



**Releasing oppressive heaviness:
Social emergencies and new-citizen
narratives in Latin America**

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Abstract

This article presents a reflection on what social emergencies and the so-called "social revolts" have represented, which have been mobilized in Latin America in recent years, and which are not only referred to in the context of the health emergency; they go further, they involve various actors, symbolic, cultural, political and aesthetic expressions. The "riots", their protagonists and their expressions take a place in this text, to be observed from a conceptual, social, cultural, political place: the riots can be read as a crisis of illusions and boredom with the modernization offered by the neoliberal order; as psychosocial expressions that made collective imaginaries of resistance and project emerge.

Keywords: social movements, political culture, citizenship, indigenous education, traditional education.

The last few years have brought great emergencies in Latin America. But not only on health and social issues, we have experienced a political emergency, led by a variety of actors and construed in various ways. Still its core narrative is a terrain of research, analysis and theoretical, political and aesthetic production, disputed both by the associates of the so-called "social revolts" and their organizations and study centers, by intellectuals and contradicting experts (Labatut, 2021).

In the case of the Chilean rebellion, which has shaken the country since the end of 2019, has been characterized as an "awakening" (Ruiz, 2020). Thousands of people and different groups took to the streets of main cities and neighborhoods in the country, to

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express radical discomfort with the unequal distribution of political power and material, cultural, educational, and legal benefits within the framework of neoliberal policies (Rojas-May, 2020).

A huge social mobilization took shape under various forms of citizen participation. It constituted a great critical and a rebellious wave against neoliberalism, and was capable of redefining public spaces through protest, urban anger and popular uprising. Neglected and vulnerable populations and communities redefined regular citizen protest and expressed themselves from their own spaces and daily studies, from their neighborhood, their youth, cultural and artistic production organizations, from the margins of the "well-educated cities" and from the media circuits. Thus, new generation citizens gave their own life for a high-impact social mobilization. It was emotionally intense in its community dimension, bold in its working methods and connectivity, with a great capability to summon people and social movements towards political and cultural creation. Months later, a similar experience arose in Colombia brought by groups claiming for peace and the defense of life, protesting against corruption and demanding dignity, recognition and justice.

A predominant image in these protests, was the quick transformation of these uprisings into a network of common demands: These were expressed by young girls and boys in a short period of time and included democratization of power, the dismantling of neoliberal economy and the redefinition of social policies. Other demands included the claim for a more protective State during social and sanitary emergencies, the reorganization of political institutions, a call for an active response to the climate crisis and the effects of extra-activism, as well as clamor for gender justice

and the defense of indigenous communities expropriated of their territories and knowledge, among other no less significant demands.

The same protagonists were building narratives to provide argumentative and symbolic resources for the riots. Images, icons, performances and graffiti gradually shaped a political imaginary that unfolded through direct action methodologies, cultural productions, manifestos, and audiovisual recordings. The common goal in these demonstrations –either in Chile or Colombia– was to show society the existence of a section of the citizenship that was determined to rebel and dispute agendas, public spaces and definitions of the future given by the elites and the established political institutions discredited in the eyes of ordinary citizens. Everyday life was convulsed by “citizen anger”, which manifested itself as a reaction to harm, abuse, and discrimination (Parra, 2001, 2002, 2019). In a high-conflict situation there was a collective takeover of the city that made it clear that towns, communities, and mobilized citizens demanded a new political order, protection and guarantee of human rights. This was an “order for dignity”, aiming at a complete recognition of cultural, gender and ethnic diversities and to establish new ways of doing politics from the communities and not *on* them.

The entire repertoire of symbolic and discursive resources, slogans and modes of impact and coexistence between the revolutionaries was creating a great cultural-political-educational scene, whose form and contents was unfolding as the protests went on. They remain until today as living marks of a demand for political renewal in the country that sprouted from base of the citizenship. In the Chilean case, this can be seen in the constituent dynamics that opened up as one of the consequences of the ‘awakening’.

Diversified leaderships, territorial coordination, social support networks and educational materials were deployed in order to create a sense of strength, capable of shaking and disputing the predominant bases of public morality and organized politics. As a result, an emerging citizenship assumed itself as the protagonist “unseen possible”, in the words of Paulo Freire. The social mobilizations were something more than a great provocation, because what was being communicated for weeks was a fair call to extinguish nests of privileges and discriminatory economic and educational structures, to create a great consensus for a No-Harm society (Parra, 2019).

Three main arguments gave the public some key understanding on the expressive intentions of the riots: the creation of egalitarian, inclusive and participatory societies, capable of ensuring human rights as the main goal of the uprising-protests-revolt; the defense and care for life and the guarantee of access to material and immaterial common goods for the development of personal and collective life projects and fundamental human capacities that allow people to be protagonist of the changing times we live locally and globally; and finally, the necessary shift in understanding the reasons for the social unrest and revolt, which itself implies an epistemic shift, that requires building critical tools to develop political knowledge capable of dismantling patriarchy, ratio centrism, anthropocentrism, sexism, epistemic and other types of current material and symbolic domination that impact ancestral communities.



