

“WE NEED TO REDISTRIBUTE CHILE’S WEALTH NOW”

Contributed by Benjamin Witte
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Humanist Party leader Tomas Hirsch
Photo By Benjamin Witte

An Exclusive Interview With Chilean Humanist Leader Tomás Hirsch

(Ed. Note: Two-time presidential candidate Tomás Hirsch of the Humanist Party has kept himself incredibly busy since the 2005 elections, in which he won 5.4 percent of the popular vote. In addition to traveling extensively throughout Latin America and Europe, the outspoken political leader also found time to pen a new book. Entitled “El Fin de la Prehistoria: Un Camino hacia la Libertad” (The End of Prehistory: A Path Toward Freedom), the work is set for official release later this month.

The Santiago Times recently sat down with Hirsch in his suburban Santiago home, where he talked at length about his budding friendship with Bolivian President Evo Morales – who wrote the prologue to Hirsch’s book – his views on Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, and his interest in trying once again for the Chilean presidency. Hirsch, who ran in the last election under the banner of the Juntos Podemos (Together We Can) coalition, also offered an insightful analysis of Chile’s current political left.)

By Benjamin Witte

Santiago Times: What’s the significance of the title of your new book?

Tomas Hirsch: The title is a wink to Francis Fukuyama who wrote a book called “El Fin de la Historia y el Último Hombre,” (The End of History and the Last Man), which always seemed to me to be completely lacking in vision. To say that human history has ended because a certain economic model has been installed, or because certain political projects, such as communism or real socialism, have failed, seems to me to show a real lack of vision about the human process. What we have today instead is violence as a form of social organization. Violence in all of its forms: political, economic, racial, cultural, ethic, religious, psychological, educational, generational. From my point of view, what we need to do now is move toward a future that’s truly human, to put an end to violence in all its forms. That’s what I call “the end of prehistory.” And that’s something that’s accomplished by opening up space for freedom. That’s why the subheading is called “El Camino hacia la Libertad.”

ST: How is that violence you talk about manifested here in Chile?

TH: In Chile violence is manifested in a system that boasts excellent macroeconomic figures but one of the worst levels of income distribution on the planet. That is violence. It’s not physical violence, but rather economic violence. When you have a country that has the kind of accumulated wealth Chile has today, with international reserves like it’s never had before, incredibly high copper prices, soaring exports, but that isn’t capable of distributing that wealth, of guaranteeing fundamental human rights to Chilean families, that’s violence. Chilean society is very violent. The fact that an important sector of the population isn’t represented in the decision making bodies of the state, in Congress, that’s violence. That indigenous peoples continue to have their lands stolen from them is violence. It’s violence against an entire people. That multinational forestry companies, or mining companies, or fishing companies make use of their land, that’s violence. The fact that the decisions about what to do with the resources of Chile’s various regions are made in Santiago, rather than in the regions themselves – that’s violence. The fact that elderly people, after giving the country their best 30 or 40 years, end up being paid a miserable pension, that’s violence. So yes, we live in a society that’s profoundly violent.

ST: And to put an end to this violence?

TH: It seems to me there are three fundamental things that are necessary. First, we need to build a real democracy, a democracy in which every person is a true protagonist in the social process. This goes way beyond the issue of the binomial voting system in Congress. This is about popular initiatives such as plebiscites, revoking mandates, popular consultation on issues. Second, we need mechanisms for redistributing wealth now. Let me emphasize the word now… If not, we’re looking at a boiler that’s going to blow. A third fundamental aspect is having a media that really has the interests of the people at heart. Not what we have today, which is a media that serves the interests of certain economic monopolies.

ST: How exactly do you propose redistributing the country’s wealth?

TH: There are a number of possibilities. First, the country has certain fundamental resources that just shouldn’t be in private hands, even less so in the hands of multinational companies. The country is wasting its most important

resources. Copper, for example, should be in the hands of Chileans. What's more, it was in the hands of Chileans. It was nationalized. And we shouldn't forget that the nationalization was passed with votes from the right. They all agreed. The re-privatization of copper now amounts to losses of between US\$12-16 billion per year. There's nothing else to call that except stupidity…They say there isn't enough capital to (nationalize the copper). That's not true. CODELCO is a top-ranked company. It has access to credit all over the world. It's efficient. It makes lots of money. There's no reason why CODELCO can't expand and take control of Chile's copper. That would no doubt generate more money that could then go toward social needs.

You also have to have a pension system that doesn't just perpetuate the same poverty people suffer during their working years. I'm not saying anything new here. This isn't my invention. Today, the countries that are best able to redistribute wealth aren't the ones that have gone out of their way to follow a neo-liberal model. The Northern European countries, Australia, New Zealand, Australia – the countries that have the top distribution levels – have all applied policies where the state has a big role to play in carrying out distribution. That obviously involves leaving lots of space for private initiative, and with a strong emphasis on developing small and medium-sized companies, which create the most jobs. They also put a lot of energy into developing quality education systems, not just focusing on quantity. (Ricardo) Lagos said recently that we have 600,000 university students. That's great, but it's not enough. Higher education is a disaster these days.

