Chile's 2019 October Protests and the Student Movement: Eventful Mobilization?*

Chile 2019: las protestas de octubre y el movimiento estudiantil ¿coyuntura histórica de cambio?

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ABSTRACT

A wave of massive, at times violent, protests raged in Chile from October to December of 2019, opening new possibilities for the country's politics. This paper investigates to what extent these events affected the organization, identity, and strategies of a pivotal actor in the cycle and, for the past two decades, an important driver of domestic political change: the student movement. Based on a qualitative analysis of media coverage and in-depth interviews with key student movement figures, it argues that, although the events in question were a national turning point, they did not necessarily constitute a critical juncture for the student movement. In explaining this somewhat paradoxical outcome, the paper supports the established view that the transformative impact of protest events on social movements depends on the strength of the movement's organization and the character of its protest repertoires. In addition, it also highlights that some factors overlooked by the broader social movement literature --including the eventfulness of antecedent mobilization and the locus of protest-- mediate the consequences of protest events on the movements involved.

Keywords: Chile, Eventful Mobilization, Protest, Student Movements.

RESUMEN

Entre octubre y diciembre de 2019 una ola de protestas masivas (en ocasiones violentas) remeció Chile, abriendo nuevas posibilidades políticas para el país. Este artículo investiga en qué medida dichos eventos afectaron la organización, identidad y estrategias del movimiento estudiantil: un actor crucial en el ciclo de movilización de octubre y un protagonista importante de la política chilena de las últimas dos décadas. Con base en un análisis cualitativo de cobertura de prensa y entrevistas en profundidad a importantes figuras estudiantiles, el trabajo argumenta que aun cuando el ciclo de protesta generó un momento de inflexión nacional, este no constituyó necesariamente una coyuntura histórica de cambio para el movimiento estudiantil. En el proceso de explicar esta paradoja, el articulo confirma que el impacto transformativo de la protesta en los movimientos sociales depende de su fortaleza organizativa y del carácter de sus repertorios de protesta. El artículo destaca asimismo que algunos factores no considerados por la literatura de movimientos sociales -- incluyendo el impacto de movilizaciones precedentes y el sitio de la protesta -- median el impacto que eventos de protesta tienen en los movimientos sociales involucrados.

***Palabras clave**: Chile, Movilización Memorable, Protesta, Movimientos estudiantiles.*

* The author wishes to thank Gabriel Ondetti and the anonymous reviewers at the *Revista de Ciencia Politica* for their comments on an earlier version of the paper. She also wishes to thank her graduate assistant Mason Gaspard for editorial assistance on an earlier version. Fieldwork for this paper was supported by an internal grant from Missouri State University.

DOI: 10.4067/S0718-090X2020005000106

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last quarter of 2019, Chile experienced massive political unrest. Initially triggered by a high school student campaign against a subway ticket hike in the capital, protest subsequently spread across the country like wildfire, unleashing levels of state and citizen violence unseen since the return of democracy in 1990 and generating some of the largest demonstrations in the country's history.

Much has been written about the causes, features, and consequences of this outburst. Concerning its causes, there is a consensus that deep-seated and widespread discontent with economic and political institutions is to blame (Castiglioni 2019; Luna 2019; Mayol 2019; Pribble 2019; Salazar 2019; Titelman 2019; Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020; Somma et al. 2020; Waissbluth 2020). Existing analysis underscore that these grievances stem from two main sources. First, economic growth has occurred against a backdrop of significant inequality and economic segregation, as well as the increasing precariousness of middle-class status (a result of flat wages, expensive access to basic services, and high levels of indebtedness). Second, citizens perceive the elites who control Chile's major economic and political institutions to be selfserving, abusive, greedy, and out of touch.

In addition, analysts argue that a decade of ongoing protests has nurtured processes of politicization, collective action aggregation, and radicalization that have amped up society' propensity to engage in protest (Bassaure and Joignant 2019; Luna 2019; Miranda and Campos 2019; Pribble 2019; Ruiz 2019; Somma et al. 2020). They also underscore that the government's response (a mix of particularly harsh policing and various social concessions) beget more protest (Pribble 2019; Somma et al. 2020; Waissbluth 2020: 46-51), and that a global uptick in contentious politics may have generated a broader context favorable to protest (Waissbluth 2020: 8-9).

