


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Cultural Battle for the Chilean Model: Intellectual Elites in Times of Politicisation (2010–17)

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(Received 30 September 2020; revised 12 August 2022; accepted 17 August 2022; first published online 3 February 2023)

Abstract

The Chilean economic model has been widely studied both as a pioneering experiment in neoliberal policies and in regard to the growing social mobilisation against inequalities it has provoked. Insufficient attention has been paid, however, to the role of intellectuals in justifying and criticising the model. This article examines cultural battles over the economic model among the country's main columnists between 2010 and 2017, analysing debates as to the model's virtues and vices, achievements and failures. It shows how debate surrounding the model is highly reactive to current political events, yet occurs in somewhat of an elite bubble, centred on conceptual discussions and daily political events that tend to be dissociated from popular concerns.

Keywords: Chile; economic model; public sphere; intellectual elites

Introduction

Any explanatory system gives power to those who mobilise it. Whoever wins the cultural battle for ideas and interpretation not only understands the tectonic movements of a society, but also helps to shape and, above all, justify them.¹ In Chile, debate about capitalism and democracy has been unusually vigorous in recent years.² In 2011, mobilisations opened up fresh discussions about the country's

¹Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²Fernando Atria, *Veinte años después: Neoliberalismo con rostro humano* (Santiago: Catalonia, 2012); Alberto Mayol, *El derrumbe del modelo: La crisis de la economía de mercado en el Chile contemporáneo* (Santiago: LOM, 2012); Fernando Atria, Guillermo Larraín, José Miguel Benavente, Javier Couso and Alfredo Joignant, *El otro modelo: Del orden neoliberal al régimen de lo público* (Santiago: Debate, 2013); Tomás Undurraga, *Divergencias: Trayectorias del neoliberalismo en Argentina y Chile* (Santiago:

economic model imposed during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90) and continued throughout the transition to democracy, i.e. post 1990s. This article studies the debates surrounding the model in the main Chilean print media. In particular, we analyse a large corpus of columns written by public intellectuals between 2010 and 2017. This period encompasses the first shift in political power following 20 years of centre-left governments, namely the presidency of Sebastián Piñera (2010–14); a powerful student movement that in 2011 irrupted into the political arena, with four of its leaders going on to be elected as MPs in 2013; and the election of Michelle Bachelet for a second presidential term (2014–18) and a centre-left programme of social reforms. It is during this period that the consensus regarding the transition years came under critical scrutiny, and the economic model became increasingly contested in the streets and openly debated in the media.

Street protests in the country have been increasing during the last decade, reflecting a growing subjective climate critical of the inequalities associated with the country's model. These criticisms contrast to the positive evaluation propagated by economic and political elites during the Concertación coalition governments (1990–2010).³ The year 2011, in particular, set off a new political cycle marked by contestation and the polarisation of public debate,⁴ which led up to the social outbreak of 2019. The protests were joined by a series of social actors, incorporating new demands that ranged from improving state education to the relief of household debt, environmental protection and gender equality.⁵ For most of these contentious topics, the 1980 Constitution emerged as one of the great obstacles to bringing about those changes.

Chile's new cycle of politicisation has generated an abundant literature that examines mobilisations and new forms of political action,⁶ the political-economic model and its limitations,⁷ the characteristics of Chilean capitalism,⁸ the country's structural inequalities,⁹

Universidad Diego Portales, 2014); Manfred Svensson, Daniel Mansuy and Claudio Alvarado, *El colapso del otro modelo* (Santiago: Tajamar, 2017).

³During this period, Chile was governed by a centre-left coalition for four consecutive presidential terms. This period was economically successful but politically ambiguous in that it did not mark a deep break with the political-economic model inherited from the dictatorship. See Carlos Huneeus, *La democracia semi-soberana* (Santiago: Taurus, 2014).

⁴United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Los tiempos de la politización* (Santiago: UNDP, 2015).

⁵Kathya Araujo, 'La percepción de las desigualdades: Interacciones sociales y procesos sociohistóricos. El caso de Chile', *Revista Desacatos*, 59 (Jan.–April 2019), pp. 16–31.

⁶Sofía Donoso and Marisa von Bülow (eds.), *Social Movements in Chile: Organization, Trajectories, and Political Consequences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Nicolás M. Somma, 'Power Cages and the October 2019 Uprising in Chile', *Social Identities*, 27: 5 (2021), pp. 579–92; Eduardo Silva, 'Patagonia, without Dams! Lessons of a David vs. Goliath Campaign', *Extractive Industries and Society*, 3: 4 (2016), pp. 947–57.

⁷Mayol, *El derrumbe del modelo*; Atria *et al.*, *El otro modelo*; Huneeus, *La democracia semi-soberana*.

⁸Andrés Solimano, *Capitalismo a la chilena y la prosperidad de las élites* (Santiago: Catalonia, 2012); Manuel Gárate Chateau, *La revolución capitalista de Chile* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2012); José Miguel Ahumada, *The Political Economy of Peripheral Growth: Chile in the Global Economy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁹UNDP, *Desigualdades: Orígenes, cambios y desafíos de la brecha social en Chile* (Santiago: UNDP, 2018); Ramón López, Eugenio Figueroa and Pablo Gutiérrez, 'La "parte del león": Nuevas estimaciones de la

the trajectories of neoliberalism¹⁰ and the different ways in which business exercises power.¹¹ The outburst of social unrest in 2019 soon also produced its own literature focusing on the unrest itself and its systemic roots.¹² Despite this rich literature, a key aspect has yet received insufficient attention: the role played by intellectual elites in justifying Chilean capitalism. While the role of intellectuals in Chile's transition to democracy has been well studied,¹³ less attention has been paid to the role of intellectuals in recent debates about the country's model – especially debates among newspaper columnists. It is precisely the role played by columnists in the politicisation cycle of the last decade that is our focus here. We understand by 'politicisation cycle' the process whereby the consensus underpinning the 'democratic transition' was questioned, and certain groups in Chile came to initiate a period of mobilisations against the prevailing economic model and its defenders.

This article analyses narratives about the political-economic model, looking at how the most influential columnists debated capitalism and democracy in the country's main newspapers between 2010 and 2017. Specifically, we examine the type of diagnoses these columnists mobilised through their interventions in the press and how these interpretations legitimised, justified and/or called into question the political and social order in Chile. Thus, this research presents an exercise in sociology of the Chilean intellectual field, addressed from the standpoint of newspaper columnists. The concepts of 'intellectual field'¹⁴ and 'public sphere'¹⁵ are,

participación de los súper ricos en el ingreso de Chile', Working Paper No. 379, Economics Department, University of Chile, 2013.

¹⁰Manuel Antonio Garretón, *Neoliberalismo corregido y progresismo limitado* (Santiago: ARCIS/CLACSO, 2012); Tomás Undurraga, 'Neoliberalism in Argentina and Chile: Common Antecedents, Divergent Paths', *Revista de Sociología e Política*, 23: 55 (2015), pp. 11–34.

¹¹Tasha Fairfield, *Private Wealth and Public Revenue in Latin America: Business Power and Tax Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tomás Bril-Mascarenhas and Aldo Madariaga, 'Business Power and the Minimal State: The Defeat of Industrial Policy in Chile', *Journal of Development Studies*, 55: 6 (2017), pp. 1047–66.

¹²Kathya Araujo (ed.), *Hilos tensados: Para leer el octubre chileno* (Santiago: Editorial Usach, 2019); Patricio Fernández, *Sobre la marcha: Notas acerca del estallido social chileno* (Santiago: Editorial Debate, 2020); Carlos Peña, *Pensar el malestar* (Santiago: Taurus, 2020); Alexis Cortés, *Chile, fin del mito: Estallido, pandemia y ruptura constituyente* (Santiago: RIL Editores, 2022).

¹³José Joaquín Brunner, *Ciencias sociales y Estado: Reflexiones en voz alta*, Working Paper No. 118, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, FLACSO), Santiago, 1989; Jeffrey Puryear, *Thinking Politics: Intellectuals and Democracy in Chile, 1973–1988* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Tomás Moulian, *Chile: Anatomía de un mito* (Santiago: LOM, 1997); Wilhelm Hofmeister and Hugo Celso Felipe Mansilla, *Intelectuales y política en América Latina: El desencantamiento del espíritu crítico* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens Ediciones, 2003); Patricio Silva, *In the Name of Reason: Technocrats and Politics in Chile* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); Cristina Moyano, 'La intelectualidad de izquierda renovada en Chile durante los años 80: Debates y propuestas', *Revista de Historia*, 2: 3 (2016), pp. 9–34; Tomás Ariztía and Oriana Bernasconi, 'Sociologías públicas y la producción del cambio social en el Chile de los noventa', in Tomás Ariztía (ed.), *Produciendo lo social: Usos de las ciencias sociales en el Chile reciente* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2012), pp. 133–64.

¹⁴Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project', *Social Science Information*, 8: 2 (1969), pp. 89–119; 'Le champ littéraire', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 89 (Sept. 1991), pp. 3–46.

¹⁵Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1989); Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (London: MIT Press, 1992); Craig Calhoun, 'Civil Society and the Public Sphere', in Michael Edwards (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

therefore, present in this article as the structural backdrop to the disputes between Chilean public intellectuals about the model.

