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Multitude and Memory in the Chilean Social Uprising

Ricardo is a thirty-eight-year-old emergency medical technician from Santiago. During the 2019 social uprising, he lived in a central neighborhood close to the epicenter of the protests. He worked at a local clinic attached to a public university, where student protests and clashes between masked demonstrators and police were common. Ricardo comes from a right-wing family: only he and his sister have left-wing leanings. He has never been a member of a political party, group, or organization, and in fact he expresses mistrust of them, and of Chilean politics in general. However, the neighborhood he lived in as a child bordered on another, *Villa Francia*, which has a long history of political and community organizing and is considered a combative place. Ricardo used to go there to get involved in protests on emblematic days.[1] A few years ago, he began to take part on and off in a musical troupe that often appears at popular street events and commemorations of September 11, the date of Pinochet's coup d'état.

In Ricardo's account, two main hermeneutical and agential phenomena configured the uprising as a critical event with the capacity for political subjectivation.[2] First, Ricardo's identification of the revolt as a historical event from his own lifetime, as he drew parallels between the social uprising and the 1973–90 dictatorship, the biggest sociopolitical catastrophe of Chile's recent history. Second, the power of the masses in public demonstrations, which activated Ricardo's desire and spurred him on to a total and systematic immersion in the front line of the protests,[3] evoking memories of the

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urban street fights he knew in his childhood. Once the dictatorship was over, Ricardo and his friends had repeatedly asked themselves, "What would I have done if I'd been there?" Faced with the social uprising, at first an unintelligible event, Ricardo returns to, and brings into the present, that generation-specific question: "Where am I going to be now?" His response rose to the occasion: an extraordinary level of immersion in, and by means of, street combat. The memory of the anti-dictatorship movement, the power of the spontaneous masses, and the street as a place of encounter and struggle will activate Ricardo's political subjectivation, and the configuration of the uprising as a critical event, one that he interprets in the light of the past.

Some academic accounts of Chile's social uprising refer to the "irruption of memories" through this protest cycle. These may be long-standing memories—such as of the violence visited on the Mapuche people[4] by the Chilean state—memories of the feminist or neighborhood movements, and/or memories of the recent dictatorship (Angelcos and Pérez 2017; Vivaldi and Sepúlveda 2021; Garcés 2019; Han 2012). Certainly, the repressive policing of the protests, and the decreeing of "states of exception" revived memories of the dictatorship the length and breadth of the country. The protests became places of commemoration and homage to victims of dictatorship-era violence, and spaces in which to denounce remaining gaps in truth and justice.

The demands that inspired the uprising also referred back to the period of the political transition (1990s), which had first denounced the legacy of the neoliberal societal model imposed at gunpoint under the military regime. The relationship between these memorialization practices and new processes of political subjectivation however remains unexplored, above all among actors who do not belong to political and protest movements such as the student, feminist, or environmental movements (Bravo and Pérez 2022). In this context, Ricardo's case demonstrates the intergenerational staying power of certain subterranean memories in the trajectories of people who either did not live through the dictatorship or lived it as children and do not have a history of activism or involvement in social organizations. Decades later, during the social uprising, memories of resistance to the dictatorship evoked an ethical imperative in this ordinary citizen. Ricardo experiences this as a form of duty to his time and to his own history. This experience blurs the analytical boundaries between ethics and politics, as it becomes the engine of mobilization and a desire for social transformation not through political militancy or trajectories, but rather in unexpected and sudden awakenings and agency arrangements.

The Construction of the Event

Many firsthand testimonies about the Chilean dictatorship begin by narrating the events of September 11, 1973. Similarly, Ricardo starts his account of his experience of the social uprising by talking about "the day it all began." A succession of scenes evokes the sensation of the disruption of the everyday that ensued when street protests spread across the city over the course of October 18, 2019 (see fig. 1). The surprise at what was unfolding, and the stream of images recalled, demonstrate how critical and historic this event was for Ricardo and for the country as a whole:

> I remember the day it all started. It was October 18, 2019. I was working at the University and I was on a late shift, due to finish at 9 p.m. I'd been planning to go on to a venue just a bit up the road and see a band . . . . But as the afternoon wore on, I started hearing news about what was going on with the subway, the students . . . people were doing mass fare evasion in the subway and there were protests, demonstrations starting up.
>
> I didn't really understand much at that stage. . . . Once I left [work] there were loads of people in the street, outside the subway stations and . . . after a while, I set off home and the whole way there I could see people on every street corner. I went down Santa Rosa [Avenue] and the water company offices had been set on fire; there were barricades on every corner. By then, it was around 10 p.m. I went through *Plaza Italia*[5] and along that whole stretch of the *Alameda*[6] by bike; it looked like a battlefield. I cycled the length of the Alameda and you know, I felt, it was as though bombs had fallen and you had to swerve around all the debris from barricades. It was unbelievable, unbelievable. I got to the *Brasil* neighborhood and there was a whole contingent of police. I tried to go round them and one of them tried to grab me. I got away and kept going. I got home and with my flatmate we were like, "Look, this is what's going on." We put the radio on. [They announced] that the soldiers (*milicos*) were being sent out onto the streets so we thought, "Fuck, it's actually happening," you know? This, what we'd been waiting for so long, an uprising; it was happening.