Concerning its characteristics, analyses highlight four aspects of the cycle. First, they remark on its high levels of violence, a situation that reflected both the government's exceptionally harsh repression (which drew worldwide condemnation) and the unprecedented scope and intensity of violent protests (Somma et al. 2020: 4-5). Second, they emphasize that despite its tremendous internal heterogeneity, the movement was anchored by youth activists, many of whom were students (Núcleo de Sociología Contingente 2019; Rubio 2019; Waissbluth 2020: 41). Third, different writings underscore the acephalous nature of the movement and the fact that no political party, or set of parties, could claim a monopoly over it (Luna 2019; Albert and Köhler 2020). Collective action stemmed instead from a broad coalition of NGOs, unions, and social movement organizations loosely organized in an autonomous coalition known as *Mesa de Unidad Social*, as well as self-governing neighborhood assemblies (known as *asambleas territoriales*) (Sehnbruch and Donoso 2020; Albert and Köhler 2020; Guerrero and Cabezas 2020). The latter operated as grassroots deliberative po-

litical bodies (Albert and Köhler 2020; Guerrero and Cabezas 2020). Finally, some analyses remark on the plurinational character of the movement, best reflected in its identification with the indigenous Mapuche flag and Mapuche people's resistance to colonialism and state violence (Caniuqueo Huircapan 2019; Martínez-Navarrete 2020: 73).

Lastly, concerning protest outcomes, existing analyses emphasize that the protest cycle constituted a turning point in national politics. One significant development resulting from the events was a major exodus from existing parties and the emergence of dozens of new parties seeking to fill the void (El Mostrador 2020b; Rosenblatt, 2020). Another was a tectonic shift in the public agenda, which has made demands for overhauling the constitution inherited from Pinochet and decommodifying basic services mainstream political issues. Two additional developments include the persistence of forms of radical democracy born out of asambleas territoriales and new cultural phenomena, including songs, public art, and the informal renaming of a national landmark, *Plaza Italia*, now *Plaza Dignidad* (Montes 2019; Guerrero and Cabezas 2020; Mosciatti 2020).

This paper contributes to this extant literature by investigating to what extent, and why, the protest cycle affected the organization, strategies, and identity of a pivotal actor in the cycle: the student movement. The paper's focus on the student movement also reflects that movement's central role in Chilean politics over the last two decades in terms of both social mobilization and institutional and policy change (Donoso 2016; Kubal and Fisher 2016; Donoso and Somma 2019; Palacios and Ondetti 2019).

The paper's analysis draws from a qualitative analysis of newspaper coverage and more than twenty in-depth interviews with key figures of the student movement conducted throughout 2019 and early 2020. Interviewees included students from public high schools (*Liceo 1, Liceo 7, Liceo Carmela Carvajal*, and Instituto *Nacional*) and universities *(Universidad Austral, Universidad de Chile*, and *Universidad de Santiago*). They also included students from private universities (*Universidad de Concepcion, Universidad Diego Portales*, and *Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile*). All these schools and universities boast strong traditions of student activism and enjoy nation-wide name recognition. In addition, interviewees represented independents and party militants from different ideological currents with an important presence in the student movement --ranging from social democracy, socialism, and communism to anarchism and the revolutionary left--, as well as different levels of student government (i.e., student assemblies, unions, federations, and confederations).

Aside from contributing to the empirical analysis of protest and the student movement in Chile, the paper seeks to advance more general theories of protest eventfulness, that is, the degree to which protest events constitute watershed events that trigger new paths forward. In particular, the paper focuses on the factors that explain why some protests are more "eventful" (or

historically transformative) than others for the social movements undertaking them, a question that has occupied some contemporary scholars (McAdam and Sewell 2001; Hess and Martin 2006; Wood et al. 2017; Della Porta 2018; Portos and Carvalho 2019). It argues that although October 2019 was a national turning point in Chilean politics, it was paradoxically not a particularly transformative event for the student movement. This outcome, the paper claims, was a function of two factors the importance of which is well documented in the social movement literature, the relative strength of the movement's organization and the character of its protest repertoires, as well as two factors that have so far received less attention from scholars: the eventfulness of antecedent mobilization and the locus of protest. More specifically, the paper argues that diminished eventfulness reflected the fact that recent antecedent mobilization had been quite eventful and that at the time of the 2019 protests, student movement organization was weak and protest repertoires episodic and located in sites removed from students' quotidian lives.

The remainder of the paper is organized into four sections and a conclusion. The second section presents social movement concepts and theories about protest eventfulness, focusing on the paper's specific research question. The following section, which serves as a background to subsequent ones, summarizes the chronology of protest events involved in the cycle. The fourth section discusses the extent to which the protest cycle constituted a critical juncture for the student movement. The fifth section discusses the factors that explain the paradoxically low impact of the protest events on the student movement internal features. The conclusion contains a brief discussion of student activists' perceptions about the movement's prospects and role in national politics beyond 2019.

