



Struggling for education: The dynamics of student protests in Chile and Quebec

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Abstract

This article aims at explaining the emergence and magnitude of student protests in Chile in 2011 and in Quebec in 2012. These two societies witnessed unprecedented levels of student mobilization that cannot be accounted for simply by pointing out existing resources and political cultures. Although the latter did play a role in shaping the mobilization – insofar as in both Chile and Quebec the student movement is well organized, is composed of dense networks of formal as well as informal organizations and has been characterized by contentious practices for a long time – they cannot alone explain the timing and the duration of the 2011–2012 protests. The authors thus propose to treat organizational resources and political culture as initial conditions and draw on the work of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly to focus on three processes that were critical in determining the growth and trajectory of the conflict: (1) *mediation*, as a result of communication and coalition work among student organizations and the emergence of new collectives that redefined past lines of division; (2) *polarization*, as a result of both a closed structure of political opportunities and a radicalization of student demands; and (3) *spillover*, as student movements extended beyond initial issues and goals and fostered other mobilizations. These three processes did not evolve in sequence but instead in parallel, conditioning one another. By showing that similar mechanisms

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can generate relatively similar effects in different contexts, this study contributes to assessing their robustness. Furthermore, by comparing a case from the Global North with one from the Global South the study contributes to making social movement studies less parochial.

Keywords

Chile, mediation, polarization, protests, Quebec, spillover, student movement

Introduction

In 2011 and 2012, Chile and Quebec experienced unprecedented, massive student protests. Whereas there is a substantial number of studies looking at anti-austerity protests and other recent contentious episodes such as the Indignados in Europe and Occupy in North America (e.g. Ancelovici, 2015; Ancelovici et al., 2016; Della Porta, 2015), there still are few comparative studies focusing on the dynamics of student contention. This article wants to contribute to filling the gap by analysing how particular social processes can explain the trajectories of mobilization and protest in Chile and Quebec. It builds on the perspective developed by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015) and argues that the trajectory of the mobilization in terms of emergence, growth and decline was shaped by antecedent factors – such as an institutionalized student movement with access to resources and a history of struggles – and three dynamic processes: mediation, polarization and spillover.

By comparing the large student protests of 2011 in Chile and 2012 in Quebec, we show that identical processes can explain the extent of these protests *despite* differences in the nature of grievances and in the opportunities and obstacles faced by student movements in each country. However, we do not claim that similar processes explain a wide variety of outcomes *regardless* of the contexts in which they take place and acknowledge that the study of contexts (e.g. political institutions, windows of opportunity and closures, available resources, among other aspects) is crucial to accounting for a number of long- and medium-term effects of protests. In what follows, we outline our theoretical perspective, define each process at play, and justify the unlikely comparison of Chile and Quebec. We then very briefly present antecedent conditions or inherited factors and show how these processes unfolded in each case.

A processual perspective

Thinking in terms of processes implies focusing on the *how* question and taking time seriously. The premise is that social phenomena are not the result of a given bundle of static variables but that of the concatenation and interactions of a set of given conditions and various mechanisms and processes that unfold over time (Abbott, 2001; McAdam et al., 2001; Pierson, 2004; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). These given conditions are the starting point of the analysis; they represent a way to take into account the legacies upon which actors build; they do not bring about the outcome by themselves, but nonetheless condition the ways in which social processes producing this outcome interact and become causally significant. As Slater and Simmons (2010: 891) put it, antecedent conditions

'predispose (but do not predestine) cases to diverge as they ultimately do'. In the two cases under scrutiny here, we can identify two central antecedent conditions. First, *institutionalization with access to resources* refers to the routinization, formalization, bureaucratization, professionalization and relative normalization of collective action; it shapes the movement's favoured tactics as well as its ability for engaging in lasting struggles. The second condition is *past waves of protest* that fostered both the development and transmission of militant know-how and a narrative of victories that sustain beliefs in collective self-efficacy (Meyer, 2006).

These antecedent conditions shape the development of student protest, but the particular trajectories of the contentious episodes under scrutiny in this article are structured by three processes that we have identified inductively: mediation, polarization and spillover. According to Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 238): *processes* are 'combinations and sequences of mechanisms that produce some specified outcome' whereas *mechanisms* are 'events that produce the same immediate effects over a wide range of circumstances'. Put differently, it is always possible to unpack a given process and focus on a set of smaller-scale mechanisms. At a very general level, a mechanism is 'the causal pathway or process leading from X¹ to Y' (Gerring, 2007: 166).

Mediation builds on the concept of brokerage, commonly used in network analysis. According to Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 31), it involves the 'production of a new connection between previously unconnected sites'. Brokerage is done by individual or collective actors who are located at an interstitial position and build a bridge over a 'structural hole'. Although the concept of brokerage is well known, we prefer to use the concept of mediation to account for such bridging and connective process because complete disconnect between social movement actors is rare whereas multiple affiliations and structural overlap are common (Mische, 2008: 49). According to Mische (2008: 50), 'mediation consists of communicative practices at the intersection of two or more (partially) disconnected groups, involving the (provisional) conciliation of the identities, projects, or practices associated with those different groups'. Mediation entails continuous work not only for bringing actors together but also for ensuring that they continue to communicate and cooperate throughout the contentious episode. As such, mediation work involves some type of coalition work (cf. Staggenborg, 1986).