Central to our object of study is the ‘model’, namely the political-institutional framework that shaped economic relations in Chile, characterised by market solutions to public problems and a subsidiary role played by the state. This model was imposed by force during Pinochet’s regime; yet it was continued by the centre-left governments of the Concertación, albeit with significant reforms that tempered market economics with an agenda of social and political inclusion. The Chilean economic model is characterised by low-skill, labour-intensive production based on the extraction of raw materials – e.g. copper, pulp and salmon – and agriculture oriented to international markets. This model rapidly increased Chile’s ‘economic development’ in terms of wealth creation and poverty reduction, but the reduction in inequalities has been only modest (after dropping from 0.52 in 1990 to 0.48 in 2013, the Gini index in 2017 was running at 0.44). While this model has produced good macroeconomic results, its social legitimacy has been eroded, since it is perceived to favour political-economic elites over the population as a whole. The country’s current cycle of politicisation is a reaction partly to the inequalities that the market model produces and partly to the political restrictions that prevent structural changes – i.e. the 1980 Constitution. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),¹⁶ the politicisation of Chilean society during the last decade is visible in at least three dimensions: the politicisation of public debate about what is real, legitimate and possible; the politicisation of social conflict and the growing role of social movements; and the politicisation of the elites, expressed in their recent feeling of a loss of power.

Our research hypothesis is that the various demands expressed in recent social mobilisations permeated columnists’ discussions, revitalising the debate surrounding Chile’s economic model. The debate brought in by the most prominent print media columnists, however, has been projected from somewhat of an elite bubble, centred on conceptual discussions and daily political events that tend to be dissociated from popular concerns.

The study of intellectuals and politics in Chile dates back to the 1980s. Intellectuals used to provide professional services for the state, as well as produce interpretations that supported political reforms.¹⁷ That was the case during Eduardo Frei’s (1964–70) and Salvador Allende’s (1970–3) governments, in which critical thinking was a distinctive feature of Chilean intellectuals – e.g. José Joaquín Brunner referred to intellectuals in those years as ‘ideological transmitters’.¹⁸ Pinochet’s dictatorship, however, profoundly transformed the way in which social knowledge was produced in Chile, deinstitutionalising spaces and disrupting the overlapping relationship between intellectual and political fields. This shift also eroded Chilean intellectuals’ critical thinking.¹⁹ Within the intellectual

¹⁶UNDP, *Los tiempos de la politización*.

¹⁷Moyano, ‘La intelectualidad de izquierda renovada’.

¹⁸José Joaquín Brunner, ‘Los intelectuales y la cultura del desarrollo’, *Cuadernos de Economía*, 26: 79 (1989), pp. 311–20; José Joaquín Brunner and Ángel Flisfisch, *Los intelectuales y las instituciones de la cultura* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2014). All translations by the authors, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁹José Joaquín Brunner, ‘La participación de los centros académicos privados’, *Revista de Estudios Públicos*, 19 (Winter 1985), pp. 1–12; Tomás Moulian, ‘El quiebre del pensamiento crítico’, *Revista Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, 7: 9 (2015), pp. 53–9.

field, economists gained prestige in political parties and the public sphere. Young economists with postgraduate degrees from universities in the United States (especially Chicago) enjoyed rapid access to governmental positions and were granted extensive powers by the dictatorial regime to implement unprecedented market reforms, coming to be known as the Chicago Boys.²⁰ These economists were successful in curbing the inflationary spiral that the economy had been experiencing since the 1950s, thereby ensuring the value of investments and making the national financial market attractive to international capitals. During years of exile or resistance to Pinochet's dictatorship, the role of centres such as Corporación de Estudios para Latinoamérica (Latin American Studies Corporation, CIEPLAN), Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, FLACSO), Instituto Latinoamericano de Doctrina y Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Institute of Social Theory and Social Studies, ILADES), Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo (Centre for Development Studies, CED) and consulting firm SUR was also crucial in forging the technocratic thinking of what then became the Concertación.²¹ And this renovation of centre-left thought was fundamental for the continuity of market-friendly policies. This group of technocrats, the 'CIEPLAN Monks', in many aspects resembled their neoliberal predecessors, the 'Chicago Boys'.²² These economists and other 'technopols' that had 'technical' and 'political' resources were key political-intellectual players during the Concertación years.²³ Interestingly, the position that intellectuals took in debates about Chile's market model in turn shaped the key political debates from the 1990s.²⁴

Key intellectual figures disagreed with the continuity of the neoliberal model during the 1990s – e.g. Tomás Moulian, Manuel Antonio Garretón, Gabriel Salazar. Moulian's *Chile: Anatomía de un mito* (1997) was particularly successful in convening critical voices. According to Moulian, the dictatorship transformed the country's economic matrix from a popular to a neoliberal one. In other words, Chile entered a new productive-consumer matrix based on the market model, which was part of a larger effort to erase dictatorship atrocities. The debate about intellectuals, politics and the Chilean model was particularly lively after the publication of Moulian's 1997 book. Within the Concertación coalition, intellectual views about the model were divided into two groups, which Brunner referred to as the 'autocomplacientes' ('self-obliging') and the 'autoflagelantes' ('self-flagellating').²⁵ The former group of intellectuals highlighted the country's

²⁰Manuel Gárate Chateau, '1975: Revolución Capitalista', in Alessandro Guida, Raffaele Nocera and Claudio Rolle (eds.), *De la utopía al estallido: Los últimos cincuenta años en la historia de Chile* (Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022), pp. 46–62.

²¹Puryear, *Thinking Politics*.

²²Patricio Silva, 'Technocrats and Politics in Chile: From the Chicago Boys to the CIEPLAN Monks', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 23: 2 (1991), pp. 385–410.

²³Alfredo Joignant, 'The Politics of Technopols: Resources, Political Competence and Collective Leadership in Chile, 1990–2010', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 43: 3 (2011), pp. 517–46.

²⁴Alfredo Jocelyn-Holt, 'Los intelectuales-políticos chilenos: Un caso de protagonismo equívoco continuo', in Hofmeister and Mansilla (eds.), *Intelectuales y política en América Latina*, pp. 171–97.

²⁵José Joaquín Brunner, 'Malestar en la sociedad chilena: ¿De qué, exactamente, estamos hablando?', *Estudios Públicos*, 72 (Spring 1998), pp. 173–98.

prosperity and the stability of the economic model,²⁶ while the latter emphasised distributive inequalities, a production structure with low added value, and Concertación's inability to achieve 'growth with equity'.²⁷ These contrasting readings acquired particular prominence in the context of appraising the Concertación's legacy after 20 years in power. The *autocomplacientes* took the view that the coalition had achieved social democracy to the extent possible while, for the *autoflagelantes*, the result was 'neoliberalism with a human face'.²⁸

This article revisits the question about intellectuals and politics, asking about the specific role of columnists in the Chilean written press. We study intellectuals' *interventions* in the public sphere, especially contemporary debates about the country's model. The article is organised as follows. First, it discusses the literature on the intellectual field and the features of the Chilean public sphere where these cultural battles take place. Second, it presents the methodological decisions that were adopted about the sample of newspaper columns, their coding and analysis. Third, it discusses the main findings from the material analysed; that is, the key debates about the economic model among the country's most influential columnists between 2010 and 2017. The article concludes by discussing some of the transformations that have occurred in the Chilean intellectual field and the article's contributions to the cultural sociology of the elites.

The Chilean Journalistic Field and the Cultural Battles That It Elicits

The news and opinions published by the media are one of the most important ways through which society produces knowledge about itself and the world.²⁹ Journalists and columnists play a fundamental role in the intellectual field by signalling issues of public interest and showing why and in what ways they matter. Journalism and opinion pieces, therefore, play a vital role in the 'construction of reality' by generating knowledge and opinion about the public sphere among their audiences.

We study public intellectuals in the media using the notion of 'field'.³⁰ From this perspective, columnists are central agents of both the intellectual field and the journalistic field, two spaces that produce symbolic goods, such as news, columns and headlines, which influence the idea of society.³¹ Columnists, in particular, are at the top of these fields, due to the recognition they have achieved, their intellectual prestige and their capacity to influence public and political debate.³² In their public interventions, columnists seek to persuade the audience and influence it by providing schemes of interpretation and criteria for justification. Through their

²⁶Oscar Muñoz Goma, *El modelo económico de la Concertación, 1990–2005: ¿Reformas o cambio?* (Santiago: CIEPLAN/FLACSO, 2007).

²⁷UNDP, *Las paradojas de la modernización* (Santiago: UNDP, 1998); Peter Winn, *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1972–2002* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁸Atria, *Veinte años después*.

²⁹Alain de Botton, *The News: A User's Manual* (New York: Pantheon, 2014).

³⁰Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Political Field, the Social Science Field and the Journalistic Field', in Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 29–47.

³¹Julien Duval, *Critique de la raison journalistique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004).

³²Tomás Undurraga, 'Knowledge-Production in Journalism: Translation, Mediation and Authorship in Brazil', *Sociological Review*, 66: 1 (2018), pp. 58–74.

comments, they not only help to set the public agenda, but also take normative positions regarding the issues it contains, framing events.³³ The ideas mobilised by these columnists are far from innocuous, but they help to produce the public sphere. Following Jürgen Habermas,³⁴ we understand the ‘public sphere’ as the space in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, expressing their diverging views on issues of public concern.

