

Angel Aedo, Oriana Bernasconi, Damián Omar Martínez,
Alicia Olivari, Fernando Pairican, Juan Porma

A Politics of Care from the Margins of Chile's Social Uprising

This essay examines Chile's social uprising through the eyes of Juan (thirty-six) and Marta (fifty-nine),¹ a couple who live in *La Bastida*, a low-income neighborhood on the periphery of Santiago. Despite a lack of previous experience in social and political organizations, Juan and Marta got involved in one of the many territorial expressions of the critical event that the uprising represented. Through Juan and Marta, we explore how the powerful nature of the uprising drove acts of contention on the urban margins. We also encounter the repressive response of the police-prison apparatus of a state at a loss about how to deal with an event that appeared, at least to some authority figures, of almost otherworldly origin (Dammert and Sazo 2021). The critical force of the uprising resides precisely in this entry into the political space of actors whose presence was unforeseen, and, by some, undesired. To do so, we explore the ethical and biographical dispositions that encouraged Juan and Marta to become politicized as the uprising went on.

As in the case of Mauricio Lepin, also discussed in this dossier, Juan's and Marta's experiences allow us to appreciate the shift of two people who began as "othered"—stigmatized as *flaites*²—and became activists (*luchadores sociales*). This shift, which served as a mode of subjectivation, takes place as a critical attitude unfolds in them, one that finds expression in public interventions in defense of equality and social justice, and in acts of community and neighborhood solidarity.

The case study that we present throws light on a dimension of social upheaval that is rarely explored: the ways in which certain actors live out this critical event collectively, via a politics of care that serves as a bridge between the intimate sphere and the political sphere, the *oikos* and the *polis*. This politics of care is not built on an explicit body of discourse, nor does it spring from principles enunciated by the protagonists of our story. Care is an inherently relational activity that generates ties and bonds. When care relationships give rise to bonds that fall outside of the conventions considered proper to policing the family (Donzelot 1984) and come up against state institutions (Ziv 2017), they can become critical for the subjects living them out.

The sections of this essay follow a spatial sequence of concentric circles, with the uprising as a crosscutting event. The center and point of origin is the “home” as domestic space. This *oikos* is placed under internal tension by a “micropolitics” (Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2005) that turns it into a place of care and hospitality for homeless young people. The essay next moves out into the “street,” place of struggle and of political “appearance” (Arendt [1963] 1990; Butler 2015). In the “street,” the essay expands its frame of reference to allow in the uprising as a local critical event, via the occupation of a piece of land adjoining *La Bastida*, the *población*³ where Juan and Marta live. Next, “prison” is the circle that literally and politically suspends the couple’s space for expression when their lives collide with state-administered security and punishment (see fig. 1).

The Home

Marta was born in the 1960s in one of Santiago’s most emblematic *poblaciones*. Her life has been hard: she lived on the street for several years and suffered abuse and violence. However, she turned her traumatic experiences into an ethical sensibility for solidarity and care, spurring her on to first welcome Juan into her life and then take in a series of young people living in circumstances of precarity. The couple met for the first time in 2015 on social media, although they subsequently fell out of touch. Sometime later, Juan sought Marta out again at a time when he was in the throes of severe addiction, cancer, and depression. “And we’ve been inseparable ever since,” declared Juan. “She’s a great woman. She got me off drugs. . . . She was the one who got me up out of my sickbed when I had cancer. She wouldn’t let me just lay down and die.” The relationship is not one of dependence, though, but of a caring for the other that triggered self-care. When the uprising began, this same predisposition in Marta led her to temporarily take in a group of precarious young people:

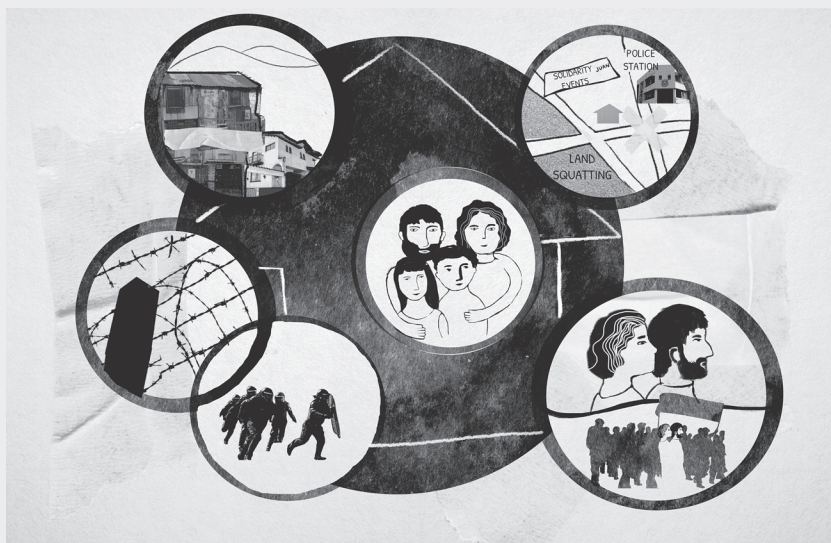


Figure 1. Home, street, prison, critical event. Illustration by Francisca Yañez.

