

Chile's Transformation Amidst Crisis

Kenneth Bunker

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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

Acknowledgments I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this project. Special thanks to the Tresquintos team for their diligent data collection of roll-call votes during both constitutional processes, and their invaluable efforts in gathering data on voting intentions and presidential approval ratings over the years. I am also grateful to the members of the Laboratorio Democracia y Gobierno of the Universidad San Sebastián for their research support, coordination of activities, and general assistance throughout the process. Among others, these include Fernanda Arrieta, Hasan Basaran, Camila Daza, Emilio Espinosa, Lorena Galdames, Benjamín Valdés, Maximiliano Vargas, and Joselyn Vilches.

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I am grateful to the many financial and political analysts who generously shared their insights in private meetings, public seminars, academic forums, and informal exchanges over the years. While I am unable to mention them individually for confidentiality reasons, their perspectives greatly enriched my understanding of the complex relationship between politics and markets. I especially appreciate those who offered reflections on institutional risk, investor sentiment, and public finance, as well as those "on the ground" in Chile whose real-world experience added essential context to this research.

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.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth Bunker is an academic, consultant, and columnist with a PhD in Government and a Master of Research in Political Science from the London School of Economics. His research focuses on electoral systems, political parties, and electoral forecasting in new democracies. His work has been featured in leading political science journals, such as Party Politics, Electoral Studies, and the Journal of Political Ideologies. He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, Business, and Government and Director of the Democracy and Government Lab at San Sebastián University. He has held visiting appointments at Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Milan in Italy. He is currently affiliated with the University of Verona. Dr. Bunker is the creator and director of Tresquintos, a Chilean political consulting firm, as well as the leading political columnist for Chilean daily Las Últimas Noticias and online news platform Ex-Ante. He is a frequent political commentator in Chilean and international outlets. His website is: <https://kennethbunker.github.io/>

ABBREVIATIONS

AFPs	Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones
AHV	Acción Humanista Verde (Green Humanist Action)
AMA	Amarillos (Yellows)
AMP	Amplitud (Amplitude)
AN	Acción Nacional (National Action)
ANI	Alianza Nacional de los Independientes (National Alliance of Independents)
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
CH1	Chile Primero (Chile First)
CEP	Centro de Estudios Públicos
CIU	Ciudadanos (Citizens)
COM	Comunes (Commons)
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CS	Convergencia Social (Social Convergence)
DC	Democracia Cristiana (Christian Democratic Party)
DEMO	Demócratas (Democrats)
DR	Democracia Regional (Regional Democracy)
DRP	Democracia Regional Patagónica (Patagonian Regional Democracy)
ECO	Ecologistas (Ecologists)
ENP	Effective Number of Parties
Evópoli	Evolución Política (Political Evolution)
FA	Frente Amplio (Broad Front)
FDN	Fuerza del Norte (Force of the North)
FECH	Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile
FEUC	Federación de Estudiantes de la Pontificia Universidad Católica

FP	Frente Popular (Popular Front)
FREP	Frente Regional y Popular (Popular and Regional Front)
FRNV	Fuerza Regional Norte Verde (Northern Green Regional Force)
FRV	Frente Regional Verde (Green Regional Front)
FRVS	Federación Regionalista Verde Social (Social Green Regionalist Federation)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index
IC	Izquierda Cristiana (Christian Left)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISAPREs	Instituciones de Salud Previsional
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Poll
LOCE	Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza
LV	Los Verdes (The Greens)
MAPU	Movimiento de Acción Popular Unitario (Popular Unitary Action Movement)
MAS	Movimiento Amplio Social (Broad Social Movement)
MIRA	Movimiento Independiente Regionalista Agrario y Social (Independent Agrarian and Regionalist Social Movement)
MIR	Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Left Movement)
NAP	Nueva Alternativa Popular (New Popular Alternative)
NT	Nuevo Tiempo (New Time)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAIS	Partido Amplio de Izquierda Socialista (Country)
PAVP	Partido Alianza Verde Popular (Popular Green Alliance Party)
PCC	Partido Conservador Cristiano (Christian Conservative Party)
PC	Partido Comunista de Chile (Communist Party of Chile)
PEC	Partido Ecologista (Ecologist Party)
PEV	Partido Ecologista Verde (Green Ecologist Party)
PEVN	Partido Ecologista Verde del Norte (Green Ecologist Party of the North)
PH	Partido Humanista (Humanist Party)
PI	Partido Igualdad (Equality Party)
PL	Partido Liberal (Liberal Party)
PN	Partido Nacional (National Party)
PNC	Partido Nacional Ciudadano (Citizen National Party)
POD	Poder (Power)
PP	Partido Popular (People's Party)
PPD	Partido por la Democracia (Party for Democracy)
PRI	Partido Regionalista Independiente (Independent Regionalist Party)
PR	Partido Radical (Radical Party)

PRM	Partido Regionalista de Magallanes (Regionalist Party of Magallanes)
PRO	Partido Progresista (Progressive Party)
PRSD	Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (Social Democrat Radical Party)
PSC	Partido Social Cristiano (Social Christian Party)
PSD	Partido Socialdemócrata (Social Democratic Party)
PS	Partido Socialista (Socialist Party)
PSCH	Partido Socialista Chileno (Chilean Socialist Party)
PTR	Partido de Trabajadores Revolucionarios (Revolutionary Workers' Party)
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
SERVEL	Servicio Electoral de Chile
SQM	Sociedad Química y Minera de Chile
RD	Revolución Democrática (Democratic Revolution)
REP	Partido Republicano (Republican Party)
RN	Renovación Nacional (National Renewal)
SAY	Somos Aysén (We Are Aysén)
SUR	Partido del Sur (Southern Party)
TODOS	Todos (Everybody)
UCC	Unión de Centro Centro (Center-Center Union)
UDI	Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union)
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UP	Unidad Popular (Popular Unity)
URD	Unidos Resulta en Democracia (United Results in Democracy)
W	Wallmapuwen (Mapuche Nation)
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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