

# The Role of Elites in Emerging Societies, or How Established Elites Deal with an Emerging Society: The Case of Business Elites in Contemporary Chile

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In contrast to the diagnosis of order and continuity in which every social position seems to be fixed and uncontested, the year 2011 brought a novelty to Chile, hitherto the model of political stability and economic orthodoxy in an always turbulent subcontinent. What the different protests of students, environmental movements and regional vindications of 2011 (and beyond) have in common is the return of public concerns after decades of the hegemony and celebration of the private realm (Atria et al. 2013). Remarkable, too, is the fact that both the semantics and rhetoric of those protests are and were mainly moral in nature and revolved around the discourse of abuse. Apart from some radical expressions, the massive claims are not directed against the model itself or its foundations and promises. They are mainly against its excesses, including but not limited to the scandal involving the retailer “La Polar”, considered one of the biggest scams in the history of Chile, the big pharmacies’ collusion to secure deliberate and sustained increases in the prices of medicines, Chile’s pension system, which is harshly criticized because it does not assure workers decent pensions, the emergence of the profit system in higher education by using state credits for students, mega-investments in energy (hydropower and thermo-electrics) without providing for even minimal environmental regulations, etc. In a sense, the cleavage is not a classical political or ideological one (left-right or industrial and agrarian proletarians against conservative owners). The claim is mainly a moral one and has been made by the middle classes, students not socialized in the crucible and crossroads of Chilean politics since the end of Pinochet’s dictatorship and regions abandoned by centralism in Santiago struggling for recognition and expressing the voice of the victims of abuses.

Who is being held responsible for these kinds of repeated abuses? One need look no further than the business elites. Behind them, political elites are also scrutinized as possible accomplices, particularly the center-left Concertación which ruled Chile from the return to democracy until 2010 (or at least until the business elites themselves took control of the government again with Sebastián Piñera, one of the big millionaires in the region). These business and political elites represent the pillars of the neoliberal experiment introduced in Chile during Pinochet’s dictatorship subsequent to the economic crisis in 1982. The fact that its leadership has been questioned in earnest since 2011 represents a complete novelty in the country’s recent past. Therefore, in the case of Chile, but also in other much bigger emerging societies such as Brazil after the protests in June 2013, the notion of the role of the elites as the drivers of an emerging society’s empowerment and leadership ought to be replaced (or at least complemented) by inquiring into their reaction to the demands that a truly emerging society (and not simply an emerging power) bring about. Some research has been done on the role of elites as boosters of the integration of certain countries in a global context (Diniz and Boschi 2004; Dupas 2005; Pelfini 2011), but less research has been done about the elites’ capacity to adapt, learn and reconvert while they cope with the completely new challenges which expanded and active middle classes introduce.

Instead of analyzing elites alone or their strategies of legitimation and reproduction as coherent autonomous actors, it will be more profitable to analyze business elites with regards to a determined configuration or constellation (Rehbein 2013). This entails an understanding of emerging societies which follows that the social is truly emerging and is embedded in a singular figuration (in the sense of Norbert Elias) and includes a more intensive contact between and rivalry of empowered middle classes which are in turn questioning not only privileges but, perhaps more significantly, responsibilities. In this sense, it is relevant to investigate the ability to adapt, learn and reconvert on the part of Chilean business elites in

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relation to three key changes in the social structure of emerging societies: a social dimension, including the mechanisms used by the elite to distinguish themselves from the enlarged and empowered middle classes; in politics, the tolerance toward the growing demands for democratization and mesocratization in contemporary Chilean society; and, at the level of transnationalization, the self-images of superiority and efficiency in the search for regional leadership. Business elites have been key players both in the country's recent economic growth and in the consolidation of its development model. Hence, it is of special interest to investigate their ability to learn, adapt and reconvert just as this model of "growth without equity" begins to face internal challenges.

This article focuses primarily on the contextualization of the problem presented above and on the justification of its axes of analysis. Additionally, it clarifies some relevant concepts and finally outlines the main research questions and hypotheses in hopes of serving as a contribution to the development of similar research in other emerging societies.

