

The 2011 Chilean student movement against neoliberal educational policies

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This paper analyses the 2011 Chilean student movement, the most relevant social mobilisation in Chile since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Based on available material and secondary sources, it describes the main features of this student movement, analyses the key components of the students' discourse and its relationship with the Chilean market-oriented educational system, and identifies its impact on the field of higher education. The paper argues that this student movement was a process of expressing accumulated grievances against some neoliberal features of Chilean education. Since this movement is also linked to the emergence of a new generation of higher education students, it identifies relevant characteristics of current students' organisations and protests. Finally, the paper discusses hypotheses for interpreting the recent student movements. This case is informative not only for those concerned with student participation, but also with the potential downsides of market-oriented educational policies.

Keywords: student movement; higher education; market-oriented education; new media; educational policy

Introduction

In this article, we analyse the 2011 Chilean student movement, the most relevant social mobilisation to have emerged in Chile since the end of Pinochet's dictatorship in 1990. In 2011 university students organised massive marches over a duration of seven months, they took over their universities, held assemblies, and ultimately changed the public education agenda (Bellei and Cabalin 2013). According to Gill and DeFronzo (2009, 208), a student movement can be defined as the effort of 'a large number of students to either bring about or prevent change in any one of the following: policies, institutional personnel, social structure (institutions), or cultural aspects of society involving either institutionalised or non-institutionalised collective actions or both simultaneously'. From this perspective, the 2011 Chilean student movement can be considered a paradigmatic case.

This student movement coincided with expressions of social and political discontent in other countries, where thousands of protesters took to the streets in massive numbers. In a characterisation of these 'new' social movements, Castells (2012, 4) suggests that 'in all cases the movements ignored political parties, distrusted the media, did not

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recognise any leadership and rejected all formal organisation, relying on the Internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making'. Indeed, the Chilean student movement shares some of these characteristics. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to consider this movement as a spontaneous demonstration of discontented youth, hyper-connected with new technologies but disconnected from traditional means of political action. The 2011 student movement cannot be understood without reference to a long tradition of student organisation and mobilisation in Chile with a strong political component. Moreover, the movement must be linked to the evolution of the Chilean higher education system, shaped by market-oriented reforms which, for over three decades, have resulted in both an accelerated process of modernisation and a pronounced socio-economic inequality.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to analyse the 2011 Chilean student movement in context, highlighting both its traditional and innovative traits. In the first section we characterise the development of Chilean higher education as a case of market-oriented educational reform. Thereafter we provide a brief summary of student organisation in Chile. We then describe and analyse the 2011 student movement in terms of its development, demands, main characteristics and effects. Finally, we discuss a number of hypotheses to aid the interpretation of this particular student movement.

Higher education in Chile: a case of market-oriented educational policies

Chilean education has been characterised as an extreme case of market-oriented educational policies (Bellei 2009). Although no single model of market reform in education exists, it is possible to identify three central components: competition among institutions, school choice, and privatisation. In higher education, the competition for resources implies a relative withdrawal of direct state funds to institutions and their replacement with competitive public funds, the sale of services, cooperation with the private sector, and the introduction of student fees. School choice is promoted by means of varied subsidies subject to demand, in the form of public financing of vouchers or credits. Finally, privatisation involves greater access for private educational institutions to public resources, making them compete openly with state institutions, and, simultaneously, the introduction of business-like dynamics to the public educational institutions, making them behave ever more like private entities. Thus, market reform in education tends to blur all relevant distinctions between public and private universities in terms of their relationships with the state, families and to the economy. The implementation of these ideas varies among countries; thus, it is important to describe the way in which they were applied to Chilean higher education.

In 1981 the Pinochet dictatorship began the implementation of sweeping reforms to the education system as part of a larger neoliberal transformation of the state, the economy and social policies. The key was to impose the principle of subsidiarity to all state activities, promoting unregulated markets (Guzmán and Larraín 1981). Essentially, education would no longer be a state responsibility but rather a service available within an increasingly private market, paid by the direct beneficiaries: the students. These higher education reforms operated in two ways: the restructuring of the existing 'traditional' universities and the promotion of new private institutions.

