

The Miracle, the Awakening, and the Celebration

Reflections for a Postneoliberal Chile

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ABSTRACT This essay reflects critically on the neoliberal Chile of the last forty years. Taking Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* as a frame of reference, the essay offers an analysis of the recent Chilean uprising. It argues that the revolt of October 2019 expressed a deep rejection of the existing economic model, emphasizing its cultural concomitants and questioning the practices of self-exploitation imposed by neoliberal work culture. The first part of the essay develops a critical picture of the figure of the entrepreneur, an embodiment of meritocratic ideology and cornerstone of the Chilean neoliberal project. After this, the essay proposes an argument to explain the historical forces behind the uprising and the different forms of resistance expressed since. It concludes with an invitation to rethink work as such and its role in a future postneoliberal Chile.

KEYWORDS Chile, work, self-exploitation, achievement society, social uprising

The present text seeks to reflect critically on the neoliberal Chile of the last forty years. The goal is to stimulate forms of rethinking Chile that will challenge the dogmas of meritocracy and employment “success” and the logics of productivity that govern Chilean society. The text offers a critical appreciation of the behaviors associated with neoliberal culture tied to the ideology of entrepreneurship and self-exploitation. It puts pressure on the supposed virtues of the Chilean model, and it exposes the negative emotional effects that neoliberal culture elicits. It argues that the neoliberal model has provoked various kinds of loss, distributed asymmetrically throughout Chilean society. Therefore, considering the neoliberal slogan “Chile winner” (*Chile ganador*), my text is an invitation to think about the (economic and emotional) losers left behind by a model that promotes an excess of

individualism. Those losers are found in every corner of the country—drowning in the perpetual debt brought upon by excessive consumption through credit. Taking as a point of departure philosopher Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society*, I ask: What is the sense of loss that persists in Chilean society? What kinds of loss can we identify? How is loss lived in an allegedly successful country? How do people live with and alongside those who are responsible for murders, disappearances, and torture—the very people who are the winners of the last forty years? What will be the future of mourning in Chilean society? How will it deal not just with the dead of the dictatorship but with the new dead of the social eruption?

Until very recently, it was said of Chile that it was a country without memory. Gladys Marín, the emblematic leader of the Partido Comunista Chileno, said this many times during the 1990s in her critique of the social reality imposed by the Chilean transition. The pact of silence and forgetting agreed upon by the political class after the civico-military dictatorship constituted an epoch of mandatory amnesia. And even though forgetting was not generalized, it was constantly promoted by the various government regimes. Those who refused to forget did so as a counterhegemonic political act. Chilean society didn't have the right to memorialize its dead publicly. This unavowed mourning left a feeling of melancholia among Chileans. The forgers of the dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet emerged as the winners of a neoliberal Chile that bragged about being the most successful country in Latin America. Chile, in fact, was a nation with the salaries of a poor country and the prices of a rich one. As for the debate about whether the social unrest of 2019 was a rejection of the neoliberal economic model or whether, on the contrary, it was merely a resentful protest for greater access to consumption, my argument is that it evidently was the former—a rejection of a model that was only supposedly successful as well as a diatribe against a neoliberal culture whose crux is the doctrine "Save yourself if you can." This refusal of the neoliberal model was expressed in different ways by at least a section of the Chilean population that took to the streets during the weeks afterward. The pandemic came months later, and it battered the everyday life of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, proving once again the inconsistencies of a model that exacerbates economic and social inequality.

The present text seeks to reflect critically on this asymmetrical distribution of loss in Chilean society, where the poorest men and women take on the loss caused by the "Chilean miracle." Such a loss was not only economic but cultural, since the "miracle" provoked a destruction of collective identities and of a sense of community within the Chilean population. So the economic model had an even more pronounced cultural impact. The precarity of everyday life was accompanied by a spiritual precarity.

A part of Chilean society tried to fill that spiritual void by becoming increasingly attached to various evangelical churches, which proliferated throughout the

country, with thousands of Chileans attempting to regain a lost sense of community. Nonetheless, that avenue didn't challenge the neoliberal narrative of freedom and progress; in fact, it has become an ideological resource for the dominant classes.

