

Interview

“Chile and Latin America are in the spotlight”

Thursday 27 March 2014, by [GAUDICHAUD Frank](#), [SOTO Hernán](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2014).

The French political scientist Franck Gaudichaud is in Chile in his research semester for University of Grenoble 3, in which he is professor of Latin American studies. A Doctorate in political science, he is a contributor to the prestigious electronic daily, [Rebellion.org](#). Gaudichaud, with links to Chile for years [\[1\]](#), closely followed the presidential campaign and in this interview analyses the Latin American political scenario and the future government of Michelle Bachelet.

Hernán Soto - What is your opinion of the presidential campaign in Chile?

Gaudichaud - “Generally, it was very bad. There was little real political debate about the deep-rooted problems, too many words, too little substance. Nevertheless, with nine candidates in the first round, everyone, including the candidate of the Right, Matthei, had to take into account - in a way - the issues that have emerged from the huge student mobilisations, particularly tax reforms, free quality education, constitutional reforms... It is also important to underscore the presence of two anti-neoliberal candidatures, that of Roxana Miranda and Marcel Claude, who provided space to some ideas of a rupture and of the Left, and while it is true that they did not achieve a significant influence in the votes, they contributed to extending the debates to essential issues like the nationalisation of copper, recuperation of water, nationalising the pension funds (AFP, as is known in Chile) and immediate measures in favour of the poor.

Overall, the preponderant sensation was that everything had been settled because Bachelet was going to win. Analysing the campaign of the New Majority, I think that those in charge of Bachelet's campaign did excellent preparatory work in terms of political marketing and communication (and with a massive budget). But the electoral campaign itself was deliberately washed out, cold, distant and without the citizens. Did they not want to create disquiet, did they fear the masses on the streets? Of course. It doesn't matter in the end: the result speaks of the electoral hegemony of Bachelet's project, and of her vision of neoliberalism partially reconfigured from the top, without being damaged by the abstention that calls for more reflection. In fact, on the day of the triumph, neither was there delirious enthusiasm. Given the lack of enthusiasm and militant participation, my attention was drawn to the cover heading of the weekly, *El Siglo* (The Century) of the Communist Party which, after the victory of its candidate, called it 'storming history' with Michelle Bachelet. It appears to be an immense exaggeration, although the Bachelet government seeks to open a new cycle representing above all the continuity of 20 years of the governments of Concertación (1990-2010) and of her faithful management of the model.

More than the discourse what interested me the most in the campaign was the form in which the principal economic groups positioned themselves, clearly favouring Bachelet's candidacy. This is a fact that stands out, as Punto Final pointed out on many occasions. The most dynamic Right, of the large businesses and finance capital, made it be known that the Bachelet government did not signify danger. It is also significant that, from what is known, Bachelet's candidacy received three times more money from big business than that what reached Matthei's treasury.

Bachelet's programme eludes, or more precisely rejects, profound transformations and is concentrated in non-structural 'modernisation' of taxes, education and institutions. There are marked and calculated omissions like the treatment of foreign inversions that receive explicit guarantees in the text of the programme and the silence in the matter of copper concessions in the hands of the transnationals, an essential matter. Neither is there any reference to military spending or to the radical redefinition of the role of the armed forces, or a definition of a Constituent Assembly or labour law reform (as with the Constitution of 1980, the labour law was drafted in the dictatorship). On the other hand, there is a favourable definition of the Pacific Alliance (with the exception that it will not be to the 'exclusion' other agreements) with Peru, Colombia, Mexico and the USA. This is one of the geo-strategic axes of the current U.S. policy for the continent. There is also the search for an agreement with the TransPacific Agreement on Economic Cooperation, among other reasons to isolate China and Russia, all of which would be a blow for Alba, Mercosur and Unasur. In this sense, it seemed appropriate to me Evo Morales' declaration that he did not think Bachelet was a 'Socialist' and if she were one, he would ask her to take Chile immediately out of the Pacific Alliance so as to integrate with Alba and the outline of Bolivarian integration."