Until 1980, Chilean higher education was comprised of two state universities (which in 1973 accounted for 67% of the country's enrolment) and six private universities, all founded by charter and mainly financed by the state. The 1981 reform decentralised the traditional universities; their regional campuses and some large schools

were converted into independent autonomous universities. In addition, the government distinguished between universities and technical education institutions, with the latter being focussed on post-secondary technical programmes and certain low-status occupations. Also it changed the financing of universities: direct state funding gradually decreased; institutions had to compete for subsidies on the basis of demand (i.e. attracting high-achieving secondary school students); and institutions were forced to be increasingly self-funded and consequently began charging students fees. Moreover, a system of subsidised credits was implemented.

The neoliberal reform promoted the creation of private universities and technical-professional institutions, forming a sub-sector of 'new' institutions. Private agents were given autonomy to create universities (previously, Chilean universities were created by law and subject to academic supervision by the University of Chile); also, the standards for the creation of new institutions were reduced, enabling technical-professional institutions to function as for-profit companies whereas universities remained as not-for-profit organisations. New private institutions accessed indirect state funding – such as competitive funds for research and subsidies based on demand – but they did not receive direct state funds, and their students could not access subsidised loans.

In practice, the 1981 reforms created two sub-systems of higher education. The 'traditional', composed of public and private universities, where the state maintained a significant funding role (although decreasing and indirect); and the 'new', composed only of private institutions, which received practically no support from the state. With the return to democracy in 1990, this structure was maintained, but the evolution of the system and the policies implemented thereafter increasingly blurred the lines between the types of institutions. A key policy in this regard was the growing relevance of the subsidies to demand, which increased from 44% of the total public expenditure on higher education in 1990 to 74% in 2011.

The 'traditional' institutions have seen a significant decrease in state funding, representing in 2011 – on average – around 17% of the total institutional budgets (CRUCH 2012), forcing them to increase their own financing, raise fees for students, and sell services. Funding constraints and – in the case of state universities – legal restrictions have hindered them from expanding significantly; also, Chilean authorities have not created new public institutions since the 1981 reform. In other words, there has been no political support for development or expansion of the traditional universities. Despite this, traditional universities still produce most of the scientific research and continue to be the most prestigious and selective academic institutions in Chile.

In contrast, new private higher education institutions have continued to be created and increased their enrolment exponentially, accounting in 2012 for 72% of the national post-secondary enrolment. This accelerated expansion can be explained by two principal factors. First, the new institutions are almost exclusively teaching institutions, most of which create low-cost programmes, and several (those with the most growth) are not academically selective. Second, in 2005 the Private Credit with State Guarantee was created, a credit facility from banks to students to pay their fees (guaranteed by the state in cases of default).¹ Through this subsidy, these institutions capitalised on an enormous unmet demand in the middle- and lower-class sectors of the population. The existence of latent demand, the growth of state subsidies and lowered standards to create institutions has transformed higher education into an attractive market for national and international private investors.

In addition to public funds to correct specific market failures, democratic governments created public institutions to ‘guide the educational market’ (Brunner et al. 2005). Thus, a quality assurance system was created in 2006.² The system consists of voluntary institutional accreditation (although obligatory for certain training programmes) performed by private agencies and based on standards and norms defined by the National Commission for Accreditation, a public entity which then makes the final decision. The system applies equally to all higher education institutions; its accreditation is required to obtain state subsidies (including student loans) and it is used by the institutions for marketing purposes.

