1 Introduction

1.1 A Thesis

This Element addresses a specific set of concerns: the effects on individuals and societies of our current historical condition, one strongly shaped by the adoption and expansion of the so-called neoliberal economic and social model.¹ The Element explores the consequences of this model for societal bonds and for the political future of our societies. It does so by examining the case of Chile, a country considered the first laboratory of neoliberalism due to the country’s early adoption of the neoliberal model. Chile, however, is also considered a particularly radical case of neoliberalism because the country’s adoption of neoliberal policies and of institutional features designed to ensure the continuity of these policies occurred under a dictatorial regime, that of Augusto Pinochet (1973–90).

In the course of research carried out over the past twenty years, I have found that Chileans perceive their country to have undergone a genuine historical change. This perception is not an abstract judgment on their part but, rather, a result of their lived experience, of having to face challenges in ordinary life for which the social “know-how” they possessed no longer seemed to work. Thus, Chileans have participated in a major and unforeseen way in transformations not only of society but also of individuals themselves and of how relationships between them are organized.

My research findings also indicate a second factor that has reshaped social life in Chile in recent decades, namely pressures for the democratization of social relations (Araujo and Martuccelli 2012).

The establishment – via institutional changes, the adoption of laws, and normative principles and via changes in the social imaginaries – of an economic and social model inspired by the premises of neoliberalism placed new structural demands on individuals. These changes radically transformed the challenges individuals had to face in their social lives – for example, in their working lives and in their ways of coping with retirement and aging or with the new rules set for them as economic subjects – at the same time as they promoted new social ideals (e.g., competition, flexibility, or new social status indicators). As a result of the ongoing experience of having to face the demands of social life with little help from the state, relying basically on themselves (or, at most, on family or friends), Chileans have developed a strong sense of feeling overwhelmed but they have also developed greater confidence in their abilities

¹ A discussion of the term neoliberalism and the shape it takes in Chile is fully developed in Section 2.
and capacities to face the challenges of social life on their own while distancing themselves from institutions. They have acquired a new understanding of what being socially worthy entails (e.g., being a consumer, a proprietor, etc.) and a new definition of the minimum of revenues that can be expected from society.

On the other hand, powerful pressures for the democratization of social relations, understood as the spread of normative ideals (such as law, equality, autonomy, or diversity) to ever more spheres of social relations (male–female and child–adult relations, among others), transformed perceptions, demands, and moral judgments concerning the individuals themselves and their relationship with society. These ideals created new expectations of how individuals should be treated by institutions and by others, prompting individuals to conceive of themselves in new ways, and provided new tools for evaluating society. These ideals prompted new expectations of horizontality and added urgency to a renewal of the principles that regulate relationships and interpersonal interactions (for example, new expectations about the rules of deference to authority figures).

All of the above has led to a period of contention. This conflict has, of course, political expressions, such as the Chilean social outburst of October 2019, but, as I will argue below, these are just the tip of the iceberg. What lies at the core of these disputes is that Chilean society currently consists of transformed individuals engaged in a tense, exhausting, conflictive, and ambivalent rearticulation of the logics and principles that order social relations and interactions.

My main argument in this Element is that one of the most important effects of Chileans’ journey in recent decades has been the generation of a circuit of detachment; that is, the generation of a process that leads to different forms of disidentification and distancing from institutions and from the social logics and principles that order the social bond. This is a dynamic process comprising four components: excessiveness, disenchantment, irritation, and, finally, detachment.

The demonstrations began in October 2019, with October 18th typically considered the symbolic start date. The demonstrations continued, although on a significantly smaller scale, until the summer of 2020. The coronavirus pandemic that struck Chile in March 2020 interrupted the mobilization but did not cause it to disappear. Protests have continued to occur sporadically, involving more limited groups of people. The protest outbreak of 2019 far exceeded previous levels of conflict observed in Chile. According to Joignant et al. (2020), the baseline level of adversarial activity in Chile at the time was around 500 protests per semester. Between October 18 and December 31, 2019, 2,700 adversarial events were recorded, 40 percent of them involving the use of violence. The events had a powerful social and political impact, leading the government to promise a referendum on whether to change the constitution dictated in 1980 under the Pinochet dictatorship, an option that was approved by 78.28 percent of voters. Debate over the crafting of a new constitution figured prominently in the contentious presidential elections of 2021 and the fate and consequences of these political disputes are part of a story that is still unfolding.
Excessiveness is linked to the experience of facing immoderate structural exigencies or demands, such as uncertainty, that incessantly impel one to action. It is also associated with the perception of being constantly overwhelmed by demands and under pressure. Both are very often experienced as a breach of one’s limits (physical, health, motivational, psychic, etc.).

