In 2011, Chilean students took to the streets to perform a flash mob of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” a “kiss in,” and a “Beach for Lavín,” a theatrical mid-winter beach scene protesting Secretary of Education Joaquín Lavín’s efforts to combat student strikes by ending the semester prematurely.¹ These protests, popularly known as the “Chilean Winter,” demanded that Sebastián Piñera’s government eliminate school tuition by renationalizing the copper mines, decreasing military spending, and enacting major tax reform.² Although focused primarily on educational reforms, the student movement also criticized the massive socioeconomic disparities resulting from the neoliberal order put in place under Pinochet’s dictatorship. In this way, the movement’s leadership sought to renew longstanding ties with Chile’s working class.

The Chilean Winter emerged from a long tradition of student and working class activism. Student-worker synergy dates back to the early 1920s, when students at the Universidad de Chile found common cause with a burgeoning anarchist labor movement. What makes the most recent protests distinctive, however, was that they occurred amidst widespread indigenous, environmental, and feminist demonstrations throughout the country. Additionally, the 2011 movement was preceded by the Penguin Revolution, a wave of strikes led by high school students in 2006.

In my research, I focused on the student mobilizations from 2006 to the present day. In particular, I examined the ways in which the demands, tactics, and public reception of the mobilizations changed between the Penguin Revolution in 2006 and the Chilean Winter in 2011. I also examined the movement’s historical roots, focusing on the activist history of the Federation of Students of the University of Chile (FECh) and the intersection of student and working class politics, as evidenced in student participation in the movement NO +AFP, a national movement against the country’s pension fund system.

In my three weeks of independent research, I conducted archival research and interviews in Valparaíso, Chile, where I was studying for the semester, and Santiago, Chile, the capital city. I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with 14 current or former student leaders and activists. The interviews consisted of a series of questions about the students’ participation in the movement, the demands and tactics of the movement, ways in which the student movement related with other student movements, and challenges that the student movement will face in the coming years. My research also consisted of ethnographic observation of student marches and demonstrations, as well as street ephemera, such as posters and graffiti. I also conducted research in the newspaper archives of the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile and the FECh Archive. This research will be the basis of my honors thesis in Latin American Studies, and I hope to be able to return in Chile over winter break to conduct additional archival research and follow-up interviews.

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