These policies have resulted in an accelerated expansion of the post-secondary system, basically due to the proliferation of new private institutions and an enormous diversification and stratification of the institutions – within both traditional and new sectors – in regards to quality and the social makeup of students (Orellana 2011; Brunner et al. 2005). In fact, in the past two decades, Chile has had radical growth in college attendance: the gross enrolment rate in post-secondary education - 16.8% in 1990, the same level as in 1973 – reached 59% in 2012 (Orellana 2011; UNESCO 2012). The privatisation trend also affected the funding sources of higher education: in 2012, 78% of the national spending on higher education was private (compared to an OECD average of 31%) coming essentially from the tuition fees paid by Chilean families, the highest among OECD countries in comparative terms (OECD 2013). Thus, in only 20 years, Chile’s higher education became a mass system (OECD and World Bank 2009).

Student organisation in Chile

Student organisation in Chile has a long history (the Student Federation of the University of Chile, FECH, was founded in 1906), and it played several important political roles during the twentieth century, including being involved in the 1960s university reform process. This was violently interrupted by the military coup of 1973, when student federations were prohibited. In the mid-1980s, an autonomous student movement reorganised (always within traditional universities) and actively participated in the protests opposing the dictatorship. The Chilean Student Confederation (CONFECH) emerged during this time as a supra-organisation composed of student federations from traditional universities. Subsequently, it was CONFECH that led the 2011 student movement.

With the arrival of democracy in 1990, although student organisations were formally recognised and funded by the universities, the student movement weakened. Only in the second half of the 1990s did student organisations from traditional universities reappear as public actors, demanding more state funding to alleviate the increasing fees for families, and greater institutional democratisation of universities. The most dynamic organisations in this resurgence were the student federations of the University of Chile and the Catholic University, the most prestigious Chilean universities. This alliance would constitute the nucleus of the university movement from this point forward. Even though the gains of that movement were minor and its political impact was limited, it represented the first public protest that questioned central aspects of the economic and social model inherited from the dictatorship and expressed a certain latent social discontent (Moulián 1998). Soon after, this movement diffused and did not re-emerge until the mid-2000s.

During this period there was no significant student organisation within new private universities. In many of these universities, student organisation was either prohibited or

lacked autonomy from the institutional authorities. It was only during the 2000s that representative student federations emerged in the new private institutions.

Finally, from the early 2000s, new student actors appeared, especially at the high school level. These organisations launched new ideas and strategies and organised different social sectors from those traditionally represented in the student movement. Arguably, it was a massive high school student movement in 2006 that stirred the university student federations and started a process that subsequently led to the 2011 student movement. Indeed, as it will become clear, there are apparent similarities in both the demands and the strategies between both movements, and a significant degree of continuity among the intermediate-level leaders and student political collectives involved. The discourse of high school students in 2006 included four key elements: the demand for free education, the defense of public education, the rejection of for-profit educational providers, and the elimination of schools' discriminatory practices (Bellei and Cabalin 2013). They also developed innovative forms of political organisation, sophisticated mass-media communication strategies, and multiple mechanisms of coordination, mainly through the intensive use of new communication technologies and instant messaging (Domedel and Peña y Lillo 2008; Bellei and Cabalin 2013). This student movement gained national attention and triggered a government crisis, which subsequently led to a political agreement focused on primary and secondary education policy issues.

Hence, in order to understand the 2011 Chilean student movement, we must consider the process of accumulation of experience from the previous university student revolts at the end of the 1990s and of secondary students in 2001 and 2006. The movement was largely the expression of a process of organisation and maturation of the student actors as political agents in the education field. Certainly, the movement also included a notable dose of spontaneity and activities developed outside the organisations.

The student movement of 2011: milestones and development

Chilean government announced that 2011 would be 'the year of higher education' and this opened the political space for student demands. The first march of 2011 - on 28 April - united 8000 university students; for the second march on 12 May, almost 20,000 students came together in Santiago alone. This was the entry point to a flood of mass actions and protests. A month later - on 16 June - for the first time in 20 years of democracy, more than 100,000 people marched down the main avenue in Santiago. The '1800 running hours for education', in which students ran around the government palace demanding free education, was one of the many actions students undertook, reflecting creativity, perseverance and mass participation.