This event gradually takes shape in Ricardo's account, as it did in the experience of many people who were out and about in Santiago that day, seeing firsthand how protest practices sprang up all over the city. After work, on an improvised urban tour, Ricardo confirmed and augmented the information he'd picked up during the day from the radio, which had described acts of civil disobedience led by high school students: a "total" event, including buildings in flames, barricades, and groups protesting outside subway stations. In Ricardo's description his initial incredulity modulates into sur-

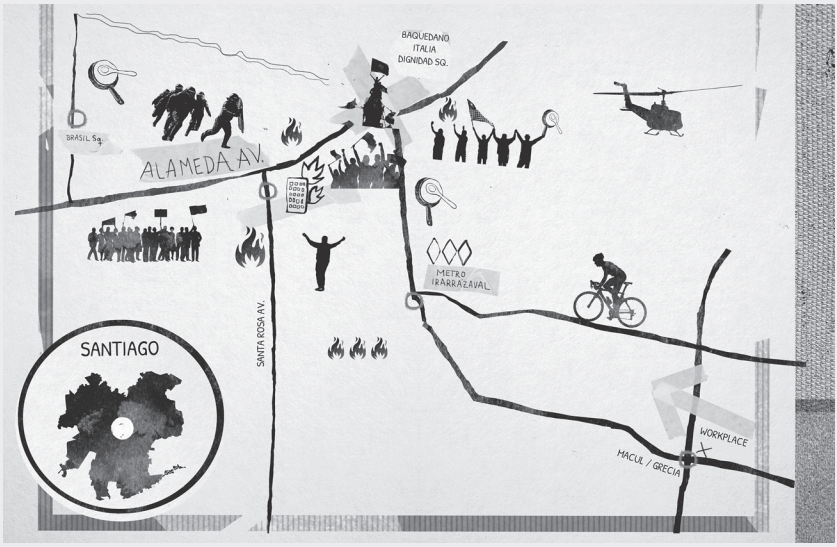

Figure 1. Ricardo's trajectory on October 18, 2019. Illustration by Francisca Yañez.

prise—"it looked like a battlefield"; "it was like something out of a film"—and finally into a political emotion that sweeps over him when he becomes convinced that the "popular revolt" that he has been awaiting for years is finally happening on a national scale.

During the first few days of the social uprising, Ricardo's daily routine—like that of most of the rest of the population—was turned upside down. His narrative refers to three elements that make the event so earth-shattering. First, its strength and magnitude: this uprising is nationwide, making it different from previous cycles of contention such as the student protests of 2011. Second, the massive levels of direct participation. This disrupted the routine of every large city and activated national history. Third, its capacity to challenge subjects, their bodies, their emotions, their memories, and to make them seek within themselves for repertoires that allowed them to project forms of immersion that would transform them into agents of history.

The Action of Anti-dictatorship Memory in a Biographical Key

Memory can be defined as the work of constructing meanings about the past in order to act in the present and project future horizons (Halbwachs 1992). Understood in this way, it is a key element of subjectivation in general (Deleuze 2015), and political subjectivation in particular (Madhok 2018). As

we said, Chile's social uprising was also an explosion of diverse memories that converged to animate, strengthen, and sustain the protest movement. Key among these memories, in Ricardo's case, was the memory of resistance to the dictatorship, which challenged him as a subject and compelled him to get involved. The event (re)activated a question that he had asked himself looking back toward "a previous historical era that the country lived through": "what would I have done in the same circumstances?" Such question had remained open, a source of uncertainty that he had been unable to resolve.

> Talking to friends you would say, "Look, if I'd lived through those days"—I was born in '83, so I lived through the end of the military government and the transition that came after; I was still only a kid during the most decisive part of that era. . . . So, the question would always come up in those conversations: What would I have done at that time? Would I have been in there, in the struggle? Maybe I would have met a different fate, you know? And everyone—this is all when you're among friends—everyone would give their opinion: "No, I don't think I'd have dared." And then suddenly along comes this, the social uprising, and it was like, "Fuck, now you have to see whether you are going to be part of it or not, you know?"

