
Reading Tocqueville in Chile

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The current political and social crisis in Chile is a contemporary example that demonstrates the validity of Tocqueville's work, as several of his ideas help explore the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to the difficult moments that the country has experienced since 2019. Although the avenues of such analysis are many, in this essay, I focus mainly on three areas of Tocqueville's thought that can be useful for understanding the Chilean situation: the welfare paradox, the refoundational spirit of revolutions, and associativity as a remedy to the tensions of democracy.

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Chile has experienced a severe political and social crisis as of late. This crisis has deeply rooted causes that have been dragging on for some time but became first visible during the intense and massive protests of October 2019, popularly known as the *estallido social* (social explosion). Unprecedented citizen mobilizations endangered the democratic stability of the country and marked the beginning of a constitutional replacement process that continues through today. Though almost four years have passed since the beginning of the crisis, current circumstances indicate that the end is nowhere in sight.

Understanding what is happening in Chile is challenging and requires deep intellectual analysis. Below I argue that Tocqueville's ideas are useful for explaining the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to this severe political and social crisis. Some of them are perhaps more obvious than others; however, each helps interpret the Chilean situation through new dimensions and perspectives.

In this sense, the central conclusion of this analysis is the incontrovertible value of Alexis de Tocqueville's thought for understanding contemporary sociopolitical phenomena. Although the French intellectual died more than 150 years ago, his influence extends to corners of the world far beyond the realities masterfully analyzed by him. Chile is an example of how Tocqueville remains an inexhaustible source of intellectual wealth that illuminates the experience of today's democracies and can help confront their various and increasingly complex problems.

1. The Chilean October and the Welfare Paradox

The fuse that ignited the Chilean social and political crisis was an increase of public transport fares by 30 pesos¹. Although the situation has many interconnected causes that were lurking beneath the surface for some time, the decision of the government to increase public transportation fares was what unleashed severe protests and mobilizations throughout the country, the most serious in the last half-century. On the night of October 18, 2019, when the protests began, 118 out of 136 subway stations were burned in the country's capital, Santiago de Chile, illustrating the scale and severity of the crisis. The following week, on Friday, October 25, the largest citizen march in Chilean history took place.

During late October and the first weeks of November, mobilizations and public disorder continued to increase and intensify. Thus, peaceful citizen marches merged with acts of violence that generated injuries, multiple human rights violations, and heated discussions regarding the legitimacy of violence as a method of political action. To end the crisis, a large part of the political class signed the *Acuerdo por la Paz y la Nueva Constitución* (Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution) during the early hours of November 15. The objective of this agreement was to elect a Constitutional Convention to initiate a constituent process to build a new social pact to solve some of the deep causes of the crisis.

One of the main slogans of all these mobilizations was, *no son 30 pesos, son 30 años* (It's not 30 pesos; it's 30 years). This idea, repeated for months throughout the country, was intended to reflect that the protests were not only generated by increased public transportation fares but also explained by decades of alleged abuses by political and economic elites. In simple terms, the slogan sought to highlight that the return to democracy following the Pinochet's dictatorship was darker than portrayed by official

¹ 30 pesos is equivalent to 0,034 USD and 0.031 Euros.

narratives, which often emphasized Chile's exceptionality in the broader context of Latin American precarity.

However, when examining Chile's economic and social indicators over the last few decades, the idea of an elite-led structural and generalized campaign of abuse against citizens becomes dubious. In fact, during the famous and reviled 30 years since the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, poverty has been reduced by more than 30%, extreme poverty has decreased from 13% to 2%, and spending on education and health has doubled. At the same time, infant mortality has dropped drastically, life expectancy has increased, and inflation has been reduced by almost 20%. In concrete terms, these numbers signified enormous improvements in the material conditions for a broad strata of the population. As Carlos Peña has pointed out, Chileans today are «more prosperous than ever, and misery has never been smaller and more cornered»².

Moreover, there is no doubt that compared to much of Latin America, Chile has been one of the most successful countries in recent decades in various dimensions of social life. In fact, in 2009, Chile became the first South American country to join the OECD, thus affirming its success both domestically and internationally.

