

## **Listening to First-Time Protesters. The Multiple Meanings of the Chilean Revolt**

### ***Draft***

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The Chilean revolt that began in October 2019 shares many traits with other expressions of contentious politics around the world of the very same year. In spite of its unheard massiveness and scope, a myriad social conflicts notably since 2011, displayed new repertoires of protest involving an increasing number of people so far alienated from political activity.

In the last decade, the consensus about the model of development which seemed deeply rooted in Chilean society for the last two decades was suddenly altered by multi-stranded conflicts, covering different territories and showing new repertoires of collective action of protests. As long as institutions could not process these demands, the breakdown of social and political consensus led to an irritated political climate, making street demonstrations the main channel to express discrepancy. By the end of 2019, the conflict acquired a dynamics that is still deepening the breakdown of the institutional system.

Many aspects of this contention process, as well as their combination, challenge the conventional wisdom about how protests come about to occur. First, the massive involvement of people in a context of a dramatic decrease in voting turnout indicates that for many people these riots inaugurate their political engagement. Next, there is no signal of centrality: there is no hierarchy or articulation among innumerable social demands, neither an accepted leadership or spokesperson. By contrast with traditional rallies people do not gather to hear discourses nor they belong to political or interest associations. So meetings occur with the conspicuous absence of political groups, with participants carrying their own hand-made signs containing specific demands, native peoples' flags, artistic performances –remarkably LasTesis' A Rapist in your Path–, clashes with the police and also a "let's party!" ambiance.

We present an interpretation based on results of a study of first-time participants in protests in Chile. We intend to establish the meaning of the protest for people with scant previous political involvement and representing social, demographic and economic diversity. During January 2020, protesters were invited to four discussion groups where they presented their experience, and had a dialogue with policy-makers and political leaders. During July and August 2020, taking into account the limitations associated with the pandemics, we have conducted some 15 individual interviews with first time protesters, and expect to attain 40 more.

To a large extent this process also challenges the scope of political participation. What is the outcome of the interplay between manifestations, deliberation and social media networks? Our research group has been wondering whether the seemingly individual and experiential involvement in political contention has evolved into a common story about their experience within a system of multiple inequalities.

In our analysis we follow the perspective proposed by Cefai (2011), and Chabanet and Royall (2014) to understand contentious politics<sup>1</sup> from the perspective of the participants', looking for their own understanding about how and why they mobilize, and "trying to avoid deducing rational logics of collective action from structural analysis" (Cefai, 2011). Thus, we sought to understand their experience, how they became actors, and how they do politics.

We believe that this perspective allows to understand how those weakly resourced social groups, who lack political, organizational and economic resources, became unexpectedly involved in those massive protests. As our interviewees have told us, even to them this massive mobilization was a surprise.

In this sense, we would like to argue that the traditional schemes of social movement analysis do not exhaust the understanding of the phenomenon, because they not allow to understand the massiveness and strength of the movement, and the incorporation of people who had never got involved in street demonstrations.

### ***Presentation***

Collective mobilizations around the world in 2020 challenged the approaches to protest based on the static comparison of organizations, cultures or identities to gauge social change (Collins 2001). This kind of comparison in search of differences assumes a relatively christalized initial position that acquires its dynamic through collective mobilization in a process of contention or conflict. The comparison, however, does not occur among two states but rather between a stylized starting point and a fluid dynamic of events, involving conflict and contention.