## 1 Chile as an Emerging Society

Sustained resonances abound in various countries regarded as emerging powers. The first criterion for defining such an emergence, and the most easily observable and digestible by the media, is to record and compare growth rates. Those attributes, however, are related to the very concept of an emerging market. The term emerging power, meanwhile, adds to those features the geopolitical component, measurable first in terms of military supremacy but also in terms of institutional strength and leadership at the regional level, dimensions that allow us to speak more specifically of emerging powers and less of big powers or hegemony, concepts which carry with them too much geopolitical and security baggage (Harris 2005). However, now focusing on the concept of "emergence", it is also important to remember that the idea of emergence is associated with something new or unexpected. The genuine emergence does not happen, then, at least not in the first case, by increasing military and economic power, but mainly by the appraisal of something unprecedented, sudden and unexpected. Additionally, if we talk of an emerging society, we mean a particularly active, complex and distinct entity, constantly moving, balancing and integrating the dynamics of the state, market and civil society pursuant to original parameters and transforming thoroughly the existing social structure without modifying a constitutive structural heterogeneity (Nederveen Pieterse and Rehbein 2008; Schwengel 2008). Furthermore, if that capability not only allows the country in question to face unprecedented challenges but provides guidance to other societies in similar conditions, then that becomes a replicable capacity representing a base to a sustained leadership (Paul, Pelfini and Rehbein 2010). Although Chile is not usually seen in this group of emerging countries (basically because of its reduced volume), one can say that at least from 2011 onwards, the country has been in transition from an "emerging market" (attractive to investors, offering a pro-business climate and low levels of corruption) to an emerging society, particularly due to the transformations in the social structure but also on account of the growing role of civil society with its resulting renewed and sustained demands.

In the last 20 years, Chile has experienced an unprecedented and sustained level of economic growth. In addition to a high level of institutional stability, the country has been upheld as a model among developing countries, at least in the Latin American subcontinent. Therefore, Chile can be considered as part of the concert of the so-called emerging societies for three main reasons: expansion and emergence of new middle classes or sectors; increasing demands for democratization and expectations of equality; and an aspiration to regional leadership sustained via increasing transnationalization or internationalization. So far, the literature on "emerging powers or emerging societies" highlights the novelty of their appearance against the backdrop of their following original and heterodox development paths (Harris 2005; Schwengel 2008), but there is little analysis focused on the transformations in the social structure as well as on the actors who would be taking center stage throughout the unfolding of the aforementioned dynamics. Paternalistic agrarian and classical industrial elites seem to be decreasing, although the patterns of this change remain opaque. The composition and transformation of elites in emerging societies has been scarcely investigated and even less so in a comparative perspective. Additionally, the limited research has focused mainly on the segment of the millionaires or "super rich", leaving aside the question of the articulation of functional and power elites. Research on the transnationalization of these sectors has concentrated on developed societies and global expansion from the center (Sklair 2001). To the extent that this preeminence of the developed societies of the Western world is not disappearing altogether but

is rather decreasing in an increasingly multi-centric world, studies on the role of the dominant elites in emerging societies become all the more urgent.

The impetus for analyzing the Chilean business elites facing the transformations of an emerging society not only responds to this vacancy at the level of comparative studies but also has its roots in internal reasons and dynamics, not the least of which is a growing questioning of the development model sustained by these sectors since 1982. This model can be labeled “growth without equity” and has been successful in reducing extreme poverty, maintaining high occupancy rates and swelling the volume of the country’s middle class without being able, in turn, to reduce the differences in income and in the access to public goods between the poles of the social structure (Ffrench-Davis 2004; Portes and Hoffman 2003). In the consolidation of this growth strategy, the dominant sectors have played a decisive role in giving legitimacy to an efficient yet restrictive model (Montero 1997). In a similar way as the political elites, who have been converted and have renounced whatever revolutionary inclinations they held prior to the dictatorship, business elites have diversified their production profile, seem to have reconciled with democracy and have become globalized, with a few having projected themselves successfully not only in neighboring countries but also by establishing original links in the Asia/Pacific region (Ossandón and Tironi 2013). All this, however, or perhaps precisely because of it, has coincided with a worsening of income differences, increasing territorial segregation and a segmentation of the educational system under the aegis of a “penal” state that has not yet been able to amend the country’s constitution or transform an electoral system designed during the dictatorship. Business elites do not seem to regard these shortcomings as problematic, but on the contrary, they would consider them as collateral damage or even as essential components in the success of the model (Solimano 2012). The focus on business elites is then evident not only because they have been one of the main drivers of Chile’s condition as an emerging country but because they regard themselves as the fundamental gatekeepers of this condition (Tironi, 2012). The linkages with political elites are obvious, but these have functioned more as subsidiaries of the interests of the business elites (Joignant 2011a; Fuentes 2013).