Why is one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America experiencing a political and social crisis of such magnitude? How can we understand this paradox between Chile's undeniable success at the macro-level and the widespread social unrest that has plagued the country for almost four years?

Although it is evident that the crisis has multiple causes, Tocqueville provides some initial answers to these specific questions. One of the most general themes from the work of the French thinker has to do precisely with the paradox exemplified by the Chilean case. In analyzing the French Revolution, Tocqueville points out that «the parts of France that were to become the principal center of the revolution were precisely those where progress was more evident»³. The question that underlies this statement is the same that we pose concerning Chile: why does a social revolt of great magnitude occur in the context of a supposed bonanza?

While other authors have responded to this question in various contexts, Tocqueville noticed it early in *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. The philosopher suggested that better-off societies may be more uncomfortable or frustrated. According to Carlos Peña, this idea means that periods of well-being can bring new social expectations whose

² C. Peña, *Pensar el Malestar: La crisis de octubre y la cuestión constitucional*, Santiago, Taurus, 2020, p. 97.

³ A. De Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 156.

non-fulfillment generates periods of intense frustration⁴. Tocqueville implied that dissatisfaction is a constant and permanent sentiment in democratic societies, as peoples «cannot attain the equality they desire [...] they do not approach it close enough to enjoy it, and they die before having fully savored its sweetness»⁵. However, social problems can be seen and felt with greater intensity in contexts of generalized prosperity; as Tocqueville suggested «every abuse that is eliminated seems only to reveal the others that remain, and makes their sting that much more painful. The ill has diminished [...] but sensitivity to it has increased»⁶. But it is not only the problems already present in society that become more palpable because, according to Raymond Aron, progress can bring new tensions that make social dynamics more complex⁷. In simple terms, times of light also have shadows. The case of Chile shows that a large percentage of the population «had experienced in the course of only fifteen or twenty years changes that in the past, for any Chilean family, took two or three generations»⁸. Transformations of this magnitude inevitably generate societal consequences, accentuate particular difficulties, and create new ones.

In this sense, and as I mentioned above, the problems that have been pointed out as the cause of this crisis are multiple and include a persistent inequality between different groups (which profoundly aggravates the Tocquevillian approach to democratic equality); a fracture between politics and citizenship, where State institutions have systematically lost the trust of citizens; a degradation of social ties and loss of the sense of belonging; family instability; the inefficiency of the State; the impunity of certain privileged groups and the unfulfilled promises of the meritocratic ideal. These problems become more serious when also considering the progressive and gradual stagnation of the economic and social success that marked the decade of the 1990s and 2000s.

Nevertheless, the example that best reflects Tocqueville's paradox in Chile is the education system, which currently faces a litany of structural issues. One of the main drivers of Chilean social mobility, according to dominant political discourse, has been access to higher education. In fact, the current government coalition entered the political arena almost ten years ago with a robust agenda in favor of free and universal access to higher education. In recent decades, the number of Chileans who have gained access to a university education has increased considerably, which has meant progress for many families. However, over the years, university degrees have lost their value and

⁴ Peña, *Pensar el Malestar* cit., p. 181.

⁵ A. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 508.

⁶ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime* cit., p. 157.

⁷ R. Aron, *Progress and Disillusion. The Dialectics of Modern Society*, Victoria & Middlesex, Pelican Books, 1968, p. 295.

⁸ Peña, *Pensar el Malestar* cit., p. 97.

relevance as engines of social mobility for several reasons, generating frustration and disillusionment throughout many sectors of the population⁹. The problems of the Chilean education system are even more relevant when considering another of Tocqueville's ideas, as, according to him, one of the central values of democracies is social mobility¹⁰. The French thinker argued that people act through the desire to arise in the social hierarchy, and Chile has not been the exception to Tocqueville's assertion.

2. The Constitutional Convention and the Refoundation of the Chilean State

In his memoirs of the French Revolution of 1848, Tocqueville noted that «some people think that 'republic' means a dictatorship in the name of Liberty; that a republic should not only change political institutions but reshape society itself. Others believe that a republic should be aggressive and propagandistic»¹¹.

