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SPAN 309

12/20/18

The Evolution of Politics in Chile

The history of Chile is a tumultuous but ultimately a triumphant one. In 1541 Chile, like many countries in Latin America, was colonized by Spain and its capital Santiago was founded by Pedro de Valdivia. With the revolutions in the British North American colonies along with the French revolution, Spain was concerned about unrest in their own colonies. In an attempt to prevent foreign influence Spain enacted many laws including banning “the entry of books printed outside Spain and prohibited printed presses inside of the colonies.”(Minnis, 2004, p. 33). These attempts weren’t quite successful however and “subversive” materials still made their way to the colonies in some way or form.

The status of Spanish control in Chile couldn’t last and eventually the situation culminated in a coup d'etat in 1811 and in 1812 Chile created a new constitution pledging loyalty to the Spanish monarch while simultaneously calling out for recognition of sovereignty. Along with establishing rights for the individual, it set limits to governmental power and a system in place for the people to choose their government. This new constitution was met with a following invasion by the Spaniards in retaliation in 1813. After repeated wars for independence Chile was finally triumphant when Chilean patriots took over Santiago and Independence was declared on January 1st 1818, under a new regime. From there on “once Independence was won from Spain, there was no stopping the new republic and Chile soon became of the strongest economies in the Americas.”(Minnis, 2004, p.33).

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

1832 marked the start of the mining boom in the country. Mine products overtook Chile's economy and by 1881 made up to 78% of its exports. Meanwhile alongside this the 1850's came with the rise of a new wealthy class based in commerce and industry, helping to push out the class based on old money and aristocratic wealthy land ownership. This was solidified by 1857 with redistribution of land estates and the depression that followed, depreciating agricultural land value and successfully flipping the economic and social positions of those apart of the old power to the new upcoming rich.

At the same time, previously crushed middle-class liberals began their re-emergence, pushing for political and social reform as well as speaking out against religious authority. A conservative by the name of Alberto Edward Vives even said that "the religious question, above all others, gave rise to party politics in Chile."(Pike, 1963, p. 16). Many members of the ruling class in Chile gathered together under their pro-church sentiment and founded the highly Catholic Conservative Party. The opposition, who were in favor of the president and congress, formed the National or Montt-Varista Party. However, even though it was against the church it 'was authoritarian and as aristocratic in its make up as the rival Conservative Party.'(Pike, 1963, p. 17).

By the 1920s the rising middle class was finally powerful enough to elect Arturo Alessandri, a reformist president. The congress at the time was still conservative however leaving Alessandri's program with less than desired accomplished. From this

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

dissatisfaction, the 1920s also saw to the rise of support for Marxist groups, key factor in class relations in the country.

Even with the push for class equality however, women's rights were still far behind and women weren't even given the right to vote nationally until 1949. Contradictorily, women were already steadfastly active in municipal elections and politics. In fact, the first female mayor of Santiago was elected in 1939, a full ten years prior to the decision in favor of women's right to participate in presidential elections. Her name was Graciela Contreras de Schnake and she "was not only the first female mayor, but also the first Socialist to be appointed to the alcalde position."(Allen, 2010, p.3) she was also a socialist, surprising many onlookers that only just a woman but a socialist woman was able to be appointment, showcasing the rising tides of Marxism in the country.

From this point on the presence of women in politics grew slowly. An important distinction to note however, is that "while several women obtained prominent political positions in this era, they were almost always elite women of the Radical Party whose husbands were also involved in politics."(Allen, 2010, p. 5.) As a whole there was and still is a rift between the access to rights for women depending on their class. Many upper and middle class women had access to education or professions but for the rest of Chile's women these opportunities were still closed off. By the 1970s the rate of illiteracy in Santiago and its surrounding areas was still 15% higher for women than

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

men, partially demonstrating the situation for lower class women into the rise and eventual fall of the Allende administration.

This rise in Marxist popularity culminated when Chile elected Salvador Allende, marking his place in world history as the first democratically elected Marxist leader. His administration went about extended effort for radical social reform such as authorizing the state to take over mining companies and increasing the number of nationalized farms. His election brought to light how deeply polarized the nation was and “this polarization along class lines was reflected sharply among Chilean women... The women who belonged to the aristocracy or to the upper-middle class saw their station in life infringed upon.”(Allen, 2010, p. 7). Many of their protests were dismissed however, as they were seen as mere mouth pieces for male conservatives. Even among left wing Chileans Allende’s accomplishments were met with controversy, for while at first under his administration the economy seemed to grow, after a year it took a turn for the worse. The price of Chile’s major export, copper, fell, Inflation skyrocketed along with imports of food creating an imbalance of the country’s payments.

The U.S was never comfortable with Allende as president, concerned with his Communist Sympathies, which wasn’t helped when he invited Castro to Chile in 1972. The political unrest that met Allende’s administration helped set the stage for the U.S and after three short years he was ousted in a secretly U.S backed military coup. Though the U.S’s involvement wouldn’t be revealed for years to come and is still

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

debated by some. In President Allende's place came Pinochet who led the military dictatorship that shaped the country's class structure and politics for decades to come.

Under Pinochet almost all of Allende's reforms were reversed. He "returned most of the industries nationalized by Allende to their prior owners, slashed public spending, and repressed the trade union movement," in a "capitalist oriented counter-revolution." (Muir, 2005). Furthermore, in an ode to irony his removal of large landowners "paved the way for the capitalist mode of agricultural production established by the military after 1973." (Muir, 2005)

The 1973 coup d'etat and following military regime under Pinochet affected all aspects of Chilean life including but not limited to gender conceptions. Under his control the progress for women's rights were only stifled. Through organizations such as CEMA-Chile and the National Secretariat of Women, both headed by the dictator's wife, "Pinochet promoted traditional gender roles for women, such as being loyal and submissive wives and not working outside the home." (Allen, 2010, p. 2). Under his government new legislation was also made that granted "men legal control of their wives and their wives' property." Furthermore, with divorce being illegal and only legal annulment being possible, which was very expensive, made it so that "while many women suffered because of the lack of divorce laws, the poor were hit hardest." (Allen, 2010, p. 23).

His abuse of human rights finally caught up to him and after an economic crisis that brought a resurgence of left-wing groups and a failed assassination attempt in

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

1986, he was voted against in a referendum that was meant to confirm his next eight years in 1988. After elections in 1989 Pinochet was forced to relinquish presidency and official power, however in his place he left his own appointed block of senators so he did not quite give up control. Pinochet even went on as the head of army until 1998.

Chile has come along way since the days of Pinochet and has gone on to make many strides in the ways of women's rights and even elected their first female President, Michelle Bachelet, in 2006 and again in 2014. However, with Bachelet leaving office and being succeeded by Sebastian Piñera, a well known misogynist and conservative, the country appears to be in danger of regressing to the Conservative wave that has made its way through the rest of the continent.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.
Shannon Liuag

Shannon Liuag

SPAN 309

12/20/18

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