In political terms, while the support for the students grew, so too did the necessity of unifying the actions of highly heterogeneous constituents (Figueroa 2013). The common point for many of the participants was the high level of indebtedness produced by higher education, which left many Chilean students in a position of economic vulnerability after graduation. On 5 July, President Piñera announced the 'Great National Agreement for Education', which included the creation of a fund of US\$4000 million for scholarships and a reduction of the interest rate of university loans. Nonetheless, the students rejected this proposal with a massive march on 14 July and widened their agenda, demanding structural changes in the educational system. At that time, students obtained the support of the university presidents and other stakeholders in the field of education, thus turning themselves into a social movement for education.

With this momentum, the students convened an unauthorised march for 4 August, which resulted in an ineffectual protest, violently repressed by the police. In support of the students, citizens from several neighbourhoods in Santiago revitalised a type of protest utilised in the 1980s against Pinochet: they sounded a ‘*cacerolazo*’ (the coordinated banging of pots and pans). While the popular support for President Piñera dropped to 26% in the polls, the student movement achieved an 80% backing (Cabalin 2012).

At the end of August, nearly a million people gathered in Santiago’s main public park to show their support for the student movement, demonstrating the broad social character of the mobilisations. Likewise, the teachers’ union led a symbolic plebiscite on education in which more than a million people voted, demanding free education and rejecting for-profit providers in education. These were the most significant mass activities organised during the 2011 movement.

In this context, the government attempted direct negotiations. It removed the minister of education, Joaquín Lavín – publicly criticised for himself being owner of a private university and for having engaged in commercial enterprise in the sale of this property – and named Felipe Bulnes, a lawyer known as a negotiator. Though the attempts at direct negotiations failed, the government persisted with its legislative and political proposals. The educational debate thus moved to the national congress in order to involve the political parties in the resolution of the conflict. The students actively participated in this legislating, including the 2012 national budget law.

The protests continued during September, October and November, totalling around 26 mass marches or public demonstrations. Nevertheless, at the end of 2011, the student movement experienced growing exhaustion: it had to confront internal divisions about the best way to approach the negotiations with the government and the parliament, and faced enormous pressure for students to return to class and normalise the functioning of their institutions. The movement was further disrupted by a change in leadership owing to the annual elections. This resulted in its debilitation, allowing the government to recover control of the agenda toward the end of 2011.

Student protest actions continued in 2012 and 2013. Though there were a few mass demonstrations, they lacked the previous intensity and the movement lost media presence. However, student organisations remained relevant within the educational policy debate and continued to assert direct pressure within the political field, as exemplified by the removal by congress of the minister of education, Harald Beyer (designated at the end of 2011) in April 2013.

Overall, the government attempted different strategies to confront the student movement. First, it downplayed the protests; then, it offered limited changes and some resources; later it negotiated directly with its leaders while simultaneously repressing the protesters; finally it redirected the negotiations toward parliament. Although the government did indeed finally succeed in diminishing the social pressure and driving the political negotiations, these strategies cost it three ministers of education and an enormous loss of popular support.

The students’ demand: beyond educational market

The student movement demanded a wide body of changes; in this section, we will focus on ‘intermediate-level’ demands related to educational policies and higher education institutions. This will show how the student movement rejected both the market approach that defines education solely as an individual good and the idea of a subsidiary

state that radically reduces the public responsibilities in education. Instead, students promoted education as a universal social right.

Based on documents produced by CONFECH (2011a, 2011b, 2011c), the 2011 Social Agreement for Education signed by several social organisations, the 2012 Representatives Commission Report on Higher Education, and student leaders' books (Vallejo 2012; Jackson 2013; Figueroa 2013), we identified five key elements of the students' agenda.