Present-day events are to a certain extent a consequence of social structure but it's difficult to forecast them. In this discussion, surprise before strong political mobilization and protests are all too abundant as well as ex-post explanations (Watts 2011). Putting attention to subjective conditions can help find the missing link from long standing social conditions to sudden and sustained overt conflict. In this presentation, having as a background the Chilean

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<sup>1</sup> By contentious politics McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) mean "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants". (p. 5) quoted in Chabanet and Royall (2014).

protests since October 2019, we elaborate on three issues that these mobilizations have highlighted:

1. Should protestors be treated as a collective social actor? This social group would be defined by a shared social identity, an organizational membership and/or a common interest. We argue here that protestors do not match an established social position nor their demands have articulation or hierarchy.
2. solidarity among first-time protesters has a strong emotional component. We argue that even in the turmoil of conflict, positive emotions predominate establishing a moral boundary with police abuses.
3. what's the level of reflexivity one can discern among protestors? Reflexivity here refers to people's social distance regarding their action, that is the meanings associated with the protest. We do not assume an a-priori rationale for contention because actors can engage in their action with no clear meaning for it, but they can develop it during the process of conflict. Politicization corresponds to a register of reflexivity related to the definition of public issues. We wonder whether protestors are able to identify models of social order that would satisfy their demands.

### ***Actors and Masses***

Social breakdown and solidarity have long contended as the explanation for social protest, establishing the distance between masses and social actors. The first assumes that in periods of social crisis or transformation people react irrationally to relative deprivation, perception of social disorder or fear about the future. The latter contends that no social crisis would create protest unless some form of solidarity had developed among those affected by social transformations. A refinement of the solidarity approach argues that solidarity needs not be a-priori to conflict; under some conditions social conflict can deliver solidarity.

At first sight Chilean protests seem closer to a mass-situation than the deployment of a social actor. Many hand-made signs as well as graffiti contained a myriad of demands and expressions of discomfort, where few of them were linked to known organizations or movements. Rallies consisted of a multitude recognizing themselves as they displayed their demands and repertoires of protest. No centrality could be discerned, no banners, singing or discourses were characteristics of these meetings.

In spite of disparity and lack of articulation or hierarchy of social demands, protestors continued to meet and recognize, welcoming everyone to express the many faces of discomfort: from unions to environmentalists, from gay/lesbians to soccer fans, from elderly associations to rock bands. This was truly a new political style in the making, a channel for many 'molecular' or 'micro-political' practices that had been in the shadows for the last two decades.

The diversity of demands expressed in the protests made evident the inability of the political system to articulate social demands; under those conditions we can see the immanent social conflict underlying the otherwise stable Chilean political system. Unless political parties and authorities widen the margins of representation to new groups and social demands, grassroots mobilizations will continue to put the system under pressure.

The protests of 2019-2020 show again an actor of the conflict increasingly autonomous of political parties and time and again conscious of its own strength. This marks a contrast with previous forms of collective action. By the end of the 20th century trade-unions had lost the central position among popular groups that they enjoyed for many decades. New groups and movements –indigenous people, feminists, environmentalist, and so on– developed their initiatives increasing their distance from political parties.

### *A meaning for activism*

Massiveness and continuity are crucial aspects of Chilean political mobilizations from October 2019 to February 2020. The repertoire of collective actions displayed along these months expressed a qualitative change in the character of protest, for rallies comprised a panoply of carnival-like forms –dancing, juggling, street-theatre, disguises, decorated carts, marching bands and many other types of performance – along with hard-core fans of football teams, street vendors, support groups, or discussion groups.

Political violence expressed in clashes between protestors and the police, fire blockades or looting has been another component of the collective action repertoire. The harsh repression on protestors by the police, resulting in mutilations and unregulated attacks contributed to develop a justification for political violence in these rallies: protestors who engaged in confrontations with the police would be a necessary condition for the manifestation to take place. The so-called frontline of the protest organized spontaneously the participants, involving also first-time protestors

It's unclear, however, that this constellation of activities corresponds to a social actor. The meaning and consequences of such sustained level of activism and variegated repertoire are to be searched in the experience of protestors. The experience of involvement in collective and open protest offers a link between structural conditions and the building of a common narrative of the situation.

The emotional energy associated with the protest has been highlighted as a key mechanism in the social construction of reality (Collins 2014). The building of a common interpretation of the situation requires negative emotions to be put aside, so that moral symbols could be mobilized. "Sad passions" such as resentment, hate, frustration, rage, envy would do any good to social conflict but to destroy its subject (Dubet 2019). Positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm or hope offer a ground to bind a group together and build a moral boundary with the antagonist. Police brutality appeared then as the other side of positive emotions.