The Chilean journalistic field has particular features that conform a particular public sphere. The print media is dominated by two journalistic consortia (*El Mercurio* and *Copesa*), which control 80 per cent of the national newspaper circulation.³⁵ There is no robust independent press media that provides a counterweight to the reporting and views expressed by the mainstream press. According to María Olivia Mönckeberg,³⁶ journalistic work in Chile is anchored and conditioned to political and economic interests. Given the high economic concentration of the print media, the editorial line expressed by these vehicles tends to syntonise with the views of elites, and also with the prevailing socio-economic order. As a consequence, certain positions tend to be made invisible, reinforcing a public agenda consistent with elite interests.³⁷ It is also worth mentioning that the Chilean public sphere is conditioned by its historical-political situation. Since the return to democracy in 1990, public debate between intellectuals was self-contained due to the fear generated by dissent within the elites themselves, and the possibility of a return to authoritarianism. This elitist consensus tended to ‘silence’ a fully diverse and contentious public debate, generating an elitist public sphere at least insofar as the latter was expressed in the leading print media.

It is important to consider that the cultural battles for the Chilean model analysed here take place within the Chilean journalistic field. The plurality of positions that columnists express in their ‘battles’, therefore, tends to be tempered by these structural issues. Columnists are invited to comment on political and economic issues by the newspaper’s editorial boards (especially *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio*) because of their recognised spheres of influence and intellectual prestige. Many of them also write in other formats, such as books and academic articles. It is also worth mentioning that columnists respond to the *zeitgeist*, or spirit of a specific historical time; that is, they react to the intellectual climate that shapes the period’s cultural patterns.³⁸ Another salient aspect to consider is that these columnists rarely debate explicitly among themselves, but rather write for their respective audiences, often appealing to readers’ ‘common sense’. Regardless of their positions vis-à-vis

³³Tomás Undurraga, Pedro Güell and Mario Fergnani, ‘“Supertanker Is a Hero, the Government a Villain”: Politicization of Chile’s 2017 Forest Fires in the Media’, *Cultural Sociology*, 16: 4 (2022), pp. 527–47.

³⁴Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

³⁵Martín Becerra and Guillermo Mastrini, ‘Concentración y convergencia de medios en América Latina’, *Communiquer: Revue de communication sociale et publique*, 20 (Sept. 2017), pp. 104–20.

³⁶María Olivia Mönckeberg, *Los magnates de la prensa: Concentración de medios de comunicación en Chile* (Santiago: Debate, 2013).

³⁷Claudia Mellado and María Luisa Humanes, ‘Homogeneity and Plurality of the Media Agenda in Chile: A Cross-Longitudinal Study of the National Print Press between 1990 and 2015’, *Communication & Society*, 30: 3 (2017), pp. 75–92.

³⁸Monika Krause, ‘What is Zeitgeist? Examining Period-Specific Cultural Patterns’, *Poetics*, 76 (Oct. 2019), available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.02.003>, last access 13 Dec. 2022.

the model, they tend to avoid criticising each other outright. This may be explained by the newspapers' editorial norms and standards or by the concentration of Chilean media, which has curbed the diversity of positions taken on the issues discussed, especially when it comes to political views and questions to do with civil society in general. In this sense, the 'cultural battles' evinced in these columns are constrained by the structural conditions of the Chilean public sphere.

Further, by asking who these columnists write for and who their audiences are, we can understand their sphere of influence. Columnists write for the readers of the main newspapers, who tend to be the political, economic and intellectual elites who read newspapers.³⁹ Mainstream newspaper readership in popular sectors in Chile is extremely low, to the extent that the media advertising industry does not even bother measuring newspaper readership among the poorest socio-economic groups.

Another factor in play is the irruption of social media. While audience dynamics have certainly changed with the spread of social media, and the main media vehicles continue to be the dominant producers of journalistic content, one may wonder about the connection between elite columnist discussion in newspapers and popular concerns. In the wake of the social outburst of October 2019, concern about the distance between elite public discussion in the mainstream press and popular realities and debate in social media grew considerably.⁴⁰

Methodology

To investigate the predominant discussions about the Chilean political-economic model, we identified the 13 most influential columnists in the print media who were involved in debates about capitalism and democracy between 2010 and 2013 as well as those 13 who were most influential between 2014 and 2017–18 in total between 2010 and 2017. We selected these 16 columnists according to a criterion of public importance, reputation, readership, and field of expertise. We began by reviewing the rankings of the most influential columnists prepared by the press itself (*La Segunda*, *Capital*) from which we selected those columnists who regularly refer to issues related to capitalism and democracy – we left aside columnists who specialised in sport, popular culture, city, arts, etc. Several columnists figure in both periods. Based on their trajectory, ubiquity of media presence and volume of production, they were identified as the dominant columnists discussing political-economic issues. We then went on to test our proposed list of names with newspaper editors and academic peers who specialise in this area. We also incorporated key economists who, although not included in the rankings,

³⁹As a reference, newspaper readership in 2015 was as follows. *El Mercurio*: 384,526 people daily; *La Tercera*: 339,328 people daily; *The Clinic*: 117,030 people weekly. Of those readers, 70 per cent were classified from social stratum ABC1 and C2; that is, social elites in Chile. For 2017, readership and social-economic distribution was almost the same: 70 per cent were classified ABC1 and C2. (Source: IPSOS Media TC. Encuesta Valida Research, 2015 and 2018.) In terms of Chilean population, 14.1 per cent are classified as ABC1; 11.2 per cent as C2; 24.7 per cent as C3; 35.9 per cent as D; and 14.1 per cent as E. (Source: Asociación de Investigadores de Mercado, 2018.)

⁴⁰Juan Pablo Luna, Sergio Toro and Sebastián Valenzuela, 'El ruido silencioso de los medios tradicionales', Centro de Investigación Periodística (CIPER), 23 March 2021, available at www.ciperchile.cl/2021/03/23/el-ruidoso-silencio-de-los-medios-tradicionales/, last access 25 Nov. 2022.

Table 1. Columnists Selected

Columnist	Total columns	Columns about the model	Period for which selected
Alberto Mayol	45	13	2012–17
Ascanio Cavallo	231	29	2010–17
Carlos Peña	370	28	2010–17
Daniel Mansuy	62	4	2016–17
Eduardo Engel	89	9	2010–17
Eugenio Tironi	182	18	2010–17
Fernando Atria	62	21	2010–17
Harald Beyer	61	6	2010–12
Héctor Soto	271	44	2010–17
Hernán Büchi	85	26	2010–14
Oscar Contardo	144	13	2014–17
Pablo Ortúzar	100	19	2016–17
Patricio Fernández	233	9	2010–17
Patricio Navia	155	16	2010–14
Rolf Lüders	161	32	2010–17
Sebastián Edwards	135	38	2010–17
Total	2,386	325	

Source: Compiled by authors.

are prominent in political-economic debate and regularly wrote columns during this period – i.e. Hernán Büchi, Sebastián Edwards, Harald Beyer, Rolf Lüders and Eduardo Engel.⁴¹ Most of the columnists selected were from the main national newspapers, *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio*. In order to better represent the plurality of voices present in debate about the Chilean model, we added key columnists from the digital media sector, which includes outlets such as *The Clinic*, *El Mostrador* and *CIPER*. The list of columnists compiled is shown in Table 1.

In all, the list comprises five economists, four journalists, two lawyers, two sociologists, two political scientists and one social anthropologist. Beyond our narrow list, the key columnists in the press that debate about capitalism and democracy in Chile are mainly lawyers, economists, journalists and, to a lesser extent, philosophers, sociologists and political scientists.⁴² But what more can be said, then, about the 16 most influential columnists during this period? With the exception of the journalists, all the columnists studied have PhDs, most of them from international universities. Although the group displays certain heterogeneities, its homogeneity is

⁴¹For a profile of each of these economists and columnists analysed, see the online Appendix, available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000032> under the 'Supplementary materials' tab.

⁴²See online Appendix for a profile of each columnist under examination.

striking: all are highly educated men, primarily from Santiago. This does not reflect arbitrary methodological decisions on our part, but instead the striking and much-lamented social homogeneity of the field, one produced by the newspaper in question.⁴³ This gender, class and regional bias certainly conditions the perspectives they take on national affairs, affecting not only the issues they choose to emphasise – and those they make invisible – but also the concepts, frameworks, normative principles, and communicative styles that inform their columns. Nonetheless their considerable social homogeneity and their positions on the main public controversies fall across a political spectrum.

Using a census approach, we collected all the columns published by this group of 16 in the national press between 2010 and 2017, resulting in a corpus of 2,386 columns. The columns averaged between 300 and 900 words: they are short texts, written in an easy-to-read narrative format. We coded each column using thematic analysis⁴⁴ to inductively identify the three main public issues they addressed. Then, through content analysis, we selected the columns that focused mainly on the Chilean political-economic model. It is not obvious how to define the boundaries of debate about the economic model since it cuts across many important public issues such as education, healthcare, labour relations, finance, international relations, gender and the environment. In order to delimit our object of study, we defined debate about the ‘economic model’ as related strictly to the following topics: the Chilean ‘model’ explicitly so named, the economy, the role of markets, neoliberalism, freedom of choice, justice, rights and the tax system (see [Table 2](#) summarising the coding topics). We then selected the columns that contained at least three of these topics, giving us a total of 325 columns.