First, the student movement demanded to make access to higher education more egalitarian. Higher education has expanded rapidly in Chile, but following an unequal pattern: students of lower socio-economic status tend to benefit less from this expansion and tend to enrol disproportionately in low-quality institutions. Students demanded that the state fully finance the education of at least the poorest 70% of Chilean families (and eventually make education free for all); implement a highly subsidised unique system of credits for the rest; control the increases in tuition; and distribute state assistance on a 'need-based' not 'merit-based' system. Finally, the students proposed different compensatory programmes in order to diminish the barriers to access higher education – especially in the more selective institutions – for traditionally disadvantaged populations, such as poor or indigenous students. In this way, the students confronted not only the direct consequences of market reforms, but also a history of unequal distribution of higher education in Chile.

Second, they demanded a strengthening and expansion of public education institutions. One of the most notorious effects of market reforms in Chile was the accelerated process of educational privatisation (in 2012, 16% of higher education students attended public universities). The student leaders (including the representatives of private institutions) proposed the state have a preferential relationship with public universities, expressed in an increase in direct state financing, a modernisation of their management processes, and the creation of new public education institutions. In other words, that state institutions recover a main (and not subsidiary) role in the provision of educational services and the leadership in the scientific research in all fields, including not only areas of greater economic value but also the humanities, the arts and the social sciences.

Third, students requested a strengthening of the state capacity for regulation and direction of the higher education system. In fact, higher education institutions have traditionally been highly autonomous, a characteristic further increased by the growth of new private institutions that are unaccountable to public authorities. The relative absence of national policies in this field and the weakness of public regulatory bodies have enabled higher education institutions to increase prices even when they are funded with public subsidies, to lower quality standards and to evade not-for-profit regulations. Furthermore, universities are not transparent in their financial administration despite their significant subsidisation by the state, including tax exemptions for their not-for-profit status. These issues are critical among new private institutions. The students have demanded a new institutionalised public watchdog position with oversight over the use of resources as well as the accreditation process of the institutions.

Fourth, students demanded to eradicate the profit motivation as the engine of higher education. Even though universities must be non-profit entities, there is evidence that various new private universities use subterfuge to permit the return of profits for their owners (Mönckeberg 2007; Commission on Higher Education 2012). In fact, some international companies – such as Laureate International and Apollo – have

purchased private universities in Chile. Additionally, non-university institutions are allowed to organise as for-profit companies and receive significant state funds, especially via subsidies on the demand. New private institutions experienced the greatest growth in the last decade and the main financing mechanism for that has been the credit loaned to the students by private banks, institutions that also obtained enormous earnings from families and states subsidies (30% of the 2012 public budget for higher education was to finance this credit). In summary, the dynamism of Chilean post-secondary educational expansion has been driven by for-profit institutions. The students believe that the primacy of commercial motivations produced inequality and abuses in the field of education. Consequently, they proposed a better oversight of the universities, requiring all educational institutions be genuinely not-for-profit (or alternatively keeping public resources for not-for-profit institutions) and removing the banks from the administration of student credit.

Finally, the student movement also wanted to see the promotion of student participation and organisation in all post-secondary educational institutions. Organised student participation has been severely restricted in new private higher education institutions: owners and administrators have total control, including prohibiting student participation. Students demanded new regulations to ensure student organisations are permitted in all institutions. Indeed, this is linked with a deeper concern: although the Chilean state widely finances and subsidises private universities, it does not require them to satisfy institutional high-quality standards, such as financial transparency, non-discriminatory policies as employers, participation, and ideological pluralism.

Characteristics of the movement and student organisation

The scale of the 2011 student movement suggests that it was able to articulate the classic student movements with the new political, social and cultural expressions of this generation. This also represents a more profound change: since the early 2000s, the Chilean student movements have experienced internal transformations in their social character and organisational dynamics. There are three central features of recent Chilean student movements: an important (but not total) independence from the political system, a continuing trend of internal democratisation, and an intensive combination of traditional and innovative forms of protest and public demonstration.

Research on the student movement identified two kinds of actions: one traditional, linked to political parties, with a 'classic' discourse of anti-neoliberalism; and another 'emergent', with horizontal practices, a critical discourse towards the political parties, and claims arising from a mature neoliberalism (Aguilera 2012; Salinas and Fraser 2012; Tricot 2012). Although this characterisation highlights a real distinction, it should not be applied mechanically: in the 2011 student movement, the 'old' and the 'new' are mixed.