First-time protestors discover that they can act and transform the world. Although engaged in a conflict they can create solidarity, which in turn impels the mobilization. Indeed, this is a matter of reaching a critical mass and the perception that the mobilization is bounded to victory (Collins 2001). To what extent the demobilization after Covid-19 pandemics will affect the dynamics of mobilization is a question worth addressing in our research.

### ***Politicization of protest***

Politicization, in many analysis of social movements, refers to the strategic interaction between the movement and the State. The political aspects of Chilean protests do not fit easily the frame offered by theories of political conflict. For one thing it has been stressed the lack of involvement of the Chilean population in institutional politics (Garreton 2002, Angelcos 2010). Voting turnout, for example has only decreased since 1988. We do not equate here the distance to institutional politics with de-politicization. Involvement in social protest may well be the outcome of a different type of politicization.

Another way of understanding politicization is with reference to the reflexive distancing from society (Angelcos 2010). Reflexivity refers to the critical examination of social links, which puts in question the social order itself. The building of a criticism of social order in Chile is still in process because for a long time the conditions for the model of development were taken for granted. The rationale of domination by a political elite seemed so perfected under Concertación governments that it seemed unlikely if not impossible to witness such massive expression of unrest, supported almost unanimously by the whole Chilean population.

Power abuses in several domains of social life contributed to the development of a critical appreciation of order (Martuccelli & Araujo 2012). Localized experiences in public transportation, waiting long hours for medical attention, or lining-up for otherwise routine services constituted the micro-social experience of inequality. Large scale abuses in the price of drugs, foods and retail payments were disclosed and their responsible put into trial to receive almost no punishment. These abuses were extended in Chilean society and offered the ground for the criticism of the model of development.

Chilean protests put in doubt the goal of the elites, making it clear the gap between elites and society: higher levels of functional inclusion went hand in hand with an increasing discomfort for the present and uncertainty facing the future.

The term dignity appeared in manifestations as a common denominator for a myriad of specific demands. Although it lacks a clear definition, dignity has the quality of denoting the converse of abuse. Such an empty concept represents everybody but has no certain meaning. In part the future of the mobilizations depends of finding common narratives around the concept of dignity.

### *Preliminary analysis of interviewees and group discussion*

“el cambio es ese, es atreverse a manifestarse sin el amparo de un partido político, de un líder” (Mujer, 52 años, Valparaíso)

A main result of our study is the lack of a strategic narrative about our interviewees' involvement in the protests. They rather refer to emotional and other causes to explain why they became involved. Moreover, to them the main demands of the movement were not new. On the contrary, when we asked them about their demands they refer to arguments based on their own experiences of inequalities and injustices. In this sense, they have felt the necessity for a change since long time ago, but they have connected them to a collective experience and narrative only recently (and for many only thanks to the protests). On the contrary, what is new in their own understanding is to have get involved in protests to demand those changes. And, even though some became involved in protests in the last years for single issue cases (No + AFP, educational policies), all understand that those massive protests of October 2019 have been something new, not seen in their lives before: so massive and fueled only with common people like them, without any conduction of a leader or organization. As they have report to us, they initially joined the protests mostly by the direct encounter with them in the streets (or through the media). They describe that felt they had to be part of it and to support the movement. Some even speak about having felt a “call” to join the protests. Why do they got involved? Mainly, because the felt for the first time that a real change was possible, and that this massive mobilization had to be a mean to achieve it. Their main involvement was just going out to the street, being there with others like them, and screaming loud for a change. Some were also involved in “cabildos” and local protests with “caceroleos”. Using the social networks to get informed and sharing information was also a key repertoire.