I lived on the streets for three years. I know what abuse is, I know what it's like to be cold and hungry. And Juan told me about some kids that had nowhere to live. So, seeing as I've got a spare room upstairs, I told him: "Juan, tell them they can come and stay here."

Marta shared a roof and a table with the young people. She drew up rotations for chores, with everyone taking turns at cleaning, and showed care and concern by setting limits on the time people were to be home at night and even enforcing bedtimes. When someone didn't come home on time, Marta would suffer. On one occasion Eduardo, one of the young people, left the household and ended up sleeping on the street. Marta refused to give up until he was found and brought home. "When he got here I hugged him and told him 'That's the last time you sleep out on the street. If you're somewhere and they throw you out, you come and knock on the back window here and I'll get out of bed to let you in. But I never want to see you out on the street again.'" The affection that was cultivated in this shared household created a sense of family that both Marta and Juan referred to repeatedly in their interviews. Some of the young people came to acknowledge and reciprocate the feelings, treating the pair "like we were their mom and dad." In this way, in the heat of the uprising, Marta brought them all together and acted as the head of this assembled, provisional household, proudly ensuring

that “no one ever went without” even when they were obliged to resort to one of the many *ollas communes* (soup kitchens) that sprang up during the Covid pandemic. This same identity was the one Marta would appeal to time and time again when the public prosecution service subsequently accused them of constituting an organized group that had supposedly come together for the purpose of attacking a local police station, and its occupants, with incendiary devices and firearms. She counters with “Here, we were a family.”

The space of care that Marta created grew from a series of everyday affects that circulated in the background of various political subjects entangled in this event. An ethical awareness rooted in her own history predisposed Marta to be part of the whole, to protect the weak, to rebel against neoliberal individualism, and to transform her home into a space that was as hospitable as it was politicizing, and where all would radically participate. Care, responsibility, rows, and comradeship were all part of community life in Marta and Juan’s spontaneous home, demolishing the boundaries that usually separate public from private, care from politicization. This politics of care started to take shape before it was articulated as a properly political discourse. As we will see, however, it was in the force field galvanized by the social uprising that the commitment binding Marta and Juan’s household together was interpreted, by the state’s security apparatus, as a sign of insurrectionary intent.

The Street

Prior to October 2019 Juan had taken part in protests each September 11, commemorating the 1973 coup d’état led by General Pinochet. Other than this, however, he had no history or habit of participating in social or political organizations. The social uprising accordingly marked a turning point in his attitude to the political, although his own biographical narrative indicated two events that predisposed him to get involved in a large-scale event such as the uprising and emerge from it as an activist. The first event was having been the subject of Marta’s care, as we mentioned above. This care allowed Juan to transform his relationship with himself and move toward becoming “the person I am now, an activist [*un luchador social*].”

A second event is connected to his membership in *La Garra Blanca* (literally, White Claw), an association of soccer fans (known in Chile as *barras bravas*).⁴ *La Garra Blanca* is made up of supporters of Colo-Colo, one of the country’s most popular soccer clubs, which has a large following in *poblaciones* (Aguilar 2023). Belonging to *La Garra* gave Juan a community *pathos*

that combines a love of soccer with explicit support for the struggles of the Mapuche indigenous people, and an anti-fascist, anti-system ethic that plays out in regular confrontations between *La Garra Blanca* and the police: “I’m a Garra member, a fighter,” Juan said. “The antifas of the *Colo* [Colo], we’re all anti-cop. We fight for the rights of the Wallmapu,⁵ . . . it’s not only about the social context of around here [i.e., of urban Santiago].”

When the uprising came along, Juan translated the sense of community that he had forged in the *barra brava* into a conception of neighborhood, of commitment to his area and his *población*, to “the street.” This reached the point where he stopped attending to the calls that came from the *Garra* fans, to stay alive to the struggle of the moment, which he saw as the one happening in his own neighborhood:

They would say “let’s head to the stadium.” [But] No; my time is in the street, the street’s here, the people who need me are here in the *población*. The stadium can wait, the struggle there will always be there waiting for me, but the people here in the *población*, they’re the ones fighting for their homes, their rights, decent health care and education, they’re here.