The uprising offers Ricardo the chance to revisit this question and transform the hypothetical scenario into a real, present, and urgent question. It pushes him to make a decision despite the possibility of facing the same fate as so many of those who resisted the dictatorship and were exiled, tortured, or killed. While this is a decision for the present moment, it is inseparable from a nostalgic vantage point on the past. The density of this affective and moral linkage is precisely what impels Ricardo to become an agent of the "history of the present" (Scott 2011).

The role memory plays in Ricardo's political activation contrasts with the role it has played in other cycles of contention. For example, those linked to the youthful protagonists of the 2011 student protests, whose emergent political subjectivity has as one of its key components a post-memory of the 1990s democratic transition that is particularly critical of its unfulfilled promises (Paredes, Ortiz, and Araya 2018). One of the keys to reading Ricardo's account is an understanding of his generational position. Born five years before the electoral defeat of Pinochet that began the transition toward democracy, his generation occupies a grey zone between a generation that lived through the dictatorship and took a position on it while it was still ongoing, and a generation that is the protagonist of the present day. This latter is a generation born in democracy, which has crafted new discourses and struggles in the transitional era and has been considered the key genera-

tional protagonist of the 2019 social uprising (Ganter 2022). This intermediate position is most evident among people who self-identify as on the political left, appearing as the 1980s generation, clearly set apart from those who did not live through the dictatorship at all, but equally not having lived through it fully themselves (Reyes et al. 2015).

The uprising as a new social event offers Ricardo an opening, a space to act "for and in common with," a unique invitation to feel part of history in the making. Ricardo takes to heart the question about his position regarding the historical event and makes a commitment to the ethical and political project associated with the uprising. His commitment traces back to a relationship with a past that shapes him even though he was not an active part of it. That relationship left him with a feeling of having been found wanting, but did not render him completely helpless. His ethical relationship with the uprising contains both nostalgic and future-oriented components, insofar as Ricardo says he joined the struggle seeking transformation not for his own benefit but for the sake of his daughter and eventually his grandchildren.

From Peripheral Participation to Total Involvement: The Role of the Street

The uprising awakened an ethical impulse in Ricardo to be part of something, which he lived out by participating actively in the protests during the months when they were at their height. His objective became "to uphold these social transformations, keep them alive," "to prevent this from dying down," and "to make it lead to something." To that end, he got involved in a range of spaces of struggle and "trenches" that the day, and the rituals emerging around the uprising, provided. He engaged in demonstrations and marches on most days, often joining the front line to allow the multitude to gather, letting participants express themselves and stay together while occupying the street.

> My participation was to go up as close to the front as possible, where the confrontations with the police were happening. I was on the front line. I would be with a friend or an acquaintance, then you might meet up with someone else there, but it wasn't, like, planned. It was more that you would go with a couple of friends, and once you got there, spontaneously everyone would go up to the front to protest. And by "protest" I mean throwing stones at the police, tear gas flying this way, Molotovs that way . . . . And basically you did it because it was containment, containing [them] so that the masses could be in the demo, so the police wouldn't overrun us and shut down the whole protest. It was a way of being there, you had to be there and hold the line.

Once a week Ricardo would alternate "holding the line" with providing first aid. Wearing his white coat and carrying medical supplies, he would attend to people wounded by police repression. Back in his home neighborhood, he would also take part in *cacerolazos*. The roles and functions that Ricardo takes on in the protest are connected to repertoires of collective action, political reference points, and emblems of resistance that appear in his personal history. He noted that the university where he works

> is a place where there are constant protests, they're a way of showing discontent . . . so helping someone who's been hit in the head by a tear gas canister during the uprising wasn't a new thing for me, I'd already done that here at the university and also, when I was a boy I lived near *Villa Francia*. I used to take part in the protests that happened there: sometimes just being around, other times maybe going to the gas station to fetch gas so that the guys could make Molotovs, you know?

These activities became part of his repertoire of action, allowing him to become an activist (*luchador)* who took part in street protests by directly confronting the police, defending and protecting the multitude involved in the demonstrations, and healing the wounded, putting into practice a kind of practical ethics (fig. 2).

For Ricardo, the struggle of the dispossessed against the police amounts to an act of disobedience that makes this mass of people part of history, in a new chapter of the age-old class struggle:

> The cops, the military, they work protecting the interests of the few, the powerful people in this country. So when we went out to fight, to throw stones at the police, it was standing up to that, that armed wing of the elite, the businesspeople and those with power in the country. Yes, that's how I see it, that's how I saw it back then.

