). I'm taken aback to see the occasional middle-aged businessman in a suit and a tie appear, and hop through just like the teenagers and the old ladies, chanting under their breath, and smirking. Occasionally someone will stop to look directly into the eyes of whomever is holding the exit open, and say "thank you". The whole scene feels like the antithesis to the government's discourse all week, which has repeatedly insisted that the mass evasions are a matter of unruly students, who represent an irrelevantly small section of the population. The police seem to be taking it easy today – no reports of tear gas inside the metro station, at least. A voice calls out over the intercom that the station is now being shut completely, along with the entire system. We walk out, not imagining how long it would be before we might set foot in the metro again.

Cacerolazo en el metro

18/10/2019 20:30

In the streets of my neighbourhood, front doors are open. I go out, carrying a bag with a small saucepan and a wooden spoon, and head nervously towards the metro station. As I cut through a side lane, I'm confused to see so many people walking in the same direction. We glance at each other, perhaps the same question on everyone's mind. Suddenly, a door swings open and out bursts a middle-aged woman, banging a pot and spoon, and shouting "*vamos, vecinas, al metro!*" We all start taking out our respective utensils, laughing and cheering as suddenly the situation makes sense, thanks to the small spark of that

neighbour's enthusiasm. It feels as if no one will ever put their pots and pans away, now that they are out. Hopefully even when they've stopped sounding every evening, we won't go back to those nervous glances, or hesitating when it's time to shout.

Arriving at the metro stop, there's about a hundred people, chanting and banging their pots and pans. Some bang stones against lamp posts, or discarded bottles from the street. The two policemen present, on foot, decide to leave as the crowd grows. Passing vehicles beep their horns to the tune of the chant. We move towards the traffic, cheering at the support. No one speaks of the next step. After a few minutes, some older men decisively step out and stop the traffic, at the corner, letting no more cars pass. Others, behind them, start to pile up pallets, wooden posts, and other debris from a conveniently nearby construction site, and in what seems like a minute, the first big barricade is blazing. There is no observable disagreement as to the tactics employed. In fact, as in the afternoon, the overwhelming impression is of a sort of glee in popular revolt, evidenced in the unrestrainable grinning of those present, in laughter, chanting and singing.

At ten the crowd has grown, and the barricades likewise. We mutter our surprise, as not a single *paco* (cop) nor police vehicle has passed. A friend arrives and tells me that he came by bike from some five stations away, and that the situation is the same in all. We find it hard to believe that this could happen. The call-out has been for a *cacerolazo* in all the metro stations in Santiago, and the resulting protests are therefore local and decentralized, spread throughout the city and outskirts. The word spreads of a general chaos, with some stations, buses and even part of the Enel (electricity tycoon) building in flames. The overwhelmingly spontaneous nature of the uprising, and the sheer scale of the convening power it has had, leaves us in a state of amazement and excitement. We try to come to terms with it, reflecting that nothing like this has happened since the dictatorship, or since we don't know when. The ecstasy of the moment is accompanied by a sort of eerie nervousness. We're two blocks from a massive barracks, so where are the cops? A state of emergency is declared just after midnight, and there's talk of the army being on the streets, but it's difficult to believe, just as all that has happened.

La cagada en el centro

19/10/2019 14:00

In Avenida Independencia, an open-sided army truck passes by on patrol every couple of minutes, packed with soldiers holding huge guns, almost convincingly. It's a moment of realisation of what has come to pass. Walking towards the city centre, seemingly every car that passes beeps, as they did last night. In many of the buses, passengers are jumping around, singing, cheering out the windows, holding homemade placards. Everyone seems to be walking in the same direction, and many of them are banging pots and pans. Along the Río Mapocho, which marks the entrance to the city centre, groups have blocked all

the main intersections, toppling lamp posts, signs, burning street furniture and rubbish. In Bellavista, there is a sort of game on, hitting a massive television-billboard with stones. Half the pixels are out, and a cheer rings out in the crowd each time the target is hit. At one point, a couple of men appear with boxes of beer and bags of crisps, handing them out. They exclaim that a large supermarket has been opened around the corner. Scores run to loot and share the food. Neighbours hang from their balconies, mostly cheering on those below, and some throwing empty shopping bags down to help. In a tower block, a single man shouts something about communist scum, before being shouted down by adjacent neighbours, and retreating, shutting his blind. A couple of blocks away, a bus has been burned out, and riots have already moved on, leaving the carcass to be crawled through by amateur photographers.

The protests and riots are dispersed throughout massive expanse of the city centre, and appear to occur with almost total impunity. Occasionally, the shout rings out: “*pacos!*” or “*milicos!*”, announcing the arrival of the police or the army, but they mainly drive past, without engaging. Shots ring out in the distance, and there is talk of people having been hit by bullets, but also of the forces allowing the riots to continue intentionally, in order to justify a brutal response at a later point. Near the centres of power and wealth, it’s a different story, as the carabineros shoot tear gas canisters in massive quantities into the middle of fleeing protesters. This turns into a sort of game of cat and mouse, seemingly endlessly, which runs throughout the city streets. As we catch our breaths at one point near San Borja, a girl jogs past with her phone in her hand, shouting “*toque de queda a las diez*” (military curfew at 10pm) to sceptical responses from those present. The news is soon confirmed, to relative disbelief. It’s the first time there’ll be a curfew of this nature since the dictatorship, specifically since 1987, so it does not simply mean an hourly restriction on freedom of movement and assembly, nor will it be perceived as a mere tool of governance. It carries a massive symbolic weight, and functions as a key to the collective memory of dreaded times past, and so it’s more than expected that there’ll be some resistance.