Disenchantment is the effect of broken promises. It emerges from the experience of a conflict between, on the one hand, the promises of neoliberalism and democratization and, on the other, the realities of ordinary social life. Disenchantment gives rise to distrust but also to a very skeptical view of the social world and its institutions and actors.

Irritation refers to a hypersensitivity and disproportionality between stimulus and response that characterizes interactions and relations between individuals and between individuals and institutions. Irritation is at odds with civility and is related to the fact that social relations and interactions are seen and experienced as charged with friction, mostly tinged with anger, and dominated by a noticeable deregulation of the use of force.

Detachment, the last component, denotes an irregular and complex process of estrangement and disengagement from the principles, rationalities, and legitimacies that order the social bond, without complete abandonment of society. Links that bind us to society and to a shared life are loosened and customary ways of relating to one another and to institutions lose effectiveness. Detachment is an individual self-protective response to the harshness of social life.

This circuit can be understood to operate diachronically, such that excessiveness is followed by disenchantment, disenchantment by irritation, and irritation by detachment. But these elements can also be seen to operate synchronically, such that they are simultaneously active and provide feedback to one another.

This circuit has important social consequences, as I will discuss below, and also incurs risks to the political bond. As my work has shown, individuals’ assessment of democracy is not limited to their evaluation of the functioning of its institutions. Rather, democracy is a living entity. While its existence and solidity depend on the relationships that individuals establish with the normative principles and the set of promises of which democracy is constituted, these relationships depend, in turn, on the social experiences with which individuals are confronted and on how these experiences affect individuals’ trust in and adherence to democracy, its institutions, and its actors. As I have found, experiences such as the use of personal connections to get a job or of being treated in daily interactions as of lesser value than those who are richer, whiter, or possessed a prestigious family name strongly erode the political bond. Everyday social experiences are, crucially, the proving ground on which
people’s adherence and fidelity to democracy will depend (Araujo 2017). Thus, the political bond is strongly influenced by the vicissitudes of the social bond. The circuit of detachment, given its centrifugal motion – that is, the fact that it is moved by an outward force, which pushes individuals away from the center toward the margins of society – establishes a set of very serious political challenges.

1.2 A Thesis in Context

The question of how structural changes in recent decades have affected Chilean society and individuals is not a new issue. For example, the second half of the 1990s witnessed a fierce debate between those who emphasized the advantages of modernization (Brunner 1992) and rated it a success and those who espoused more critical perspectives. The term modernization refers to the effects of the economic and societal model first implemented under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and then continued, without fundamental changes, under the center-left Coalition of Parties for Democracy (Garretón 2012) that ruled the country without interruption from 1990 to 2010. In this debate, three major critical diagnoses were advanced, each emphasizing a particular theme: 1) exploitation and alienation (Moulian 1997; 1998); 2) malaise (United Nations Development Programme, PNUD 1998, 2002; Lechner 1990, 2006); and 3) the rupture or weakening of collective identity and community values (Bengoa 1996; Larraín 2001; Tironi 1999).

This discussion entered a new phase around the first half of the 2010s, sparked by some fresh developments. The defenders of modernization continued to interpret the vicissitudes of Chilean society as predictable effects of the modernization process. They emphasized Chileans’ high level of satisfaction with society and denied that modernization was the cause of social ills (Guzmán and Oppliger 2012; Gonzáles 2017). On the other hand, the critical perspective on modernization increasingly developed, implicitly or explicitly, under the influence of the student movement3 and, more generally, under the influence of a new cycle of social mobilization (Somma 2017), which saw its greatest expression in the sequence of events culminating in the protests of

3 The 2006 student movement, known as the “penguin revolution” and involving secondary school students, first centered on protests against the increase in the cost of the University Selection Test and for a reduction in public transport fares. It ended with demands for the repeal of the Organic Constitutional Law of Education, the reversal of the municipalization of schools, and the reinstatement of free education, all of which had unprecedented public support. The 2011 mobilization, by contrast, had university students as its main protagonists and even greater social outreach and public support. Its demands included an end to profitmaking, a questioning of the neoliberal economic growth model, discontent with student debt, and demands for a quality public education (Ruiz 2020: 70–71).
October 2019. What had been a discussion regarding the more generic question of modernization became a specific debate about the consequences of neoliberalism. The critics’ formerly pessimistic tone gave way to a more optimistic outlook, strongly influenced by the increase and success of political mobilizations. Although criticism of neoliberalism and consumerism generally continued, alongside the criticism there emerged an epic discourse on individuals as political actors (Ruiz and Boccardo 2015; Mayol 2013; PNUD 2015).

