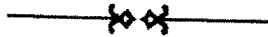


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¡Basta YA! Chilean Students Say “Enough”

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When Occupy Wall Street burst on the political scene in lower Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park in the summer of 2011, it energized flagging public debate about socioeconomic fairness in a nation in which inequality has risen to embarrassing levels for an advanced democracy. The kernel of a social movement that aims to articulate the demands of those left behind or let down, OWS is a refreshing and long-overdue response to the Great Recession and the concentration of wealth in the United States. In a way, OWS can be seen to represent those who have lost and who are systematically exploited and excluded, as opposed to those who do not want to pay for bailouts or a social safety net—that is, the Tea Party and its supporters. OWS activists are the *indignados*, or the outraged, of the United States. Perhaps the people who lost homes and jobs, whose incomes did not rise even in times of prosperity, who do not have access to quality education, who are denied health insurance, and who continue to face discrimination will

finally carve themselves a space for transformational social dissent. But is OWS a vehicle for them to do that, and why were the inroads it made in the fall of 2011 not more significant? How does OWS compare to similar contemporary social movements that have succeeded in garnering widespread support and placing their issues at the forefront of the political and policy agenda in their countries? One place to look to is the 2011 Chilean student movement, which has several key characteristics in common with OWS.

The Chilean student movement began in May–June 2011 with marches and the occupation of school buildings. It was able to quickly rally public opinion (70 percent of the public supports the movement), it kept the conservative government of billionaire president Sebastián Piñera on the defensive for six months, and it forced the political establishment to deal with its grievances. Although many observers and the Chilean government itself were taken by surprise—high-growth Chile is considered a model of economic success—the students' complaints are legitimate. Because education is a major gateway to social mobility, students want not only access to a college education but assurances that what they get is affordable and of high quality. The members of the new middle class created by Chile's strong economic growth over the past twenty years do not want to lose their status either because they cannot afford to pay back their loans when the economy is failing or because of inferior training. Students essentially protested because the Chilean educational system—in spite of its undeniable progress—had failed to reduce entrenched inequality of opportunity in one of the most unequal countries in the world.

Although access to higher education, including among the poorest segments of the population, rose steadily between 1990 and 2011 (among those eighteen to twenty-four years old, enrollment increased from 16 percent to 50 percent), the gap in

access between the rich and the poor remains large. The difference in enrollment rates between the poorest and the richest 10 percent is seventy percentage points: 20 percent and over 90 percent, respectively. To a large extent the expansion in access was possible due to the mushrooming of expensive private universities under the regime of Augusto Pinochet, president of Chile from 1974 to 1990.

There are three types of universities in Chile: public; traditional, pre-1981 private universities; and Pinochet-era private universities. None of them are open to all, and all of them charge tuition. Although by law not-for-profit, the Pinochet-era private universities turned into highly profitable ventures through a dubious arrangement involving payments from the universities themselves to the owners of the land on which the universities are built. The quality of these institutions is uneven, and there is no reliable system to help prospective students choose the right place. Tuition (even at public universities) is relatively high and is paid by the nonwealthy with student loans, some at a subsidized interest rate but many not. (Beginning in 2006, the nonsubsidized rate was set at 5.9 percent. In early 2012, a bill was introduced to reduce the interest rate to 2 percent, but at this writing it had not passed.)

On average, the cost of sending a child to college is around 40 percent of the family income for those in the bottom 60 percent of the population. Many young people who hope to use education as a vehicle to move up the socioeconomic ladder find themselves unable to complete their degrees because of the cost and mounting debt. Even when students are able to graduate, they end up without access to the higher-paying jobs that go to those who have attended elite universities. Saddled with low-paying jobs, young graduates and their families struggle or default. Crushed hopes of upward mobility—the failure to gain entry to the burgeoning middle class—is cause for deep-seated

frustration and understandable anger. Effort does not really lead to economic success.

In response to these difficult conditions, the Confederation of Chilean Students (Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile, or CONFECH) drafted a proposal for reform—the Social Agreement for Chilean Education—that included university and high school student demands. These centered on free public education, quality education across all tiers of the system, an end to loopholes that allow nonprofit colleges to turn a profit, creation of a state agency to ensure quality of education and closure of said loopholes, and a more affordable and accessible university system as a whole.

Throughout the ensuing cycle of protest that culminated in a legislative battle over the 2012 budget in December 2011, students never achieved their maximum demand: to change the market-driven education model for a state-funded and state-administered system. They had consistently rejected all government overtures that limited negotiation largely to the issue of student loans, and they declared themselves dissatisfied with the results of the politicians' wrangling over the education budget. Nevertheless, the protesters achieved far more than had been accomplished in previous protests over education policy, such as the "revolution of the penguins" in 2006. Those protests were led by high school students who wore blue blazers, white shirts, and gray pants (hence the penguin moniker); university students later joined in. The protests culminated in a government-appointed blue-ribbon commission that left the students feeling sidelined. They felt that their demands for a more centralized and state-financed system were not addressed. However, the commission did recommend regulations to improve the educational system that later became law. Unlike the 2006 episode, the university-led student protests of 2011 placed the issue of inequality front and center in the national

political debate, where it is likely to stay until at least the December 2013 presidential election.

The 2012 budget substantially increased funds for education in general, established new merit- and income-based scholarship programs for the bottom 60 percent of the population, and increased funds for student loans to levels the state would not have contemplated otherwise. These are to be offered at significantly lower interest rates than before, making education more accessible and affordable. A separate bill created a new state oversight agency, the Education Superintendency, whose purpose is to ensure quality education and strict adherence to not-for-profit rules. Significantly for OWS, legislative support for tax increases has surged, including from Piñera and his party. Temporary corporate tax increases to help pay for the 2010 earthquake recovery will probably be made permanent, among other measures.