You have to modify the tax structure. Chile's tax rates are so low there's still a lot of room to raise them. Sweden, which doesn't seem to have any investment problems, has a tax rate that's between 52 and 54 percent. It's the same in Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, and so on. In Chile, tax levels for the richest people, and for the biggest companies is absolutely inadequate for the country's needs… And the private copper companies need to pay a true royalty. The three percent they pay now is just a joke. I think that after that 3 percent went into effect, (the company owners) must have toasted their pisco sours, because it's just a joke…

There you have some ideas that would be absolutely effective toward improving wealth distribution. None involve expropriating companies, hanging bankers, kicking people out of the country. Nothing like that. But we are talking about a shift in focus. We can't continue to have a “let it be” state, a state that sits on the sidelines letting the market operate as it will. From the point of view of the needs of the people, that kind of state has proven itself a disaster.

ST: The prologue of your book was written by Bolivian President Evo Morales, who comes across in the text as a bit of an environmentalist. Are those ideas you share?

TH: They're ideas that I share with him and that we've in fact spoken about at length. At times we've planned 20-minute meetings and have instead spent two hours talking. He has a profound understanding of the importance of a sustainable economy… He also understands that our region is in real danger. He and I are both completely for industrialization and for making use of natural resources. Our type of environmentalism, if you want to call it that, isn't of the fundamentalist variety. We're not interested in protecting the green-footed lizard at the expense of human beings. No. We believe in making use of our forest, fishing and mining resources. But Evo, although he's from such a poor country that has so many needs, also understands the importance of protecting, for example, the Amazonian region of Eastern Bolivia.

ST: Can you comment on the job the current Chilean administration is doing in terms of the environment?

TH: Our current government applauds new Nobel Prize winner Mr. Gore. They welcomed him here, gave him all kinds of honors. They also promoted Mr. Ricardo Lagos as the new – what do they call him here? – Captain Planet, as if he were a true defender of the environment. All of that seems to me like a big joke. Who knows if they're pulling the country's leg, or what they're trying to do. In reality, the government follows an economic model that's based on destroying natural resources. What do I mean by that? It's a model that's based on earning short-term profits…

We have environmental laws, requisite environmental impact studies, what have you. But they still authorized Pascua Lama. And it's no secret to anybody that Pascua Lama means the complete destruction of two glaciers that are unique in all the world and that in addition, represent the only water source for an entire Chilean desert province. CELCO time and time again shows it has no concern whatsoever for the environment. Not just in Valdivia, where thousands of (black-necked) swans died. It's more than that. The pollution of deep wells that end up being used by the region's indigenous people. Later the Mataquito River. And in every one of those situations, there's an investigation but ultimately, nothing happens.

You can travel Chile from Arica to Punta Arenas and you'll discover that in every city and rural area, economic powers are given permission to run roughshod over the environment. There's an incestuous relationship between the big capital holders and the state, all to the detriment of the environment.

There is a solution. There's definitely a way to solve this without reducing the country's production levels. You need to create an autonomous body, an environmental ombudsmen, that's independent of the government and has the power to establish norms, regulate and levy fines. Having an Environment Ministry isn't enough,

because it's still part of any current administration. It's subject, therefore, to pressures from the Finance Ministry, which is what really decides to accept certain projects even if they harm the environment.

To summarize, my evaluation of this government is that it's doing a disastrous job in terms of the environment. It's putting the future of Chile at risk. I didn't even mention the Aysén (hydroelectric dam) issue. The problem with Aysén isn't just that they're going to put up some electricity towers that will make the landscape uglier. The problem is that they're destroying an entire habitat and creating irreversible environmental damage.

ST: The Aysén Project, if approved by the government, would generate some 2,750 MW of electricity. Doesn't Chile need that energy?

TH: Obviously Chile needs energy, but there are a few things one must look at beforehand. A major part of Chile's additional energy demand isn't being driven by citizens, but rather by huge mining projects. That's the first thing; Second, although I'm not an energy expert, I understand from studies that this type of energy generation, which is based on large generating plants connected by long transmission lines, isn't very efficient. I understand that between Aysén and the SIC (the Central Chile electricity grid) there would be an energy loss of between 17 and 22 percent. It may be profitable for the investors, but it's not the most efficient system.

From a social point of view, it's better to have a system that involves small, semi-autonomous generating plants. I have no doubt that we need to produce energy. Of course we do. But we should do so with semi-autonomous, smaller, localized generators; Another thing is that we can't depend on just one energy source. Depending on Argentine natural gas was a mistake. There needs to be a diversified energy matrix;

Chile is a country that has how many, 5,000 kilometers of coastline? And where's the development in wind energy? The president promised that by the end of her term 15 percent of energy generation in Chile would come from alternative sources. We're not even close to that. Not even close. We're not even at one percent. Nothing's been done.

