Power to the People?
(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

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Can politics of *ciudadanía* move social movements forward?

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The last decades of Chile’s socio-political and economic development have been widely highlighted as a key to understanding the neo-liberal turn in global politics (Harvey 2005). Chile was the place where neo-liberal policies were first largely developed and imposed on the population, and the neo-liberal project has continued being the hegemonic socio-political project until today. Yet, important movements and moments of resistance to the neo-liberal model have taken place in the country recently. In 2004, there was massive political mobilisation against the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders’ Summit, which included the visit of George W Bush to the country.

Membership in APEC is part of the strategy of Chile’s integration into the capitalist global economy. APEC aims at the development of free and open trade between its associates. Several groups joined in resistance to this meeting, and alliances were created to this effect. One such alliance was the Chile Social Forum (CHSF) that organised a social forum during the days of the APEC meeting. Organisations grouped under the CHSF were varied, and several political positions converged in this space. For some organisations, the focus of activism was highly dependent on a *ciudadanía*-based discourse. For others, the focus was on a clearer opposition to neo-liberal policies, and for others again anti-capitalism was the issue to be addressed during these events.

Another movement of resistance to neo-liberalism in Chile took place during 2006, when a huge protest movement arose with Chilean secondary students as its protagonists. The students involved, adolescents between 14 and 18 years old, abruptly changed the political scenario of the nation through the occupation of schools, strikes and protests in
public streets all over the country. Students claimed that their main goal was a thorough transformation of the educational system. Among other things, they asked for the substitution of Chilean education laws that were passed during Pinochet’s dictatorship but still valid. The student strike of 2006 came as a response to a crisis in the education system, which had been a national issue for many years, with different actors constantly criticising both the discriminatory structure of the system, the structural inequalities and the poor results of recent reforms in term of quality of education (Alarcon 2007).

Another episode of political mobilisation against central pillars of the neo-liberal model was the strike of forest workers in 2007. This strike aimed at obtaining a collective bargain for workers within contractor or subcontractor firms to one of the largest forest companies in the country. Even though strikes were rejected and considered illegal by the forest company, it was forced to accept this kind of procedure through the strike and massive mobilisations of the trade unions. The forest company was forced to assume responsibility for the working conditions also within their contractor or subcontractor firms, thereby relating the economic and working condition claims directly to the income of the large forest company.

During recent years, concepts and discussions on citizenship have been flourishing. One scholar, for example, recognises at least eleven different approaches to the idea of citizenship (Close 1995). The problematic relation between politics of citizenship and struggles for broader social emancipation was also one focus of Marx in his book On the Jewish Question. Marx criticised that the idea of citizenship was used to separate different spheres of the human search for emancipation. A similar problem was noted by E P Thompson (1989) in his analysis of the citizenship-based arguments of worker movements in England during the process of workers becoming a working class.

The briefly described cases above tell us important things about the challenge of developing a theoretical discussion on how to understand the relations between theories and concepts on ciudadanía, on the one hand, and recent developments of resistance to as well as the stability of neoliberalism and capitalist hegemony in Chile on the other hand. The question is: can politics of ciudadanía move social movements forward in Chile?
While the idea of a *ciudadanía*-based social movement was launched by some organisations within the anti-APEC coalition, other movements presented above lacked the crucial articulation of the *ciudadanía* idea in their political discourses and identity politics. In fact, two of the biggest recent movements of resistance to neo-liberalism in Chile based their articulations on the very material points of organising subcontracted workers and structurally discriminated students. One could argue that it was the materiality of their lives as students and subcontracted workers that articulated the construction of political mobilisation in those movements.

The fact that material circumstances were fundamental when building the political identity is a key issue when considering the potential of *ciudadanía* as an articulating political concept within social movements. ‘Poor urban dwellers’ or ‘landless peasants’, for example, would be material situations that could articulate political identity in a better way. Besides, recent Chilean governments have used the notion of *ciudadanía* in order to articulate *their* political discourses. When opposing the governments’ use of the idea of citizenship social movements in Chile, we would therefore need to invoke another meaning of the *ciudadanía* that is being referred to, qualifying it by talking about ‘authentic’ *ciudadanía*, for example. This would imply to contrast and even oppose other understandings of *ciudadanía* that do not fulfill the requirements of authenticity.

The use of the notion of *ciudadanía* on the part of different Chilean governments, as indicated above, runs parallel to attempts to develop social movements, also through the articulation of political discourses with the notion of *ciudadanía*. Moreover, a tradition of political identification through the notion of ‘popular movement’ and ‘pueblo’ exists in Chile, so the future of *ciudadanía* as ‘the’ articulating concept for social movements becomes problematic. It may even turn into a political option that runs counter to better political articulations, when it comes to informing social movements that may bring about social changes in the country.
Notes

1. The Spanish term *ciudadanía* – analogous to the English ‘citizenship’ – is in this text used within the rationale of the theme of the session in which the paper was presented, referring to a broad range of rights.

2. Marx’s *On the Jewish Question* (1844) states the problem as follows: “The actual individual man must take the abstract citizen back into himself and, as an individual man in his empirical life, in him in his individual work and individual relationships, become a species-being; man must recognise his own forces as social forces, organise them and thus no longer separate social forces from himself in the form of political forces. Only when this has been achieved will human emancipation be completed (Marx 1844).

References


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