The history of *La Bastida* fed that incipient neighborhood identity due to its own traditions, including social struggles for housing and historical resistance to fascism and to the Pinochet dictatorship, articulated through grassroots organizations.

The uprising triggered something vital in Juan, which he identified with his experiences of commonality in *La Garra Blanca*. But it went further: it gave him “more strength,” bringing out in him something that, he says, “I never knew existed” but “I had inside of me”: his “essence” as an activist “who can fight every day on others’ behalf.” Juan, then, moved in a direction that led him to describe himself as an activist (*luchador social*). Marta, on the other hand, does not identify herself in this way. This should not be mistaken for a lack of politicization on her part: it simply represents a different form of subjectivation. The uprising also produced a shift in her, in how she understands politics and the importance of protest: “If people told me to go out and protest,” says Marta, “I’d do it. . . . If there’s a need to go and march, I’ll get out there and march.”

A Critical Event

Some weeks after the uprising began, a large group of low-income families occupied an area of land belonging to a family from the Chilean high elite,

bordering on the northern limit of *La Bastida*. The aim of the occupation was to highlight the problem of overcrowding on the urban margins of Santiago, in housing districts that often originate in land squatting and self-construction, characteristic of what Teresa Caldeira (2017) has called “peripheral urbanization.” The police response was repressive and the situation escalated into levels of violence that had not been seen since the 1990s, when the Pinochet dictatorship ended. *La Bastida* was surrounded by police for over a week, with daily confrontations between police and demonstrators. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights produced a report detailing raids and destruction, tear gas launched into homes and health centers and close to educational institutions, deliberate running over of protesters with police vehicles, arbitrary detentions, and torture committed inside police stations.

Groups of residents demolished an emblematic boundary wall separating *La Bastida* from the occupied land, leaving a long thoroughfare full of rubble and burning barricades. The police station was attacked on various occasions with fire and stones. Avenida Bogotá, a street close to Marta and Juan’s house, became the material and symbolic center of this territorial expression of the social uprising in *La Bastida*. It was a site of intense conflict over various months, even after the Covid pandemic arrived.

A certain sense of vertigo can be detected in the way Juan and Marta talk about this encounter with the multitude. There seems to be a sense of *déjà vu*, where the same actions and people are repeated day after day: “Shit. It’s the same thing all over again,” says Juan. “We’re always the same people who turn up. You see the same faces every day.” But then the adrenaline kicks in: Juan, who knows other active protesters, feels an inexplicable attraction for “the street”: “I started to get a taste for following along, getting out there; the adrenaline rush, it’s like the street was calling me, like the street was saying ‘come on, we need you out here.’ So there were a couple of weeks after that when I was basically out in the street the whole time.” His references to the magnetism of the street, to adrenaline, and to seeing the same familiar faces, is reminiscent of Durkheim’s (1984) “collective consciousness” or Randall Collins’s (2009) “emotional energy,” which contributes to generating a sense of belonging to a group. Juan recalls that “here [Avenida Bogotá] was full of people, if you came here someday at nighttime, you could easily count five hundred, six hundred people.” This collective consciousness, expressed in asphalt and a multitude of familiar faces, was what grabbed Juan and Marta and “wouldn’t let them go.” This sense of vertigo is the same one with which Juan and Marta speak with a certain nostalgia about Avenida Bogotá, no lon-

ger full of protesters. Only the black asphalt remains as a visible reminder of what went on: “For me, what makes me nostalgic is seeing that we used to gather there, we protested there and went out to fight for others, and to see the street empty now, the night empty . . . and nothing.”

When Juan and Marta speak about their involvement in the uprising, they do not craft a discourse in the way community leaders often do. Their discourse always refers to actions and experiences, to what the event really did “in and through” them. When their words seek to explain the reasons behind their lived experience, they tend, however, to reach for conventional formulas. The truth value of these statements is perhaps less important than what they reveal about the overabundance of meaning that this event had in their lives, their ways of recognizing one another, and their ways of being in relation to others. When Juan is asked about the reasons that led him to protest, his voice abandons the personal register to personify a collective subject: “We didn’t go out to fight for our own benefit, but for the good of the whole country, for the sake of the *población*.” He adopts as his own, a reason that belongs to an “us:” “because we want more dignified lives in this country, we don’t want more injustice, we don’t want any more human rights violations.” His testimony about his own experience fluctuates, sometimes situating Juan and Marta inside the event, as protagonists of the uprising, and at other times outside, as casual observers of the urban periphery who end up swept along by the adrenaline created by the situation. Looking at Juan during the interview, Marta told him:

One day I told you “Let’s go for a look,” and we went to look and I enjoyed running away from the cops; seeing how they set fires; and then we started going for a look . . . we went out to have a cigarette on Avenida Bogotá . . . and we stayed at the protest, watching, because there were so many people there already. Why would you go home and sit indoors when you were there seeing how people were running away from the cops and all that? . . . And if the cops were on their way, you weren’t going to stand idly by . . . for the cops to pick you up . . . obviously you had to run away, right?