Some events related to this Tocqueville quote have happened in Chile since the protests of 2019 erupted. In a certain way, the slogan *no son 30 pesos, son 30 años* embodied a popular spirit that sought to refound the institutional order. For many of the protagonists, the so-called Chilean *estallido social* was construed as new beginning whereby, following Tocqueville, the crisis not only opened the possibility of modifying political institutions but transforming society. The often-repeated slogan that *Chile será la tumba del neoliberalismo* (Chile will be the tomb of neoliberalism) or *Chile despertó* (Chile woke up) were nested in an attempt to rid society of everything *old* in order to make way for everything *new*. It is not an exaggeration to state that broad groups of the population assumed that 2019 could be the year that would allow Chile to be re-founded and separated from its history, as if this depended on the will of the demonstrators and as if the future political order could be determined in advance.

It is even possible to suggest that during the first months of the Chilean social explosion, religious fervor surrounding the political disputes reflected Tocqueville's thoughts. According to the French thinker, «like religious revolutions, the French Revolution spread far and wide and did so, as they did, by preaching and propaganda»¹². Interpreting Tocqueville through a more general approach, Raymond Aron suggests that «we may generalize the statement and say that every political

⁹ K. Araujo-D. Martucelli, *La escuela y la cuestión del mérito: reflexiones desde la experiencia chilena*, in «Educação E Pesquisa», n.41 (2015), pp. 1503-1520, 1509.

¹⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* cit., p. 456.

¹¹ A. De Tocqueville, *Recollections. The French Revolution of 1848 and Its Aftermath*, Charlottesville & London, University of Virginia Press, 2016, p. 244.

¹² Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime* cit., p. 20.

revolution assumes some of the characteristics of a religious revolution when it aspires to universal validity, when it claims to be the way of salvation for all humanity»¹³. In that sense, the Chilean protests generated religious symbols that remain today, such as the *Perro Matapacos* (Cop-Killing Dog) and peregrination places, such as *Plaza de la Dignidad* (Dignity Square), where the most relevant mobilizations took place¹⁴. For some people, the October revolts were the event that explained their existence. Some persons got married in *Plaza de la Dignidad*, and there is a museum of the social explosion where people light candles to the *Perro Matapacos*.

The constituent process initiated to address the crisis and failed when the citizenry massively rejected the Constitutional Convention's proposal also reflected this re-foundational spirit. In the Convention's inaugural speech, the president of the constitutional body, Elisa Loncon, pointed out that «today a new plural, multilingual Chile is founded, with all cultures, with all peoples, with women, and with the territories, that is our dream to write a new Constitution»¹⁵. During the work of the Constitutional Convention, it was possible to observe how this re-foundational spirit was embodied in the norms approved by the body as well as in the proposed constitutional architecture (later widely rejected by Chileans). Simply put, they wanted to build Chile from scratch without considering the constitutional tradition or the country's longstanding characteristics.

An example of this is the proposals of the Constitutional Convention on indigenous peoples. The constitutional body tried to turn Chile into a Plurinational State like Ecuador or Bolivia without considering that Chile's indigenous peoples are far from that reality. Unlike these countries, Chile has a high degree of *mestizaje* (miscegenation, or ethnic intermingling) between Indigenous Peoples and Chileans. This fact means that there are many people who, while identifying as Indigenous, also identify as Chileans. Thus, the Indigenous Peoples' worldview contains a mix of Chile's national symbols, generating combinations and multi-dimensional identities that are difficult to classify.

The close relationship between the re-foundational spirit of the October crisis and the Constitutional Convention's work is similar to how Tocqueville describes some dimensions of the French Revolution. According to the French thinker, the history of this revolt shows that it was carried out in «the same spirit that gave rise to so many

¹³ R. Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: Volume 1*, London & New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 481.

¹⁴ The *Perro Matapacos* was a dog that accompanied the protests and supposedly was trained to attack the police. This dog became the symbol of the Chilean revolt over time. Protesters built multiple statues in his image, and there is reverence for him to this day.