ST: Can you talk a bit about where the Chilean left stands these days?

TH: It seems to me that in both Chile and the rest of the world people are asking questions about what it means to be on the left, about what the left's role is; Today there is a system throughout the world, or at least in the West, that is more or less a two-party system, divided between the right and social democrats. They go by various names. In Chile's they're called the Concertación, in Argentina Kirshnerism, etc.

Generally speaking, people tend not to want the right in power. And so the social democrats come up with what's truly a type of blackmail. They say, "if you don't want the right, then you have to vote for us. We're the ones that'll save you." The people then vote for the social democrats, who end up governing on behalf of the political right, upholding their model but with slight touch ups. And hundreds of millions of people live with this permanent system of blackmail, which is called the "lesser of two evils." It's what exists in Italy with (Romano) Prodi, in Chile, in Peru with Alan (Garcia);

There's another part of the Latin American left that could be referred to as "no longer an option." With the fall of the real socialist systems, the fall of the Berlin wall, the fall of the Soviet Union and that (traditional) left is no longer an option. That project, that dream is no longer possible. That's meant that important sectors of the Latin American left have ended up accepting the leadership of the social democrats. They've decided the best they can do is exert a slight influence;

But at the same time, I've seen in Latin America a resurgence, an awakening of people who are seeking new paths. They can't be classified as the traditional left. It has more to do with new generations, or indigenous peoples, or women. They're humanist movements. Not necessarily part of my Humanist Party, but humanist movements nevertheless. There are the Zapatistas, for example. In some countries they've even formed governments — (Ecuador's Rafael) Correa, Evo, (Venezuela's Hugo) Chavez. They're not of the traditional left. Is Evo a Marxist? No, that's ridiculous. Is Chavez a Marxist? Not at all. European intellectuals try to classify them as a "New Left," but that's not really accurate either. Those governments are very interesting, though all very different from one another. Different, but with certain things in common: an emphasis on Latin American integration, the recovery of natural resources and formation of constituent assemblies.

This is all relevant in Chile as well. In Chile there's a group in government that calls itself the left; although they don't have much to do with the left. They maintain a neoliberal, or semi-neoliberal model. Also there's a historic, "no longer possible," left. So what they do is try to influence the Concertación governments a little here, a little there, but with the assumption that they won't ever be the government. And finally there are small groups that are looking to build something. It seems to me that's the situation.

ST: Speaking of the governments of Correa, Chavez and Morales, do you think those leaders have made any mistakes that could serve as lessons for Chile?

TH: Quite a few. I think Chavez talks more than necessary, which is a very Venezuelan thing. It's not really Chavez so much as it is Venezuelan. But I think he should tone down the language he uses. This isn't a time to exacerbate confrontations; There are other Latin American leaders that may not follow directly in line with what he wants, are even with what I want, but this is really a time for us to be coming together. This isn't the time to just run your mouth, and it seems to me that in that sense he's done something unnecessary. Second, it seems to me he's gone too far in terms of arming (Venezuela), something that I obviously don't agree with. And third, I don't like any mechanism that goes toward perpetuity in power. When I start to see things like that, I don't like it. Nor do I think it's necessary. Movements can't depend only on people. They need to depend on fundamental ideas.

In the case of Correa, I really can't say anything yet. He's very new. He's just getting starting and I hope things go well for him.

In the case of Evo, I think that yes he has made mistakes, but because of inexperience. He himself admits that. I think he's unnecessarily fallen into a few traps. He's allowed himself to be sucked into arguments that the opposition initiates. Things he should have avoided so as to move ahead with the really important issues; I think in the very beginning he got overly excited, going around firing off against everyone, wanting to condemn all different sectors: the Church, the education system, the rightist business world. I think he needs to be more focused, which he's now doing. But yes, there were some mistakes at the beginning.

But on the other hand, look at what Evo's accomplished. Look how in his first year he fulfilled his campaign promises, something that's very unusual. He nationalized the gas. He formed a constituent assembly. He developed a community justice system, gave rights back to indigenous peoples, carried out an agrarian reform. All in his first year. It's all more the impressive when you consider that here in Chile we have a president whose program initiatives have turned out to be paper airplanes.

ST: Do you plan to run in the next election?

TH: We'll be running a candidate in the next election. Who that's going to be? I think it has to be a group decision. I don't believe in such personalized projects. But at the same time, to answer your question in all sincerity, I'd happily be a candidate. For me it was a wonderful experience. I think we did a great job. As a team, all of the organizations working together, we did a beautiful job. And from that point of view, if it falls to me to be a candidate, I'd gladly and eagerly accept. I like the idea; But I also have to say that in all sincerity my goal in life isn't just to be a candidate. I'd rather be president of Chile in order to really change things.