



CHILE, THE RICH KID ON THE BLOCK (IT STARTS TO FEEL LONELY)

By LARRY ROHTER

Resumen. El TLC negociado con los Estados Unidos se supuso ser el momento estelar del ingreso de Chile en el club de la élite de naciones estables, democráticas y prósperas. En su lugar, el nuevo acuerdo, firmado en enero de 2010, volvió a detonar una discusión a veces angustiante, sobre lo que significa ser latinoamericano y si Chile ha perdido de alguna manera esas características esenciales. Desde el principio de la década, los tres vecinos de Chile, han sufrido las convulsiones políticas y económicas que han forzado cambios de gobierno. Esto ha provocado celos y molestias de sus vecino como la Argentina, Bolivia y Perú, sin mencionar el resto de Suramérica.

Achieving a free trade agreement with the United States was supposed to be the magic moment that certified Chile's entry into the elite club of stable, democratic and prosperous nations. Instead, the new accord, signed in January, has reignited a sometimes anguished debate here about what it means to be Latin American and whether Chile has somehow lost those essential characteristics. Since the beginning of the decade, all three of Chile's neighbors have suffered political and economic convulsions that have forced changes of government. In sharp contrast to Argentina, Bolivia and Peru, not to mention the rest of South America, Chile these days looks "dull but virtuous," to borrow the title of a recent report by one Wall Street brokerage house.

This is a country where most people actually pay their taxes, laws are rigidly enforced and the police only rarely seek bribes. That is unusual for Latin America and probably should be cause for celebration. Yet, it has the rest of the region looking at Chile as if there is something wrong with it because it is not what the Brazilians call "bagunça" or what the Argentines call "quilombo" - passionately messy, turbulent and chaotic.

"The image of Chile for many years has been that of a country that is 'different and solitary,' the Peruvian political commentator Vargas Llosa, wrote in a recent essay that generated much comment here. *"Curiously, although Chile has undertaken a growing trade with the world and attracted investments, it was perceived as 'isolated' in a space that is psychological more than political or economic."* Chileans were abruptly reminded of their unpopularity late last year, when an uprising in neighboring Bolivia overthrew a president who favored exporting natural gas through a Chilean port. Bolivia has been landlocked since losing a war to Chile in 1879, and Chileans were shocked to discover that many Latin Americans - led by the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez - supported Bolivia's historical claim to recover a piece of its coastline. It has been this way for at least a generation, Chile as South America's odd man out. When Salvador Allende came top over in 1970, the rest of the Southern Cone was ruled by right-wing military dictatorships, and by the time those countries began to swing back toward democracy in the 1980's, Gen. Augusto Pinochet was in power. Chileans gained sympathy during the Pinochet dictatorship, when "solidarity with Chile was a cause that people in Latin America believed in, somewhat like Spain was in the late 1930's," said the writer Ariel Dorfman. But that changed when democracy returned, he said. ***"Many people resented how Chileans, especially our entrepreneurs, behaved, buying up all the banks and telephone and electricity companies and acting arrogant and obnoxious."***

Today, Chile is a hypercapitalist state at a time when Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador and Uruguay are all moving leftward and questioning free trade and open markets. Chile may also be suffering from what might be called teacher's pet syndrome. Since the 1980's, other Latin American countries have had to endure repeated lectures from the United States, Europe and Japan on the need to become more like Chile in opening their economies to the outside world and combating corruption. "For some mysterious socio cultural reason we have been 'the serious kids in the neighborhood,' " Mario Waissbluth, a business consultant here, acknowledged recently in an essay for the newspaper La Tercera. "We are the nerd student who does all of his homework and is loath

some to the rest" of his classmates. "Obviously it's better to be dull and virtuous than bloody and Pinochetista, but Chile has been a very gray country for many years now," said Mr. Dorfman, one of whose novels, "The Nanny and the Iceberg," deconstructs Chile's "cool and efficient" image of itself. "Modernization doesn't necessarily have to come with soullessness, and I think there is a degree of that happening." The Free Trade Agreement with the United States has aggravated all these contradictory sentiments. "Everyone, from Peru to Colombia, is fighting tooth and nail to get the same status," Mr. Vargas Llosa wrote. "But it pains them that Chile has got there ahead of them." Government officials here say they are conscious of their potty image and are moving to mend fences with their neighbors. But their initiatives have been limited mainly to trade-oriented efforts like dispatching delegations to Brazil and Central America to advise on what to expect in negotiations with the United States. "My concern is that of Chileans being seen as the new Phoenicians of Latin America, just good at trade," said María de los Ángeles Fernández, director of the political science program at Diego Portales University here. *"That is not sufficient to have good relations. You need other means of communication."*

Simultaneously, though, Chile is also looking to establish alliances beyond its own troubled neighborhood. A free trade agreement with the European Union went into effect last year, a similar accord with South Korea has been ratified, and in November Chile will play host to a conference of the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic cooperation conference - an effort to strengthen its identity as part of the equally dull but virtuous Pacific basin. *"We are trying to do everything within our reach to integrate ourselves"* with the world beyond Latin America, Ricardo Lagos Weber, the main organizer of the conference and the son of the president, acknowledged in an interview. But there is also a recognition here, he added, that Chile "can't be an enclave of modernity surrounded by poverty, instability and bad vibes" without suffering the consequences.

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SANTIAGO, Chile

UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA
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