

The 2019 Social Outbreak in Chile: Evidence of a Delusional Oasis

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Abstract

Economy shapes society. In Chile, a neoliberal model was imposed during the dictatorship (1973-1990). Such a model brought great macroeconomic balance and prosperity. However, only 1% of the population has ended up concentrating 33% of national wealth, while 80% has suffered the indolence of a state that does not act as a guarantor of social security nor essential services. Regardless of the ruling political coalition, social inequality, impunity, and corruption have remained unsolved and have gained visibility through the years. The fragility of the Chilean “socio-economic stability” had come to light when an increase of metro fare in €0,04 triggered a major social outbreak.

The October 18th outbreak (18-O) started in Santiago, a few days after secondary school students refused to pay the metro fare. The disproportionate repression, and in particular, the deployment of military forces into the streets, boosted the protests to escalate quickly throughout Chile. The 18-O evolved into nationwide demands for profound changes in the socio-economic system, whereas the government’s abuse of the monopoly of force has led to generalized violations of Human Rights.

Here, we discuss the short-term and long-term causes leading to the ongoing social outbreak in Chile. Moreover, the 18-O is discussed within the context of a greater global crisis. Finally, as scientists, we examine the current role of science within society.

Keywords: Chilean outbreak, socio-economic crisis, neoliberalism, Human Rights violations, science within society

The Chilean Oasis

Chile has experienced a booming economy with continuous growth. The average annual growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 2000 and 2018 was 4,1%, reaching a peak of 7,2% in 2004 [1]. This macroeconomic indicator and the apparent social stability led President Sebastian Piñera to declare Chile an oasis within Latin America [2]. However, if Chile is an oasis, how could the 18-O happen?

Leaving the “Oasis” behind

To understand the reasons leading to the 18-O, it is necessary to provide the context of living in Chile. For instance, the typical daily routine of most working people in Santiago includes 9 hours of work per day and, on average, 2 hours of commuting, while transport expenses are 14.3% of the minimum wage and the cost of living is more than twice the minimum wage (Table 1). Despite this, on October 5th, the Ministry of Transportation announced an increase of €0,04 (30 Chilean pesos) in the price of metro tickets at rush hour in Santiago. Later, the Minister of Economy Juan Andrés Fontaine announced “...who gets up early can be helped with a lower fare” [3]. Such a statement gave rise to the anger of people who already struggle to make ends

meet. Secondary students claimed the increase in the metro fare to be unfair compared to the cost of living (Table 1) and started massive evasions on many metro stations.

PARAMETER	CHILE	GERMANY	OBSERVATIONS
Minimum salary	365	1.557	€/month (before taxes)
Weekly working time	45	40	hours
University fees	2.424 - 7.386	<500	€/year
Cost of living	862	1.020	€/month
Debt ratio	75%	—	of monthly income
Retirement pension	~90%; <198	46%; <800	% retiree; < €/month
Parliament salary	31	6,5	times minimum salary
Transport cost	14,3% ^[1]	5,14%	of minimum salary

^[1] Considering two tickets per day

Table 1. Comparison of socio-economic parameters between Chile and Germany [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9].

On October 17th, as the mass protests continued, during an interview with the British newspaper *Financial Times* Piñera compared himself to Odysseus: “Ulysses tied himself to a ship’s mast and put pieces of wax in his ears to avoid falling for the siren calls, ...we are ready to do everything to not fall into populism, into demagoguery” [2]. On October 18th, the demonstrations exponentially escalated. Subsequently, Piñera established the State of Emergency first in Santiago, and then it was quickly extended to 15 of the 16 administrative areas of the country. For the first time since the dictatorship, a politically driven curfew was imposed throughout the country, and the army took control of the streets. Later, on the night of October 21st, Piñera went to the army headquarters in Santiago to give a public announcement on a national broadcast: “We are at war against a powerful enemy” [10].