II. PROTEST AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS

In a seminal work, Sewell (1996: 272) argues that some historical events set in motion "contingent, discontinuous and open-ended processes" that alter history. Some of these events, for example the taking of the Bastille or the Montgomery Bus Boycott, involve iconic moments of heightened mobilization, which "become turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity when the logic of historical development is reconfigured by human action but by no means abolished" (McAdam and Sewell 2001: 102).

Historically eventful protests can also be crucibles of change for the social movements behind them. They may modify movement's power relations; alter activists' culture, loyalties and forms of collective action; and contribute to prefigure new paths forward; generating abrupt breaks with the past and giving birth to new, enduring, arrangements that fundamentally transform those who protagonized them (Della Porta 2018).

Research on why some protests are more eventful than others for those carrying them out is still limited, but existing studies suggest a few clues. Della Porta (2012) argues, for example, that the degree to which protest will transform social movements depends on their repertoires of protest, with long-term protest camps or occupations being particularly transformative. This form of protest, this author argues, intensifies and extends ties of affection, trust, and organization; and facilitates the creation of arenas of conversation that encourage deep reflection and generate strong feelings of belonging (Della Porta 2012: 261). Wood et al. (2017) agree with Della Porta, and also suggest that protest is more eventful when mobilizing structures are strong, and repression is high. The former creates strong bonds between activists, while the latter nurtures moral outrage, contributing to generate salient protest events. Other scholars also support the notion that high levels of state repression may generate backlash, contributing to make protest eventful (Hess and Martin 2006). Finally, Portos and Carvalho (2019) study suggests that movement autonomy –that is, the degree to which collective action develops uncontrolled by political parties and unions- affects the degree to which protest will be eventful for movement coalition building dynamics, with more autonomy being equivalent to more eventfulness.

This paper offers empirical support for the notions that the characteristics of protest repertoires and the strength of pre-existing movement organization shape the relative eventfulness of protest for the social movements engaged in it.[1] In addition, it sheds light on two factors that have received less theoretical attention.

The first of these is the idea that the location of protest has an impact on its eventfulness. While scholars such as Wood et al. (2017: 29) have noted in passing that the site of protest matters, the argument has not been fleshed out. This paper distinguishes between quotidian and non-quotidian spaces. It argues that sites where protesters spend most of their waking hours generate more eventfulness. This is the case because in such sites, protest alters the routines of protesters dramatically and is biographically and emotionally more salient because it involves familiar spaces and faces.

A second factor has to do with the idea that the features of antecedent mobilization mediate the eventfulness of protest. In particular, the paper indicates, protest eventfulness is shaped by the extent to which recent protest was already eventful. The paper suggests that the more eventful a protest is, the more likely immediately subsequent protests will have lesser effects. This idea builds on scholarly debates about the length of critical junctures. Scholars disagree on this

[1] The paper does not explore the potential effects of autonomy on protest eventfulness. The main reason is that its research design lacks the temporal or cross-movement variation necessary to test such a relationship. That said, the fact that during the past two decades autonomy has been a defining feature of large student mobilization, but only some of those protests have been eventful for the movement, suggests a complex causal relationship between the two variables.

issue, with some viewing critical junctures as long-term episodes lasting decades (Collier and Collier 1991) and others viewing them as windows of change that close relatively fast (Cappocia and Keleman 2007). While not weighing in on this general debate, the paper suggests that the idea that path dependency can settle in rather quickly may be particularly applicable to eventful protests.

Finally, concerning state repression, the paper does not dispute that, in general, high levels of repression contribute to eventful protest. It argues, however, that protestors' prior experiences mediate this relationship. That is, it is not so much the objective levels as the perceptions of repression that matter. Such perceptions are shaped by cultural norms about acceptable levels of repression. However, as this paper suggests, the breaching of these norms may "accustom" some protestors to new levels of repression, making subsequent harsh state policing less eventful for them (even if these new levels of repression are not socially acceptable). In addition, episodes of harsh repression radicalize some activists, a situation that alters movement strategy and affects future interactions between protesters and the police. In order to capture the gist of these complexities, the paper examines police violence under the banner of antecedent mobilization.

III. THE 2019 OCTOBER PROTEST CYCLE: A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

The protest cycle under analysis in this paper started on October 7 of 2019, when the *Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes* or *ACES* (a forum of student individuals, groups, and unions with nation-wide presence) called for a subway turnstile evasion campaign demanding the nullification of a recent fare hike.[2] Student protest was also driven by ongoing resistance to *"Aula Segura"* (Safe Classroom). This 2018 law allowed high school authorities to expel students accused of carrying concealed weapons and participating in school occupations and protests where violence occurred. As described later in the paper, rejection of this law had already provoked fierce student-police confrontations several months before October, leading to numerous student expulsions and some criminal prosecutions of activists.