Over the course of subsequent months certain more formally organized spaces opened up, including territorial assemblies where demands could be pooled and actions channeled. Ricardo nonetheless continued to opt for the street as the place for his own participation, a place where he could make his own decision to act, and practice protest repertoires learned over the course of his life. In the street he encountered "the masses," the vector for his action, the source of his strength, and a resource offering protection and the means to implement struggle:

> It's the tool you have, because you're fighting [with] stones against tear gas, against rubber bullets, you know? It's unequal, so [being part of] "the

Figure 2. Health volunteers under police attack. Santiago de Chile, December 20, 2019. Courtesy of GrosbyGroup.

> masses" is what kind of puts you back on an equal footing. So, yeah, the protection of the masses is what gave me courage and strength, to be there every time I had to be there.

The masses out in the street brought together a whole range of people who joined in, autonomously, spontaneously, and sometimes only fleetingly. Being part of this multitude involved "shouting, jumping, singing, taking a rest, cleaning yourself up, drinking some water, getting your strength back, and losing your fear." One could "leave" the masses to "go to the front and defend [the multitude]," or to provide first aid and assistance for people who were hurt defending it. The power of the multitude was reflected not only in its size, but also in the way it served as a resource transforming many people into protesters and activists. The masses lent courage, provided tokens of solidarity, and gave witness to participation in a shared struggle with common meaning. This potential was what allowed Ricardo to immerse himself fully: "If you were taking part, you had to be clear that you were in it with everything you'd got, whatever happened. If you were needed over here or over there, if you had to face a whole contingent of cops, that's what you had to do, you couldn't be halfhearted about it, d'you see?"

This event also happens to subjects, it challenges them to take positions, pushing them to risk their lives to take part in a protest. Ricardo eventually reduced the intensity of his participation in the protests, under the combined weight of news about his partner's pregnancy, a change of neighborhood, and being hit by shotgun pellets fired by the police: two of the three pellets that injured him have still not been removed. Nonetheless, he is still visibly moved when he acknowledges that he placed himself on a particular side of history,

> to have dared to do it, when the time came. I don't think of myself as very brave, but in the moment you took courage, bravery that made you be there, made you go up to the front. . . . It was a big deal, and I think often you would take the risk without really thinking about what could happen. You could arrive home blinded in one eye, or you could be killed. So that's how it was . . . it was beautiful, and really striking. While I don't want to romanticize the protests, I think that those of us who lived it, at least in my case, it moves me because I feel that when you had to be there, I was there.

Final Reflections

Chile's social uprising was also a "graphic dispute" made up of inscriptions and erasures (Campos and Bernasconi 2021). Murals, posters, and other acts of public inscription—such as graffiti, tags, spray painted slogans—spread the protesters' demands across walls and urban infrastructure, assisting the production of territories in dispute. Many of the slogans and demands are testament to the range of memories that found a place in these events: "History is not repeating itself: This time we won't be silenced!"; "#Chilehasawakened"; "Where Are They?[7] Truth and Justice"; "Today, like yesterday, the dictatorship continues"; "Fight like a Mapuche."

The political subjectivation of a citizen like Ricardo, with no history of militancy in parties or formal associations, relies less on ideological discourse than on memories of the struggle against the dictatorship. In the face of the critical juncture, an embodied memory of bygone years' protest actions awaken, allowing Ricardo to take on roles in the new cycle of protests. That memory becomes an ethical imperative to be part of a possibility for societal change. The force of the multitude in the center of the city lends more potency to this imperative. The masses provide "shelter," allowing Ricardo to deploy resources for street struggle and care that are already part of his life story, making him suddenly an agent of history. This event affects Ricardo not only at the level of ideology—insofar as he sees certain causes as

close to his heart—but above all in his body, his affect, and his ethics, all of which come together to inspire the final words of his interview: "it moves me because . . . when you had to be there, I was there." Ricardo became the embodiment of an activist (*luchador*) during the months following the uprising, before falling back into his everyday space of peripheral participation.

—Translated by Cath Collins

Notes

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1 Dates associated with notorious repressive episodes.

2 We carried out an in-depth interview with Ricardo in June 2022. For details see the introduction to this dossier.

3 *Front line or first line* (*primera línea*) refers to a group of protesters at the forefront of confrontations with the police, facing them with stones and improvised homemade weapons.

4 Chile's largest First Nation, engaged in a historical struggle with the Chilean state.

5 The main city square and intersection, separating uptown from downtown, that would later become the Ground Zero of the protests.

6 The major city thoroughfare.

7 In context, this refers to those disappeared by dictatorship-era repression.

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