Human Rights at stake

From the 18-O outbreak onwards, the national demonstrations just grew stronger. The riot for a metro fare, that reminded people of all the previous unsolved social demands, turned into nationwide demonstrations for systemic changes: 87% of the population demanded a new constitution by November 4th [11]. Yet, the president refused to hear social demands and insistently put the focus on public and private property damages. By November 7th, the president’s actions registered just 9,1% of approval [12], making him the worst evaluated

president since the return of democracy. Instead of opening up to discuss possible solutions as the ones proposed by the society, Piñera decided to assemble the National Security Council (COSENA), announcing several measures to increase the repression and criminalize demonstrators [13]. Furthermore, he made no mention of the flagrant violations of Human Rights.

Finally, on November 15th, the political elite started showing some concern about social demands and not only on the economic costs of the past few weeks. Most political parties signed an agreement for “social peace and a new constitution”, where the call to a national plebiscite was agreed in April 2020 to define whether a new Constitution will be drafted and what mechanism will be used for that. However, the official document did not make any reference to the other social demands nor the violations of Human Rights. Instead, the Minister Secretary General of Government, Karla Rubilar, declared public order institutions have the full support of the government in the context of “violence observed throughout Chile”. She also affirmed that “the government will not tolerate excess, abuse or protocol skipping” but did not refer to violations of Human Rights [14]. Such statements are alarming as the reports of the National Human Rights Institute, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch clarified the existence of these violations [23, 20, 21].

Figure 1 shows three distinctive features: (1) The president’s decision to replace the Interior Minister (October 28th) had no impact on the abuse of the monopoly of force. This conclusion can be inferred from the fact that the new minister Gonzalo Blumel is politically responsible for almost the same amount of eyes wounded than his predecessor Andrés Chadwick but over a more extended period. Further, since October 28th, the number of prosecution presented for tortures and cruel treatment, and sexual violence increased seven and six times, respectively. Under Blumel’s administration it has also come to light the fact that the use of diluted CS (C₁₀H₅CIN₂) in police water cannons can cause chemical burns and blisters on the skin [15]. These effects have started to be observed in some people after demonstrations. (2) A lower rate of eyes-wounded cases since November 17th coincides with the report presented by the University of Chile (November 16th) [16], which revealed the real composition of rubber bullets with only 20% rubber, while the remaining 80% corresponds to minerals and metals such as lead. This report preceded the suspension of their use (November 19th) [17]. (3) **The violations of Human Rights have not ceased in spite of all the warnings and indications presented by national and international institutions. Early warnings were given by the Chilean Medical Association, the Chilean Society of Ophthalmology (SOCHIOF, October 28th) [18], the United Nations (November 8th) [19], and by the National Human Rights Institute (INDH) during its hearing at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, November 11th) [20]. Later indications were presented by Amnesty International (November 21st) [21] and Human Rights Watch (November 26th) [22]. These features suggest that either the government did not take serious measures because of these reports, or reacted to them but without having control over the security forces. The police have chosen to question the integrity of these reports instead of considering them to take action to stop the violations of Human Rights.**