Based on this codification, we subjected these 325 columns to thematic narrative analysis, identifying the emerging categories and cleavages that characterised the discussion under analysis. In other words, we studied how justifications and criticisms of the economic model were expressed by these intellectuals through their comments on current events in Chile.

Results

The data shows that debate about the economic model became especially vigorous in the 2010s: 325 columns out of the 2,386 analysed directly addressed issues related to it. The ‘model’ as concept, although it is used with different meanings and intentions, generally refers to the package of policies, laws and norms of governance that characterise the economic growth strategy established during the dictatorship (1973–90) and largely continued in democracy (1990 onwards). In short, it refers to an institutional and economic framework that favours the private provision of

⁴³In 2017, *El Mercurio* published 18 opinions columns per week, of which 17 were written by men, while *La Tercera* published 38 per week, of which 32 were by men and only six by women. We looked carefully at women who wrote columns about capitalism and democracy in the main newspapers during this period, such as Andrea Repetto, Claudia Sanhueza, Lucía Santa Cruz and María de los Angeles Fernández. However interesting their columns were, none of them wrote regularly during this period. This reveals how, between 2010 and 2017, the economic model discussion in the main newspapers was approached as a male topic.

⁴⁴Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (London: Sage, 2008).

Table 2. Coding Topics of Model's Columns

Model: Policies, laws and norms of governance that have characterised Chile's economic strategy over the past 40 years.
Economy: Production and transaction of goods and services, including financial and social indicators, business sector and institutions that ensure production and consumption.
Market: Mechanism of social coordination whereby services, goods, labour relations and social life are produced and in which private actors play a key role.
Neoliberalism: Critical means of referring to market-led policies, including criticisms of spreading inequalities and the tendency towards social crisis.
Freedom of choice: Autonomy in decision-making as the organising principle in society. Means of justifying the limits of state action in the provision of public services.
Social justice: Ways in which social benefits are distributed within the Chilean model, including discussions of fairness, rights, policies and meritocracy.
Rights: Basic social benefits that any citizen should have in society.
Tax: Chile's tax system and its implications both for incentivising economic activity and for financing state social programmes.

Source: Compiled by authors.

social security (health, pensions and education) and is based on natural-resources extraction over investment in technology and research. Some further key elements of the Chilean model, so understood, are: the centrality of macroeconomic balances and the avoidance of large-scale state debt; the progressive reduction of the state's sphere of action in the economy; the concentration of foreign policy on the establishment of free-trade agreements; pursuing poverty reduction via narrow targeted measures at the expense of more universal social policies; and the key role of private actors in providing basic services. One of the particular characteristics of this debate is that the columnists explicitly talk about the 'model' as a construct or entity that also has its own means of verification through economic indicators and Chile's position in international economic rankings. For example, Edwards writes: 'In a recent interview, Foreign Minister Heraldó Muñoz asks the rhetorical question: Why is Chile not doing well in the region? [...] He said: Chile is not a model, there is a certain arrogance in thinking we are a model [...] The minister is wrong: Chile is a model.'⁴⁵

For those columnists who praise the Chilean economic model as a successful example for the region, having a clear economic model is part of making Chile an exemplary country, or a 'model country' in the second sense of that term. This idea that the country has followed a clear economic model has been around since the 1980s, when the promoters of the market reforms made a special effort to highlight the country's economic results. Given the 'original sin'⁴⁶ of these reforms having been imposed by force during Pinochet's dictatorship, the political-economic elites of the transition period made a special effort to install a

⁴⁵Sebastián Edwards, *El Mercurio*, 29 March 2014.

⁴⁶Arturo Fontaine, 'Sobre el pecado original de la transformación capitalista chileno', in Barry Levine, *El desafío neoliberal: El fin del tercermundismo en América Latina* (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 1992), pp. 93–140.

narrative of success in a bid to give the privatising reforms social and democratic legitimacy.⁴⁷ For the intellectuals who defended this idea, the notion of ‘the model’ has a dual purpose: it serves as a roadmap through which to maintain the consistency of domestic policies with the aim of preserving a positive investment environment, and, secondly, it represents an ideal to be pursued, a blueprint for other countries with similar socio-economic and historical processes.⁴⁸

The novelty of debate surrounding the model in the 2010s was its intensity and openness, echoing new criticisms of key actors and the results of the Chilean model.⁴⁹ The politicisation of Chilean society broadened the scope of what could be discussed regarding the model and other issues. While columnists who supported the model underlined Chile’s economic results in terms of wealth creation, reduction of poverty and political-institutional stability, its critics emphasised the inequalities to which it gave rise, the political restrictions upon which it relied (the 1980 Constitution), and the model’s lack of social legitimacy, both in being imposed un-democratically and in favouring elites over the citizenry.

In what follows, debates in relation to the model are analysed in two ways. First, we present a chronology of disputes between 2010 and 2017, identifying three junctures – contestation, reform and defence of the model. Second, we unpack the key debates – i.e. what is talked about – among the country’s most influential columnists.

Chronology of Disputes, 2010–17: Contestation, Reforms and Defence of the Model

When analysing debate about capitalism and democracy between 2010 and 2017, three major junctures stand out. First, the social movements of 2011 that focused on the demand for free high-quality education canalised a variety of other latent social demands, giving rise to the first mass street demonstrations against the ‘economic model’ (2011–13). The second occurred with the structural reforms of education, taxation and labour laws implemented by Bachelet’s second administration (2014–15) and, finally, the third juncture is marked by mounting criticism of the reforms’ implementation, their eventual economic impact and the quality of management displayed by the Nueva Mayoría government (2015–17). The model was defended in this context through questioning the technical quality of the reforms, and the government’s aptitude to promote and implement them.

⁴⁷Eugenio Tironi, ‘Adaptación sin relato: La empresa chilena ante la democracia y la globalización’, in José Ossandón and Eugenio Tironi (eds.), *Adaptación: La empresa chilena después de Friedman* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2013).

⁴⁸Alejandro Pelfini, Claudio Riveros and Omar Aguilar, ‘¿Han aprendido la lección? Las élites empresariales y su reacción ante las reformas. Chile 2014–2020’, *Revista Izquierdas*, 49 (Sept. 2020), pp. 4738–58; and Carlos Huneeus and Tomás Undurraga, ‘Authoritarian Rule and Economic Groups in Chile: A Case of Winner-Takes-All Politics’, in Victoria Basualdo, Hartmut Berghoff and Marcelo Bucheli (eds.), *Big Business and Dictatorships in Latin America: A Transnational History of Profits and Repression* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 91–125.

⁴⁹Trust in private enterprise dropped from 31 per cent in 2010 to 17 per cent in 2012, and to 13 per cent in 2017 (CEP, 2010, 2012, 2017); discontent with privatised public services (water, electricity, etc.) grew from 62 per cent in 2010 to 74 per cent in 2013 (Latinobarómetro, 2010, 2013); and trust in political parties dropped from 22 per cent in 2010 to 10 per cent in 2017 (Latinobarómetro, 2010, 2017).

The figures below show how these three junctures marked the main topics addressed in the columns on capitalism and democracy. For *contestation* of the model, we selected columns that included the words ‘social movements’, ‘inequality’, ‘street’ and ‘protest’; for *reforms* to the model, columns containing the words ‘reform’, ‘tax’, ‘programme’, ‘public’ and ‘rights’; and, for *defence* of the model, ‘socialism’, ‘Venezuela’, ‘improvisation’ and ‘diagnosis’.

Contestation of the Chilean Model (2011–13)

Piñera (2010–14) was the first right-wing president to be democratically elected in Chile in 50 years. This well-known businessman and former senator promised to increase economic growth and eliminate inefficiencies in the state apparatus. Chile’s incorporation into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and its trade agreements with the European Union and the United States reinforced the country’s social imaginary of economic success. The main political event of his government was, however, not related to economic growth, but to the rupture caused by the student movement of 2011, which, by criticising profit-making in the educational system and its organisation as a market, articulated the biggest challenge to the economic model in 30 years (see [Figure 1](#)).

Faced with the contestation expressed in the mobilisations, the columnists put forward various interpretations of the changed political context. While some proclaimed the start of a ‘new political cycle’, others highlighted the model’s achievements and the capitalist modernisation associated with it. The debate took place on several fronts, focusing on the erosion of the ‘democracy of agreements’ or, in other words, the approach to politics that had permitted the continuing reproduction of the model; citizen disaffection with Chilean capitalism and the different roots of social malaise; and demands for the model’s transformation into one geared toward social rights.

The ‘democracy of agreements’, which marked the functioning of the political system between 1990 and 2010, was characterised by consensus among the political and economic elites, based on the veto of the minority over the political majority through institutional mechanisms (the 1980 Constitution) and an electoral system that favoured the existence of two large political blocs. For some columnists, this approach to politics hampered structural changes to the model while, for others, it was a guarantee of much-needed stability.

