Critical Event and Political Subjectivation through Chile's Social Uprising

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Introduction: Widening the Space of Politics

The largest cycle of protests Chile has seen in the past thirty years began on October 18, 2019, preceded by sporadic actions of civil disobedience, including massive fare evasion by high school students in Santiago's subway system. That day, mobilizations diversified and spread across the country's capital, halting millions of commuters and city residents in their tracks. Some of the actions drew on a repertoire familiar from traditions of national protest: street barricades, *cacerolazos,*[1] performances, marches, and mass gatherings. Other actions included looting, the deliberate burning of metro stations and city buses, destruction of monuments and churches, and a profusion of graffiti-style inscriptions on the city's walls and infrastructure, demanding profound social change. These actions soon spilled over, becoming city-wide in scale.

The protests spread to all the country's major cities, creating an extraordinary scene of nationwide agitation. TV and social media showed image after image of convulsion in every corner of a country only recently described, by its then president, as a supposed "oasis" of stability and prosperity. Placards appeared declaring, "Neoliberalism was born here, and here it will die." Every day for the first few weeks thousands of actors from a wide range of origins and ages gathered, after work, in Baquedano Square, which protesters renamed "Dignity Square" (*Plaza Dignidad*). Members of social movements and organizations, students, workers, and whole families congregated in this ground zero zone. Multitudinous crowds gathered every Friday at various key points around Santiago and around the country, testament to the

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nationwide nature of the movement. The march of Friday, October 25, was the largest ever in the country's history.[2] Alongside the marches, self-convened assemblies in different neighborhoods drew up collective petitions and debated proposals for a new constitution. Thirty years after the transition toward democracy had begun, they hoped to finally replace the extant constitution, imposed during a cruel dictatorship.

The government, led by a right-wing coalition, responded from the outset by criminalizing the protest. A constitutional state of emergency was decreed, whose terms included a nighttime curfew. In some parts of the country soldiers were deployed in the streets over a ten-day period, leading to scenes last seen under the dictatorship. The army used live rounds, killing three people in engagements during protests (Amnesty International 2020: 4). A prolonged period of police repression likewise deployed weapons, using anti-riot shotguns, launching tear gas canisters directly at protesters, firing pistols with lethal intent, and driving motorized vehicles directly into crowds. According to Amnesty International the police inflicted deliberate harm on protesters with punitive intent, either intentionally or recklessly, using untraceable ammunition to enhance institutional impunity (4–5).

Cross-party negotiations between all political parties represented in congress produced an institutional exit route from the crisis. On November 15 the parties signed the Accord for Social Peace and the New Constitution, seeking to reassure mobilized citizens' groups that the constitutional replacement they were demanding in the streets was going to happen. Although protests continued, they began to lose impetus due both to the signing of the accord and the risks involved in exposure to the police response. Street actions resolved into something akin to a conflict between two regular combat forces. One of these was the so-called Front Line,[3] which had emerged as a self-defense force with an internal structure—complete with roles, rules, planning, and distribution of tasks—to resist police sorties. The militarized police response meanwhile continued to unleash repressive force, resulting in the detention of more than twenty-three thousand people by March 2020. By that same date, the government had brought formal criminal complaints against over three thousand citizens for alleged offenses ranging from public disorder and arson to attacks on police officers or soldiers (Rojas 2022: 1000–1001).

Summer vacation season, in January and February, further lessened the intensity of the protests. The process that was to lead to a constitutional assembly was also set in train, absorbing some of the media attention previously focused on the protests. The March 2020 Covid lockdown finally brought the protests to an end. Thousands of complaints had been registered

over human rights violations occurring during those five months. The Office of the Public Prosecutor counted 5,500 individual victims of institutional violence, with most injuries caused by use of kinetic impact projectiles (Amnesty International 2020: 5). According to the Ministry of the Interior 347 people had received eye wounds; five were left permanently blinded (Senado de Chile 2020). During the first month alone, the Office of the Public Prosecutor reported twenty-six investigations into "people who have died in the context of social protests" (OHCHR 2019: 10).