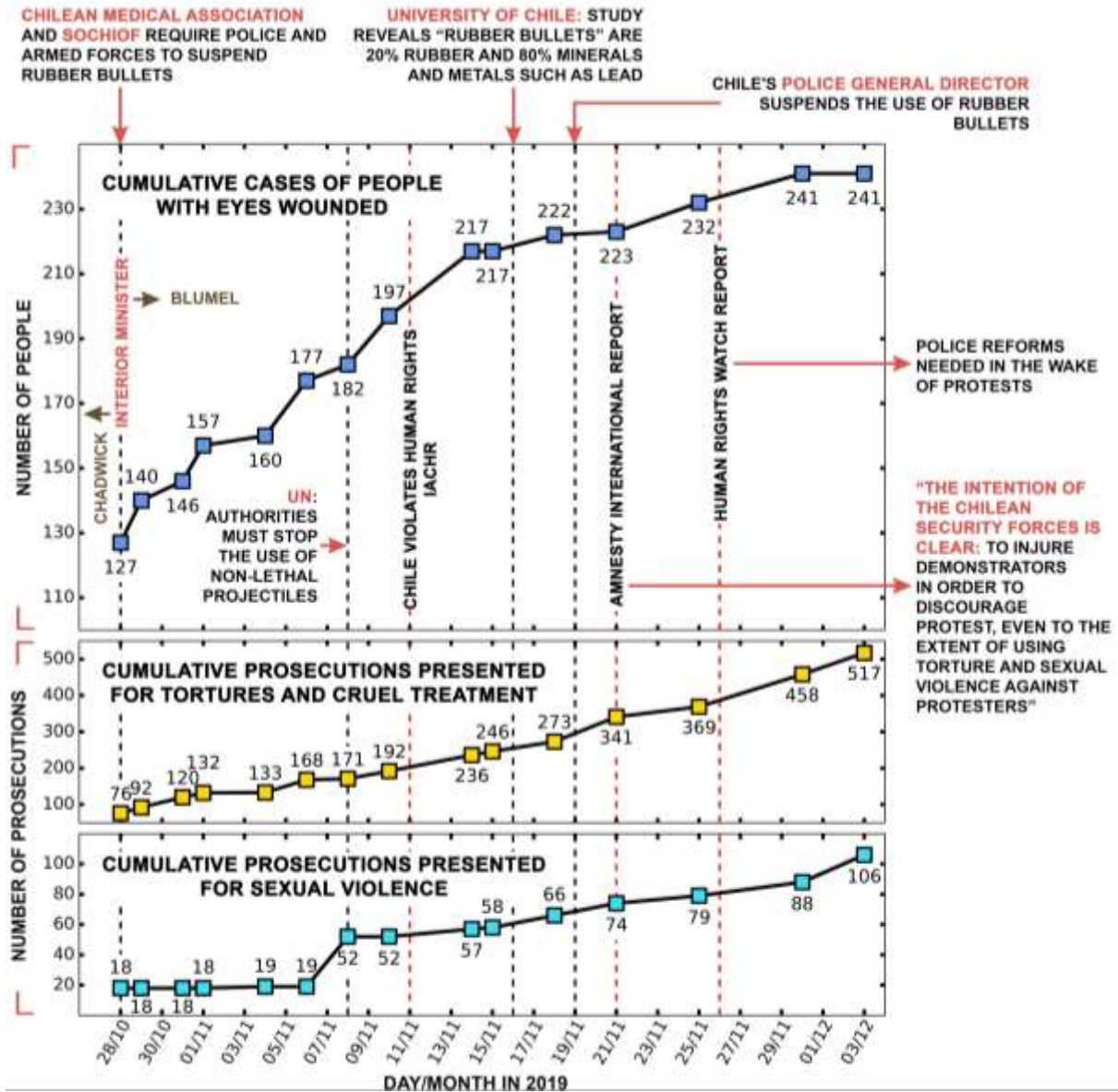


Figure 1. Cumulative distribution of eyes-wounded cases and prosecutions presented for tortures, cruel treatments, and prosecutions for sexual violence. Data from the National Human Rights Institute (INDH) reported until December 3rd [24].