The student mobilisations also triggered intense debate about the reasons for the protests and how to explain the ‘social malaise’ expressed in them. Some columnists saw the protests as an expression of citizens’ disaffection with the country’s political and economic institutions while others attributed the social malaise to the concentration of wealth and unequal distribution. Others focused on the absence of meritocratic paths to social advancement. For columnists critical of the model, the mobilisations were a clear sign of a demand to transform the model into one more focused on guaranteeing social rights. Under the latter reading, the model was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy because it so clearly benefitted political and economic elites over citizens. As Eugenio Tironi put it, ‘Why is the country peppered with protests, when the economy is growing and unemployment is falling? Why is profit so determinedly rejected when [the country] has just elected

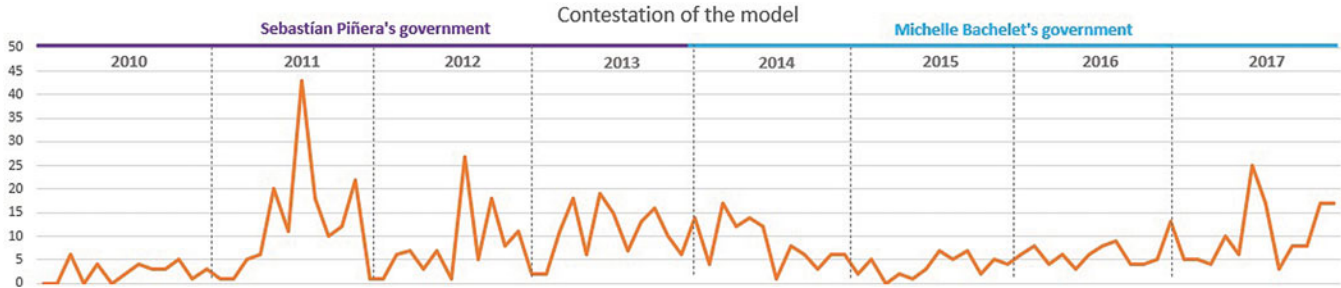


Figure 1. Columns 'Contesting the Model'

Notes: Based on columns that include the words 'social movements', 'inequality', 'street', 'protest'. N = 747.

Source: Compiled by authors.

to government one of its most conspicuous disciples? [...] Why is the “model” being questioned now when it has made us more prosperous than we ever imagined?⁵⁰

For columnists who defended the model, the inconsistency between, on the one hand, positive economic indicators and the stable political trajectory of the transition (1990–2010) and, on the other, the massive social protests, was a political and intellectual enigma. Some doubted that the mobilisations were a criticism of the model at all, citing high levels of consumption as counterfactual evidence. This type of interpretation attributed the malaise expressed in the mobilisations to a mismatch of expectations typical of the pathologies of capitalist modernisation. In this view, mobilisations were not a direct criticism of the economic model, but rather a result of the cultural changes brought about by modernisation and increased consumption. In other words, the mobilisations could be explained as reflecting a lack of adjustment between the expectations of change created by capitalist modernisation, and limitations on the satisfaction of these expectations.

Reforming the Model: The Institutional Response to Malaise (2013–14)

In 2014 the socialist Bachelet began her second presidential period (2014–18). Columnists focused on the reforms proposed by the Nueva Mayoría government and criticism among businessmen regarding investment risks and structural pressures that those reforms would exert on the economy (i.e. the model).⁵¹ The columnists discussed the government’s reformist bent and the implementation of educational, tax and labour reforms. Three aspects dominated these discussions: first, the principles inspiring the market and the reforms (strengthening the state, providing social guarantees and regulating markets); second, the re-foundational aims of the Nueva Mayoría that would change the neoliberal model; and, third, the model’s internal contradictions in the wake of recurrent corruption scandals involving businesspeople whose conduct was undermining it from within (see Figure 2).

In the midst of the negotiations surrounding the tax, educational and labour reforms of 2014, one of the key matters raised in public debate about the model was how to finance the proposed expansion of the role of the state. While some columnists supported the expansion of the state as necessary for guaranteeing social rights, others questioned the efficiency of state solutions and defended the benefits of a mixed social market economy.

Those who favoured technocratic solutions criticised the tax reform contained in Bachelet’s programme on the grounds of the supposed uncertainties it would create for the country’s economic growth. The centrality of this reform gave way to a highly ideological discussion between supporters and detractors of the ‘model’. Thus, for columnists who supported the model’s fundamental features, the reforms were only justifiable insofar as they could be viewed as marginal and in no way jeopardising the core ideas and principles that had given Chile so much growth and prosperity. It was probably Büchi, a finance minister under the dictatorship (1985–9) and unsuccessful presidential candidate, who presented the most

⁵⁰Eugenio Tironi, *El Mercurio*, 21 June 2011.

⁵¹See Fairfield, *Private Wealth and Public Revenue in Latin America*.

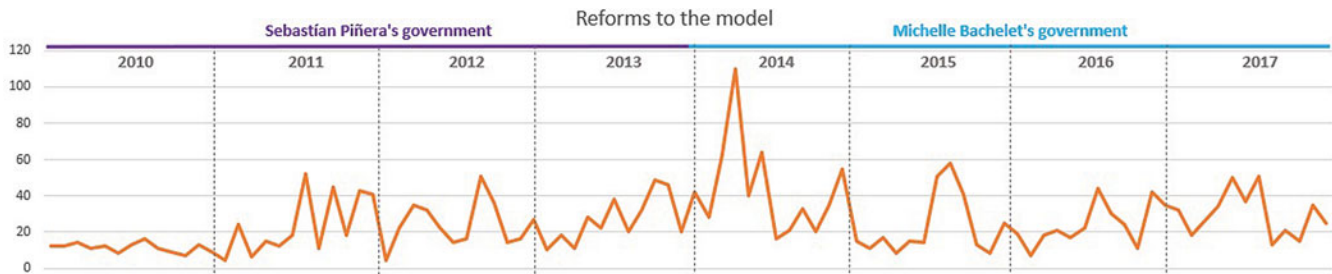


Figure 2. Columns on 'Reforms to the Model'

Notes: Based on columns that include the words 'reform', 'taxation', 'programme', 'public', 'rights'. N = 2,469.

Source: Compiled by authors.

'naturalised' justification of the model, which, in his opinion, had given Chile a world of wealth and prosperity that became merely 'taken for granted'. In his view, a reform that raised taxes would only damage the functioning of the model.

Defence of the Model and Criticism of Bachelet's Reforms (2015–17)

The columns published between 2015 and 2017 were characterised by their broad criticism of Bachelet's reforms, the way they were implemented and the economic and social impact they were predicted to have. A majority of the columnists defended the model (see [Figure 3](#)). They argued that the reforms were based on a 'mistaken diagnosis'; they also criticised 'improvisation' in the reforms' implementation. A third type of criticism focused on the economic impact the reforms would have.

As from 2016, a narrative began to emerge challenging the idea, which had been gaining ground since 2011, that there was general discontent with the model. According to one group of columnists, the idea that people were openly tired of 'neoliberalism' was incorrect. According to this argument, the reforms were criticised as being based on a misdiagnosis by the Nueva Mayoría government ('bad sociology', according to Carlos Peña).⁵² These columnists asserted that discontent did not reflect people's rejection of the model but, rather, a demand for deepening and improving it with a view to further expanding its economic results. Chileans were unhappy with the current system because it was not delivering on its promises or performing as well as it should. Peña, the main advocate of this thesis, wrote:

Because what bothers citizens is not the market as an institution or as a place of sociability (if not, let the malls say so), but the fact that it does not live up to the principles it employs to legitimise itself [...] The intensity of that indignation is not a measure of market rejection, but of adherence to its principles.⁵³

Edwards, for example, criticised the quality of the reforms and the technical capabilities of those implementing them. According to Edwards, the challenge is not to implement 'just any reform [...] the challenge is to implement a good reform, a reform that attracts broad support and that boosts economic growth, instead of undermining it'.⁵⁴ The opinions of economists on the reforms were, in general, quite negative about their predicted impact on the economic model. Lüders, one of the so-called 'fathers' of the Chilean model, was vociferous in criticising the problems of the reforms: 'In an economy open to external capital flows like the Chilean economy, all the impact of such increased taxation will be felt by wages, which will drop until the net return on capital recovers its level before the tax change.'⁵⁵

The supposed 'shift to the Left' made by the Nueva Mayoría was criticised by associating it with leftist Latin American regimes deemed to have failed (Cuba and Venezuela) and as a sort of return to socialism that would undermine freedom and growth. These criticisms were directed against President Bachelet, and,

⁵²Carlos Peña, *El Mercurio*, 3 Dec. 2017.

⁵³Carlos Peña, *El Mercurio*, 15 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁴Sebastián Edwards, *La Tercera*, 3 Dec. 2014.

⁵⁵Rolf Lüders, *La Tercera*, 14 Aug. 2014.

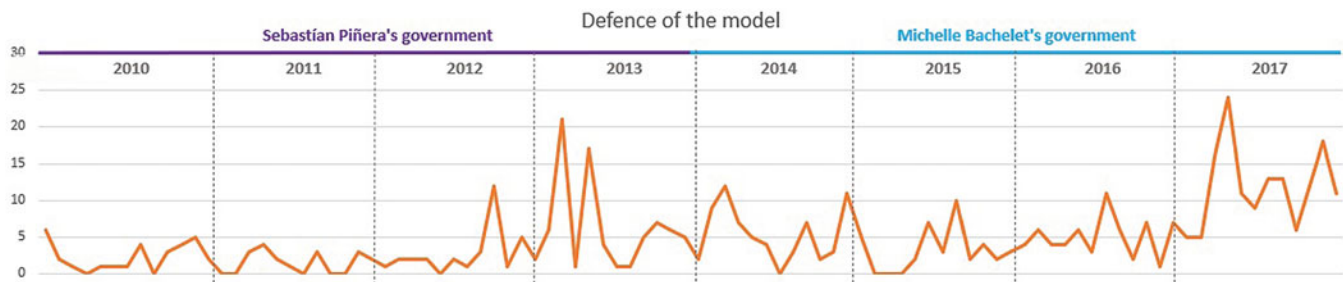


Figure 3. Columns 'Defending the Model'

Notes: Based on columns that include the words 'socialism', 'Venezuela', 'improvisation', 'diagnosis'. N = 462.