It is because of all this that Chile appears today as an exhausted society. Tired of losing so much, drowning in debt, worn down by its alleged success, Chile exploded in October 2019. Even though it wasn't the first time (the student protests of 2006, 2011, and 2013 anticipated much of what would happen later), what took place in 2019 was something of greater intensity, something more developed, given its national reach and, above all, the fact that it was a movement that surpassed the political limits of the student movement.

Of course, not all of Chile took to the streets to protest the order of things. After all, what we here call the neoliberal subject's reach doesn't extend to the entire Chilean population. A part of the country—perplexed, astonished, skeptical—contented itself with watching what took place. So here I make a distinction between two forms of subjectivity that (among others) share space in neoliberal Chile. One of them embraces the economic model, has profited from it, and is willing to defend it to the last. This subject we will call the entrepreneur. The other subject dealt with in this text is the one embodied by those who took to the streets to fight against the neoliberal model in different forms and for various reasons. Those people come from different socioeconomic strata, with various gender identities, and they cannot be treated homogeneously as if they were all the same. Still, they share a spirit of rebelliousness against the neoliberal project and what it represents. They are, then, different subjects who, in the heat of political battle, come together to form a common subject made up of a multiplicity of attributes: antineoliberal, anticonservative, and counterhegemonic.

It was this last group that filled the country's boulevards from October 18, 2019, on. The intense heightening of individual debt led to an explosion of the system's foundations in a wave of protests rarely seen in the country's recent history. The fury of those days had an unmistakable political meaning, since it was a direct refusal of the neoliberal economic model and of the political class that implemented it. Still, such violence was confronted with an even greater violence in the form of state repression, which brought to memory that other, disavowed violence of forty years ago. The ambivalence of the healing and the impossibility of reconciliation were thus exposed. The social eruption exhibited the most profound wounds of Chilean society.

The Entrepreneur

In his essay *The Burnout Society*, the philosopher Byung-Chul Han affirms that we no longer live in the disciplinary society that Michel Foucault described, arguing that we live rather in an achievement society, where we must develop strategies

of self-exploitation, attesting to the triumph of the ideology of neoliberal competitiveness. The obsession with productivity in our times leads to a situation of everyday failures and depression. According to Han, we are a depressed society. All this notoriously applies in Chilean society. In today's Chile, one sees a direct link between depression and work: low salaries, long working hours, precarious conditions. The neoliberal economic model is tied to precarious work, to more informal employment, all-too-often obscured by the rhetoric of flexibility and its supposed virtues. Given this reality, I ask: Is a new way of understanding work in postneoliberal Chile possible? Are new ways of relating to our labor possible? What paths must we follow to avoid the autoexploitative logics imposed by neoliberal culture?

Han's essay is a contribution to a theoretical understanding of what happened in Chile after forty years of neoliberalism. But it doesn't focus on consumption or the market like the Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian did in the 1990s.¹ Working from another angle, Han sets his eyes on labor and the logics of self-exploitation imposed by neoliberal culture. Such a culture is linked to the ideology of meritocracy and the supposed virtues of the neoliberal work ethic, which promotes unrealistic work objectives that are completely unfeasible for most Chilean workers. Thus, Moulian's texts, which were key during the 1990s, need updating two decades later.

The Chile of today is a very different country than it was twenty years ago. The neoliberal project has acquired cultural characteristics that go beyond consumption patterns, leaving indelible marks on practices of self-exploitation and hyper-productivity. Moulian's analysis drew attention to how the political militancy of the Chilean working class was diluted by its desire to consume North American or Japanese products and by its attraction to the bourgeois lifestyle projected through television screens purchased through credit. Moulian deepened our understanding of Chile's recent history, its modernizing process, and the country's electoral party landscape, but his work didn't develop a meticulous analysis of self-exploitative behaviors and performance-measuring practices promoted by the neoliberal economic model. Therefore, although his approach was valid, Moulian stopped short of developing a forceful critique of the impact of the neoliberal model on labor practices in Chile. Han's critique, by contrast, offers new ways of understanding the losses imposed by this model that is almost forty years old. We live in an achievement society now.