Our results also confirm that these protests present some features of continuity with previous processes of mobilizations in Chile. As several authors have argued, the mobilizations of October 2019 belong to a larger cycle of protests that began around 2006-2011 with the emergence of the student movement, and which got stronger with the mobilizations for a change in the pension system since 2015. In fact, regarding the student movement, we observe two continuities. First, our interviewees confirm that they mobilize for the same demands of the student movement, which are to end the highly segregated educational system, and to change the role played by the market and by the Estate in the provision of education at various levels. In broader terms they criticize that the actual system only provides a good education for people who have the means to pay for it, deepening the social inequalities in Chilean society. Some of our interviewees already participated in those previous protests.

Secondly, the collective actor that began the protests of October 2019 were students. They have become a legitimate contentious actor during this last decade for archiving -by means of massive protests- significant (but considered not enough) changes in educational policies. Even, some of their leaders are part now of a new generation of politicians. However, their mobilized in October not for a sectorial demand on education, but for a broader claim against abuses, that resonated strong. Indeed, the unrest of October 2019 was precluded with protests by school students during the previous weeks, who challenged, through massive “evasions”,

a last rise in public transport fares. They were not directly affected, but they framed the fare increase as one more abuse by the people in power (the government and technocrats in this case) against common people who cannot bear these continuous increases. This resonated strongly in many sectors of society, already very discontent with the several cases of corruption by big companies and politicians, who have either evaded taxes or have got colluded to keep prices high for consumer goods, such as toilet paper and chicken, among others.

More continuities with the longer cycle of protest is the relation of this mobilizations with the protests of the “No + AFP” movement. Many interviewees have reported to have already joined those manifestations in the last years, and most share their demands as part of the October unrest. This movement claims that the current pension system provides very low pensions (dar datos) and enriches the few owners of the AFPs companies.

Other demands raised by our interviewees were improving the public health system and accessing housing. All together are understood as a main claim against social inequalities and against the abuses committed by the more powerful sectors of society against the rest of the population and in particular to the most vulnerable sectors.

However, we observe an interesting aspect which is new, or at least was not part of the previous experiences of protest. Strikingly, our interviewees are not expecting to promote new leaders or even to propose specific new political arrangement to solve all those problems. For them to join those protests has been a way of putting pressure into the political system to make those changes happen. This, by going out to demonstrate that this claim is massive. We could even say that to this ordinary people the legitimacy of the movement arises precisely *from the absence of political and social leaders*. This is explained by them because they do not trust any actual politician, having a strong criticism to the current political representatives. They argue that politicians only govern for their own benefit. Moreover, almost all interviewees include in their demands a complete renewal of “la clase política”.

When we asked what kind of society they dream about, their answers are a more just and equal society, where people respect each other, and where everybody can reach a dignified living standard with their own job. Most see that this can only be achieved by a constitutional reform. However, they are not able to go deeper in the analysis and still would like to rely on experts or people who are in political positions to make those changes. This presents a big paradox, and some are aware of it.

The main ways out to them are:

- Writing down a new Constitution. This 25<sup>th</sup> of October Chile will have a Referendum to ask about the creation of a new Constitution. This has been one of the main concrete achievements of the movement
- They also say they will come back to protests when the pandemic is over, because they see that if not nothing will really change
- Some also express a deep feeling of uncertainty about the future

In this sense it is striking that they do not expect to be part of the group of people in charge to design or implement those changes. Thus, we are not in front of a demand for more political participation, neither for a populist leader. They just want things to work out fairly for everybody, and not only for a few.

One other interesting aspect is that joining the protest is also regarded as a new form of building social ties and forging collective solidarities. Many reported that by getting involved in the manifestations they felt alive again, and that by joining those collective manifestations they recovered a sense of “us” lost by the predominant individualism of current Chilean society. At a more local level many have begun to make meetings and getting to know their neighbors for the first time, strengthening territorial ties. Some also refer to the space of protest as a place where they can really express the rage. Related to that is the strong sense of unity and collectiveness that the harsh repression reinforced to them initially<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> We say initially, because this was reported to us only in January and not in the interviews conducted in August 2020.



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