## 2 Analyzing Entrepreneurial Elites

In order to reduce the universe of discourse and to investigate and distinguish it from use in common sense and in ordinary language in social sciences, it is important to reverse the usual mixture of concepts elite, ruling class and upper strata (Imbusch 2003), by which elites become a polysemic category with little heuristic power but a category that nonetheless represents economic, political and status attributes without any weight. According to the classical theory of elites of Pareto and Mosca in Italy in the early twentieth century, elites are active minorities in permanent circulation, rising, declining and recruiting new members (and losing former ones, too, of course). Essential is the idea that elites are key players in key positions whose endowment of resources, power and status is higher than that of the majority they lead (Dreizel 1962; Scott 2001). In contrast, a concept like ruling class fuses political and economic power in just one actor, and this actor necessarily maintains an antagonistic relationship with the dominated. The more widespread idea of conceiving elites as simply “at the top” or as high or higher than the highest paid sectors of a singular economic unit overlooks agency and looks only to position in the social structure, essentializing and crystallizing the differences between strata. Oligarchy, aristocracy, establishment or the reference to the elites in the singular (“the elite”, like an unified entity) may be the forms that symbolic and material distribution assumes in a given society, but they can hardly be presumed as an a priori before observing what specifically happens in each case (Pelfini 2011). The question of who wields greater power in a society depends on its formation and history and on the areas in which that power is decisive.

As mentioned above, in conditions of growing inequality at the national level, but also at the global one, the study not only of those harmed by this inequality, but especially of the beneficiaries and, in a way, its perpetrators is therefore becoming more urgent. And this is something that the social sciences have left to the side, at least in relation to the importance of these sectors with regards to the dynamic global financial capitalism (Savage and Williams 2008). In Chile, business elites have been accumulating power in recent decades and this accumulation of power picked up steam in particular after privatization during the Pinochet regime and the 1982 crisis (Fazio 1997; Gárate 2012). Within the economic elites, that power includes revenue and traditional sectors of the economy, while business elites represent the most dynamic sector of the economy, with a technocratic mode of thinking and a propagation of an entrepreneurial spirit and managerial habits (Field and Higley 1980; Bröckling 2007). These respective

groups would form a particular “milieu” composed of business owners, managers, think tanks, foundations and business organizations.

The category milieu is equivalent to a group of people who share a similar habitus (Bourdieu 2007). The habitus is a system of rules learned from experience and acts as a generator mechanism for the practices of individuals. Thus, individuals who have a similar habitus tend to be recognized as belonging to a particular social category and therefore can be subsumed within a specific milieu. Most likely they tend to have similar resources and perform similar activities. This is what Michael Vester (2003) designated as milieu and, especially in Germany, has been established as the main unit to analyze social structure and has been extended for use in market research. Although the idea of milieu has some things in common with the concept of class as both are based on an unequal distribution of resources in society, milieux are not classes, because their focus falls on the habitus which combines the possession of resources with more diverse occupations and activities (taste, consumption, ideological orientations) including the symbolic or cultural dimension. The hypothesis is that individuals cannot act spontaneously; their behaviors are learned, and this learning takes place through the incorporation of forms of behavior that become patterns. In addition, individuals cannot apply their behavioral patterns at random, because they are confined to certain social spheres that depend on both embedded and other external resources. Resources, habitus and activities are not defined objectively or essentially but socially and relationally. Each resource, habitus and activity is symbolically codified and socially classified. It gets a name and a valuation, which relies on some evaluation that reflects both the perspective of the members of a particular milieu and of external observers. What matters is that each evaluation reconfirms the social differences, which are interpreted on the basis of the available criteria. Through that recurrent self-observation and the consequent classifications and distinctions, a sense of belonging and of differentiation in a particular milieu crystallizes. Analyzing the Chilean business elites as a specific milieu - basically a conservative technocratic milieu - and investigating its internal divisions or variants involves reconstructing mechanisms of classification and differentiation from other competitors (sectors of the middle classes, neighboring countries, etc.) in order to identify the resources and habitus activities that define their members. This definition is not static and descriptive, but determines their persistence or revocation in relation to the prevailing assessments in the context of the emergence of middle classes with demands for greater democratization and mesocratization and a growing transnationalization of activities, which, in turn, allow for a hold on a privileged position in the social structure. The methodology developed for the analysis of milieu, called “habitus hermeneutics” (Vester et al. 2001; Bremer 2004), seeks to analyse the patterns of behaviour and the acquisition of external resources during the life-course. The method should illuminate the composition of habitus and resources – and then establish their relation to the division of fields or their value. The material for habitus hermeneutics is basically provided by a brief life history that should be recorded and transcribed.