It stands to reason, then, that this society doesn't value leisure. Neoliberal ideology makes room only for business. It has fostered the illusion that all of us can be entrepreneurs of the self, treating our bodies and our lives like neoliberal businesses, with expenditures and costs, profits and benefits. The existence of "free time" to be enjoyed implies the existence of another "time of enslavement" to be endured. All this evidently has psychological and emotional repercussions. Han affirms that "the neuronal illnesses of the twenty-first century follow a

dialectic: not the dialectic of negativity but that of positivity. They are pathological conditions deriving from an *excess of positivity*.”²

But my critique of the work practices imposed by the neoliberal project does not seek to reproduce conservative ideas of the evils of modernity. On the contrary, my critique of modernity draws on a decolonial perspective, where modernity is inseparable from coloniality as a direct legacy of historical colonial processes.³ Therefore, it’s an anticolonial orientation that sees in the neoliberal project colonial patterns that reproduce dynamics of racial capitalism, where hierarchies of race and gender persist in the twenty-first century. The social eruption that took place in Chile in 2019 was, in large part, an attack on such colonial dynamics, which have been pervasive in the country for the last forty years—as suggested by the fact that the Mapuche flag was present, even more than the Chilean one, in every protest.

The Chilean entrepreneur, however, does not share this critique. They reject any analysis that puts pressure on the alleged virtues of free commerce and waged work. They embody market optimism and inflict such optimism on Chilean society through mass communication media as if it were a pervasive truth. As a result of this feigned positivity, they seek to hide the fallacies of the neoliberal model. There is, in other words, a massification of positivity. But this is not a matter of a healthy optimism, of a hope-inducing optimism that is life-affirming and forward-looking, but rather of an alienated positivity that betrays the subject and commits them to impossible, unrealistic goals. Out of reach, such goals eventually lead to frustration and exhaustion.

But exhaustion is not the only thing that overwhelms the Chilean entrepreneur. It’s appropriate to speak also of a profound boredom afflicting the neoliberal subject. They turn to their cell phone at every moment. They’re addicted to it, seeking to kill time. They’re no longer poor, miserable, like they were years earlier during the dictatorship. Now they drive a new car and live in a chic high-rise apartment. Their misery is spiritual. A subject of performance, they are obsessed with productivity. An entrepreneur of the self, an exploiter of their own body—here lies the Chilean neoliberal subject.

According to Han, “Foucault’s analysis of power cannot account for the psychic and topological changes that occurred as disciplinary society transformed into an achievement society” (*TBS*, 8). Disciplinary society has too much negativity. Present society, on the other hand, is full of optimism. The Chilean entrepreneur dreams of becoming a millionaire, of creating a recycling business only to sell it later. They’re full of optimism, which overwhelms, tires, and exhausts them but continues to exploit them even when they are not in need of money.

They look at the future with optimism. They feel powerful, conscious of their potentiality. They embody an excess of positivity that overwhelms them. They want

so much they can't fall asleep. So it is that "prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. A disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, an achievement society creates depressives and losers" (TBS, 9). Chile, a success story, a country of winners. A piece of Europe trapped in Latin America.

There is, however, no spirit of revolt in the Chilean entrepreneur. Their rebellious attitude is spent on the consumption of a few grams of cocaine, a prelude to alcohol-induced intoxication, because "the obedient subject remains disciplined. It has now completed the disciplinary stage" (TBS, 9). The neoliberal subject doesn't stop to contemplate anything. They rush constantly, as if stopping to think unnerved them. If they stop, they do so to look at their phone. Human life "has never been as fleeting as it is today. Not just human life, but the world in general is becoming radically fleeting. Nothing promises duration or substance (*Bestand*). Given this lack of Being, nervousness and unease arise" (TBS, 18). Precarious life, ephemeral contracts, informal work, all of this bare life. Labor itself appears as a bare activity.

The entrepreneur is an active person. They get up early, even on days off. Free time bothers them. The entrepreneur leads an empty life, which they pretend to fill with consumption—whether of drugs, alcohol, or any commodities that they think they need. They live a bare life; they don't have friends beyond virtual ones.

