

Chile's Transformation Amidst Crisis

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The Theseus Paradox

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*For Anna
To Olivia Maria and Luca Leon*

PREFACE

In October 2019, Chile—a country long celebrated as a beacon of stability and progress in Latin America—was suddenly thrust into the global spotlight for reasons few could have anticipated. What began as a modest fare increase in Santiago’s metro system ignited a wave of protests that quickly spread across the nation. The demands were urgent and wide-ranging, accompanied by an unprecedented surge of violence now known as the *estallido social* (social outburst). At the heart of the crisis lay a profound contradiction: how could a nation that had been so often hailed as a model erupt so suddenly into mayhem?

What followed was a dramatic and unlikely chain of events. Chile embarked on an ambitious journey to redefine itself through a new constitution, raising hopes for a fundamental transformation of its political system and social landscape. However, despite the momentum for change, voters ultimately rejected two proposals—first a progressive one and then a conservative one—effectively reaffirming the constitution originally drafted under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. This underscores a second contradiction: how can a country that had been so determined to fully overhaul its structure reject not one but two proposals to reform its foundational charter?

The purpose of this book is to examine the circumstances that led to the social outburst and then the failure of two constitutional processes. It delves into the structural conditions and moments that transformed Chile while leaving much of what had once been presented as a problem

in place. By exploring this “Theseus Paradox,” of sorts, this book seeks to provide a candid and unique account of Chile’s recent history, offering lessons for other developing democracies grappling with crises and contemplating reform, and examining in detail how much things really changed in Chile between 2019 and 2023.

The primary source of insight for this book comes from my experience as a political columnist for *Las Últimas Noticias* and *Ex-Ante*, two leading Chilean media outlets where I published hundreds of articles throughout the four-year ordeal. These columns, written in real-time, in the heat of the moment, offered a window into the experience of those navigating the crisis and served as theoretical placeholders while events still unfolded. Since many of the original ideas have withstood the test of time, they are woven into the text here, adding a perspective rooted in the immediacy of the events.

This work is further informed by my extensive engagement with both local and international media outlets attempting to make sense of the unfolding crisis. Speaking to journalists from global platforms such as *TIME*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Economist*, as well as traditional Chilean outlets like *El Mercurio*, *Diario Financiero*, and *TVN*, helped me identify the most contentious points of the rapidly evolving situation. Because I believe these interactions helped me understand the multidimensional nature of the events, many of those articles are included in the references as additional context.

Yet a third source of input comes from the numerous conversations I had with foreign investors and decision-makers. These dialogues illuminated the global significance of Chile’s upheaval and challenged me to explain the complex transformation that Chile was going through to an audience heavily invested in the country’s future. Since the concerns raised in these discussions helped refine my own stance on the situation at hand, I made sure to provide an account that was capable of addressing both the local and international spheres of the situation.

Finally, this book is shaped by my experience in academia. Attending and presenting at seminars, labs, research groups, and discussion forums across universities in the United States, Chile, and Italy, where much of this work was conducted, provided me with a deeper understanding of a problem that is, by nature, not only complex, but universal. The nuances of what is undeniably a delicate political situation are reflected not only in the multilayered analysis but also in its broad applicability across a diverse range of contexts.

The book is written for anybody interested in understanding the unexpected series of events that disrupted an otherwise stable and predictable country. It offers an accessible narrative that sheds light on Chile's trajectory, providing both background and an original account of the crisis and its aftermath.

Readers with little to no prior knowledge of Chile are encouraged to begin with Part I (Chapters 2–5), which provides a clear historical and conceptual foundation for understanding the issues at stake. While many of the topics covered here are explored in greater depth elsewhere, this section brings them together in a concise and accessible format, offering a coherent starting point for engaging with the more detailed analysis that follows.

Those already familiar with the Chilean case may prefer to start directly with Part II (Chapters 6–10), which examines the interplay of structural and contingent factors that ultimately triggered the social outburst. This section will be particularly relevant for risk analysts and country specialists, as it uncovers meaningful trends in the evolution of the party system and shifts in voter-party linkages through quantitative methods. These insights are complemented by a close reading of political discourse, shedding light on how competing narratives framed the crisis and influenced public perception.

Academics, in turn, may find value in Part III (Chapters 11–17), which traces the trajectory of the two constitutional processes and examines the factors behind their eventual failure as well as the events that took place in between. Scholars—especially political scientists and historians—will have access not only to original data and replication code but also to a rich set of supplemental materials, including a unique archive of documents that chronicle the unfolding of this pivotal chapter in Chile's recent history.

Finally, Part IV (Chapters 18–19), will be of particular interest to policymakers and stakeholders. These readers, who often focus more on the future than the past, will find a succinct synthesis of the key turning points that irreversibly reshaped the country's trajectory. These chapters are designed to stand alone and can be read independently of the rest of the book, offering a streamlined overview for those seeking a quick yet comprehensive understanding of the core arguments.

Readers interested in exploring supplementary materials, such as images, datasets, code, documents, and additional resources referenced throughout the book, are encouraged to visit the companion website at

<https://kennethbunker.github.io/theseus>. There, they will find a curated collection of files designed to complement and expand upon the topics discussed in each chapter, offering further depth and opportunities for independent analysis.

My hope is that this work will not only help make sense of Chile's experience but also encourage deeper reflection on the broader tensions between stability, crisis, and the choice to pursue reform amidst uncertainty.

Santiago, Chile

Kenneth Bunker

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I am equally appreciative of the journalists whose timely and probing questions helped uncover subtle yet important dynamics shaping public discourse. Through hundreds of interviews, chats and conversations—both in Chile and abroad—I was often challenged in ways that helped refine my thinking. While there are far too many of these interactions to mention individually here, I've done my best to document them on my website as a small way of recognizing their value.

I extend my thanks to the research colleagues with whom I collaborated on projects that intersected with the themes explored in this book during the period in which it was written. The research undertaken with Gabriel Negretto on electoral systems relates to some of the discussion presented in Chapter 6, while the work with John Polga-Hecimovich on cleavage theory relates to some of the ideas discussed in Chapter 7. In turn, the work on ideological polarization, carried out with Stéphanie Alenda and Miguel Ángel López, is more directly connected to the analysis of extremism and related dynamics presented in Chapter 12.

Although these collaborations emerged from distinct contexts, they each contributed meaningfully.

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So then, with that, here begins the account offered to the reader: a necessarily incomplete but deliberately straightforward interpretation of the events that profoundly and perhaps permanently altered the course of Chile. Written over time and shaped by chance, it is now as ready as it ever will be to be released into the sea. Any and all errors are mine, and mine alone.

Competing Interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.