In the organisational aspect, the emergent patterns have fused with the traditional, transforming them. Student federations from traditional universities are formal, legitimate organisations, based on automatic membership, whose authorities are elected yearly in democratic elections. They officially represent students' demands before university authorities. Grouped in CONFECH, they have also negotiated with Chilean government, but this is a political, unregulated practice. In 2011, CONFECH continued to be the organisation that was the overall voice for the movement, but for the first time they admitted student federations from new private universities (who in 2012 accounted

for 23% of students represented by CONFECH). Given the different social and institutional bases of both sectors, this mixture is a noticeable change from the current student movement. The result is a hybrid between traditional and emergent forms, in which new ways of collective action increase the movement's capacity to convene students, and this subsequently applies pressure for changes in the student organisations.

The 'classic' and 'emergent' also overlap within organisational dynamics. The contemporary student movement is not conducted from the top or the base, but rather complexly articulates spaces for direct participation, elections and negotiation among political actors. Thus during the moments of greatest conflict, the student federations are 'overseen' by both intermediate groups and ordinary students, subjecting their action to the political will of the majority, expressed in assemblies of representatives or directly from the base. This makes for a sort of revocability of the federation's authorities. CONFECH also designates spokespeople among the presidents of specific federations. Complimentarily, within CONFECH – throughout the movement in its various spaces from the base until the top – are student political collectives who act as catalysts and drivers. The unity of the student movement is largely a product of agreements between those collectives, agreements that must also satisfy the assemblies at the base, the intermediary organisations, and the leaders of CONFECH (Figueroa 2013).

Finally, the actions of the students combined the traditional strategies of political movements (mass marches, taking over educational buildings, work stoppages, assemblies, hunger strikes) and innovative strategies, creative activities and the constant use of public space (in flash-mobs, artistic interventions, mass races, kiss-ins, viral campaigns, street dances and performances, costume gatherings). Students developed 'performative protests',³ using public space in highly original ways, framed their movement through an innovative communicational strategy, and made extensive use of digital social networks for both the coordination of actions and communication to the public. It was the combination of 'classic' political protest with new 'performative' protest which allowed for the movement to communicate so successfully to the masses.

Effects of the student movement

Despite the opposition of the government and the difficulties of the political sphere in processing the students' demands, the student movement had a relevant impact on the public policies of higher education and – in general – in the field of Chilean education.

Regarding the regulatory framework, the Chilean government proposed the creation of agencies of government (sub-secretary of higher education), supervision (superintendence of higher education), and quality assurance (public system of accreditation). Concerning the oversight of higher education institutions, a special commission of the House of Representatives identified systematic and extensive practices through which the owners of some private universities avoided the law to make profits. Similarly, the national congress dismissed the minister of education in 2013, arguing that he had not complied with his oversight responsibilities to enforce the prohibition of for-profit activities to the universities. Finally, the courts began to investigate anomalies in the higher education system, such as the aforementioned undercover profit and illegal influence in obtaining the quality accreditation required to access public resources.

Finally, the Chilean government proposed a new integrated system of student financing for higher education. This system provides full scholarships (conditional on academic merit) for students pertaining to the poorest 60% of the population, and credits

for students belonging to the 60–90% income bracket or those who do not receive scholarships with a 2% interest rate. These credits would be administered by a public agency – eliminating the intermediation of private banks – and the payment would be contingent on the income of the students once in the labour market. Also, the state will compensate the banks for a similar retroactive reduction of the interest rate to benefit indebted students.

The student movement also had an identifiable impact on broader Chilean political debate, highlighting the limits of the current political system, particularly its poor ability to represent social actors and channel youth participation.