Chile in the retina

What stands out in the social movements of Chile, their strengths and weaknesses?

"I think that the principal themes of the presidential campaign such as the new Constitution through a Constituent Assembly, free quality education at all levels, tax reforms and others are products of the social movements of 2011 and 2012. It forced the political class to include them in their proposals or, at least, to mention these, though in an instrumental manner. Had it not been for the huge mobilisations, these would most probably not have been mention in this campaign.

There are two basic questions in the dynamics of the social movements: the flexible articulation of diverse struggles and sectors in mobilisation which still are heterogeneous and have varied characteristics, including their social composition which differentiate them. The other, perhaps fundamental, is resolving the passage from social mobilisation to an organisation and a broad anti-capitalist political proposal which should provide stability and objectives to movements that have real "thermal oscillations" which conspire against their continuity and successful intervention in the socio-political field.

'No more education for profit'

There are many other debates around the theme of social movements. At a forum in the University of Chile, I perceived that there still are tendencies rooted in the rejection of youth participation in politics, which can be explained and is perfectly understandable because of discredited politicians and a political system moulded by the dictatorship and the instruments of dominance. But because it can be explained is not to say that it is always worthy of approval in strategic terms because without political organisation after each social eruption, it is the same people who come back to rule. Without new political anti-capitalist organisations, co-option becomes easier for the traditional apparatuses as has happened in the case of the leader, Iván Fuentes of Coyhaique.

I do not think that the visualisation of students as vanguards of social change, guiding and leading

the workers, works either. This is not to forget that many times, certainly, the students have had an important role in the changes, in particular in the struggles for cultural hegemony, but neither can they be considered the only conductors of the struggles. The students cannot substitute the workers. Happily, though still in an incipient form, there have been in the past few years important mobilisations of copper workers, fishermen, forest workers, and now port workers, even those of the retail and service sectors, together with students and other central sectors of social movements such as town people.”

Abstention and neoliberal depoliticisation

Speaking of abstention...

“Much has been written about the issue because it is indeed a massive phenomenon of the “politicality” of the popular classes. The first electoral majority of this country is that of the abstentionists (essentially, Bachelet was elected with 25% of the votes as the abstention was more than 50% of those in the electoral registry). But there still remains much to analyse. It should also be a matter of critical reflection from the Left as in a given moment it could act against a real democratic radical development, given that abstention concerns mostly the poorer sectors and is manifest in all the sectors, including among the students, whose participation in the elections in their own organisation is low, not to speak of the professional colleges, trade unions of the waged sectors and other base-level social organisations. I have had some discussion with friends who have a different take on this fundamental issue. It is obvious that there is an absolute lack of representativeness and of legitimacy of the current political system, inherited from the dictatorship that goes beyond its reforms and, therefore, abstention is also a sign of rejection and unease. But the analysis should be more careful. To see abstention as an expression of massive discontent and as an organised anti-neoliberal rejection is an error. Unfortunately, there is a long road ahead. What still dominates, in my opinion, is abstentionism particular to societies where neoliberalism has triumphed with an overwhelming dominance of anomie individualism, lack of confidence in collective action, also a product of not seeing themselves represented in the current politics – this much is true. That is, individualism that is more regressive than progressive, for now at least. It is true, I insist, that there were sectors that consciously went for an “electoral strike”: critical intellectuals, Marxist collectives and libertarians, citizens who did not want to participate in an “electoral farce” of the binominal system, etc. They have to be valued but are very few in number. I have read Gabriel Salazar’s declarations, who holds the position that the massive abstention is a product of the social mobilisations and of rejection of the system. Such a lineal conclusion and evaluation of the global forces seems to me to be an error. The Latinobarómetro opinion poll draws attention to the degree of politicisation and depoliticisation in the Latin American countries. Venezuela appears at the head of politicisation and towards the bottom, Chile, which also shows alarming figures about the positioning between the Right and the Left, which a majority of the interviewees could not define.