The riots can be conceived as a crisis of illusions and expression of boredom in the face of the modernity offered by the neoliberal order. But also, as

an objection brought forward by unsatisfied expectations with the democratization of consumption and the promises of merit-based government (two key discourses of such an order). Neoliberalism has been nothing but the recent expression of a capitalism that expropriates the modernizing dream of people and their integration and material development project. However, inequalities, the precariousness of life, social vulnerability and the commodification of fundamental services, such as health and public education, configured the opaque "human" and "compassionate" face of neoliberalism.

But what has mobilized important popular and middle-class sectors is not only the crisis of expectations and the disillusionment felt in front of the unfulfilled modernizing promises. Additionally, there has been an explosive feeling of weariness against the abuses, the cultural humiliation and the precariousness of life found in the depth, in the matrix, of the neoliberal order. The deterritorialization of employment, the lack of access to quality education and to key assets to sustain material life, the generation of unworthy conditions in areas of social and work life, impunity in the face of corruption in the political class, the precariousness and insecurity of popular neighborhoods and racialized segregation, among other manifestations, ended up configuring an uprising mood where the neoliberal order lost all of its credibility, both in the version administered by right-wing political sectors as by progressivism.

The revolts, as psychosocial expressions, operated by visualizing new horizons and configuring a collective imaginary of resistance and development. They become, using Franco Belardi's expression, schools of social imagination (Belardi, 2014).

It was like realizing that it is possible to look beyond what is regular and a jump over the material fences of degraded and mistrusted institutional control. It was the end of the ban on the citizen-lead construction of democracy: you can see the image of the turnstile jumping at the Santiago's metro as the inaugural event of the protests in Chile (Tapia, et al., 2021).

The movements had diverse scales and scopes. They were deployed in large urban areas, in popular neighborhoods, in residential and commercial sectors, in small and large cities, in schools, in universities, in public transport, in cultural and artistic centers, in the streets and on their walls, as a great demonstration of citizen imagery (Vivanco, Johansson, 2021). Social groups and communities –damaged and violated– repaired their sufferings by voicing their own desires and power. Cities swarmed, and roads, human flows and public spaces acquired an emergency tone. Memories, once smothered, emerged and the intensity of the most radical manifestations –filled with anger and confrontation– gave a way to thought processes that were also radical. The revolts turned territories into spaces to generate agendas that went far over those that were strictly institutional, official, or those that tried to place traditional political organizations at the center.

Feminism turned insubordination into a slogan; environmentalism, the defense of life; local and cultural groups, the right to live truly participatory democracies open to innovation, and with sovereign rights to explore unprecedented political meanings to manage coexistence, security and access to scientific, technological and natural commons. Popular educators and schoolteachers in the emerging scenario, came up with an agenda of public pedagogical actions, through urban interventions, performances, councils,

citizen forums, community analysis and communication groups. Different fields, vehicles and tools for dialogue were integrated, to create a stage to express the wishes of collective movements in an educational sense, thus generating "cultural formants" (Didi-Huberman, 2018). This created networks that maintain (until now) a flow of actions for public incidence, through the sovereigntist and constituent processes that unfolded after the revolts. As Camus would say, a new conscience was born from the rebellion, a conscience that releases waves that from motionlessness, became furious (Camus, 2013).



The revolts generated an explosive language, an irreverent aesthetic and forms of communication and artistic manifestations that framed the protests in a larger stage of education and citizen action. Much in the vivid way, of "The Theater of the Oppressed" and the "Aesthetics of the Oppressed", by Augusto Boal (Boal, 2016), which narrated the transition from the dejection of many precarious groups by the neoliberal order to their mobilization and anger. The same groups recovered the memories of past and forgotten uprisings that recorded in real time, the use of public space as scenarios for "other presences", extravagant, rebellious and ready for physical disputes, and a harsh and poetic confrontation, against repression and walls.

Protests have been a great vindication of the public and the common, in contexts of limited political freedoms and high discrimination and inequality. New directions have been proposed to think about and lead democratic politics, to organize self-managed citizen groups, to articulate, based on common

agendas, diverse social movements. But also, to demand "pacts for equality" in the countries that build political agreements of social justice and recovery of political life, without violence and repression; to broaden the meaning of affection and coexistence in social mobilizations, without sexism, without exclusions or identity prejudice, without domination by patriarchal political practices, to value a social and collective intelligence arising from the continuous awareness of one's own suffering and the oppressions of others, to promote projects and gatherings that configure citizen power and social voice in public life, to create a neo-paradigmatic political thought, focused on caring about life and having earthly responsibility. The protagonists of revolts have sown the seeds of unique ways to live in community, without hiding anger and exaltations, creating narratives and art, forming common meanings, making local leadership visible. They are challenged, off course, to not just be ephemeral swarms, but integral subjects, aware of their responsibility to work on projects of a new order, based on peace and total respect for human rights and life. (Bauman, 2020).

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