

Because the People are Tired with the Market Rules: Collective Action Frames and Hegemony, Lessons from the Chilean Student Movement

“Behind this mask there is more than just flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea... and ideas are bulletproof” (Alan Moore, V for Vendetta)

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Abstract

This presentation focusses on the collective action frame of and its relevance for social movements. For this purpose, the presentation uses the example of the Chilean student movement of 2011. The first part gives a summary of the background of the movement, to then define the concept of collective action frames. Thirdly it summarizes the “no to profit” collective action frame and its relevance to create alternatives against the neoliberal hegemony. For the conclusion I give a comparison between the collective action frames of the Chilean student movement with the collective action frame of the student protest of 2010 in the UK.

Key words: social movement, Chile, collective action frames.

1. Introduction

“What the people need is free education, because the people are tired of the market rules”:

This was a common chant used during the 2011 student mobilization that summarizes in a great deal the arguments that were used during this cycle of protest. When we reflect upon the argument that is underlined in it, it is possible to see a clear challenge to the core of the neoliberal discourse and its resort to the sacred rules of the market.

This presentation will focus its attention in the construction of collective action frames by this particular mobilization, and its efficiency to challenge the neoliberal hegemony in the country. First, I will give a summary of the political and social causes of this cycle of protest, to then present the collective action frames of the Chilean student movement, to end with a reflection regarding the student protest in the UK. My main argument is that one of the main features that explain the strength of the Chilean student movement was the capability to connect with the subjective experience of neoliberalism through broad and flexible collective action frames.

Before I move forward, I would like to state the following warning. It is not the aim of this presentation to give a complete account of the causes of the Chilean movement, nor does it argue that the framing process is the sole or even the most relevant characteristic of this mobilization. It only focuses on this particular issue in order to provide arguments for future process of mobilization.

2. Background

To discuss current Chilean history, it is always necessary to reflect on the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. It constitutes a breaking point in the history of the country and determined the framework in which the political and social struggle has developed throughout the last 40 years. As Tomás Moulian argues, current Chilean society was created by the dictatorship; it is the direct creature of this period (1994).

Indeed, from the constitution to the electoral system, to the economic system, all of these elements were created in the seventeen year-long rule of Augusto Pinochet and the military “junta” (1973-1990). The reasons behind the endurance of its legacy are numerous, but perhaps the most relevant is the complex set of cultural and political structures that are at the centre of Chilean democracy. These set of structures are characterized as “the model”, which are the combination between neoliberal economic policies and the politic and social apparatus that supports it (Mayol & Azocar 2011).

The political sphere is characterized by Manuel Garretón as authoritarian enclaves (Garretón 2011). By this term, the author refers to political restrictions that were left by the dictatorship to avoid any kind of drastic change to the politic and economic reforms. The second sphere is fear. The acts of state terror carried out during dictatorship left a permanent scar of fear on the subjectivity of the Chilean population, sentiment that was mainly personified in the figure of the dictator and the possibilities of a second coup in the country.

After the end of the dictatorship, both structures were kept, assuring the reproduction of the neoliberal system in the country, but now legitimized through popular elections. The electoral model left by Pinochet forced the political system in the country to be kept with tight constraints, making it extremely difficult to implement any real changes. On the other hand, the political elites were not interested in producing any real changes to a system that allowed them constant reproduction of power. In this sense, the neoliberal system became hegemonic, sustained both by a cultural and electoral structure.

In this scenario, Chilean society developed a strong process of de-politicization which derived into a strong contempt towards its governing rule and the social order that was created in dictatorship. However this contempt was not expressed on the streets or even on the elections, it run deep in the social fabric of society (Araujo 2009; Mayol 2011).

According to the Chilean sociologist Alberto Mayol, the mobilization of 2011 constitutes the expression of this contempt through the re-politicization of society.

The student mobilization of 2011 was led mainly by higher education students which had three core demands: 1) Reform to the system of access to universities to ensure equal opportunities; 2) A substantial increase to the public expenditure in education, and 3) Democratization of the higher education system. The main objective of the movement was free and quality education for all students in the country (FECH 2011).

There are multiple elements that made the 2011 student mobilization so significant to Chilean society, but perhaps one the most relevant is the fact that it was able to create a discourse that challenged the neoliberal rule imposed in the country since the dictatorship. In this sense, the movement developed a narrative that was able to resonate with a wide spread discomfort in society, gathering an 80% of support from the Chilean population (Adimark 2011).

At this point, we turn our attention to collective action frames which are the term by which social movement theory identifies these narratives.

3. No to Profit: Collective Action Frames and the Challenge to Neoliberal Hegemony

Collective action frame is a particular perspective within framing theory that focuses on the construction of meaning in social movements. Benford and Snow define collective action frames as *“action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate activities and campaigns of a social movement organization. [Collective action frames] are not merely aggregations of individual attitudes and perceptions but also the outcome of negotiated shared meaning”* (Benford & Snow 2000; pp. 614).