Bachelet’s task will be exactly to maintain this “low-intensity neoliberal democracy” and at the same time try and avoid an uncontrolled eruption of the social movements in its government’s agenda. I read, between the two visits, an article by Eugenio Tironi in *El Mercurio* titled, ‘reform or revolution’. In his view, the electoral results showed that there is a demand for change in Chile which should be produced in a ‘gradual and moderate form’, contrary to all ‘revolutionary’ options, which would confirm – according to him – Michelle Bachelet’s proposal aimed at avoiding ruptures that might come from the streets. Tironi ends his text affirming that Bachelet’s task will be to respond to the expectations that have been aroused. These are interesting opinions that come from an organic Concertación intellectual which explains what lies ahead. This shows the strategy of the New Majority, or that of the ex-Concertación plus the more recent joining, the Communist Party: propose a path of light and partial reforms, giving a new legitimacy to the model, a path that could more or less be viable in the parliamentary sector if the new government unites its

forces and isolates the hardline sectors of the Right (a minority) and, at the same time, the option is to disarm the most radical struggles or control them - neutralise them within the margins of the current institutional system and Bachelet's social-liberal programme".

The spotlight is on Latin America

What is the current situation in Latin America and what are its perspectives?

"It is not easy to say it in a few words. The region is still within a cycle with good macroeconomic perspectives, based principally in the export of primary materials, objective improvements of the situation in very broad social sectors and political stability. At the same time, the social polarisation continues and consolidates, though in a very light form of inequality.

It is important to underscore that we are in the fifteenth year of the triumph of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela: a decade with varied governments, from national-popular governments or less radical ones, others simply progressives or social liberals. There has also been a significant setback in the ideas and organisations of the traditional Right. Nevertheless, tensions are building up in all parts, including in Venezuela, in which economic growth - though diminished - continues, but at the head of an absolutely predatory model. There has also been a lowering of industrial production in the region and a re-prioritisation of the economies. Brazil, which a big industrial power, is regressing regarding industrialisation, for example it favours an industrial agriculture oriented to a large-scale transgenic export.

This model is product of an international division of work, which is being remodelled by the multinationals and emerging powers such as China. I think that we touch on a node that none of the region's governments have been able to sever and one that affects the possibility of profound changes in society. This model is environmentally depredataory as also socially. A new wave of dependency is being created which can only be attenuated through the integration of the Latin American countries, which has not happened yet and it is not sure if it will happen. Alba has not experienced much progress, neither has Mercosur, which is not an alternative. Celac has been a great advance in the diplomatic and political fields as a space for conversation and the search for agreements without the USA but still there is much to do.

In my opinion, a new cycle of large social movements is shaping up as at the start of the Nineties when there were important indigenous movements in Ecuador, in the defence of water in Bolivia and earlier the 'Caracazo' in Venezuela as also mobilisations in Argentina. Now they are lining up against the mega-extractive model. In Peru, the indigenous movements are very strong against, for example, the Conga project and in Argentina around soya production and the project called Monsanto City, near Cordoba, which wants to construct 270 silos for genetically modified maize for the region. The comunards mobilised to defeat the project. There is mobilisation against Barrick Gold in Chile and in Argentina.

The protests also affect the governments of the Centre Left, such as that of Ecuador, given that no government has been capable of opposing the strategies of accumulation by dispossession by the multinationals. On the contrary, they incentivise it. The indigenous people revindicate the post-extractive and post-neoliberal path while the government of Correa keeps awarding concessions that cover an important part of the national territory, as activists and environmental NGOs denounce, and which has abandoned the idea of reservation without exploiting the petroleum fields in the Amazonian forest (the famous Yasuni project) for lack of international support.