Does the Chilean experience hold positive lessons for OWS? The student movement and OWS share several significant characteristics; strangely, it is precisely these characteristics that have been cited by media analysts as reasons for OWS's relative lack of traction. Members of both movements are rebelling against complex problems that potentially divide the public, such as the injustice of high levels of socioeconomic inequality in market societies. Tired of neglect and ineffectual politics as usual, their repertoire emphasizes disruptive direct action that transgresses norms of public order to focus public attention on the problems. Both movements consciously reject links to establishment politics, especially political parties and complicit insider organizations—and particularly those that might be in these political parties' pockets. They also refuse to be drawn into the policy process, claiming that as a social movement their responsibility is to force the establishment to engage with pressing issues it ignores, not to formulate policy.

Since the Chilean student movement had significant political impact, in and of themselves these characteristics cannot explain OWS's difficulty in amplifying its message. What did the Chilean students do differently? What does the Chilean experience offer as points of reflection for OWS regarding its positions? Issue framing is critical. Chilean students tackled the broad and diffuse issues of socioeconomic injustice through the prism of their educational system. Everyone had experience with this more tightly focused issue, which offered the perfect frame for the larger problem and resonated with people in many different social situations, drawing them in. Education had been turned into a commodity in a largely private system that replicated the inequalities of Chilean market society. The existing educational system could not be the vehicle by which citizens could universally aspire to social mobility. This was a frame that successfully challenged the official discourse to legitimate the market-based model. It was then extended to other issues, such as labor rights, environmental justice, and identity politics.

By doing precisely this, the Chilean student movement served as a fulcrum for coalition building with other movements—a key to increasing the power of the movement. Throughout, it maintained its autonomy, demonstrating that co-optation is not necessarily the outcome of working with others. The student movement was secure in its identity, its goals (taking the market out of education), and its targets (school administrations and the state). Members did not engage in conflicts over representation with other movements, which left a broad swath of potential allies weary of market orthodoxy free to join in.

The Chilean students had great organizational capacity, from the department or lower school levels up through colleges, university-wide, and among national confederations. At each level students voted on whether to mobilize and on the

type of direct action they would employ. While rejecting in principle involvement in institutionalized politics, the Chilean student movement was very political. It sought to effect change in national education policy without getting embroiled in policy debates. It employed highly ritualized mass marches and rallies with deep roots in the history of social protest in Chile. The students obtained permits for the marches, which generally followed the same route and were limited to a timetable by the authorities. Riot police were deployed in numbers, at a distance but still visible and sufficiently menacing. The marches ended in rallies in front of government offices and the presidential palace, La Moneda. The implication was clear: problems could be solved in these buildings.

Not all was seriousness and anger; the marches had a strongly festive feeling, too. There were samba bands, dancing, huge puppets symbolizing the continuity of education policy from Pinochet to Michelle Bachelet to Piñera, banners made



Santiago: This mass kissing event, in July 2011, was both an effort on the part of Chilean students to call attention to grievances and a comment on establishment prudishness. (Photograph by Fernando Nabuel, *European Pressphoto Agency*)

by art school students, humorous drama school skits, and the famous mass-kissing events. When the official time for a march was up, the police would start to disperse the crowd. There were some violent skirmishes, and property was attacked; this was played up by national media in news reporting of the events. Students also occupied schools and universities for months to pressure administration officials. The government's attempts to divide and break the movement failed. The Chilean student movement achieved its objective of bringing the limits of market-oriented approaches to education—and to social policy more broadly—to the forefront of political discourse. By placing the issue on the agenda and by galvanizing the public's support, the students forced more established and institutionalized political actors to deal with it. This did not happen by accident. The students leveraged a critical political opportunity. The government had declared 2011 the year of higher education and had proclaimed education as the vehicle for social mobility in a market society. True to a campaign pledge, it had initiated a review of the education law inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship.

Might OWS activists think a little more politically about objectives, targets, opportunities, and actions without compromising their core values? OWS is more diverse and diffuse, but it could work at this nonetheless. "Unity in Diversity"—the watchword of the global justice movement, which successfully dealt with the problem of heterogeneous agendas, ideologies, social values, and perspectives—could be a useful guide to action. OWS activists could work on framing the issues differently. For instance, reducing income inequality requires taxation of higher-income groups. Highlighting this or some other issue as a means of understanding social inequality, particularly in ways that resonate with American political culture, could be a fruitful exercise. Whatever the frame, the exercise does not

require coming up with policy position papers, or making a list of demands, or giving up on inclusiveness of issues. It does imply a more strategic approach to explaining the roots of the problem through a narrative that members of a broader public can comprehend and recognize themselves in. One of the aims of such an approach would be to rouse the public to undertake action in its own way.

In just a few months, OWS started a national conversation about inequality. With the closing of many of its encampments, the movement entered a new phase. Some said the change would ensure success. Others think the movement will fail without political partners and compromise. More than forty years ago, the victims of racial and gender discrimination, young adults who repudiated conscription and the Vietnam War, students who wanted to protect their basic rights, and the disenfranchised organized themselves in distinct but overlapping movements. The civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and women's lib and the broader free speech and counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s led to fundamental changes in social norms, practices, and the law. However, as we know, the work in each case was left unfinished, and some of the gains were reversed with the ascent of conservative politics. Can OWS and its sister movements across the country seize the opportunity to move the progressive agenda forward?