Prison

“Quick! Get dressed, get dressed!” were the first words Marta heard very early one apparently ordinary morning in October 2020. She had been awakened shortly before, by noise on the galvanized steel roof. “Suddenly,” she says, “I hear the door being opened. And there’s a cop standing there.” In the course of an ongoing investigation that the public prosecutor’s office had

begun some months earlier, the police had come to raid Marta and Juan's house looking for evidence against them and the young people they had fostered. Marta grows visibly agitated as she recounts the details, as though it had all happened only yesterday: the violence visited on them, the destruction of their belongings. After an exchange of words, one police officer said to Marta: "Look, *hueona*,⁶ look me in the eye and tell me where the gun is." Marta looked him straight in the eye and said, "Look, *hueón* . . . you won't find—look me in the eye, then, you look me in the eye the same way I'm looking at you—you're not going to find any damn thing here. There's nothing here. You're not going to find anything, anything, anything." "And it was true," Marta concludes, "he didn't find anything." They were all arrested and held on remand, accused of criminal association, making and launching incendiary devices, and possession of firearms. Juan and Marta were accused of leading the group in an attack on the local police station. After five months, in Marta's case, and eight months in Juan's case, they were released. Some of the young people were kept in jail for longer. At time of writing only one was still detained.

Even once out of preventive detention, Juan's conditions of release include a five-year suspension of his right to vote. He is currently on parole. Marta must report to a police station once a month, for the next three years. They reflect that the state may have got what it wanted when locking up them and other protesters: to intimidate people and put an end to the social uprising. "People were so scared that they never went out to protest again. Who wouldn't be scared if they smashed up your house?" asks Marta. Their close encounter with police repression and, finally, with incarceration are the modes by which state coercion affected their lives. The message sent to these poor, politically unaffiliated *pobladores*⁷ was clear: if you dare to show your discontent in the streets, and seek to join your voice to that of the multitude, you will be met by violence from the state. The traces repression left on Juan and Marta, however, led to something more than simple paralysis through fear. They awoke a consciousness and a desire to assist comrades and neighbors still in detention, through neighborhood solidarity activities and the creation of a Political Prisoners' Support Group in *La Bastida*. Both became key actors organizing collections, bingo nights, and solidarity events to provide food and toiletries for young people still in prison. This shift reveals how a total event such as the social uprising continues in less spectacular forms, requiring ethical-political gestures (Foucault 1997) of solidarity and fraternity. This takes Juan and Marta out of the circuit of care practices limited to the private sphere, into a public arena whose importance they want to accentuate.

Closure

Autonomous care practices that emerge from below and are not subordinated to a governmental rationality, such as those we see through Marta and then through Juan, create bonds, construct loyalties, and allow for the development of new forms of social participation. But care is also affected by events: acts of care happen and are also called forth by other events. Marta and Juan's entry into the October 2019 revolt made their (hospitable) care practices necessary and pushed them to develop fraternal relationships with people imprisoned as a result of the uprising. As an event, the Chilean uprising shone a spotlight on care practices that took on a political character in Juan and Marta's lives, through awakening the couple's solidarity with the oppressed, and through motivating them to engage in counter-behaviors that became, for the state, reasons to denounce, condemn, and punish them.

State security and punishment comes into the lives of Marta and Juan, erupting into their home in the form of a police raid that put them on a collision course with the criminal justice system and with prison. The pandemic that hit Chile six months after the uprising began led to the introduction of biosecurity quarantine measures that closed down impoverished urban areas, accentuating existing enclosure and socio-spatial margination of *poblaciones* like the one where Marta and Juan reside. The Chilean uprising, however, left a crucial and exceptional legacy: it triggered changes in the nature of *población* altruism as practiced by Marta, and in the openness to community experiences associated with Juan's membership in the *Garra Blanca*. The reach of these changes, which over the course of this essay we have treated as amounting to shifts, is evidence of their incorporation of the event as a critical instance of subjectivation via the politicization of care, and the domestication of politics.