The mining and socio-environmental conflicts are sharpening and show up the limits of the progress in terms of the democratisation of the economic structure and of the model of accumulation of capital. The new conflicts in gestation and in development are often linked to this complex problem.

Another approaching theme is the 'right to the city', exemplified in the huge struggles in Brazil where sectors of the urban poor and also the middle class, demanded an improvement in the urban services such as transport, the right to a clean and safe environment, the defence of urban space in the service of everyone and the right to health."

Uniting the workers

"A third theme is labour and its conflicts with capital, an essential factor in the functioning of society. The union, the right to strike, minimum remuneration, work security relating to accidents and professional illnesses and the struggle for the right to social security remain at the centre of the preoccupation of millions of Latin Americans and of multiple struggles, although there still has not been a powerful and continuing movement of the salaried classes. And here class unity is fundamental. For this I disagreed when CUT (the Chilean trade union confederation) called for a vote for Bachelet which the president of CUT could have done individually and as a Communist. The great Clotario Blest always opposed CUT taking political positions that could divide the workers, including during the Allende government.

Regarding the current situation, it was suggested in a recently published book in Ecuador ('Emancipation in Latin America') that it is necessary to reconstruct the trade union movement from below, from the base, without electoral and political manipulations. There is much experience in Latin America that could serve as a guide: from the factories abandoned by the owners which have functioned in the hands of workers (such as Fasinpet in Argentina), the historical experience of the industrial cordons in Chile of Popular Unity or, from another ambit, with the twenty years of the experience of Zapatista self-government. The sociologist Atilio Boron has insisted on the necessity of coordination and articulation of the workers. They face powerful enemies: the owners who coordinate in powerful organisations that extend beyond the frontiers and have the police and the military, with the power of imperialism. In Latin America, there are tens of U.S. military bases. The workers should organise in a well-articulated forms, with independent class strategies and their own alternative anti-capitalist political tools".

Threat to peace

"It is not only within the current Latin American geopolitics that one has to look at Venezuela and Colombia but also from the global perspective. I think that in the case of Bolivarian Venezuela, the reasons are obvious, above all when there is multiple and potentially explosive tension within 'Chavismo without Chavez' against a very aggressive and very neoliberal opposition. Obviously, the electoral victory of Chavismo in the municipal elections of December 8 is important for the continuity of the process. But it is an error of the triumphalist vision that some analysts of the Left have. We have published various texts in rebellion.org that show the growing discontent in the popular bases in Venezuela against corruption, the economic problems and insecurity while the bourgeois keeps accumulating privileges and organising one of the largest flight of capital in the history of South America.

On the other side is Colombia, key to U.S. presence in the region, not only through Plan Colombia and the Pacific Alliance but also thanks to the millions of dollars inverted in the dirty work of military intelligence (as has just been confirmed thanks to the revelations of Edward Snowden). One has to closely look at the dynamics of the peace process in progress in Havana between President Santos and FARC. The scandalous sacking of the current progressive mayor of Bogota, Gustavo Petro, is a direct attack to the perspective of peace with social transformation and a radical agrarian reform, hoped for by millions of displaced farmers. With the destitution of a popular leader, though very moderate, the state and the dominant classes are telling the Colombian people: there will be peace to the extent that is possible and above all for the foreign investors (as Washington demands). All those who think of challenging this new order will be punished. A clear message for the

participants of the social movements and the leadership of FARC thinking of moving to civic political life”.

Interview by Hernán Soto with Franck Gaudichaud, French political scientist.

P.S.

* <http://www.tlaxcala-int.org/article.asp?reference=11235>

* Original article dated 10/01/2014: <http://rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=179710>

* Translation: Supriyo Chatterjee.

Footnotes

[1] His latest book is a history ‘from below’ of the thousand days of Popular Unity and the Allende government (Chili 1970-1973. Mille jours qui ébranlèrent le monde, Presses universitaires de Rennes-IDA, Rennes, 2013.