The fare evasion campaign set in motion a chain of events, including violent clashes between high school students and the police, and the government's closure of some metro stations. The latter sparked, in turn, a widespread backlash, leading to spontaneous seizures by students and non-students of more metro stations and further confrontations with the police. In the days that followed, protest, centered originally in the capital's downtown metro stations, extended to other areas of the city. In response, the government closed the entire metro network. Daily life and basic services came to a halt, and protest diffused across

[2] Chile's metro is the most expensive in the region. Estimates indicate that low-income working families spend around 11.3% of their income in metro transport (Cádiz 2019).

the city's neighborhoods and demographic groups, leading to more civilian and police confrontations. Conflict escalated on October 18 when barricades and arson, as well as peaceful pot banging, broke simultaneously across the city.

To regain control of the situation, on October 19, a beleaguered president declared a 15-day state of emergency, imposed a curfew, and brought the military into the streets. Initially focused on the capital city and its surrounding areas, these measures were extended to other large cities during the next few days. In parallel, the president —a staunch conservative— proposed a new, stricter, anti-looting law and increased penalties for protestors covering their faces and targeting the police or the military. He also decreed more resources for the surveillance and prosecution of protestors. Although the state of exception lasted only eight days, intense state repression continued into early 2020. Between October and December of 2019 alone, tens of thousands of protesters, including 4,080 minors, were arrested (Boddenberg and McGowan 2020). More than 3,000 civilians were injured (405 lost their eyes to rubber bullets, and 253 suffered burning due to aggressive tear gas), and four civilians died as a result of excessive police force. During the same period, the *Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos* (INDH) filed 770 torture and 158 sexual violence lawsuits (Telesur 2020, January 19).

Unable to quell protests by force, the government offered concessions. At the end of October, for example, it announced a package of future reforms that promised, among other measures, improvements to pensions and health insurance, the creation of a guaranteed minimum wage, term limits and salary reductions for elected officials, increased taxation for the top income brackets, and more support for small business. The following month, it invited opposition parties to discuss the resumption of the constituent process initiated during the second term of socialist president Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018).[3] On November 15, government and opposition reached an agreement to hold a plebiscite on April 26, 2020. Due to the COVID pandemic, this date was later changed to October 5, 2020. Citizens will be asked if they want a new constitution and, if so, what mechanism should be used to create it: a constituent assembly formed by delegates elected directly by the people, or a mixed convention with half of the members being directly elected and the other half coming from congress. If the response is favorable to a new constitution, a new election will be held in early 2021 and, if everything goes according to the plan, the proposal for the new constitution should be finalized by early 2022 and ratified later that year in another plebiscite.

[3] To fulfill campaign promises, in 2016, the Bachelet administration initiated a complex constituent process that involved online consultation and local self-organized neighborhood, provincial, and regional meetings. The government systematized the result of this initial process in "*Bases Ciudadanas Para La Nueva Constitución*" and proposed two methods for passage of a new constitution: a mixed convention with members of parliament and citizens, or a citizen-only convention. Ratification would occur through a plebiscite. A bill was finally introduced to congress only five days before the end of the prior administration, but was quickly withdrawn by the incoming president.

Military presence in the streets (which reminded many Chileans of the breakdown of democracy in 1973), significant disruptions of public life, and the plummeting of government's public approval meant that the announcements did not bring social peace (Infobae 2020). Nation-wide peaceful demonstrations, as well as episodic riots, arson, barricades, and looting, continued throughout the latter part of November and throughout December.

In response to the unrest, starting in mid-October social organizations in several neighborhoods in the capital city summoned meetings (*asambleas territoriales*) to develop strategies to deal with food shortages and violence, to organize protests against the state, and to start working toward a citizen-led constituent convention (Guerrero and Cabezas 2020). *Asambleas territoriales*, opened to anyone who wanted to join, brought together an array of individuals and organizations operating at the local grassroots level, including students. During November and December, many more of these *asambleas* formed across the country.[4] This process occurred independently of party organizations. Interviewees for this paper indicated that, although many individual party militants did join *asambleas territoriales*, in several, party leaders were publicly shamed and denied participation (personal communication with A.M.). In Santiago, the epicenter of the protest wave, inter-assembly coordinations, several of which were still in existence as of January of 2020, were formed (Guerrero and Cabezas 2020). Most were autonomous territorial networks, for example, the *Asamblea de Maipú*, the *Coordinadora de Asambleas Territoriales de la Provincia Cordillera*, the *Comunal Santiago*, and the *Cordón Grecia*. A few (e.g., *Asamblea de Asambleas Populares y Autoconvocadas*) were a mix of *asambleas territoriales* and other left political organizations.