### 3 The Main Challenges for the Hegemony of the Business Elites in Chile

In the case of Chile, the three characteristics identified to distinguish an emerging society are some of the most significant elements of the social transformation experienced by the country in the past 20 years. As mentioned above, they can be classified in terms a primarily social dimension, a political one, or a transnational dimension.

In relation to the first dimension, the expansion of middle classes and the concomitant poverty reduction has been one of the most salient processes of transformation of the social structure in the country throughout the past two decades. Studies on mobility and social stratification support the notion that the Chilean middle classes have grown significantly compared to other Latin American countries in recent years (Portes and Hoffman 2003; Wormald and Torche 2004; Barozet and Espinoza 2008). The neoliberal transformation in Chile (1973-1990) had an impact on the social structure of the country, resulting in a “privatization” of the middle class in terms of a significant occupational migration from public to private sector. This type of social integration and mobility is mainly based on consumption and on the provision by the market for health care, social security and education. According to the occupation variable, the middle class can be divided, first, into a service class, mainly made up of high level professionals and technicians hired in the private and public sector, business executives and managers, and state officials (21%). A step below is a class of non-manual workers including people employed as

merchants, administrative assistants and clerks in stores, and includes, at a lower level, secretaries and cashiers (18%). Finally, 15% belong to the subgroup of self-employed and small business owners. In total, according to Casen 2009, the middle class, divided into these occupational subgroups, corresponds to 54% of the working population (Mac-Clure 2012: 171-172). What is relevant to our problem of a competition between established elites and emerging middle classes is that between 1992 and 2006 the service class registered the largest growth (Mac-Clure 2012:174). In the context of social integration via consumption and open access to the market, this service class increasingly tends to imitate the motivations, lifestyles and cultural orientations of the dominant sectors and thus resembles the category “managerial habits” (Field and Higley 1980; Brökling 2007). In this situation, it is of particular interest to inquire into the possible transformation of the distinction and classification mechanisms operating on the recruitment and co-optation in which the business elites reproduce themselves (Núñez and Gutiérrez 2004). In other words, if the rising middle classes share the entrepreneurial spirit and consumption patterns of the business elites, which mechanisms of differentiation are operating apart from the success, volume and profit of each entrepreneurial project? Additionally, does the reduction of abrupt material discrepancies between the two sectors foster a process of mimesis of their habitus and generate a sharing of the language of the new spirit of capitalism without major hesitation (Boltanski and Chiapello 2002)?

Secondly, following the axis Democratization/Mesocratization, it is noteworthy that in the last 10 years the problem of social inequality has been installed as a central issue on the public agenda. Today it is an unavoidable issue for the various political forces in the country, including those that historically have proved to be contrary to the egalitarian principles that leftist groups have always raised (OECD 2014). Business elites, whose channels of expression in the political system have come from mainly right-wing forces and political parties, could not remain indifferent to this point (Tironi 1999). Therefore, they had to take seriously the question of the legitimacy of the Chilean development model, which is now taking shape in the discussion of profit in higher education, access to the health system, abuses of companies with regards to their customers and clients and the problems of the pension system, among other issues. Given the centrality that the problem of inequality has gained in Chile, it is crucial to analyze how business elites observe or perceive this subject. This means to investigate to what extent they share the diagnosis of inequality that seems to generate and be generated by this model of development and the level of tolerance that these sectors show with respect to the level of inequality reached in Chilean society. If inequality is defined as a real weakness or collateral effect of the economic model, which mechanisms for the reduction of inequality and redistribution of income and resources are business elites able to accept? Will they put the focus on the equity of positions or on the equity of opportunities (Dubet 2011)? The linkage of business elites with political and intellectual elites, who have historically represented their interests, is an area of great interest for observing how the demand for a less unequal society could be processed. Think tanks linked to the powerful Chilean economic groups, their union leaderships and the lobbyists through which these elites seek to influence government or parliamentary decisions constitute a preferential milieu for observing this phenomenon to which we are referring.