One of the most relevant tasks of a social movement organization is the construction and development of a narrative of perception that will enable the movement to mobilize sympathisers, confront competing actors, and engaging possible supporters. Collective action frames deal with these tasks by creating and unpacking meaning in the contentious field of the movement.

Indeed, collective action frames are constructed through a dialogic process that involves from the members of the social movement organization (SMO) to the opponents of the movement. This process includes the construction of schemes of perception that characterize the arguments of the social movement. These schemes are composed by narratives and symbols that are created in the development of the social movement and are used by the movement to engage in contentious field.

Collective action frames are a relevant element to social movements in terms that they are able to challenge the hegemonic ideas in society by the development of alternative perspectives. The construction of these perspectives is what gives social movements one of its most relevant features: their capacity to criticize the social order and the ideas that govern it.

It is in this sense that collective action frames become relevant to challenge the neoliberal hegemony. Indeed, neoliberalism is based strongly on a discourse of the obvious, what Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea regarded as "common-sense", the perspective by which government is reduced to the administration of the economic machine. This condition forces movements to construct narratives that are able to challenge this discourse and create alternatives to the hegemonic rule of neoliberalism (2014).

In the case of the Chilean student movement of 2011, the collective action frame can be summarized in the concept of "no to profit"¹. This claim was first aimed at the form by which education is provided in the country, but soon it was able to resonate to other spheres within the social order, providing a discourse that would criticize the core of the neoliberal regime in the country and its ramifications in different areas such as health, housing, pensions, etc. (Mayol 2011).

Indeed, "no to profit" stroke the right chord in the historical moment of the country because it was able to resonate with a core experience in the neoliberal regime: the increase commercialization of social life. As Doreen Massey points out, the first and foremost activity performed by neoliberal governments is the redefinition of social relationships in commercial terms (2014). Behind this social policy is the inherent faith in the benign nature of markets and their interest in profit, what Bourdieu calls "*free trade faith*" (1998). Thus, "no to profit" represents a challenge to the imposition of this logic in education and provides arguments to the creation of alternatives to neoliberalism.

In this sense, this simple claim became a master frame by which it was possible to summarize the critic not only the government politics regarding education, but also to the general socioeconomic development model of the country during the last forty years. Thus, as the movement grew and found its momentum the claims shifted from only claims to the educational system to the structure of what was characterized above as "the model". In this sense, a new constitution was demanded for the country, together with a tax reform that would allow a better distribution of the wealth.

¹ No al lucro

The major strength of “no to profit” is that it does not only refer to a specific problem with the provision of education, but it can also refer to a broader experience within neoliberalism. This condition allowed two major possibilities: the engagement of people who were not directly affected by education, but could easily relate to the same narrative by reflecting on their own experiences. Secondly, the development of narratives in other dimensions of government (political system, healthcare, taxes, etc.).

4. Conclusion

Throughout this presentation I have reviewed the relevance of the “no to profit” collective action frame for the Chilean student mobilization of 2011. Its relevance resides mainly in the connection that it established with the subjective experiences of the neoliberal hegemony in the country. In this final section I would like to reflect on the 2010 students protests against the fees and the differences in terms of collective action frames with the Chilean movement.

A comparison of mobilizations is always a hazardous exercise. Every cycle of protest has its own characteristics that makes them unique and separate them from any other kind of mobilization, especially if we are analysing countries as different as Chile and the UK. However the neoliberal hegemony is a phenomenon that it is experienced globally, and so is the mobilizations against its rule.

In this sense, the comparison between the Chilean student movement and the student protest in the UK becomes relevant. Both of them were student led movements which directed their efforts against the privatization of education. In both cases the mobilizations were grounded in countries with a strong neoliberal hegemony, against which the movements created collective action frames in order to gather support for their causes. On the other hand, in both cases it is possible to see process of de-politicization through the imposition of the neoliberal regime. Also, the riots of 2011 are proof of a contempt and anger against the political establishment that has not been developed in political terms, which is a similar phenomenon to the one described in Chile.

The student movement in the UK focused their claims on the particular issue of the fees, being “F*** the fees” the most relevant banner used during the mobilizations. Although there are different and complex elements that are involved in the success of a mobilization, the collective action frame it is one of the most relevant characteristics. In this sense, the 2010 mobilization did not have a string of connection with the subjectivity of the rest of the

population; it only focussed on the particular condition of the students, limiting its possibilities of resonance into a wider population.

The neoliberal hegemony it is lived in society as an overarching process of commercialization of public goods, for mobilization against this process to be successful they must be able to relate to these experiences in order to engage a wider audience. In this sense, collective action frames must focus on issues that go beyond particular claims in order to provide the platform for the engagement of a wider audience.

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