In parallel, major union federations and confederations reached out to student, feminist, Mapuche, and other social movements to demand the investigation of human rights violations and pressure for a citizen constituent assembly (Claro 2019). The resulting coalition, named *Mesa de Unidad Social*, supported the creation of more *asambleas territoriales*, facilitated inter-assembly coordination (*Coordinadora de Asambleas Territoriales*), and successfully called for peaceful demonstrations. The most notable of these were a national march on October 25, which summoned more than a million and a quarter protestors and is considered by some to be one of the largest in the country's history; and a nation-wide general strike on November 12, which is estimated to have rallied two million people (Telesur 2019, 12 November; BBC 2019).

Protest started to taper off in December, the beginning of vacation season in Chile, but protests centered on downtown landmark sites in the capital city, such as *Plaza Dignidad*, continued into February of 2020. They involved primarily secondary and university students and non-student youth, including minors under the tutelage of the justice system (Rubio 2019; Claude 2020; El Mostrador 2020b; Somma et al. 2020: 2). Assisting them was an array of vol-

[4] By January 18 of 2020, there were at least 164 active *asambleas territoriales* (Zibechi 2020, February 3).

unteer health workers, lawyers, and artists (Joignant 2020; personal communication with J.L.). In addition, ACES organized boycotts of the university entry exam, a test seen by students as reflecting and reinforcing educational inequalities. As part of the boycott, students occupied buildings to prevent the administration of the test. The government allowed affected students to retake the test, but new examinations were met with more student mobilization. For its part, the *Coordinadora Nacional de Estudiantes Secundarios* (CONES, a confederation of student unions) occupied the Ministry of Education, demanding the invalidation of test results. These protests ended in numerous arrests (Telesur 2020, January 13 and 26).

IV. EVENTFUL MOBILIZATION FOR THE STUDENT MOVEMENT?

Interviewees for this paper agreed that the October 2019 protest explosion was a turning point for the nation. They described it as "the beginning of something new," "a rupture," and used adjectives such as "strong," "scary," "terrible," and "hopeful" to describe the events. Paradoxically, they also indicated that the protest wave's specific impact on the student movement's identity, organization, and strategy might have been less significant than that of previous protest cycles.

With regard to movement identity, one interviewee suggested that the October events had challenged the student movement's vanguard identity and that perhaps there was an emerging feeling among student activists that the student movement had to be "*al servicio del pueblo*" (at the service of the people) (personal communication with J.L.). Another pointed to the revival of human rights concerns as a defining feature of student mobilization (personal with A.M.). None, however, made explicit connections between these ideas and profound or enduring student movement identity transformations. Instead, when speaking about the movement's identity, interviewees stressed other protest cycles. More specifically, they argued that the student movement was a new generation forged in the student protest campaigns of 2006, 2011, and 2018. This generation, they pointed out, was free of the fears of the past and thus empowered to produce radical political and social transformations.

Interviewees also offered different interpretations of the lack of salience of 2019 in the student movement's identity. Some argued that the overall protest cycle was so polyphonic that narrow identities did not make sense (personal communication with J.L.). Others viewed the role of the student movement as secondary to a movement they believed was fundamentally about class (personal communication with A.M. and B.P.). Regardless, the result was, as an interviewee argued, that students participated in the cycle primarily "as youth, not students" (personal communication with J.L.), or as another put it, "as part of the people" (personal communication with B.P.).

Concerning organization and strategy, interviewees suggested that students of different political persuasion saw the cycle more as an affirmation of ongoing trends than as a moment triggering change. Regarding organization, they indicated that there were no significant shifts away from a general situation of organizational weakness, which had grown increasingly problematic since 2011 and came to a head during massive feminist protests in 2018. With regard to strategy, it is important to note that sustained local neighborhood associativity was not all that novel for student activists. Interviews for this paper indicate, for example, that since 2018 the *Coordinadora 8M* and the *Coordinadora de Mujeres en Lucha* (two multiclass feminist networks) had become strategic hubs for many feminist students. The work of these *coordinadoras* had involved the strengthening of grassroots feminist collective action through routine preparatory neighborhood meetings that brought together feminists from different social and political spaces (personal communication with A.C.). This strategy had diffused within the student movement, spreading to other student groups and networks, especially (but not exclusively) at the high school level (personal communication with B.P.).