Source: Compiled by authors.

secondly, against the Nueva Mayoría as a political coalition that had reneged on the policies that had been central to its previous 20 years in power.

What Is Discussed in Debate about the Model?

The words used to describe the model are the first visible sign of political differences. While the model's supporters refer to the 'Chilean capitalist model', a 'social market economy', 'capitalist modernisation' or 'democratic capitalism', its critics refer to the 'neoliberal model', the 'neoliberal project', 'neoliberalism' or simply 'the model'. Its defenders depict it as a social construct created by the economic reforms implemented during the Pinochet regime, and often point to the political agreements reached in democracy to adjust its functioning, notably giving Chilean entrepreneurs greater access to international markets. They consider it efficient in the allocation of resources and as having the virtue of limiting state intervention in the economy and providing market agents with clear rules. Their main concern during this period was that its 'institutional framework' may prove fragile in the face of 'populist' pressures (for example, in favour of 'wasteful spending', which is the thesis of Rudiger Dornbusch and Edwards).⁵⁶

What exactly, then, is discussed by these columnists when they talk about the model? Five main dimensions can be identified: (i) the market as a mechanism of coordination between private agents for the provision of public services (92 columns); (ii) the state and other institutions that enable the functioning of the model by protecting it against changes that are viewed as arbitrary or unwarranted, such as the 1980 Constitution, the autonomous Central Bank, regulatory bodies, the Constitutional Tribunal and legislation (138 columns); (iii) the 'politics of agreements' between the elites that permitted continuity of the economic model and nostalgia for the consensus and agreements that characterised the period between 1990 and 2010 (77 columns); (iv) diagnoses and results of the economic model, including both its virtues (modernisation, growth, poverty reduction, political stability) and its vices (social malaise, corruption, inequalities and countless other social pathologies) (185 columns); (v) projections of the model's transformation, including two readings: a fatalistic one (deviation from the course of the most sustained cycle of economic growth in the country's history) and an optimistic one (focusing on the urgency of changing a model that reproduces and generates inequalities) (78 columns). These five dimensions are usually discussed in an interrelated manner in the heat of the political struggles that were taking place against the backdrop of social mobilisations. In general, the columns are heavy on adjectives and value judgements, commenting on surveys and political events while making little use of independent research, international events and global debates. They are reviewed below.

The Market as a Mechanism of Coordination between Private Agents for the Provision of Public Services

Three ideas underpin these discussions: first, the market as a mechanism of social coordination which, it is argued, is efficient and fair for society; second, the market

⁵⁶Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastián Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 7–13.

as the driver of growth fuelling Chile's economic success – in contrast to other Latin American countries and Chile's own history, including the role of companies and businesspeople in this growth; and, third, a critical view of the market as a source of mercantilisation, individualism and the creation of inequalities.

One of the elements most frequently highlighted as a virtue of the model is the autonomy and freedom it allows people and intermediate bodies vis-à-vis state action. Most columnists who defend this argument view this as an important moral value and regard profit-making as the 'fuel' that feeds the system and generates social benefits (such as mass access to higher education and consumer credit). For Peña, for instance, the model offers meritocracy, and, although it has flaws and generates inequalities, it allows social mobility through education.⁵⁷ Other columnists cite the macroeconomic indicators achieved during the first years of the transition to democracy as demonstrating the model's positive attributes. As Edwards states, 'Chile followed a market model based on openness, innovation and productivity gains',⁵⁸ and 'On most counts, Chile is better off than the rest of the countries in the region.'⁵⁹ It is precisely this advantage that these columnists see as threatened by the reforms of the Nueva Mayoría, especially with regard to the country's growth rate and position of regional leadership. For one economist, 'good macroeconomic policies – including a very well-managed Central Bank and a strong fiscal reserve' inherited from the consensus period, helped Chile to survive the onslaught of the 2008 subprime crisis.⁶⁰ Despite the tendency of several columnists to defend the Chilean model on moral and economic grounds, many also identify the limitations of this model for producing social integration. As Peña points out, the model is a source of tension: 'while it provides material well-being, it does not offer recognition. It favours communication, yet does not stimulate dialogue. It accentuates individuality, but impairs civic life.'⁶¹

Critics of the model, on the other hand, deplore the expansion of capitalist individualism as mercantilising social life, damaging the environment, increasing inequalities of all kinds and breaking community ties through different forms of segregation (economic, social, cultural and urban). The impact of the market on education, in particular, was a matter of intense debate. Fernando Atria, for example, emphasises that the market in education 'denies freedom to the poor because they cannot choose if they cannot pay'.⁶² For its critics, the model is based on a promise that is impossible to fulfil because, with economic and cultural means so unequally and badly distributed, not all Chileans are free.

The State and Institutions That Enable the Model to Function and Have Hampered Changes to It

The institutional arrangement on which the model is based is another recurring topic among the columnists. Independent of its democratic legitimacy, it is

⁵⁷ Carlos Peña, *El Mercurio*, 5 Jan. 2014.

⁵⁸ Sebastián Edwards, *La Tercera*, 4 Feb. 2017.

⁵⁹ Sebastián Edwards, *La Tercera*, 29 March 2014.

⁶⁰ Sebastián Edwards, *La Tercera*, 7 May 2011.

⁶¹ Carlos Peña, *El Mercurio*, 14 Jan. 2016.

⁶² Fernando Atria, *The Clinic*, 21 June 2011.

defended on the grounds of the stability and economic growth it enabled over the previous 30 years. Given that economic rules are based on the economy's own means of verification – indicators such as economic growth measured in GDP, the reduction of poverty or the attraction of foreign investment – several columnists argue that existing institutional arrangements allow successful economic performance to be maintained over time and projected into the future. Today, however, it is much less common to see these ideas defended in the face of the avalanche of egalitarian discourses about a society that has overcome the stage of scarcity and extreme poverty. Even the model's founders, such as the economist Büchi, recognise that the old regime of justification of the Chilean model – based on economic growth – is in crisis: 'It is possible that the bonds of the "politically correct" can be broken; that is, unjust capitalism that hurts the poor versus the kind and wise state in which we are trapped. This idea took strong root in the world from 2008 forward.'⁶³

It is interesting to note that, among the columnists studied, only the economists (Büchi, Edwards, Beyer, Lüders and Engel) discussed these economic issues using arguments and concepts that are explicitly technical in character and drawn from the economic discipline. Of these, all except Engel tend to defend the model based on its functioning and benefits. Although their arguments are not always technical, they tend systematically towards a catastrophic view of model reform. It is also noticeable that developmental approaches such as the entrepreneurial state,⁶⁴ the diversification of production,⁶⁵ or public investment are rarely discussed between 2010 and 2017 by these columnists. The columnists who are not economists tend to discuss economic issues through more general conceptual repertoires linked to neoliberalism, markets, growth or inequality, their principles and consequences. By and large they do not enter into the technical debate in their columns or refer explicitly to the mechanisms involved in how the economy works. This indicates that the professional boundaries of the economic field as a disciplinary jurisdiction are well defined in terms of who is authorised to discuss economic matters. In other words, the field of expert economists as represented by these columnists appears closed to outsiders. In Andrew Abbott's terms,⁶⁶ the jurisdictional borders of the economic discipline in Chile are very clear and well defined. It is worth asking if the columnists who are not economists tend to avoid technical discussion of economics because of professional respect, lack of technical competence, or other reasons.

Some columnists also stress the role of institutions in ensuring the correct functioning of the Chilean model. Several cases of political and business corruption that affected Chile between 2013 and 2016 – e.g. irregular financing of political campaigns, collusion in the pharmacy, fishery and pulp industries, price rigging, among others – eroded citizens' confidence in the economic model, private enterprise and political parties. Some columnists called upon institutions – such as the

⁶³Hernán Büchi, *El Mercurio*, 3 May 2017.

⁶⁴Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector* (London: Anthem Press, 2013).

⁶⁵Ahumada, *The Political Economy of Peripheral Growth*.