The uprising broadened the ambit of action of care relationships, causing Marta and Juan to enter into a political arena that was for them unprecedented. Care turned out to be subversive as it began to erase the frontiers between the private and the public, transforming the meaning and practices of creating a family and turning the street from a mere space for circulation into a "space of appearances" (Arendt [1963] 1990; Butler 2015). In this appearance, Marta and Juan re-encountered one another while performing roles they had never before taken on. In the process, they came to question the social order that favors the few while marginalizing the majority. The raid on their home and their subsequent incarceration revealed, in part, the disruptive force unleashed during the uprising by this couple who counted for little in the eyes of the Chilean state. The social uprising that spread through

Chile's major cities ran parallel to processes of subjectivation that should be understood as inherent with the revolt, as Juan and Marta's experience shows. By becoming political subjects, they created a space of action for a community, breaking down the barriers between *oikos* and *polis* (Arendt [1958] 1998).

—Translated by Cath Collins

Notes

This work was funded by ANID—Millennium Science Initiative Program—ICS2019_025, ANID/FONDECYT 1212047, ANID/FONDECYT 1190834, ANID/FONDECYT 3220446 and ANID/BECA DOCTORADO NACIONAL 21191269, CIIR/FONDAP15110006, European Union—NextGenerationEU (Program for the Requalification of the Spanish University System [2021-2023] of the Spanish Ministry of Universities, modality “María Zambrano,” University of Murcia) and German Research Foundation (Collaborative Research Center 923 “Bedrohte Ordnungen,” University of Tübingen, Germany).

The order of authors in this article is alphabetical and does not indicate a hierarchical relationship among them. They all contributed equally to the conceptualization, data analysis, and writing of the introduction and the three articles in this dossier and should be considered co-first authors.

- 1 Names of people and places have been changed to protect anonymity. The couple was interviewed in December 2021 and November 2022, using audiovisual ethnographic techniques.
- 2 Pejorative term used in Chile to refer to people with low levels of formal education who live in low-income neighborhoods, associating them with violent or criminal behavior. Reasonably close analogies might include the term “chav,” as used in the UK.
- 3 The term *población* in Chile refers, strictly speaking, to low-income neighborhoods, but it retains a series of political, historical, and symbolic connotations that enrich the concept beyond a literal rendering. Given the importance the term has as used by our protagonists, we have chosen to retain the original Spanish-language usage. *Población* dwellers are referred to as *pobladores*.
- 4 *Barras bravas* are groups of soccer fans who use the space around fandom as a place to create and affirm an identity. In the case of the Colo-Colo soccer club, that identity pays homage to a wise indigenous community leader (*longko*) of the sixteenth century, who defended the Mapuche during the wars of colonization of Chile's southern Araucanía.
- 5 Mapuche term for their own ancestral lands, located in the south of Chile.
- 6 A vulgar way of addressing someone, in context clearly intended to be offensive.

References

- Aguilar, Felipe. 2023. “Aliento, violencia y un fenómeno social: La historia detrás de la Garra Blanca, barra oficial de Colo-Colo” (“Cheering, Violence, and a Social Phenomenon: The Story behind Garra Blanca, Colo-Colo's Official Soccer Club”). *Sentimiento Popular (Popular Sentiment)*. May 4, 2023, <https://sentimientopopular.cl/2023/05/04/aliento-violencia-y-un-fenomeno-social-la-historia-detras-de-la-garra-blanca-barra-oficial-de-colo-colo/>.

- Arendt, Hannah. (1958) 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. (1963) 1990. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.
- Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Caldeira, Teresa. 2017. "Peripheral Urbanization: Autoconstruction, Transversal Logics, and Politics in Cities of the Global South." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1: 3–20.
- Collins, Randall. 2009. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dammert, Lucía, and Diego Sazo. 2021. "La teoría del complot en el Estallido chileno: un examen crítico" ("The Theory of the Plot in the Chilean Uprising: A Critical Examination"). *Ciper*. March 20, <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2021/03/20/la-teoria-del-complot-en-el-estallido-chileno-un-examen-critico/>.
- Deleuze, Giles, and Felix Guattari. (1987) 2005. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Donzelot, Jacques. 1984. *The Policing of Families*. New York: Pantheon.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1984. *The Division of Labour in Society*. London: Macmillan.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997 "What Is Enlightenment?" In *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, edited by Paul Rabinow and James D. Faubion, 303–19. New York: The New Press.
- Ziv Tali. 2017. "‘It be hard just existing’: Institutional Surveillance and Precarious Objects in the Northeast Rustbelt." *Ethnography* 18, no. 2: 153–74.