More generally, some activists viewed the outburst as a show of public support for long-held student political demands for a new constitution and the de-marketization of society, both seen as fundamental steps toward greater democratic equality (personal communication with R.M.). Others thought of it as a continuation of trends set in motion in 2018. One interviewee even stated that "two thousand eighteen was the beginning of the end, the [2019] social explosion was more like let's get together and finish it" (personal communication with M.J.A.). Regardless, there was more of a sense of continuity than change among student activists.

In sum, despite strong perceptions that the October events were a national critical juncture, and the fact that during the cycle many individual students were involved in protests and *asambleas territoriales* (and in some cases were victims of state violence) at the meso-level (organizational structures, strategies, and identity) the impact of the cycle was relatively weak. This idea does not deny the eventfulness of the cycle at the individual student level, nor its broader systemic political eventfulness beyond the student movement. Instead, it suggests that the impact of the protest events may have been different for the specific movements partaking in them.

V. UNDERSTANDING THE PARADOX OF THE 2019 PROTEST CYCLE AND THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

Various factors explain why the 2019 cycle was not particularly eventful for the student movement. Three causes stand out. First, two relatively recent protest cycles had been very eventful, triggering processes of tremendous change in the identity, organization, and strategy of the movement. These processes had

taken root by October of 2019, making new changes less likely. Second, organizational structures were relatively weak. There was a crisis at the leadership level, and at the grassroots level, there was significant fragmentation. Finally, protest repertoires and the locus of protest were not favorable to major changes. Protest repertoires tended to be episodic, and mobilization occurred in sites relatively removed from students' quotidian spaces.

The Eventfulness of Antecedent Mobilization

Two protects cycles immediately anteceded the October 2019 protests. The first happened in 2018, the second in mid-2019. Both constituted, albeit in different ways, iconic events for the student movement.

The 2018 protest cycle involved a wave of women separatist and semi-separatist peaceful protests against sexual violence and gender inequality.[5] At its core were thousands of feminist students, who between May and August protagonized lengthy, autonomous, occupations in schools and universities across the country; as well as topless and queer performances, and *funas* (public shaming) to sexual violence perpetrators and abettors. Although students were the primary constituency of the movement, feminist separatist collective action extended to neighborhood and professional associations, parties, unions, and other social movement organizations (personal communication with A.C. and L.T.). Hence, the massiveness of student-led marches on May 16 and June 6, which in the capital alone rallied between 100,000 and 170,000 women of all ages and paths of life (El Mostrador 2018; Segovia 2018).

The cycle aroused significant attention in Chile and beyond, even constituting the topic of this journal's last year's political yearbook's chapter on Chile (Reyes-Housholder and Roque 2019). Not surprisingly, there is an extensive literature about its origins, characteristics, development, and outcomes.[6] Concerning its eventfulness, interviewees for this paper suggest that the movement 's intensity and extension generated critical processes of cultural change, political realignment (changes in the strength, ideas, and basis of right and left parties) and dealignment (decline in party identification), and increased public support for women and LGBTQ+ candidates and gender parity political reforms. For the specific purpose of the analysis undertaken here, it is important to note that the cycle also had significant consequences on the organization, strategy, and identity of the movement. In fact, student activists interviewed for this paper thought of it as a watershed moment in the history of the student

[5] Fully separatist protest camps excluded trans women. Semi-separatist occupations included trans women and, in some cases, gay men.

[6] Among others, see, for example: De Fina and Figueroa 2019; Follegati 2018; Forstenzer 2019; Ruiz and Miranda 2018; Urzúa 2019; Zerán et al.'s 2018 edited volume; Reyes-Housholder and Roque 2019; and Miranda and Roque forthcoming.

movement and used words such as "strong," "important," "a rupture," "intense," complex," and "profound" to describe its consequences.

Organizationally speaking, the most visible change was a more gender-inclusive student leadership. For example, at the end of 2018, university student elections resulted in 70% female-led student federations and the election of the first Trans women student representative (El Desconcierto 2019; El Dínamo 2019). More importantly, according to interviewees, the 2018 protests gave birth to numerous small, local, autonomous collectives who organized students around various genders and sexual identities and orientations. These organizations became the core of student grassroots organizing in 2019, replacing the central role played by student federations, student unions, and party organizations, which, stained by their sex scandals and gender inequalities, emerged weaker than ever from 2018.

These changes helped, in turn, transform the student movement's identity and strategy. To be a student activist started to mean not only to be part of a new generation that would bring change (a legacy of the 2011 movement), but also to be a feminist, even if only in discourse as some activists complained (personal communication with A.A.). They also affected the strategy of the movement, which started to more forcefully center on the idea of constructing a broad socio-political agenda that bypassed existing parties and directly connected the student movement with other movements outside schools and universities (personal communication with A.M. and A.Ar.). No less important was the fact that the movement's relative success in gaining concessions generated a great sense of empowerment among activists, helping tilt movement strategic preferences towards direct action (personal communication with A.A., J.O.; A.M.; and A.Ar.).