The thesis of the circuit of detachment shares with prior critical contributions the diagnosis that the structural changes to Chilean society over the past several decades have produced an important set of consequences, both for individuals and for social life. However, there are at least four major differences between what previous authors have proposed and what my research has suggested.

First, there is a difference in the weight given to political factors and political junctures when explaining social change. The research I have conducted reveals that the social processes discussed are of long duration and cannot be reduced to political junctures, nor can they be understood solely in political terms. Protest and mobilization phenomena, no matter how significant, are not self-referential. My thesis focuses on social processes and dynamics that crystallize over a long period and that, I argue, take precedence over political explanations.

Second, prior contributions generally have emphasized a single structural explanatory dimension, the economic one, and have posited neoliberalism as the main explanatory factor. My research, as I have argued, reveals the centrality of a second factor—namely, pressure for the democratization of social relations. Interpretations of Chile that fail to consider the complex relationship between the two factors paint an inaccurate and misleading picture of the country.

Third, my findings suggest that Chile’s structural transformations are much more ambivalent in nature. Some examples, to which we will return later, may help clarify the point. If discontent with the “model” or the “system” appears to be widespread, it is nevertheless true that the evidence shows that Chileans do not altogether reject the societal changes they have undergone (Araujo and Martuccelli 2012: Vol. I, 29–80). While it is true that there is an increase in individualism, in the sense of an affirmation of individualities, this is not necessarily perceived or experienced as anomic or threatening, as many of the studies reviewed assume. Such a development is a precondition for the affirmation of autonomy in a society that has long favored tutelary forms of hierarchy management (Araujo 2016). Attitudes toward the concept of merit provide another example. The merit linked to meritocracy has been seen by many academics (Sandel 2020; Khan 2011) as associated with the intensity with which the logic of the market is structured and installed in societies, and,
therefore, as a formula for the maintenance of privileges and reproduction of inequalities. However, my findings have shown that, in the case of Chile, merit is seen as an essential component of the sense of justice and as a tool for defending the principle of equality because it plays a key role in breaking the historical logic of privilege that has permeated social relations in Chilean society and in other Latin America countries (Araujo and Martuccelli 2012).

Fourth, compared with prior work, my thesis takes a more nuanced view in interpreting both the neoliberal character of individuals in Chilean society and the opposite, idealized, epic-political characterization of them. My studies, for example, reveal the presence of individuals who might be called relational hyper-actors (Araujo and Martuccelli 2014), individuals who are placed in a difficult and even tragic relationship with the social values (such as competition) and the type of subjects that they are driven to embody, but who are simultaneously active in reproducing these ideal subject models. These persons have strong individual identities and reject selfishness but have serious difficulties committing to long-term relationships. They are highly sensitive to others’ abuse of power but are themselves practiced in the use and confrontational mobilization of the power that they have at their disposal (whether real or virtual) as a relational logic.

In short, what distinguishes the thesis of the circuit of detachment is that it 1) gives analytical preeminence to the societal dimension; 2) employs a multifactorial approach to understanding Chile’s historical situation by incorporating the dimension of the social bond; 3) takes a more ambivalent view of the effects of social change; and 4) views individuals in a way that neither idealizes nor demonizes them.

1.3 The Making of a Thesis

The development of this thesis and the arguments supporting it are based on the results of a series of eight large empirical studies carried out over the last twenty years. Therefore, this Element is based upon a large body of work. While each of these studies explores specific topics (e.g., individuation, structural challenges, the exercise of authority, individuals’ efforts to cope with social life, etc.), they share a common concern with the forms that the individual and the social bond take in the context of the structural changes that Chilean society has undergone in recent decades. In addition, all these studies share a common analytical framework.