According to Han, who alludes to Giorgio Agamben's work, "Life today is even barer than the life of *homo sacer*" (TBS, 18). Han deepens his critique of the Italian philosopher, referring to the *homines sacri* of today's achievement society. Agamben doesn't recognize that power no longer needs to force the neoliberal subject to exploit himself. Agamben, too close to Foucault, cannot see that the disciplinary society did its job all too well and that the neoliberal subject has internalized their own exploitation, which they embrace deliriously and christen "success." Thus, "the subject of achievement stands free from the external instances of domination forcing it to work and exploiting it. It is subject to no one but itself" (TBS, 48–49). This situation has clear effects—at the level of identity, emotion, and psychology—that the neoliberal *homo sacer* cannot and does not want to recognize. As a result of this, the neoliberal entrepreneur is submerged in the cult of image. They go to the gym to look good. And because they look good, they believe they feel good. The healthy body becomes an obsession and acts as yet another drug that hides their own alienation—a failed entrepreneur, convinced of their own success, for whom it is no longer enough to make money to feel good.

The twenty-first-century entrepreneur "hearkens mainly to *itself*. After all, it must be a self-starting entrepreneur [*Unternehmer seiner selbst*]" (TBS, 38). This entrepreneur's body is their enterprise, their life a career that is subjected to constant evaluation: "No *dimension of alterity* is involved. Depression—which often

culminates in burnout—follows from overexcited, overdriven, excessive self-reference that has assumed destructive traits. The exhausted, depressive achievement-subject grinds itself down, so to speak” (TBS, 42). Self-realization and self-destruction become one. The neoliberal depressive is amorphous, a person without traits. Extinguished, exhausted from so much success, they end up drowning in the most brutal solitude and tortuous boredom. However, “this self-constraint, which poses as freedom, has deadly results” (TBS, 46). Competition has been disguised as the myth of meritocracy, the cornerstone of neoliberal ideology, which seeks to convince us all that we are entrepreneurs, potentially successful, as long as we routinely, joyfully exploit ourselves. In this way, the subject of achievement “positivizes itself; indeed, it liberates itself into a *project*. . . . Auto-compulsion, which presents itself as freedom, takes the place of allo-compulsion” (TBS, 46). All this takes place in the context of capitalist relations of production, which are becoming more and more efficient, since they give off an air of freedom—becoming a supposedly reachable fantasy worth burning oneself out for. Thus, the “subject of achievement exploits itself until it burns out” (TBS, 47). As a result, suicide is around the corner. Or on the balcony. Capitalist accumulation, which profits from the self-exploitation of the neoliberal subject, has its mirror image in the accumulation of frustrations sedimented in the soul of the last man, the weary worker, exhausted from so much success.

Han affirms that “neoliberalism, which produces so much injustice, is not beautiful.”⁴ No. Neoliberalism, obsessed with producing profit, obsessed with despoliation and infinite accumulation, with constant production and infinite economic growth, is not beautiful. Its material riches produce human miseries, mental collapses, delirious sleeplessness. “Hypercapitalism turns human relations into commercial relations. It steals human dignity and replaces it with market value” (SDC, 117). That’s why October 2019 was a concrete call to save the dignity that had been denied to so many. Stone by stone, with fire and barricades, the popular anger shook the foundations of the Chilean neoliberal project, demanding a revival of dignity. Calling for the social recognition that the market cannot provide.

Awakenings

But the Chilean entrepreneur is only one of many subjectivities in today’s Chile. They don’t represent the whole, just a part. The part that embraces the neoliberal model as a pathway to happiness. In today’s Chile, several, often conflicting, subjectivities live side by side. Beyond the entrepreneur, there is a rebellious Chilean who refuses to be the passive object of neoliberal doctrine and its fantasies. There is a Chilean who struggles, in different ways, with the false projects of extraction-based development, economic inequality, and dispossession. It was that rebellious Chilean who came out to fill the boulevards, teeming with anger and frustration but also hope and a desire for change.