Rather narrow and small, protests in mid-2019 were perhaps not as nationally eventful as the 2018 feminist protest cycle. Nonetheless, according to interviewees for this paper, the events were iconic for students. The wave, protagonized mainly by secondary students, started due to the potential closure of the *Instituto Nacional* (one of the oldest, most prestigious public high schools in the country and a center of student political activism) and the persistence of severe infrastructure deficits in public high schools, as well as rejection of *Aula Segura*.

Student mobilization was violently repressed by the state leading to an important process of student radicalization (personal communication with B.P.).[7] In the end, and despite an escalation of violent protests, state policing succeeded at containing students, leading to many school expulsions and the criminal prosecution of dozens of activists (Chambers 2019; Cooperativa 2019). Several

[7] Interviewees drew a stark contrast between the policing of mid-2019 and the feminist cycle in 2018. Concerning the latter, interviewees reported that at the end of the wave, some feminist high school activists were expelled and charged with vandalism (personal communication with C.J.) but did not refer to excessive use of force by the police. One interviewee actually remarked on the restraint of the police in 2018 (personal communication with M.J.A.).

interviewees for this paper perceived these state actions as "excessive," "indiscriminate," and tantamount to "systematic human rights violations" (personal communication with C.J.; J.L.; A.M.; and B.P.).

The cycle was too short, small, and violent to result in profound organizational or identity transformations in the movement. However, it did leave a legacy for how important sections of the student movement would see state repression and their own propensity to engage in violent protests in October of 2019. An interviewee argued, for example, that because secondary students had already "been shot at and experienced beatings and even the military siege of some high schools," they were already used to harsh policing (personal communication with C.J.). What happened at the end of 2019, another pointed out, was that "people who had never felt it [repression], experienced it for the first time and realized the brutality of government" (personal communication with B.P.). This heightened sense of state brutality, already present in many student activists, cemented among some segments of the student movement (especially high school students) the idea that violent protests were a legitimate act of defense, furthering preferences for a strategy of direct action before October (personal communication with C.J.).

The Relative Strength of Movement Organization

During 2019 student organization remained weak. Leadership gains in gender equality happened against the background of increasingly hollowed-out student government structures. At the university level, for example, several candidates for 2019 were elected to student federation leadership positions on an interim basis because of a lack of voting quorum. According to some interviewees, many high school and college students perceived negatively the candidacy of 2018 feminist figures put forth by political parties for student federations, seeing them as an illegitimate exercise of credit-taking and "white-washing" of institutions perceived as deeply misogynistic (personal communication with A.A.; C.J.; and A.M.). The narrowing of the space for political parties led in turn to significant party factionalism that divided the movement (personal communication with C.J.; B.P.; and F.O.).

At the bottom of the student movement, small local collectives flourished during 2019. However, they remained isolated from each other, focused mostly on consciousness-raising activities. An interviewee noted that "2018 oxygenated the movement, but there is still much fragmentation... everything is spontaneous because there is nobody to lead" (personal communication with C.J.). Another activist labeled the situation as one of "dispersion" (personal communication with M.J.A.). Student activists wish things would be different, but ideological and institutional diversity has made the process of coming together tricky. Attempts at coordination at the end of 2018 and during 2019 were unsuccessful, and in some cases, ended in emotionally charged

fights that hampered future coordination (personal communication with D.B. and J.O.). Furthermore, as already mentioned, grassroots coordination, especially that involving feminist activists, occurred mostly outside the student movement's exclusive scope.

The weakness of student organizational structures meant that although many individual students did join the October protests, they did not do it as part of a movement, one that had a coordinated response or rallied many individual students under its banner. Student representatives at the university level did not call students to join the protest until late in the cycle, further angering student activists (personal communication with R.M. and A.M.). At the secondary level, organizations like ACES, a visible face of the secondary student movement during the October protests, lacked broad appeal according to several interviewees (personal communication with C.J.; A.O.; and B.P.). As a secondary student activist noted, compared to the past, "you could see that in many marches there was a lack of [student movement] slogans, songs, and banners" (personal communication with B.P.). The fact that individual and small group student activism superseded a more unified movement involvement diminished the prominence of the student movement in the cycle. This situation had a crucial role in reducing the impact of mobilization on the movement as a whole.