Various subsequent studies have explored the causes of the deep disquiet that underlay the protests: dissatisfaction over profound social inequalities, the reduction of life to monetary transactions, a crisis of political representation, and a range of sector-specific demands (e.g., Araujo 2019; Garcés 2019; Gonzalez and Morán 2020; Rojas 2022; Somma et al. 2021). Acknowledging these contributions, this dossier approaches Chile's social uprising as a critical event of political subjectivation. In particular it explores how the uprising enhanced the political subjectivation of sectors of Chilean society with no previous background of (contentious) political action. By tracing the lived experiences of subjects who inhabited the social uprising, we show how the analytically separated categories of critical event and subjectivation in fact overlap and enrich one another.

The Critical Event and Political Subjectivation

The concepts of event and political subjectivation lie at the root of the issues problematized in this dossier. By event we refer to an irruption, disturbance, shock wave, dislocation, or unpredictable rupture, one that unfolds with a force or potency that renders it both total and impossible to apprehend. Within an individual, such an event summons, upsets, saturates, and reorients the multiple meanings of the world and of oneself. When an individual "is happened to," they have no choice but to notice the event, and let it happen to them (Romano 2008). In relation to the event, we understand the process of subjectivation as an unanticipated displacement, "the formation of a one" as "relation of a self to an other" (Rancière 1992: 60). This is an inescapably incarnated, situated, and relational process. By linking event and political subjectivation, we problematize the activation of the agency of excluded individuals. In the essays that make up this dossier, we will see how the uprising as an event offers its protagonists the space to become actors, provoking unprecedented processes of political subjectivation and opening the field of action and influence to subjects who had been kept on the margins of the construction of a pretended national history.

The three essays allow the reader to identify various critical dimensions in these processes of political subjectivation in times of social uprising. A first critical sense resides in the capacity of the uprising to disturb everyday time while joining the present, in tension, to previous contentious events—such as the preceding dictatorship—and to long-accrued relations of colonial duress (Stoler 2016). The Chilean uprising thereby weaves together heterogenous temporalities, challenges the histories and memory of ordinary subjects, and pushes them to become substantively involved. For example, the first essay shows how the time of state terrorism and the memory of resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship (Bernasconi 2019) offered Ricardo a historical referent for the political and ethical tipping point that pushed him to join the uprising, becoming part of the history of the present (Revel 2015). In parallel, the social uprising activated the time of student protests and working-class neighborhood struggles in the early post-Pinochet era (Olivari and Badilla forthcoming), a time that presaged a space in which subjects who had been left out of Chile's pacted transition to democracy would appear (Osorio and Gaudichaud 2018). The protests also conjured up subterranean and rebellious temporalities. This is reflected in the experiences of Marta and Juan (essay two), and Mauricio Lepin (essay three). Marta and Juan's practices of resistance foregrounded the "erased time" (Bradley 2019) of homeless children, families pushed into precariousness, and *pobladores*[4] criminalized after the 1990 return to democracy (Aedo and Faba 2022). Mauricio's performance in the heart of the Chilean capital, at the height of the most multitudinous moment of the uprising, made present the long period of resistance by the Mapuche people to colonial domination and state violence directed against them (Pairican 2022). Taken together, these essays make clear the power of social uprising to produce critical effects by shattering the homogeneous time of domination (Rancière 2012) and by subverting a present from which none of the protagonists emerges intact or untransformed.

Another critical sense of this social uprising stems from its disruptive force regarding the self. Hundreds of individuals invested themselves in a sustained way in the uprising, through the insistent and stubborn occupation of space, the collective, affective, and expressive gathering together of bodies and signs, the production of sociality, and the crafting of rules, norms, and ways to withstand repression. They did so inspired by the desire to be a part of the uprising, recognizing their own historicity. The event emplaces, disrupts, and precipitates the production of meaning and connects with previous historical conflicts and relations of subordination, encouraging sustained engagement with the struggle and with the social and political space of uprising. At such a juncture, the critical attitude of

the subject—which Foucault (2003) has tended to locate at the level of the individual—revealed itself to be part of a collective, plural assemblage. The protesters brought the protest to life, at the same time as it enabled them to appear before themselves and others challenging the order of things, while recognizing and embracing the value of their diversity (Butler 2015) and the political potency of keeping alive the gathering that allowed them to claim the power previously denied to them. The statement "Chile has awoken" (*Chile despertó*) appeared everywhere—on walls, placards, and social media, in press analysis, and in intellectual discussion. It denotes a pluralistic attitude and the desire of a people (*demos)*—left out of the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004)—to question the inevitability of the capitalist order and awaken the desire for a different form of life in common.