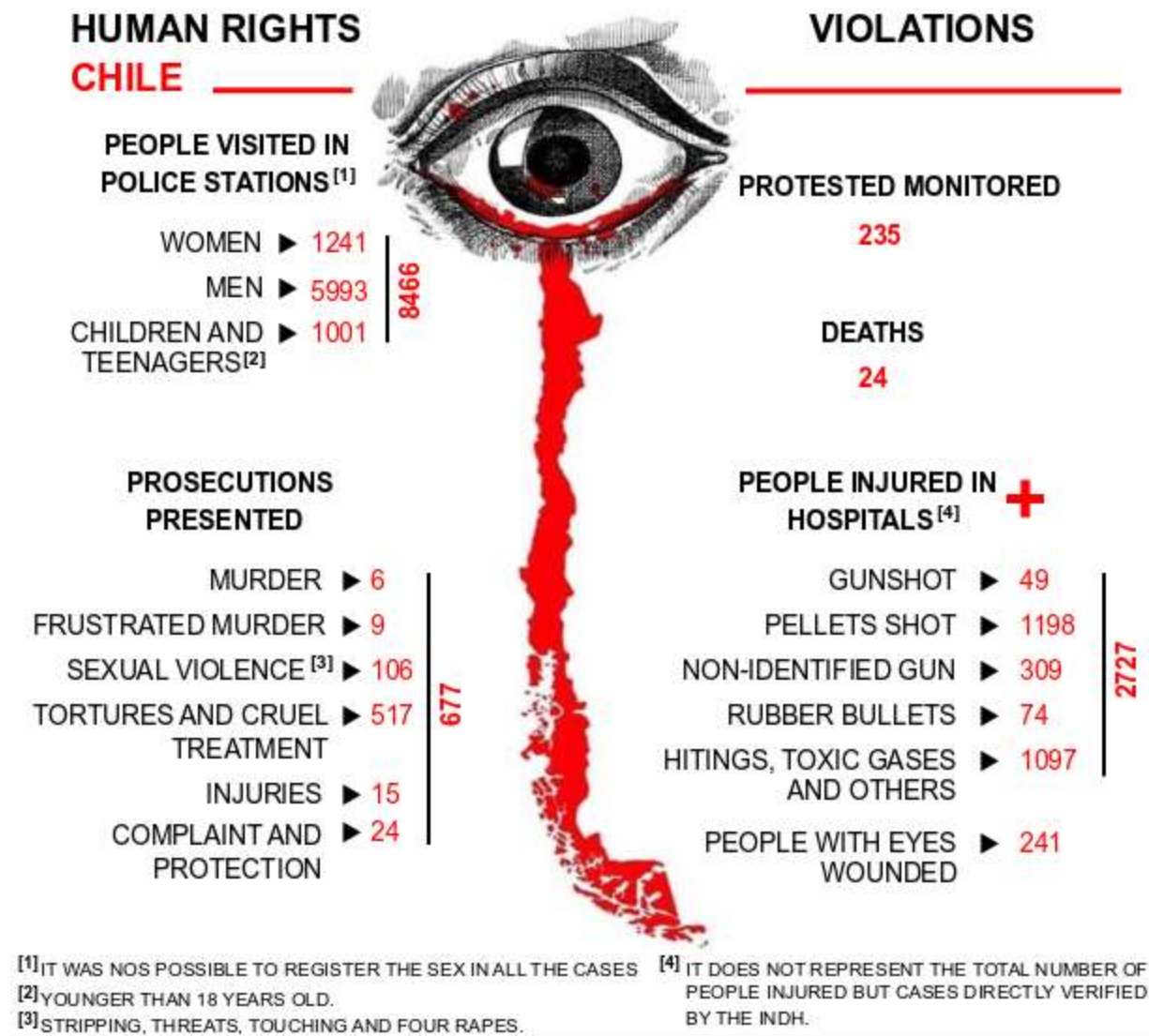


Figure 2. Generalized Human Rights violations. Data from the National Human Rights Institute (INDH) reported until December 3rd, 2019 [24].

Long-term causes: An Oasis for whom?

Besides the rise of the metro ticket and the abuse of the monopoly of force, there is a deeper context behind this uprising of the Chilean citizens against the state. In 1980, the present Chilean constitution was created within the dictatorship. That constitution is based on the neoliberal and fiscally conservative policies conceived by economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman from the University of Chicago. These neoliberal ideas were brought to Chile in the 70's by a group of Chilean students: the so-called "Chicago-boys" [25]. The foundations of the 1980 constitution are the establishment of a free market, a substantial reduction of state power, and privatization of natural resources (even water) and social services, thus transforming the guarantor state into a subsidiary one. Furthermore, this constitution assured a lifetime position as a senator to every ex-president, including the former dictator Augusto Pinochet (Article repealed in 2005), and entailed high quorums for modifications of key

Chapters: two thirds in both legislative chambers are requested to modify, for instance, Chapters I (Basis of Institutionality) and III (Constitutional Rights and Duties).

Since 1990, there have been many nationwide demonstrations due to social crises nested in the illegitimate constitution of 1980 [26]. The education system replicates the preexisting social segregation. High-quality school education in primary and secondary schools is often expensive and private, while university education is even more expensive, with monthly fees higher than the minimum wage (Table 1). The public healthcare system allows people to die while awaiting medical treatment or surgeries. Pensions are meager, so people have to work for less than the minimum wage after retirement (Table 1). There is a large gap between the cost of living and salaries: 50% of workers earn less than €466 and almost seven in ten workers make less than €640 [27] in a country with the cost of living similar to the one in Berlin, Germany. On average, people acquire debts equivalent to 75% of their monthly income to cover their daily needs [28]. Orphan's Human Rights are systematically violated by institutions subsidized by the government [27]. Indigenous people are mistreated and, often, jailed without trial, framed, and murdered by the police [29, 30, 31].