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4 The different empirical studies that make up this research agenda are described in the Appendix accompanying this text. These research studies (henceforth “Inv.”) are numbered according to the order in which they were carried out.
To understand the effects of structural transformations on Chilean society and on the individuals who compose it, I have taken inspiration from the sociology of individuation (Martuccelli and de Singly 2018; Martuccelli 2006; Elias 2000) and have focused at the level of individuals. In my work, I have approached the type of structural challenges they must face on a day-to-day basis, the strategies they employ to cope with these challenges, and the way in which these challenges and coping strategies influence the type of individuals they become. I have also paid close attention to the types of relationship they establish with the society in which they live. To address the latter, I have taken inspiration from studies of the social bond, that is, from a perspective that considers both the problem of social adherence (Bouvier 2005; Paugam 2017) and the outputs and inputs that a group mobilizes to shape the relationships and interactions between individuals (Goffman 1959).

This shared concern and shared analytical framework have shaped the research questions, defined the methodological inputs, and established the analytical procedures in each of the different studies carried out. This has enabled the results of each study to provide input for the subsequent research and allows each to be seen as a link in a chain of reasoning.

In what follows, I will present and discuss in detail the four components of the circuit of detachment: excessiveness (Section 2), disenchantment (Section 3), irritation (Section 4), and detachment (Section 5). In Section 6, I will address the consequences of this circuit for the political bond. Finally, in Section 7, I will present some concluding reflections regarding the analytical scope of the circuit of detachment. A disclaimer before continuing: Some of the ideas presented here have already been discussed in various published texts, especially in Spanish. Inevitably, then, although the context is new, I will be restating some previously published ideas and arguments. It is worth bearing in mind that long-haul intellectual work necessarily involves reflecting on one’s own ideas to refine or transform them along the way (Tilly 2005). The production and advancement of knowledge are rarely linear, even if only because we often must retrace our steps to recover an idea that we had left behind.

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5 A research journey is always a collective enterprise. I am profoundly indebted to each of the members of the research teams which took part in the different empirical works carried out in the last almost two decades. But I am specially indebted to Danilo Martuccelli for his theoretical inspiration and his intellectual generosity.

6 Consequently, priority will be given to references to the publications in which the specific results were presented and the arguments deriving from them were defended. In the case of direct quotations, the reader will be referred to the research study from which the quotation is taken.
2 Excessiveness

2.1 Neoliberalism and the Historical Condition

2.1.1 Neoliberalism As a Concept and Model

Neoliberalism is the name given to a type of economic model based on the imperative of promoting free markets and on the belief that market self-regulation via competition will benefit the economy. With variations, the model depends on the deregulation of individuals’ relationships with the market and envisions the state’s role as limited to safeguarding competitive practices in the market. As a correlate, the neoliberal model envisions the state abandoning many areas of social provision previously within its purview. Neoliberalism promotes depoliticization by prioritizing an economic and moral vision of society; legitimizes a perspective centered on the individual, rather than on collective structures; and aspires to understand and mold society on the basis of these principles, institutions, and relational modes (Amable 2011; Davies 2014). Finally, neoliberalism’s most visible political and economic effects in recent decades have been the growing importance of the financial sector, a sharp increase in inequality, a significant increase in returns to capital at the cost of diminished returns to labor, and altered ways of thinking about collective experience (Harvey 2005; Streeck 2011).

Neoliberalism takes various forms depending on the country in which it occurs. Chile was one of the first countries in the world to change its policies and institutions based on neoliberal principles. Chile began with a series of economic measures that progressively took shape as a “model,” including privatization of state companies; the state’s retreat from the direct provision of social services, and the subsequent commercialization of these services; a state based upon the principle of subsidiarity; economic liberalization and deregulation; the opening of markets to international competition; and labor flexibility, among others (Salazar and Pinto 1999; Ruiz and Boccardo 2015). These measures aligned with neoliberal principles: they eroded a redistributive conception of social protection, weakened worker protections and forms of collective labor organization, strengthened individual solutions over collective ones, and promoted an economistic view of society.