Estamos en guerra

19/10/2019 21:30

Walking along Avenida Independencia, there are bonfires and barricades at every junction. They glow lineally into the dark distance. The rooftops of the few recently constructed apartment blocks, which house the much more affluent part of the local population, are lined with scores of more cautious onlookers. The street is packed with neighbours. By the firelight, the chants are unceasing, taunting the arrival of the curfew hour, and the passing overhead of a police helicopter. As 10pm comes and passes, some neighbours tire and go home. Word goes around that the supermarkets nearby are being looted. Those that pass with goods are middle-aged in their majority, and most carry diapers, toilet roll, and other basic supplies. Occasionally, someone passes, handing out cans

of beer. The police arrive in massive numbers in one section of the street, but seemingly begin to supervise the looting. We are relieved for the neighbours, but there's something eerie about the scene, because no one is foolish enough to imagine that it's out of any form of solidarity. After a few minutes, they begin to point searchlights at us and other onlookers. We move towards home.

As we pass along the side streets, every doorway is bursting with families, who seem excited to witness the scene. From the comfort of the (ivory) towers above, angry voices call out those below as thieving scum in a constant roaring cacophony. However, every time a police vehicle passes, there is a brief unity of jeers of “*pacos culiaos*”, and the volume echoes that of a football stadium. Occasionally a single voice will call out “*arriba los carabineros*”, or something to that effect, praising the same cops, to a chorus of laughter and then “go to bed neighbour!” or more intense scorn from the rest of the balconies and the streets below. The scene quiets when President Piñera comes out to make a speech on television. “We are at war with a powerful, relentless enemy that respects nothing and no one”. It's just violent delinquents, violent delinquents – same old, same old. Still, strategic questions come to mind as we hear him declare war on his own population. I wonder if that will backfire.

Las balas que nos tiraron van a volver

An exceptional week follows, right up to the second Friday of protests. It is marked by a list of deaths that grows seemingly incessantly. As each day of protest fades into an early night of curfew, social networks disseminate an endless stream of reports of injuries, disappearances, torture, and rape. The atmosphere in the Alameda and Plaza Italia (later renamed to Plaza de la Dignidad) is overwhelmingly one of poignant indignance and fierce resistance. Lines of militancy are taking shape, their visible manifestation exemplified in the demarcation of the “*primera línea*” (front line) which creates a protective layer around protests, and bears the brunt of the police brutality. The chant of the week (heading above) translates to “the bullets they've shot at us will find their way back”, and the protest feels confident, strong in rebellion. On the other hand, the police repression is becoming more intense and organised. New, stronger types of pepper and tear gas are being added to their inventory, stronger corrosive chemicals to the water sprayed by the *guanaco* (water cannon), and various types of pellets and supposed rubber bullets are being shot at anyone who should, intentionally or inopportunately, get too close to the *pacos*.

Chile despertó

25/10/2019 16:00

The magnitude of the crowds crossing Parque Forestal towards the focal point of the protests is cause for surprise, despite the prediction of a large turnout. The call has been for the biggest march in Chile's history, a daring proposition. There are virtually no cars, and seemingly infinite lines of people walk, heads

raised, most of them with flags, banners and placards, filling the reclaimed traffic lanes. In Lastarria there are countless *comparsas*, marching bands, performing their own elaborate versions of this week's chants (such as "Chile has awoken") and the classics from Parra, Jara and Quilapayún, among others. The actual route of the protest proves almost impossible to cover, due to the sheer number of people marching. At one point it is said to have reached a million, and broken all records. The general impression is of a momentary feeling of invincibility among this great majority that has avoided the protests of the previous days, and has arrived here feeling part of a battle won. On social networks, worry is expressed on the sites that have hosted communication for the solid core of the protests. The messages remind us that nothing has been won yet, in the face of a perceived naivety in the massive protest. One notes a slight air of deception, but trusts in the momentum gained. The natural cycle of protest occurs, eventually, culminating in the brutal running of protesters out of the city centre with *zorrillos* and *guanacos*. As this occurs, and so many are left behind, injured or arrested, the rhetorical question rings out, "where are the television crews now?"

Esto no ha terminado

The government likes to talk about a return to normality. The following week, the state of emergency is called off and international human rights observers arrive. The daily protests continue, occasionally intensifying, and there are weekly national strikes. The transport system is barely working. In the university, classes don't resume. Many never return to their jobs. As we reach the beginning of December, a meme spreads on social networks that poses the question, "since when isn't it October?", and it strikes a chord. At times it feels like that weekend never ended. Protest banners repeat consistently that this has not ended. Networks of territorial assemblies have been woven throughout Santiago and other regions, to channel the will to change. It's taken the government some time to understand that the issue is not the 30 pesos of the metro fare hike, but the last 30 years. Thinking back to that first Friday in October, I remember a single woman who insisted on paying the metro fare, despite the access having been opened, and I remember the defiance in her face as she defended the status quo. The political class seems to cling to this sort of caricature, and its symbolic power. Protests come to focus largely on the traumatic costs of the rebellion in deaths and injuries, especially the eyes lost. Those who still go to the protests, week after week, seem to know that the feeling of potential nervousness that all this might end can only be overcome through sheer defiance. As evening falls in Plaza de la Dignidad, one always hears the shout to stick it out: "*aguanten cabrxs*".

Hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre.

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Action note

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