Instead of solving any of these social crises, the different governments have repeatedly neglected social demands, repressed manifestations, persecuted social activists, and called "solutions" the subsidy of private institutions. Moreover, each government has been involved in several corruption cases. Parliamentarians and government's employees implicated in those cases have not been severely penalized by the judiciary, while only insignificant sanctions have been applied to private companies because of tax evasion and collusion [32, 33]. **While politicians claim the lack of resources to resolve social demands, some of the abovementioned scandals add up to €4.500 million [34]. This number is alarming as it represents more than four times the annual GDP of Science, Technology and Innovation, and a third of the yearly GDP of health in 2018 [35].**

In effect, then it is not surprising that the few privileged ones, who have little or no contact with the reality of the most, think the country is an oasis.

Chilean crisis: local anomaly or global trend?

Since the industrial revolution, policies applied by governments have been driven by one economic paradigm: perpetually increasing production and economic growth. This paradigm has induced the environmental and humanitarian crises we experience today. On the one hand, the most significant features of the environmental crisis, global warming and ecosystem loss, are rooted in the exponential growth of garbage, deforestation, and emissions of CO2 equivalent production observed since World War II [36, 37]. On the other hand, the role of the state as a guarantor of rights, duties, freedom, and justice to all citizens has been minimized by the neoliberal paradigm, which instead promotes the protection and liberty of the capital. The resulting humanitarian crisis, in which state institutions have been optimized for extractive and productive activities but not for solving social needs, is characterized by the high levels of social segregation, poverty, lack of healthcare, and malnutrition observed in many countries nowadays.

The socio-environmental Chilean crisis is an illustrative example of this phenomenon: a neoliberal state that allows and encourages transnational companies to export wealth while leaving behind poverty, health problems, water scarcity, and numerous sacrifice zones (Tocopilla, Puchuncaví-Quinteros, Coronel, Antofagasta, Mejillones, Calama, Petorca, among many others) [38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46].

Although some states have developed more socialistic and 'eco-friendly' policies, the global environmental and humanitarian crises cannot be solved if such policies apply only nationally, while the local lifestyle is sustained by pollution and exploitation elsewhere; countries are not thermodynamically isolated systems.

Science for What and Whom?

Just like population and CO₂ equivalent emissions, science has also shown explosive academic production over the last century [47]. Science requires funding, and scientists have often engaged with politics primarily to discuss their budgets. Most associations of Chilean scientists have behaved similarly, demanding an improvement in scientific funding from the government, before [48] and during the outbreak [49]. Budgetary matters are undoubtedly necessary for science to progress, but progress in what direction?

The predominant economic paradigm defines not only the socio-political context but also the ultimate aim toward which science develops. This paradigm, with the due contribution of science, has brought us to the current environmental and humanitarian crisis. **We are convinced the time has come to start actively questioning the role that scientific research and technology development have had under the current economic paradigm. Do we use our preparation for more than our scientific careers? What are we doing for our local communities? Is science communication all that we can offer to our communities? What is the civic role of a scientist, as a member of a community? Is there any other conceivable or perhaps already proposed economic paradigm (such as degrowth or ecosocialism) that would make it easier to solve the social and environmental global crisis?**

We think it is our duty, as scientists, to align science with society in the search for new economic and political principles. Regardless of our disciplines, we have the ethical duty of sharing our skills and tools to contribute, horizontally, on this search; without pontificating nor claiming to have all the answers.

The search for new paradigms seems logical and inevitable. We need to reconsider the configuration of our democracy to ensure a real representation of the people's will. As a collaborative society, we should permanently drive and supervise the state's policies and institutions. In this way, sovereignty could be effectively vested in the people, and not in a political elite that, so far, has tended to work for their self-serving short-sighted agenda.

The path to the new Chile will be rough and long, as demonstrated by the observed generalized Human Rights violations and more than 50 days of demonstrations to date. We, as scientists, must therefore be attentive and supportive in all the upcoming steps.

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