The Locus and Character of Protest Repertoires

The locus and character of protest also made it less likely that the October cycle would trigger a new path for the student movement. Protest repertoires were located in non-quotidian spaces and made little use of occupations; two factors the literature stresses are causes of protest eventfulness for those who partake in them.

Several reasons explain why school and university occupations played a relatively small role in the cycle. At the university level, the government's sudden and simultaneous closure of public educational establishments meant that there was no time for the student base to meet and discuss student mobilization (personal communication with A.M. and J.L.). Furthermore, even in the case of private universities that did not close, lack of transportation and public disruption made it difficult for many students to come close to university premises (personal communication with M.J.A.). The result was that few occupations occurred (personal communication with R.M.; A.M.; and B.P.). Furthermore, at least in Santiago, the only university occupation mentioned by interviewees (of the capital's downtown administrative offices of the *University of Chile*) was short-lived, led by secondary rather than university students, and, according to one of its leaders, reluctantly supported by peak student government representatives (personal communication with B.P.). The case of the secondary student movement was somewhat different. An activist who followed closely these

developments estimated that before the public education system's shutdown, there were around 30 school occupations. However, because they were in the periphery of the city, these occupations did not capture the media's attention (personal communication with C.J.). Moreover, according to the same interviewee, they ended rather quickly because education authorities responded positively to all local demands to prevent an escalation of student mobilization.

Instead, student protest was displayed in marches, street barricades, neighborhood pot bangings, online trolling, neighborhood assemblies, and even riots. All of these repertoires had an episodic nature. Some were inherently so (e.g., marches, riots, and neighborhood assemblies). Others, such as street barricades and the occupation of central public spaces, had to be episodic by necessity.[8] Activists tried to find a way to bypass this problem by generating a consistent schedule of protests. An example of this was the Friday rallies in *Plaza Dignidad* (El Mostrador 2020c). The routinization of some protests generated much-needed continuity, but that continuity was punctuated by changes in members, context, and interactions with the police. The bonds generated in the context of such dynamics are by no means weak, but of a different quality than those born out of long periods of continuous cohabitation.

The locus of most collective action was also non-quotidian to students. In Chile, public high schools normally run from around 8:00 am to 4:00 pm and tend to be located in centric areas. Universities offer classes throughout the day and into the evening and are for the most part also located in centric areas. That is also the case of libraries, entertainment, and other resources. Thus, many students spend a significant amount of time traveling throughout the city and are likely to spend most of the day far away from their home neighborhoods. Increasing autonomy from parents and job opportunities further contributes to pushing them away from the areas immediately surrounding their home. Given the decentralized neighborhood basis of the October events, and apart from some national demonstrations, the bulk of the cycle's collective action centered in sites where students would typically spend only a few hours a day.

VI. CONCLUSION

The 2019 protest cycle was a national watershed. Paradoxically, the effects of the cycle on the student movement were less dramatic. Protest, after all, does not impact participants in the same manner or to the same extent. In the case of the student movement, this paper argues, this had to do with three factors. First, the cycle was directly anteceded by student-led iconic protests that had already charted new organizational and strategic paths and altered the identity of the movement in substantive ways. Second, movement organizational struc-

[8] Repertoires based on confronting the state are dangerous, and thus difficult to maintain over time.

tures were weak. Finally, protest repertoires tended to be episodic and located in spaces that were not quotidian to students.

Given this lack of eventfulness, how do activists see the prospects of the student movement and, in particular, its role in national politics after 2019? Interviews for this paper suggest that student activists have a sense that they are living in times of profound change (personal communication with A.M.). Transformations set in motion in the last two decades are still ongoing and, if anything, have been reinforced by the events of 2019 (personal communication with R.M. and B.P.). However, there is uncertainty about the outcomes and forms that such transformations will take in the future (personal communication with C.J.; J.L.; and A.M.). Furthermore, the answer to the big picture question of what role the student movement should play as a political actor remains elusive. Activists are in particular concerned about bridging internal movement divisions and rebuilding an effective organizational infrastructure (personal communication with C.J.; J.L.; and A.M.). Despite the uncertainty, they have a sense of hope that the military regime's neoliberal and constitutional legacy can be broken, and a strong feeling that the student movement is not alone in that struggle (personal communication with A.A.; M.J.A.; and C.J.).

This degree of "uncertain hope" is not unique to the student movement. Media notes, opinions, and editorials suggest that for many Chileans it is not altogether clear what will remain after the dust settles, how will the 2020 COVID crisis impact the forces and demands unleashed in October, or even how progressive the contents of a potential new Constitution will be. Nevertheless, the October events have undoubtedly shaken Chile to its core, opening new possibilities for the country's politics.

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Received*:* March 17, 2020
Accepted: June 8, 2020

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