Discussion: understanding the Chilean student movement

Previous studies tend to agree on some features of the Chilean student movement. First, the student grievances were a result of the increase in educational enrolment and aspirations, combined with diminished access to good, affordable education and thus an extension of inequality; additionally, the students successfully communicated and framed their demands, connecting their message with society, mobilising adherents and affecting the political system; also, they took advantage of political opportunities; and finally, the movement was characterised by the availability and intensive use of intellectual, technological and political resources in innovative ways (Bellei and Cabalin 2013; Donoso 2013; Salinas and Fraser 2012). Although it is too early to have empirically based explanations for the causes of the movement, researchers have produced some preliminary hypotheses. In this section we briefly discuss these hypotheses, distinguishing between direct and profound causes, and contributing factors.

Primarily, the direct motivation that triggered the student movement was arguably the conditions of access to the university system, perceived by the students as increasingly unsatisfactory. Dissatisfaction emerged for students attending traditional universities because some of these institutions (especially less selective universities and those in mid-sized cities) have been losing ground and faced financial crisis; while the most prestigious traditional universities have drastically increased their tuition fees. Students attending new private institutions (especially those from middle and low social classes) felt similarly dissatisfied because of their enormous debts, which in many cases have been impossible to repay given their more precarious position in the labour market. Market dynamics debilitated many of the traditional Chilean universities, expanded private institutions of low quality, and increased the costs of education enormously. Paradoxically, the way in which Chilean post-secondary education evolved has expanded access, but produced generalised levels of dissatisfaction among students (Atria 2012; Espinoza and González 2013; Orellana 2012; Lustig, Mizala, and Silva 2012; Somma 2012; Guzmán-Concha 2012).

This direct motivation, nonetheless, would be connected to more profound causes. The accelerated access of new social sectors to higher education has been complemented by a persistent social mobility discourse, a trademark of a country on the verge of development. The individualistic meritocratic ideology channelled towards education has given rise to the social demand for participation in the well-being expected to flow from development. However, since Chilean education is increasingly organised according to market dynamics, instead of becoming an equaliser for social opportunity, it tends to reproduce inequality in the next generation (Lemaitre and Atria 2013). Students tend to access educational institutions linked to the economic, social and cultural

capital of their families, reinforcing a socially segregated educational system (Valenzuela, Bellei, and De los Ríos 2014).

Consequently, complaints about educational inequity are no longer an individual but rather a collective issue, due to the contradiction between the discourses promoting social mobility through educational success and the widespread experiences of educational inequality. Some authors interpret student protests from the notion of social class – of Weberian and Marxist traditions – as a manifestation of common interests, product of similar positions in the socio-economic structure that are projected as a conflict of power. Specifically, these protests would express a discontent towards the effect of the marketisation of life opportunities for those who lack economic capital to secure their well-being; in the Chilean case, a widespread condition given the enormous income distribution inequality. This educational conflict, added to conflicts and forms of collective action emerging in other fields in Chile, would be part of the potential constitution of such new classes (Fleet 2011; Orellana 2011; Ruiz Encina and Sáez 2012).

Even without adopting a social class analysis, it is clear that the combination of a country with rapid economic growth and increasing expectations, enormous social inequality, a precarious job market, and without the compensatory social policies of the welfare state, produces an environment of predictable social tension. The student movement would therefore be the most articulated sign of a larger ‘social malaise’ – especially from the middle class – with certain features of the neoliberal socio-economic system. Particularly, the high levels of marketisation of access to health care, housing, social security and education in Chile, and the absence of guaranteed social rights. This would explain the strong support of the student movement by the public, and the irony that the children who benefit from the ‘Chilean Economic Miracle’ are now in the streets protesting against their benefactor.

The existence of ‘profound causes’ helps to explain the emergence of the student movement, but the identification of some facilitating factors permits us to understand the intensity and the form of its expression. Two interpretations appear plausible in this dimension: a legitimisation crisis of Chilean politics and the emergence of new forms of communication and coordination among youth, facilitated by new technologies.