The third axis of analysis is the international/global projection of the country and of its growth model as worthy of emulation by other countries in the region. This projection results in the formation of an international identity (Lafer 2002) which is also expressed in a sudden perception of superiority over neighboring countries at least as long as the OECD countries remain the points of reference. This transnational dimension allows for the study of two key elements for defining the emerging nature of a country and the composition and projection of its elites. First, the idea of emergence is associated with some kind of leadership that in a midrange country like Chile may chiefly be manifested at the regional rather than at the continental or global level, as is the case, for example, with Brazil. This leadership is expressed primarily in the ability to “export” its model of development and to provide the linkage between market and state. Second, there is considerable debate about the transnationalization of the elites and their alleged globality, resulting in analyses not only of their mobility and their companies (Pries 2011) but of their value-based orientations (Kanter 1995) and their marriage strategies (Weiss 2006). Among the various positions focused on the formation of an alleged transnational (Krysmanski 2004, Sklair 2001) capitalist class, on the one hand, and others highlighting the centrality of national educational institutions and national composition of its most conspicuous representatives, on the other (Hartmann 1996 and 2003, Ziegler and Gessaghi 2012), when evaluating the empirical evidence, especially in Latin America, we prefer to talk about globalized national elites (Lenger, Schneickert and Schumacher 2010; Pelfini 2009). In this line, for the Chilean case, the transnationalization of elites also seems to be rather scarce, taking mainly the form of an internationalization of business elites as a result of the

expansion of Chilean capitalism to countries in the region, particularly in neighboring Argentina and Peru. After joining the OECD, for Chile and especially for its leading sectors, the Latin or the South American frameworks have ceased to be the main reference and the immediate region of interest. This framework is still used but only to show differentiation or the uniqueness of Chile in the region, while the main parameters of comparison are other countries in the “caboose” of the OECD. The neighboring countries become mostly places to export the growth model, as well as business management models - mainly in Peru and to a lesser extent in Argentina. Their carriers would then be sectors of the elites that are transitory and have moved to these countries - internationalizing themselves but not necessarily experiencing a transnationalization - projecting their identity self-images, their management models and value-based representations and moral criteria in the new context. Here the question is whether these self-perceptions, models and representations are simply reinforced or whether they are challenged in this confrontation in a space and culture related to their own, yet different and somewhat in competition with it. It is important to analyze how the self-image of the vaunted “Latin American jaguar” is reinforced throughout the course of this internationalization (Larraín 2001). As expected, this active openness to the world of Chilean business elites has developed more cosmopolitanism in their values, norms and customs. It is relevant, however, to analyze the kind of cosmopolitanism and conception of globality to which they mostly adhere: are they fixed to an “Atlantic-Western type (Held 2003) or a more plural one, sensitive to cultural differences and living together with strangers (Appiah 2007; Beck 2004)? In relation to globalization and its core features, it is interesting to inquire into the nature of the globalization in which these business elites move more comfortably. This reflects the first phase of globalization, beginning in the 1990s and based on neoliberalism and on the expansion of the financial sector. Can this now be referred to as twenty-first century globalization (Nederveen Pieterse 2012), where the state and the productive sectors are catching up and the axis of growth is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific?