¹⁵ M. Woods, *On the Chilean Social Explosion*, London & New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 177.

abstruse books about government»¹⁶. The Constitutional Convention fell into errors quite similar to those described by Tocqueville, in the «same contempt for existing facts; the same confidence in theory, the same taste for the original, ingenious, and novel in institutions; the same urge to remake the entire constitution [...] rather than seek to amend its faulty parts»¹⁷. Similarly, the members of the Constitutional Convention did not consider the distance between their discourse and reality and that «what is quality in the writer is sometimes vice in the statesman, and the same things that often allowed to write beautiful books, can provoke great revolutions»¹⁸.

The failure of the Constitutional Convention is explained in good measure by this spirit that contradicted Chileans' desire for structural changes but with moderation and balance. As I pointed out in the first part of this essay, Chile has improved by many measures in the last decades, and, despite new and old problems, people felt that they had a lot to preserve and protect. According to Tocqueville, this is a natural feeling of democratic societies, for in them, «the majority of citizens do not clearly see what they stand to gain from a revolution, and feel at every instant and in a thousand ways what they stand to lose from it»¹⁹.

This refoundational spirit that permeated both the protests and the Chilean constitutional process is also problematic in Tocqueville's light in other dimensions of social life. During radical change processes, people often forget that success is not assured and that the outcome of the revolts depends on many factors beyond the will of those who promote social modifications. Tocqueville clearly pointed out that a society's democratization process does not necessarily lead to a better future. Democratization does not always end in a liberal regime because it brings deep vices that can lead countries to despotism worse than the most oppressive monarchies.

Democratic individualism, centralization, and the tyranny of the majority described by Tocqueville can generate profound difficulties in how freedom and equality develop. In the case of Chile, the generations that played the leading role in the so-called *estallido social* are precisely those that were born and grew up in the most prosperous times of the country. They are generations accustomed to peace and constant economic and social progress. Their parents lived better than their grandparents, and it is likely that many take for granted that they will live much better than their ancestors. However, a crisis like the Chilean one could (and still can) lead to very different and much more negative scenarios than this one. Thus, the atmosphere of jubilation in the face of the political

¹⁶ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime* cit., p. 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, cit., p. 302.

debacle of October 2019 requires at least a look with a broader perspective, which allows observing the crisis distanced as much as possible from the feelings that may cloud our analysis in critical moments. It is precisely this bird's eye view in times of crisis that Tocqueville provides. During the occurrences of 1848, which show shocking parallels to the Chilean situation, the French thinker pleaded one of his close friends and asked him, «you are glad that the government was brought down, but don't you see that it is authority itself that has been overthrown?»²⁰. To which his interlocutor replies, «let us first rejoice in our victory. Later we can worry about what comes next»²¹. This is precisely what happened in Chile during the most critical moments of October mobilizations, as many people watched with euphoria the political debacle without understanding that the crisis was much deeper than that of an incompetent government incapable of containing social unrest. The resounding failure of the constituent process and the deepening of the crisis at the institutional level has made many aware of this stark reality and of the fact that, as Tocqueville suggested, future democratic success is far from assured and that refoundations and revolutions usually end worse than expected by those who promote them.

Another relevant aspect of the Chilean crisis connected to the refoundational logic is the similarity between the causes of the crisis and how citizen demands were deployed in the public space. A curious aspect of the Chilean mobilizations is that they did not produce a clear set of demands, nor were there established leaders to direct citizen sentiment. In simple terms, thousands of people demanded thousands of wishes and personal preferences from the State. If one of the criticisms was of the Chilean neoliberal model, many of the demonstrations during those days also reflected the same neoliberalism that they sought to combat, at least in terms of the individualistic nature of citizens' demands. In a certain way, the revolutionary spirit of the Chilean October was sustained on the premises of a democratic individualism exacerbated both by the capitalist modernization of recent decades and by a profound crisis of the family and intermediate bodies.