Chile’s implementation of neoliberal policies, introduced after the 1973 coup under the military regime of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–90) by the so-called Chilean Chicago Boys, who were taught and directly influenced by Milton Friedman (Valdés 1995), encountered some obstacles over time and underwent various modifications along the way (Büchi 2008). First, in the 1980s, power shifted to a more pragmatic team that gave greater scope for
The Circuit of Detachment in Chile

state action and proposed new measures in response to the country’s serious economic crisis (Collier and Sater 1999). Second, adjustments occurred that made the business sector a major social actor (Ruiz and Boccardo 2015). Third, consolidation of the model occurred in association with the return to democracy in 1990 and the subsequent twenty years of uninterrupted government by the Coalition of Parties for Democracy.7

A distinctive aspect of Chilean neoliberalism is the oligopolistic control of markets with an extreme concentration of property in most sectors of the economy (Ruiz and Boccardo 2015), a phenomenon Schneider (2013) has called hierarchical capitalism. Another distinguishing feature is that the model’s consolidation benefited from a surge of wealth in the Latin American region due to the so-called commodity boom that began in the mid-2000s. This boom was particularly spectacular in a country whose economy depends more on income from natural resources – primarily from copper mining – than does the economy of any other Latin American country (Ordóñez and Silva 2019).

The conception of the functions of the state was a very important aspect of the neoliberal model. Within the neoliberal framework, the state’s role was to be reduced to supplying what other actors, such as families, private parties, or individuals, could not or would not supply. State economic intervention was to occur only in extreme cases, and the state was not the only entity that could provide social services; private companies also could serve as providers.

Chile’s adoption of the neoliberal model resulted in a sharp reduction in state provision of social services and protections. The erosion of the ideal of universal provision of services and protections to the entire population in favor of support targeted at very vulnerable groups (Raczynski 1994) undermined the feelings of solidarity that form the core of the social bond. One effect of this erosion was that Chileans lacked adequate protection from predatory market actors, leaving them vulnerable to the “fine print,” or abuses.

2.1.2 Neoliberalism Experienced

At the same time, “neoliberalism” is the name Chileans give to what they call the “system” or “model” shaping their day-to-day lives. Chileans recognize this “system” as one of the two factors that give form to the combination of constraints and challenges that must be faced in social life, that is, as one of the factors that shape their historical condition (the second factor, discussed in Section 3.2, is the pressure to democratize social relations) (Araujo and Martuccelli 2012).

7 The so-called coalition did not alter either the productive or the economic structure in any essential aspect, but it developed an increasingly successful network of social protection for the most vulnerable (Espinoza, Barozet, and Méndez 2013; Garretón 2012).
The term figures increasingly in individuals’ accounts of their lives from the early 2000s until the present day.

Unlike the way neoliberalism is typically discussed in European and North American debates on the subject, in Chile the term refers to a system that seems to many Chileans to have been imposed on them by force rather than because of any belief they may have had in it. Indeed, since the late 1990s, the consequences of neoliberalism have been viewed increasingly critically across society, except perhaps by the most privileged and protected members of society. Yet, these criticisms tell only one side of the story, for Chileans can point to various ways in which neoliberalism has benefited the country.

For example, Chile has experienced a reduction in poverty. While the exact numbers remain subject to debate, there is no question that the prevalence of poverty has decreased, or at least that its nature has changed. A new face of poverty has emerged, linked to increased access to consumer goods. The increased availability of household appliances and other household goods lies at the heart of this change. In 1987, 7 percent of households with the lowest income owned three assets such as a washing machine, a television, a refrigerator, or a gas cooker. By 2002, about 74 percent of households in this income bracket owned three or more of these items (Ariztía 2004). Beyond a simple question of status, this increase in ownership of durable goods brought about a real improvement in Chileans’ quality of life. Between 1992 and 2002, a third of the needy Chilean households obtained electricity for the first time. During the same period, the percentage of poor urban households that lacked access to potable water dropped from 20 percent to 8 percent (Ramos 2004).

Another especially important change has been the increase in levels of schooling and the new groups that have received higher education. In 1992, 46.49 percent of Chileans over 25 years old reported that primary school was their highest level of education and only 11.7 percent reported having completed postsecondary studies (e.g., in universities, technology institutes, technical education centers). By 2017, the percentage of the adult population who had completed only primary school had dropped to 25.6 percent while the percentage of those who completed higher education had risen to 29.8 percent (INE 2017).

There have been changes in the measurement of poverty. In 2009, it changed from a one-dimensional, income-based measurement to a multifactorial measurement comprising four dimensions until 2015, and thereafter comprising five dimensions. Despite the variation in the percentages produced by each type of measurement – the percentage of the population living in poverty in 2017 measured by income was 8.6 percent; with four factors, it was 18.6 percent; and with five factors, 20.7 percent – all of them show a downward trend (MINDES 2020).