In the political dimension, the protagonists of the 2011 Chilean student movement would belong to a new generation of leaders who do not feel compromised by the limits imposed by the political transition from dictatorship to democracy, and feel capable of questioning the institutionalised arrangements inherited from that period, including market-oriented education (Bellei and Cabalin 2013). In their words, ‘we are a generation which was not born under the traumas of the dictatorship, a generation with less fear, raised in the post-dictatorship’ (Jackson 2013, 110). This political reactivation is not limited to education: in recent years, expressions of new social protests occurred around regional development, environmentalism, and sexual minority rights. The other side of this citizen awakening is the profound fatigue of the Chilean political system, expressed in the extremely low confidence in congress, the government and the political parties, and low political participation. Accordingly, the Chilean political system has shown little ability to process new social demands, further increasing dissatisfaction: currently, there is a growing social and political claim for a new constitution to replace the one imposed by Pinochet in 1980 (Salazar 2012; Oyarzún 2012; Mayol, Azócar, and Brega 2011).

Political deliberation played an important role in the movement, but it was the collective actions that nurtured the force and unity of the students (Figueroa 2013). If the

main actions were indeed carried out in the streets and the urban space was the site of student encounters, Internet social networks were the digital space used to organise and communicate the protest activities; through them the movement formed a horizontal and efficient community. The mobilised students employed Twitter, YouTube and Facebook intensively, in order to share information, coordinate activities and disseminate their discourse about education: 68% of those who were mobilised used Internet and social networks as a platform of information about the movement (Arriagada et al. 2011). Students also created their own digital media to communicate, congregate and discuss the actions of the movement. Similar uses of new technologies had already been identified in the 2006 high school student movement, when students used *Fotologs*, *blogs* and *YouTube* to communicate their demands (Condeza 2009). This communicational dimension is very relevant in Chile where the high concentration of mass media reduces the plurality of the messages circulated.

The participation of the youth in political activities and use of digital social networks has been documented in several countries in protests against authoritarian regimes, environmental problems, lack of opportunities, and inequality, among other issues (Herrera 2012). These mobilisations suggest that 'social network sites and other Web 2.0 platforms can aid offline forms of citizen participation, rather than two forms (online and offline) being separate parallel worlds of activism' (Valenzuela 2013, 936). Without proposing a technological determinism and reaching beyond the debate between *cyberoptimists* and *cyberpessimists* (Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman 2012, 302), Internet social networks arguably have the potential for the construction of new discourses and the coordination of protest actions in different fields.

Finally, from an educational policy perspective, reforms aimed at introducing market dynamics to educational systems have been widely proposed as part of the depletion of the redistributive and development policies of welfare states, and the growing adoption of neoliberal ideas in the fields of economics and public policy (McCarthy 2011; Olssen and Peters 2005). The Chilean case demonstrates that although their potential to restructure education systems makes these policies attractive, market reforms confront at least two major difficulties. First, they entail a radical redefinition of the established notion of 'public education'. Second, making education operate as a market implies transforming the relationship between students and educational institutions into one of private purchase-and-sale exchange, divesting education of its connections to public goods, especially the commitment to equal opportunity. Hence, as the recent Chilean student movement shows, it is likely that important social actors, politicians and institutions will resist these types of neoliberal policies in education.

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Notes

1. This credit was granted with 6% interest and paid at a fixed fee after graduation with no termination period; in contrast, the state loans to students attending traditional universities have a 2% interest rate, their fees are contingent on income and they are forgiven after 12 years. This state guarantee credit increased the already high debts of Chilean families and was one of the central concerns of the 2011 student movement.

2. Since 1999 a National Commission for Undergraduate Accreditation operated as an adviser unit for the Ministry of Education; the new system institutionalised and expanded this experience.
3. 'Performative protests' are manifestations in the public space with a highly artistic component. For example, thousands of students danced a 'Thriller for Education' in front of the government palace; as in Michael Jackson's song with a similar name, they wore zombie costumes, representing their death because of their educational debts.

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