On October 19, 2019, there was an explosion of street violence, as if all the combined grievances of the victims of the neoliberal economic model exploded one night. Residual wrath became political energy. Suddenly, neoliberal Chile seemed to reject its own achievements. The repressed anger over consumption poured forth as if from an active volcano. Or a Chilean-style earthquake. In the middle of this urban uprising in October, one word became powerful: *dignity*. The Chilean multitude was reclaiming its lost dignity, usurped by forty years' worth of abuse and anguish. The neoliberal project robbed two generations of Chileans of dreams, childhoods, identities, communities, and possibilities. The neoliberal pillaging reproduced colonial dynamics of accumulation by dispossession. The economic model destroyed the population's sense of belonging, leaving in its wake a widespread melancholy that needs to be depathologized. The ever-growing sense of loss, its asymmetrical distribution, cannot be split apart from a profound melancholy for the lost Chile, the predictorship Chile, idealized through collective nostalgia, often of an unconscious kind—expressed through music, cinema, and literature.

Nonetheless, new paths of redemption emerged in the form of a new constitution to replace the old one, a direct legacy of the dictatorship, because “rage is the capacity to interrupt a given state and *make a new state begin*” (TBS, 23). A sense of urgency around the possibility of a new social pact became evident: will it be enough? A new economic model capable of recovering the lost community seems indispensable. All in all, it seems necessary to recover not only what was lost but the sense of loss itself and the right to mourn in Chilean society—the recognition of loss, the acceptance of it, if only to allow Chileans to later reflect on whether the lost object is worth recovering. Han, full of pessimism, writes that “in this context all resistance, revolt, or revolution is impossible” (SDC, 109). And here's where I radically depart from him, since October 2019 is evidence to the contrary; it proves that the accumulated fury, beyond individual or collective depression, could ignite a popular wrath leading to the most important social upheaval of the last decades in Chile. Han affirms that “we have lost the capacity to be surprised” (SDC, 118). Nonetheless, the scope of the October uprising surprised the whole of Chile, rousing it from a deep slumber, from a long neoliberal nap. Because during the course of this October, the students—the usual antagonists of the neoliberal project—were not the only ones who took to the streets. Many people who had never protested before did so for the first time then. So what was surprising about the 2019 movement was less that young people came out in opposition to the neoliberal economic model and political elites than that the part of society that was usually against protests was for them this time around. This, then, gave the movement a legitimacy and transversal support at a national level that few uprisings before achieved.

The street uprising that came after the eruption had a profound political meaning. It expressed the tiredness brought on not only by the economic model but also

by Chilean political parties. Han affirms that “tiredness of this kind proves violent because it destroys all that is common or shared, all proximity, and even language itself” (TBS, 31). However, “‘fundamental tiredness’ *inspires*. It allows spirit/intellect [Geist] to emerge” (TBS, 32). This is the paradox of tiredness. Chilean neoliberal society was an achievement society that didn’t recognize its own tiredness. It did not wish to face it. Submerged in contradictions, the country seemed to be growing ever richer but ever more miserable, too. One had the impression that Chile was lacking life. It was a soulless country. A spiritless nation. Melancholy and affliction remained submerged in the whirlwind of consumption—latent in more quotidian forms of pain brought on by eternal debt, drowned in credit. The neoliberal subject inhabited the tiredness of the “I.” It was, as Han says, living through a history of exhaustion. October 2019 was at once a lament and an accusation.

The political project lost in 1973, extracted like a Marxist cancer, did not disappear from the Chilean collective unconscious. A painful feeling of melancholy took hold, an inability to mourn a project that was not to be but could have been. But such melancholy must establish a creative relation to the lost object, where what’s fundamental will be the incorporation of the loss into the community, individuals, and the Chilean popular tradition. So, paradoxically, the experience of loss exposes the dangers of a melancholic fetishism that seeks to establish a deadened relation to the past, that seeks a return to a country that no longer exists. All of this is evidence of the ambivalence of loss: creative and fetishized, displaced and static, eternal and ephemeral.