The coproduction of event and subjectivation confronted its participants with issues that would require political and ethical decisions both in everyday living and in street protest. In response they deployed counter-conducts against the intolerable. These counter-conducts ranged from Marta's creating a home with six local young people living in a situation of extreme precariousness, to Ricardo's total commitment and his caring for protesters wounded by the police. They include the extraordinary transformation of Juan, who was inspired by Marta's care and by witnessing a people taking to the streets to himself become a social activist in an impoverished Santiago neighborhood. They also include Mauricio Lepin's sudden decolonial act, affirming the sovereign self-determination of an indigenous people in the very epicenter of the nation that has for so long denied it.

At the level of the domestic, the uprising politicizes the *oikos*, that space supposedly reserved for the intimacy of the private sphere, beyond the reach of public deliberation. This dossier, especially its second essay, shows how, through the uprising, the home became an arena of experimentation and struggle. This is possible because transformations that are crucial for subjects and collectivities take place in the domestic sphere, such as the emergence of a genuine politics of care that goes beyond kinship to meet the community in the street and the neighborhood.

The social uprising, however, also challenged the entangled relationship between police and politics as developed by Rancière. The revolt, as an event made of acts disobedience, converged against the police order and the instituted political economy. The political aspect of this event, its critical force, resides in the fact that it makes dissent appear, manifesting the presence of other worlds in one. As the essays in this dossier show, the political nature of this event resonates simultaneously through processes of subjec-

tivation that redefine the terms and modes of acting politically, by challenging public perception or the "manner of partitioning the sensible" (Rancière 2004: 6). The history of the present in which the experiences studied in this dossier are inscribed shows that the social uprising in Chile widened and reconfigured the space of politics, bringing in actors historically kept on the margins. Their voices called for justice, contested the normalized violence of inequality, and expanded the space for struggle and creation of a common world.

Methods

This dossier was prepared over a ten-month period by an interdisciplinary team affiliated with Chile's Millennium Institute for Research into Violence and Democracy. Three years had elapsed since the beginning of Chile's social uprising, and the project took as its starting point field material that was being produced with various protesters involved in it. The dossier format allowed us to select participants for an analytical exercise that we set ourselves the task of addressing collectively by identifying a shared problem. For the exploration we drew on the team's disciplines of origin (history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy) and areas of research specialism (colonial violence, political violence, security and illegalism, social memory, and urban studies) combined with our interest in experiencing ways of coming together to problematize and collectively communicate some aspect of Chile's social uprising.

The cases chosen deploy different methodologies, converging around the biographical narrative format. Ricardo's case is based on an unstructured in-depth interview about his involvement in the protests, carried out in June 2022. Juan and Marta's story combines two unstructured in-depth interviews carried out in December 2021 and November 2022 as part of an audiovisual ethnography comprising a succession of encounters and episodic conversations in the field. The case study of Mauricio Lepin was produced for the dossier as oral history: an extensive life history was taken over two encounters in August 2022. Interviews were carried out by anthropologists and sociologists (Ricardo, and Juan and Marta) or by two Mapuche historians (Mauricio Lepin).[5]

Our participants have quite varied vital trajectories, allowing us to bring territorial, ethnic, class, gender, and generational insights to the analysis. This in turn allowed us to interrogate the biographical space, to identify and examine the repertoire of affects and actions with the power to constitute

political subjectivation. Given the bounded scope of the exercise, we prioritized intersectionality rather than aspiring to representativeness. In terms of difference, the cases engage subjects who had hitherto seen the history of their own society pass them by. Workshops discussing the transcripts of each conversation enabled the team to define the arguments that would appear in each essay. We then undertook a collective writing process, commissioning an illustration for each essay that acts as a cartographical tool helping communicate local places, moments, and events for a global readership.

—Translated by Cath Collins

Notes

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1 A non-violent way of showing discontent or solidarity with a cause. It involves concerted beating of pots and pans with kitchen implements, creating a noise through which participants recognize one another in a common sensory expression.
2 According to official estimates 1,200,0001.2 million people took part.
3 The term *front line* or *first line* (*primera linea*) was coined to refer to the group of people who headed up any march or gathering. Their task was to take on the police, using stones and improvised home-made weapons, to allow other participants to demonstrate.
4 Residents of poor neighborhoods.
5 In accordance with the terms of confidentiality agreed with participants, only Mauricio Lepin appears under his real name.

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