## 4 Hypothesis and perspectives

At least two features distinguish Chilean elites from other elites or dominant classes in South America: the socio-economic and ideological homogeneity, on the one hand, and the share of strong moral values rooted in an extremely conservative version of Catholicism (Thumala 2007), on the other. This is not the case in Brazil, Argentina or Peru, for example, where tensions reveal conflicts between export-oriented and internal-market businesses, industrialists and land-owners and the Coast and the Andes, etc. In Chile, business elites add to these features other attributes which increase their homogeneity and moral cohesion, including: “having studied in one of the schools that corresponds to 0.1% of primary and secondary education in Chile, in one of the two universities which is equivalent to the 1% of the institutions for higher education in the country and in one or two careers that count” (Giesen 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Of course, a moral representation is part of each construction of superiority and eligibility which is crucial in the formation of elites (Lasch 1995). Nevertheless, in Chile the homogeneity of moral values rooted in a conservative version of Catholicism is an identity marker for elites. It is much more than a legacy or an aftertaste of colonial times. Indeed, it was renovated and consolidated during the dictatorship in parallel with a deep modernization of the country in terms of communication, infrastructure and market liberalization.<sup>2</sup>

Facing the question of the reaction of elites to an emerging society, I distinguish four main possibilities: adaptation, learning, reconversion and isolation. Adaptation consists of the adjustment of the strategies for self-presentation and the justification mechanism to a new context with increased complexity and uncertainty, but leaving the main preferences and values untouched (Deutsch 1978; Luhmann 1986). Learning adds a moral component to this adjustment: preferences have to be rethought not merely because of complexity reduction but because of the recognition of an obligation (Eder 1985 and 1999; Pelfini 2005). Reconversion is a higher stage that implies a transfiguration at a level in which collectives are able to leave former preferences and values and adopt those from the claimers (Dryzek 2000). Isolation can be defined as self-absorption through communication pathologies like deafness and muteness. If it

<sup>1</sup>The author mentions the Universidad Católica and the Universidad de Chile. The careers referred to are mainly civil engineering and business administration. One can add a MBA in selected Business Schools in the USA.

<sup>2</sup>According to Thumala, since the establishment of the neo-liberal economic model in the mid-seventies the Chilean business elite has been influenced by some conservative religious movements like Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ, which promoted a revival of the religious pietism among the members of the business elite and has converged with the neo-liberal ethos.

is repeated, reproduced and constantly represented as a tautology it becomes what Sfez calls “tautism” (Sfez 1988).

Considering the moral cohesion of elites around a conservative version of Catholicism, one can expect that business elites in Chile will be sensitive to the types of claims coming from empowered middle classes whose fundamental semantic is a moral one: accusations of abuse, excess and disregard for justice instead of claims against the foundations of the current economic model (Güell 2012; Joignant 2011b). Considering the socioeconomic and ideological homogeneity of elites, one can expect that despite possible divergences within business elites in the ways they react to the challenges outlined above, their political positions will be “en block” and no fundamental fissures will be registered in the end.

In consequence, moral cohesion can be a condition to promote learning, in the best case, or a factor that strengthens isolation or leads to an intentional blockade, in the worst. In the last possibility, moral cohesion justifies superiority and domination; the others are not considered as legitimate partners. Homogeneity can certainly contribute to learning, in the sense that there is already a collective identity able to perform self-observation, but it can also be an obstacle to the incorporation of new value constellations and to a redefinition of priorities.

Which is the factor that explains the movement between both polarities? In hard sociological language, it is nothing more than the combination of the variables habitus and reflexivity (Aguilar 2013). If the category habitus underlines the force and permanence of codified patterns of perception and classification within a given social group (or milieu), the only possibility to escape from determinism and reproductivism remains in the idea of reflexivity, which is defined as the capacity for self-observation and criticism, evaluation of the collateral consequences and externalities of actions and decisions (Archer 2010; Beck Giddens and Lash 1994). Therefore, in an emerging society such as Chile, it is now crucial to determine whether the moral claims pointed out by empowered middle classes are disturbing the habitus of the business elites and whether this is leading to more reflexivity. If their habitus remain untouched, fewer changes are to be expected in the business elites apart from a scarce adaptation to a new, more turbulent context and to a semantic of suspicion. In contrast, if reflexivity increases, some kind of collective learning process can be initiated. In sum, in the case that the habitus of the business elites reinforce their moral cohesion and socioeconomic and ideological homogeneity and that this then leads to a blockade and a kind of autism with respect to claims for more justice, equality, access to public goods and - in particularly referring to the business elites - against abuse in the generation of profits, one could reach the following conclusion: in Chile, despite their continuous statements in the public sphere revising their non-critical support of Pinochet’s dictatorship, business elites seems to be truly unprepared for democracy...

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