According to Han, “Mourning differs from depression above all through its strong libidinal attachment to an object. In contrast, depression is objectless and therefore undirected” (TBS, 43). The Chilean left’s object is the socialist, democratic, popular project that was brought down and bombed on September 11, 1973. But the left wasn’t the only group that took to the streets on October 18, 2019. The depressives came out, too. It was as if violence had therapeutic virtues. In any event, “it is important to distinguish depression from melancholy. Melancholy is preceded by the experience of loss. Therefore it still stands in a relation—namely, a *negative relation*—to the absent thing or party. In contrast, depression is cut off from all relation and attachment” (TBS, 43). Neoliberal depression does not have a fetish to yearn for. One is depressed without knowing why. Work success and economic well-being do not bring personal satisfaction. The neoliberal entrepreneur cannot find repose. They don’t know peace. Han affirms that “mourning occurs when an object with a strong libidinal cathexis goes missing” (TBS, 43). In the Chilean case, the lost object was the popular socialist project embodied in Salvador Allende’s government. However, the libidinal object was not Allende, perhaps not even socialism, but the possibility of constructing a popular Chile, a Chile for the people. The desire to try once more to build a democratic Chile that, from

below, builds the foundations of a better society—this is a desire that persists in latent form in the collective consciousness of the Chilean people. That utopia was also part of the set of multiple subjectivities that emerged during the uprising. It expressed itself in songs, dances, and other artistic forms in the streets of Santiago. A utopia that remained latent in the collective memory of that part of the country that refused to embrace the neoliberal model and its false promises of wealth, success, and happiness.

Leisure and the Festivities

By way of conclusion, I propose to turn to a different form of tiredness proper to a society that values leisure, that appreciates inactivity, nonproduction—one that appreciates work as only a part of life, without ascribing to it totalizing traits that turn working life into life as such. I propose to turn to what Han calls “fundamental tiredness.” “Fundamental tiredness’ suspends the ego’s isolation and founds a community that needs no kinship. Here a particular rhythm (*Takt*) emerges that leads to agreement (*Zusammenstimmung*), proximity, and vicinity (*Nachbarschaft*) without familial or functional connections.” Another Chile. Another being. We move toward a society that opposes the active society, one that would be “a society of those who are tired in a special way” (*TBS*, 34). That new society will be the society of tiredness. But this tiredness will be recognized, valued, sought after. It will be the tiredness of those who rest. Of those satisfied with their labor. Of those who don’t live to work. Of those who don’t seek out success. Of those who don’t believe in the “Chilean miracle.”

It will be a sublime time. Han reminds us that “the gods neither produce nor work. Perhaps we should recover that divinity, that festive divinity, instead of continuing to serve work and achievement” (*SDC*, 105). Work is a right, says modernity. Disciplinary society transformed it into an obligation. The achievement society turned work into a virtue. “Work time, which is becoming total today, destroys the sublime time, the time of celebration” (*SDC*, 106). Postneoliberal Chile must reconceptualize the time of celebration. The quiet festival, the time of tranquility, the festival that embraces the intoxications of art, music, and poetry, but that avoids chemically induced intoxications. Because “sublime time is a replete time, different from work time, which is empty and one searches in vain to fill, moving between boredom and industriousness” (*SDC*, 107). Postneoliberal society must learn to value leisure over work, free time over the time of enslavement. Neoliberal Chile, rejected on October 18, 2019, is a Chile made sick by consumption, a Chile of malls, credit, and debt. October opened the door to other forms of life, other forms of happiness. Here Han’s pessimism is not enough; we must embrace, as a moral duty, an ethics of optimism, where hope wins out over fear; where solidarity wins out over egoism; where cooperation replaces capitalist competition. For that,

“it will be necessary to escape from the major shopping malls. We should turn the malls into a house, or better yet, into a celebratory space that’s actually worth living in” (SDC, 118). October was a celebration.

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Notes

1. Moulian, *Chile Actual*; Moulian, *El consumo me consume*.
2. Han, *Burnout Society*, 4 (hereafter cited in text as TBS).
3. Dussel, Moraña, and Jauregui, *Coloniality at Large*; Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*.
4. Han, *Sociedad del cansancio*, 113 (hereafter cited in text as SDC).

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