

¡Y va a caer, va a caer la educación de Pinochet!

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Boys as young as thirteen were covering their faces with scarves to protect themselves from tear gas and to hide their identities. People were all over the sidewalks smashing stones against bricks in preparation for the war between students and police. They were lighting tires smothered in gas on fire all over the streets and setting up barricades to get the paco's attention. There were old men on the side of the road selling lemons, because sucking on lemons is about the only thing that you can do to help with tear gas. About twenty minutes passed before the police finally came over to attempt to put out the fires and break up the crowd - and that's when all hell broke loose.

El Guanaco came speeding in from around the corner, spraying some sort of acid-water mixture at anyone and everyone. While many people, myself included, went running in the opposite direction others went forward pelting whatever they could at the police - rocks, lemons, bombs. For a twenty-year-old English major from a suburb of the Twin Cities, homemade bombs falling from the sky were a definite first. We ran to the end of the block and tried to get out of the area, but around the corner was a barricade of fiery tires blocking the street. I held on to my friend Pato's arm for dear life as we contemplated other ways out and looked for the rest of the group. Suddenly a tear gas shell landed a few feet away from us and we ran back, coughing and crying.

We only had to run another block or so before we were out of the immediate dangers of flying rocks and Guanaco water, and were able to turn and watch the combat. Water bottle bombs were flung in all directions and the sounds were incredible. Chanting. Booming. Screaming. Sirens. Gun shots? We were too far away to see exactly

what was happening so I asked Pato if that's what we were hearing. "No, son bombas no más." Only bombs—as if that would make me feel better. In fact, the noises I heard were guns; the police were shooting rubber bullets at rioters. One of my compañeros had gone forward to take more pictures of the action and was shot in the arm by a stray rubber bullet. We stayed back to absorb the madness of fires and flying objects for when the Guanaco and the fighting crowd took a turn for our direction. While the tear gas initiated it, I was now crying because I was so scared, and I asked Pato and Alfonso to take me home.

When I came to Chile this semester I expected to be taking classes with Chilean professors and making all sorts of amigos hispanohablantes. Tomorrow though when I go to class at La Universidad Católica de Chile the person sitting next to me will almost definitely be from California, not Chile. I will have to dance my way through a marching band of protesting students and then climb over a mountain of chairs barricading the entrance to my classroom. If the professor comes he will likely end up cancelling class when students storm into the room banging on pots and pans and chanting. High schools and university students all across Chile are on strike.

Access to free education was available to every student in Chile from the 1800s until 1973 when Augusto Pinochet came into power through a military coup. Free education is not the only thing that Chileans lost during the seventeen year dictatorship. After the coup, thousands of leftists were taken from their homes and put into concentration camps where they were tortured and often disappeared. The military government was able to maintain its conservative pow-



"Resistance"
"Resistencia"
Photograph by Tomás
Vasconcelo Villalobos



Above: "National movement"
"Movilización nacional"
Photograph by Tomás Vasconcelo Villalobos

Left: "Family movement for education"
"Movilización familiar por la educación"
Photograph by Tomás Vasconcelo Villalobos



er until 1990 through the constant threat of torture and death that faced anyone who spoke out. During Pinochet's capitalist rule the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. Rich kids went to good private schools, poor kids went and still go to terrible public schools. Pinochet denationalized Chilean mines and sold them to private investors, taking even more money away from the Chilean people. When the dictatorship ended people expected that the government would give the people back many of the things that they had lost during the time of Pinochet - free and quality education included. However, twenty-one years have passed and while many things have changed, too many have stayed the same.

Chile's education system today is undeniably suffering. Anyone who can afford it sends their children to fancy private schools where they are taught by the best teachers and prepared for the best colleges. Universities base their admission and scholarships on a single test called the Prueba de Selección Universitaria. Expensive private schools spend years preparing their students for the test. Public schools cannot afford the same quality of education, so most students have no hope of even scoring high enough to get into the best universities, let alone get scholarships.

For the past three months students across the country have been going to extreme lengths to protest the injustice that is education in

Chile. Various high schools and universities are either *en paro* or *en toma*. To be *en paro* means that students are striking and not going to classes. A *toma* is when students literally take over their school; nobody but students are allowed in, professors and administration included. Students live inside of the buildings and plot ways to help support the movement. Every week students come to an assembly at the school and vote on whether or not they are going to continue with the strike or resume classes. Some schools have been either in strike or *en toma* for as long as three months. Additionally, every day there is some sort of event relating to the movements - concerts, marches, flash mobs, staged pillow fights, etc.

Sounds fun, right? With all of the excitement of positive parts of the protests it's easy for an outsider to forget the reality of the situation. Many students have already lost a semester and some are approaching the entire year. They are sacrificing their own privileged access to quality education for the sake of everyone else's: they have already paid for the semester's worth of education that they are not receiving! Several students have even gone as far as going on hunger strikes and have not eaten in months. Chillingly, President Sebastian Piñera is still unwilling to come to an agreement with the masses.

While on one hand what the students are asking for seems a little extreme—free and quality education (universities included)—on the other hand it seems completely reasonable. Chilean universities are the second most expensive in the world after the United States, while average income in Chile is but a fraction of that in the US. Rather

than being a radical new idea, Chileans had access to equal education, which was partially funded by the nationalized mines. It is easy to understand people's anger and the violent protests against the government when you take into consideration the recent history of Chile and what was taken away from the people during the dictatorship. For years the same people that are protesting today were suppressed under Pinochet. Tens of thousands of Chileans were murdered, disappeared, tortured, or exiled. People are not just provoking and attacking police officers for the fun of it, they are lashing out against the injustice that has been served to them for decades. They are attacking a government that tormented and terrorized them. El pueblo wants its social rights back and they are willing to go to great lengths to restore them - hunger strikes and violence if necessary.

This may seem like the semester abroad from hell - no classes, no Chilean peers, tear gas on the metro, bombs. But truthfully I could not have asked for a better experience. Rather than sitting in my classroom learning about Latin American social movements, I am living one. Seeing the selflessness of students who are taking to the streets is exciting and inspiring. Por eso, you can find me in the streets with my would-be classmates chanting, "¡Y VA A CAER, VA A CAER LA EDUCACIÓN DE PINOCHET!"



"Pasacalle por la educación gratuita"
 "Pasacalle for a free education"
 Photograph by Tomás Vasconcelo Villalobos