⁶⁶Andrew Abbott, *The Sociology of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Supreme Court or the Banking Superintendence – to help contain the damage inflicted on the model’s legitimacy. Héctor Soto, for instance, argued that people may make mistakes; yet, if institutions work, confidence in the model may be restored: ‘Once the crime has been discovered, the only thing that can be expected is that the institutions work and wrong-doers are held responsible with all the rigour that they deserve [...] The market economy is not based on the ethics of businessmen.’⁶⁷

Columnists who tend to criticise the model – e.g. Alberto Mayol, Patricio Fernández, Atria, Oscar Contardo – have a different starting point. They question the purposes and normative assumptions that drive the model and the institutional arrangements that impede changes to it. They argue that the organisation of Chilean society through this institutional arrangement has been elitist and entails injustices, inequality, dysfunctionalities and a way of life that is not sufficiently democratic or environmentally sustainable. This is a highly controversial element since there are bodies that, critics argue, act against the sovereign will of the majority (for example, super-majorities required for the approval of certain legislation and the Constitutional Tribunal). The lawyer Atria, for instance, affirms that the institutions inherited from the dictatorship were designed precisely so as not to respond to democratic demands and to prevent any important social change.⁶⁸ This institutional framework is seen as a ‘retaining wall’ against the demands of a majority of Chileans. As Mayol argues, ‘Novoa understands that the model works only and exclusively under its current conditions, that real reforms cannot be implemented without breaking the retaining wall that was built during the dictatorship and the transition.’⁶⁹

It is necessary to bear in mind that disputes about the legitimacy of the 1980 Constitution underlie the disagreements about the model’s stability. For many the fact that the Constitution was imposed by the dictatorship – without opposition or even deliberation – constitutes its ‘original sin’. Many of these rules surfaced for the first time during the period covered by this article. What collapsed with the social outbreak of October 2019 – and the subsequent start of the constitutional process – among other things, was the tacit social toleration for this original sin. This sin (or its antonym, virtue) is at the centre of debate for intellectuals writing in Chilean newspapers during this period.

The Policy of Agreements between Elites That Permitted Continuity of the Economic Model

If there is a nostalgic idea repeated by columnists who seek to defend the model, it is the broad political ‘consensus’ of the early years of the transition to democracy, which evokes something resembling a golden age of the model. This applies particularly to the 1990s when, based on agreements between the political and business elites, annual growth reached around 7 per cent. This ‘democracy of agreements’ is

⁶⁷Héctor Soto, *La Tercera*, 1 Nov. 2015.

⁶⁸Fernando Atria, *The Clinic*, 22 Aug. 2011.

⁶⁹Alberto Mayol, *El Mostrador*, 3 May 2013. Novoa refers to an influential senator for the Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI), the political party with the closest ties to the Pinochet dictatorship.

viewed as having ensured the continuity of the economic model between 1990 and 2010 and the cultural dominance of the elites who were responsible for it. According to Patricio Navia, the social mobilisations of 2011 pushed the Concertación further to the left, encouraging it to reject the successful consensus policies of the golden age, 'leaving aside that moderate majority in favour of changes in a context of continuity'.⁷⁰

Supposedly the virtue of these agreements was precisely their elitist nature because, according to these columnists, they excluded sectors seeking maximalist or revolutionary solutions, although in practice civil-society organisations of all types were excluded, particularly the trade unions. In this sense, Ascanio Cavallo argues that 'the transition was a betrayal. Why? Because it was peaceful, gradual and inclusive. It did not send anyone into exile, it did not fill the prisons and it did not ban ideas or parties. And, especially, because it was not a revolution as many young people had dreamed of in the 1980s'.⁷¹ What the columnists who defend the model tend to forget, however, is that those first years of the democratic transition (1990–8) were marked by ongoing military tutelage and the continuing veto power of a political minority, both of which hindered the political and social changes that had been demanded since the late 1980s.

This 'politics of agreement' is central to several columnists' understanding of the continuity of the Chilean model. It is one of the 'architectural pieces' that supports 'the success of the model and its current ideas'.⁷² Some columnists – Lüders, Edwards, Navia – stress that this is a virtuous feature because it provides clear economic benefits. Others consider it as part of the political realism typical of the transition years, where it was necessary to govern with the military hovering next to the government, having 'as many virtues as limitations, which also expressed the limitations of the institutions, parties and individuals that were the guideline of the transition'.⁷³ Finally, some columnists consider the 'politics of agreement' as the seed from which later social unrest grew: 'The political formula of the transition was harmonious and effective: a low-intensity politics was necessary to provide governability, the citizens would know how to wait for the moment of equality [... Yet] Chileans have turned their image of the elite into a lumpen-bourgeoisie, they treat them like criminals'.⁷⁴

Critics of the model emphasise that mobilisation was not directed against the reforms of Bachelet's second administration, but against the institutional scaffolding that subjects everything to a kind of political stalemate, preventing in-depth reforms and thus benefitting the economic elite. Atria, for example, argues that, 'What there is is rejection of the binominal republic and its "elite", not the reforms. Can anyone really believe that those who march demanding the end of the AFPs do so in defence of the capitalist modernisation process?'⁷⁵ It is precisely this consensus among the elites, with little resonance in the wider society, that gradually

⁷⁰Patricio Navia, *La Tercera*, 20 June 2011.

⁷¹Ascanio Cavallo, *La Tercera*, 17 June 2017.

⁷²Alberto Mayol, *El Mostrador*, 12 Feb. 2014.

⁷³Ascanio Cavallo, *La Tercera*, 24 Jan. 2010.

⁷⁴Mayol, *La Tercera*, 25 Feb. 2016.

⁷⁵Fernando Atria, *La Tercera*, 1 Oct. 2016. AFPs refer to 'Administradoras de Fondos de Pensiones' (Pension Fund Administrators).

deteriorated at the end of the 1990s, and erupted with renewed force in 2011 with the student movement. This explains why from 2011 onwards the columnists wrote more about the end of the era of grand political agreements and the feared return of conflict. Yet, in our view, this is clearly a retrospective idealisation, since the previous period was not exempt from important political and social conflicts, such as the one generated after the arrest of Pinochet in London (1998–2000). Nevertheless, these columnists saw the breakdown of the consensus-based scheme as leaving Chilean society (and, especially, its elites) in a state of uncertainty. As Tironi wrote, ‘The ruling class lost the power that allowed it to keep at bay the seismic force that pushes society to give back to the state the role it played throughout its history.’⁷⁶

Results of the Economic Model

A pointed disagreement about the model is its results, and to what extent they can justify the virtues and vices built into the model itself. While some columnists emphasise the successes of the Chilean economy over the previous 30 years, which positioned it at the head of Latin America, its critics, albeit not denying growth, point to the high concentration of wealth and poor distribution of income seen in countless forms of inequality and social segregation. They add that there is a kind of exhaustion with a model that focuses on the extraction of raw materials, resulting in poor-quality jobs, low added value, social spatial segregation, and mounting damage to the environment.⁷⁷ Regardless of the columnists’ position in these debates, a salient aspect is how economists demarcate the variables that are used to measure the model’s results. As the economist Lüders argues:

The Chilean population seems to be, in general, very happy with their situation, and 77 per cent of them say so (CEP survey, June–July 2011). They have good reason to be, given that in the last 20 years the model has allowed the real income of Chileans in all quintiles to double. Poverty has been continuously reduced, prices have stabilised and social progress has been enormous, placing the country in first place in Latin America in the United Nations Human Development ranking. No, Camila, the effectiveness of our model is not a myth, it is an objective reality and people feel it.⁷⁸

The main virtues attributed to the model include growth, poverty reduction and capitalist modernisation in a process of expansion of material and social benefits that, it is argued, has shifted citizens’ expectations towards those of a more developed country.⁷⁹ These are the main justifications used to defend the model as a policy success. Differences in interpreting this narrative, however, appear when

⁷⁶Eugenio Tironi, *El Mercurio*, 22 Nov. 2011.

⁷⁷Solimano, *Capitalismo a la chilena*; Ahumada, *The Political Economy of Peripheral Growth*.

⁷⁸Rolf Lüders, *La Tercera*, 11 Nov. 2011. ‘Camila’ refers to Camila Vallejo, one of the 2011 student leaders who organised widespread mobilisation by criticising the unfairness of the economic model. Vallejo was then elected MP in 2013 and 2017, and since 2022 has been a government spokesperson under President Gabriel Boric.

⁷⁹Carlos Peña, *Lo que el dinero sí puede comprar* (Santiago: Taurus, 2017).

evaluating the extent to which this material progress is sufficient to produce citizen adherence to the model and contain demands for social protection from the state. As Pablo Ortúzar argues:

It is necessary to clarify the issue of the middle classes and capitalist modernisation. Carlos Peña has an insightful sociological diagnosis, but made a poor electoral translation of that diagnosis. We have a broad, fragile and pragmatic middle class. It does not want to reduce its consumption, it wants a more meritocratic society and, with the same intensity, it wants more security. It fears the risks of modernity as much as it loves its fruits. Inequality of opportunity upsets it, but so too does inequality of security. And it expects the state to provide that security.⁸⁰

Critics of the model, on the other hand, emphasise the vices and bad outcomes to which it is linked in terms of malaise, corruption, individualism, inequalities, environmental costs, economic insecurity and mental health. Fernández, for example, argues that, from whichever angle it is viewed, the neoliberal project is falling apart: 'Time has run out for the AFPs, and will soon run out for the ISAPRES.'⁸¹ The problem of the elderly is not so much money but how to pay for healthcare, and it's reasonable to assume that the complaint about low pensions will sooner or later shift to that.⁸²

Criticism of the business and political elites, fuelled by corruption scandals linked to party financiers, collusion among chicken producers and the usurious interest rates charged by department stores and pharmacies, goes hand in hand with criticism of the model. Questions are asked about the role played by the elites in hampering market competition and innovation as well as about whether the elites are up to the moral standards of competitive capitalism that respects the rules. Commitment to innovation and competition alone is seen as insufficient and it is argued that, 'On too many occasions, sectors of business and the Right are passive accomplices, keeping silent about business actions that discredit the market economy.'⁸³ The questionable ethics of businesspeople are framed as a moral deficit with respect to the values the model requires for its operation. Corruption and collusion, in this sense, are described as a severe blow to the model from within, dealt by businesspeople themselves.