This dynamic of continuity between the old and the new is linked to another of Tocqueville's approaches. According to the French thinker, there would be a close relationship between the old French regime and that which emerged from the revolution. In simple terms, the only way to make sense of the French Revolution is to link it to the social processes that preceded it. As radical as the revolt was, it was less innovative than is usually assumed. This assertion may lead one to think that

²⁰ Tocqueville, *Recollections* cit., p. 144.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 145.

refoundations are practically impossible; however extreme the revolutions may be. If the French Revolution was, according to Tocqueville, a mirror of the Ancien Régime, it is to be expected that a minor revolt such as the Chilean one would also have traces of the periods that it seeks to overthrow. It is almost inevitable: the past follows the present and the future as a shadow.

3. Final Thoughts: Associativity and Family

Having interpreted some aspects of the Chilean crisis through a Tocquevillian lens, it is possible to finally ask whether the French intellectual offers any possible ways out of the complex situation that the Latin American country has experienced since October 2019.

One of the keys to Tocqueville's thought is that the equality of democratic conditions provokes an individualism that destroys social ties and favors the dispersion of society. Thus, the individual in democracies withdraws from the world and remains alone with his family and closest circle. He «is like a stranger to the destiny of all others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him»²². Thus, the man described by Tocqueville «as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them [...] he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family still remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country»²³.

In the specific case of Chile, it is possible to suggest that, as I pointed out in the previous section, democratic individualism was also exacerbated by other dynamics of the capitalist modernization that the country has experienced over the last half-century. One of these is the deep crisis of family instability that has only increased over the decades. It is worth asking to what extent this family crisis acquires relevance in the Chilean democratic context and Tocqueville's description. In simple terms, how do democratic individuals sustain themselves if the refuge of the family space is strained to such a level like that of Chile? Although Tocqueville did not ask these questions, it is possible to suggest that the nihilism that has characterized some stages of the Chilean crisis can be explained to a large extent by this dynamic.

In Chile, there seems to be no awareness of the relevance of these problems in social life, and it tends to be analyzed as an exclusively conservative concern. However, family stability is relevant when thinking about political projects that associate the left with the

²² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* cit., p. 651.

²³ *Ibid.*

construction of a Welfare State. In the rehabilitation of the family, there is a pending task for all political sectors in Chile.

On the other hand, Tocqueville also suggests that the remedies to the problems of democracy are, among others, intermediate associations. Using Pierre Manent's categories to analyze Tocqueville, if the nature of democracy is to separate, the art of democracy is the voluntary association, especially at the local level²⁴. Thus, democracy would have this double movement of undoing the social bond and remaking it, of «deliberately destroying all given dependence and attempting to reconstruct unity through strictly consensual relations guaranteed by an external power»²⁵. Associativity in Chile has also been in crisis. At present, this fact is perhaps one of the principal causes of the deep social tensions that plague the country. For this reason, its promotion and strengthening, as suggested by Tocqueville, may be one of the many ways to address a crisis far exceeding the constitutional sphere.

Finally, and as I discussed throughout this essay, Alexis de Tocqueville's thought remains highly relevant, and the way in which he elucidates the Chilean social and political crisis is an excellent example of his influence worldwide. In this essay, I used some of Tocqueville's categories to explain the fundamental aspects of the Chilean problem. I believe that this exercise is helpful because it allows the reader to internalize a social context about which, on the one hand, not many details are known and that, on the other hand, has had public relevance due to the particularities of the Chilean constituent process and its controversial failure.

The Chilean crisis continues, and although almost four years have passed since the *estallido social* there is no clear end in sight. A new constituent process is currently underway to replace the current Constitution. Likewise, the political class has tried to solve, through legislative means, some of the causes of social unrest, but without much success. At the same time, citizens continue to distance themselves from an inward-looking political system. The last elections for the Constitutional Council have systematically shown an enormous dissatisfaction with the State and those who wield power.

Hopefully, a more thorough reading of authors as rich as Tocqueville will enlighten decision-makers and help them better understand the nature of and formidable a challenge as controlling its hegemonic will when in office.

²⁴ P. Manent, *Tocqueville y la naturaleza de la democracia*, Santiago, IES Chile, 2018, p. 86.

²⁵ F. Echeverría, *Democracia: la otra revolución*, in «Punto y Coma», 5 (2021), pp. 1-136, 89.