Projections of the Model's Transformation

Finally, when it comes to projecting future changes in the economic model, we found a range of both more fatalistic and more hopeful views. Those who defend the model at all costs argue there is no better or alternative road to development and that modernisation has created new demands that only the model itself can satisfy, although

⁸⁰Pablo Ortúzar, *Qué Pasa*, 24 Nov. 2017.

⁸¹ISAPRES refer to 'Instituciones de Salud Previsional', health insurers that mediate between patients and providers by negotiating with healthcare institutions the conditions of future medical provisions and controlling and managing the costs for their pool of users.

⁸²Patricio Fernández, *The Clinic*, 8 April 2016.

⁸³Eduardo Engel, *La Tercera*, 19 Oct. 2014.

they recognise that it needs to be more efficient and better regulated. According to this line of argument, to change the model would be to depart from the course associated with the longest phase of economic growth in Chile's history and take the country back to where it was in the 1970s. In the words of Soto, 'Chile cannot afford to undo its progress. For that, it is certainly essential that the Concertación can claim its work with a feeling of pride.'⁸⁴ Altering the model, according to Soto, would be to fall back into self-flagellation, risking that 'the country slows down and begins to say goodbye to the three best decades it has had in its historical evolution, in terms of social development and economic growth'.⁸⁵

On the other side, there is a transformative reading of the situation that views changes to a model that reproduces and increases inequalities as a matter of urgency. Critics insist that the model not only generates these disparities, but also creates more social discrimination, urban segregation and an unsustainable socio-political situation. According to this argument, a growing concentration of power in the hands of an elite, described as indolent and incapable of thinking in terms of universal social rights, or even of connecting with the needs of the majority of Chileans, could pose a threat to democracy itself. This prognosis seemed to be vindicated by the protests and the social outbreak that forced the congress agreement with cross-party support of the constitutional plebiscite of 15 November 2019.

For critics of the model, such as Atria, Mayol or Contardo, the protests and social mobilisation indicate a need to transform the market economy model into one that also provides guaranteed social rights and democratic stability. These columnists' general proposal is to channel the malaise expressed in social movements through institutional reforms that regulate market solutions to public problems, limit the concentration of power and capital in the hands of a few, and reinforce the state's redistributive role.

Conclusions

What can be concluded from this analysis of the intellectual disputes among the country's most influential columnists about the Chilean socio-economic model between 2010 and 2017? It is possible to distinguish discussions of three types: first, about the chronology of disputes regarding the model; second, about the substantive issues involved in understanding and interpreting the model; and, third, about the type of public sphere that these columnists elicit more generally.

First, when analysing the disputes about the model in the light of the political events of the time, we see that the central themes of the debate change significantly between 2010 and 2017. There are three clearly distinguishable moments: contestation, reform and defence of the model. These columnists helped to guide and give meaning to this shift in themes. This does not suggest that the journalistic field has a socially autonomous functioning, but rather may be seen as

⁸⁴Héctor Soto, *La Tercera*, 27 Aug. 2011.

⁸⁵Héctor Soto, *La Tercera*, 5 Oct. 2014.

reacting to forces and social movements from outside the field. These battles over the model were characterised by disputes between defenders and detractors of a reality that was losing stability and pre-eminence, of an economic model that was ceasing to exist as a naturalised, taken-for-granted backdrop against which other political and social questions were raised. These struggles foreshadowed the cultural battles that would break out in a singularly radical way with the social protests of 2019.

Second, when observing these columnists as a group of intellectuals that are at the top of the intellectual and journalistic fields, their marked heteronomy with the political field is striking. The debates about the model carried out by these columnists would not be understood without the role of social movements in the period under study and the politicisation of the public debate. There is a sort of circular causality: social movements politicise public debate, and intellectuals expand the frontier of what is debatable (questioning or justifying the Chilean model), thus contributing to the process of politicisation. Columnists, in this regard, present themselves as interpreters of the cultural battles surrounding the Chilean model.

Third, on analysing the body of columns panoramically, the data shows that the columnists comment primarily on issues related to current events and survey results. In this regard, they are more 'morning-after columnists' who write about the immediate political situation, rather than intellectuals who install an informed debate on capitalism and democracy, as Habermas or Craig Calhoun suggest. Contrary to our expectations, few columns explicitly respond to other columns, producing what might be considered a 'narrow' public sphere. This is not to say that these columnists do not produce a public sphere à la Habermas through other communicational vehicles such as books and academic articles, but the intellectual field they form in the printed press operates in a way that is reactive to current events in Chile. Their interventions usually offer interpretations of the ongoing actions and discourses of political and economic agents.

There may be a risk of exaggerating the role of columnists as public intellectuals and of over-interpreting their production. Their presumed influence rests on the assumption that their columns are read by politicians, opinion leaders and other decision-makers who may re-signify the social order in light of the views and opinions expressed. Of course, it is not possible to offer evidence on the political and social efficacy of these intellectuals' production in this sense. However, the fact that many of the books published by these columnists have gone on to become Chilean best-sellers suggests that their influence on the elite public sphere is not negligible.

How connected is the public sphere, built by these columnists, to the popular concerns of the Chilean citizenry? Certainly, the tone, scope and themes of the discussion are different from that of the Morning TV shows, where the 'model' as such is not discussed. These television programmes are among the most popular in Chile. This distance suggests that the columnists' discussion of the model happens in and reinforces a sort of elite bubble, a prestigious one dissociated from popular concerns, reaching few non-elite readers. These differences between elite and popular public debate in Chile echo what Jorge Atria and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser found when contrasting elite and popular views on critical issues affecting Chilean

society today – e.g. education, health, employment.⁸⁶ Chilean elites seem to live in a parallel reality, one that is reinforced by an elitist public discussion. This elitist public sphere appears to be accentuated by the structural conditions of the Chilean journalistic field and by the homogeneity of these dominant columnists: all men, professionals, mostly from Santiago and with a high level of educational attainment. This undoubtedly has consequences for both the reading of debates about the model and the issues that are foregrounded and omitted. However, after the outbreak of social unrest in October 2019, the cultural battle no longer oscillates between nostalgia for a golden age and criticism of the past: what prevails is a struggle over the future. Between 2010 and 2017, the foundations were laid for a new cultural battle, the ‘mother of all battles’ – that over Chile’s new Constitution – and the way it approaches a socio-economic model that, whatever the constitutional result, will never be the same.

Acknowledgements. The research and writing of this article received financial support from the Chilean government, through its Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo (ANID) via Fondo de Financiamiento de Áreas Prioritarias (FONDAP) Project No. 15130009, Investigación Conjunta ANID–Max Planck No. MPG190012, and Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Científico y Tecnológico (FONDECYT) Projects No. 1230300, No. 1230291, No. 1200493 and Anillo ATE220047.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000032>

La batalla cultural por el modelo chileno: Élités intelectuales en tiempos de politización (2010–17)

El modelo económico chileno ha sido estudiado ampliamente tanto como un experimento pionero en las políticas neoliberales como por su relación con la creciente movilización social en contra de las desigualdades que ha provocado. Poca atención se ha dado, sin embargo, al papel de los intelectuales en justificar o criticar el modelo. Este artículo examina las batallas culturales sobre el modelo económico entre los principales columnistas del país entre 2010 y 2017, analizando los debates alrededor de las virtudes y los vicios del modelo, sus logros y fracasos. Muestra cómo las discusiones alrededor del modelo son altamente reactivas a los eventos políticos actuales, aunque se den en una especie de burbuja de élite, centrada en polémicas conceptuales y eventos políticos cotidianos que tienden a estar disociados de las preocupaciones populares.

Palabras clave: Chile; modelo económico; esfera pública; élites intelectuales

A batalha cultural pelo modelo chileno: Elites intelectuais em tempos de politização (2010–17)

O modelo econômico chileno tem sido amplamente estudado tanto como experiência pioneira nas políticas neoliberais quanto pela crescente mobilização social contra as

⁸⁶Jorge Atria and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Informe de Resultados: Estudio COES de la elite cultural, económica y política en Chile’, Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social (Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies, COES), 2021, available at <https://coes.cl/encuesta-elites-estudio-coes-de-la-elite-cultural-economica-y-politica-en-chile-2/>, last access 25 Nov. 2022.

desigualdades que tem provocado. No entanto, pouca atenção tem sido dada ao papel dos intelectuais na justificação ou crítica do modelo. Este artigo examina as batalhas culturais sobre o modelo econômico entre os principais colonistas do país entre 2010 e 2017, analisando debates sobre virtudes e vícios, conquistas e fracassos do modelo. Mostra ainda como o debate em torno do modelo é altamente reativo aos eventos políticos atuais, mas ocorre em uma espécie de bolha de elite, centrada em discussões conceituais e eventos políticos cotidianos que tendem a ser dissociados das preocupações populares.

Palavras-chave: Chile; modelo econômico; esfera pública; elites intelectuais

Cite this article: Undurraga T, Gárate Chateau M, Joignant A, Fergnani M, Márquez F (2023). The Cultural Battle for the Chilean Model: Intellectual Elites in Times of Politicisation (2010–17). *Journal of Latin American Studies* 55, 293–321. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X23000032>