Polarization refers to a process by which the ideological distance between actors increases (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 130); it involves two smaller-scale mechanisms: *boundary activation*, i.e. the 'creation of a new boundary or the crystallization of an existing one between challenging groups and their targets' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 36), and *escalation*, i.e. 'the substitution of more extreme goals and more robust tactics for more moderate ones in order to maintain the interest of their supporters and attract new ones' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 130; escalation involves thus a radicalization of claims).

Finally, *spillover* refers to the process through which social movements influence one another. This influence can be reciprocal and translates into the diffusion of ideas, identities, tactics, modes of organization, etc. It shapes the overall level and dynamics of protest (Whittier, 2004). These effects are generated through several distinctive, though overlapping, routes: cohort effects, multiple affiliations and shared personnel, change in the political opportunity structure, change in the structure of competition in the social movement sector (Meyer and Boutcher, 2007; Whittier, 2004). Finally, the time frame of

spillover effects vary. Whereas the spillover effect of a change in the political opportunity structure (e.g. a repressive response from the state) or competition in the social movement sector (as a result of the emergence of new organizations) can be observed relatively quickly, cohort effects tend by definition to be more diffused over time (Whittier, 2004).

It is worth pointing out that the study of mechanisms and processes does not necessarily require a long-term analysis. In advocating for this perspective, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) build on a great variety of contentious episodes, lasting from a few weeks to several months. Similarly, in their study of riots and collective violence in Argentina, Auyero and Moran (2007) focus on three mechanisms (brokerage, signalling spirals and certification) that unfold over a week.

Unpacking the comparison

Chile and Quebec are seldom, if ever, compared. When one looks at their political institutions, traditions and the characteristics of their higher education system, they stand at opposite ends. Quebec is a sub-national entity that enjoys significant degrees of self-government. The francophone province of Canada is a parliamentary democracy that possesses the power to determine its own education policy, taxes and overall its welfare institutions and public services. In the North American context, Quebec is characterized by an advanced capitalism that is more egalitarian and redistributive, with a larger and more interventionist state that has established a corporatist relationship with civil society (Graefe, 2016; Montpetit, 2004). In the higher education sector, there are no private universities as such but public and semi-public ones; moreover, although tuition fees have grown over the last decades, their levels remain the lowest in North America. Chile, by contrast, pioneered the introduction of neoliberalism with the reforms implemented during Pinochet's dictatorship (Harvey, 2005). Although reforms have been made by successive democratic administrations since 1990 (Garretón, 2013), the legacy of the authoritarian period has been persistent both in political and socioeconomic institutions. Furthermore, the country remains among those with the largest socioeconomic inequalities in the world. In the higher education sector, private universities have prospered over the last decades, concentrating about 85% of enrolment, while tuition fees are among the highest in the OECD when considering purchasing power parity (OECD, 2014).

In light of these differences, why compare Quebec and Chile? As we shall see below, the main argument in favour of such comparison is the significance and near simultaneity of student protests in the two cases. In terms of intensity and length of student mobilization, they clearly stand out among Western and Latin American countries. Furthermore, both the Maple Spring and the Chilean Winter can to some extent be considered part of the global wave of social unrest triggered by the financial and Euro crises of 2008, which hit to different degrees both advanced and developing economies. Another reason for comparing these two cases is the importance of making social movement studies and social sciences in general less parochial. As Poulson et al. (2014: 230) have shown, Western countries are significantly over-represented in the study of social movements whereas non-Western countries count for about a third of papers published in the two leading international social movement journals, *Mobilization* and *Social Movement*

Studies (SMS): in the period 2002–2010, ‘72% (n = 126) of the content in *Mobilization* and 77% (n = 98) of the content in *SMS* included the study of Western peoples. Overall, . . . 36% (n = 109) of the journal content included the study of non-Western peoples.’ While Canada and the United States represented 40% of the countries studied in these two journals, Latin America counted for a mere 16% (Poulson et al., 2014: 231). We believe that making the study of social movements less parochial involves not only that we look into cases from non-Western countries or the Global South, but also that we compare them with cases from the Global North to avoid parallel discussions.

Although some authors have questioned whether concepts and theories from the Global North ‘are at all capable of grasping the particular form and dynamics of social movements in the Global South’ and have advocated for a decolonial epistemic opening that would make room for encounters and exchanges with different forms of knowledge (Cox et al., 2017: 5, 25), our goal here is not so much to replace a ‘North American’ or ‘European’ theory with a ‘Latin American’ one as to take into account and contrast a greater variety of cases (cf. Centeno and López-Alves, 2001). We aim not only at making social movement studies less parochial, but also at extending and consolidating the reach of our concepts and theories.

Finally, we realize that mechanisms and processes do not generate outcomes alone, but rather through their interactions with the context in which they operate (Falleti and Lynch, 2009). Contexts can involve a variety of actors and ‘comprise multiple, potentially unsynchronized, potentially causally important layers’ (Falleti and Lynch, 2009: 1161). Insofar as Chile and Quebec constitute different contexts, the outcome under scrutiny in this article derives not only from mechanisms and processes but also from these differences and the way they interact with them. Although we do not identify multiple layers and periodizations, as Falleti and Lynch (2009) suggest, we do take into account inherited contextual factors that we named earlier ‘antecedent conditions’ (institutionalization with access to resources and past waves of protest).

In order to carry out our analysis, we relied on a process tracing method that is particularly appropriate for capturing causal mechanisms and processes at play (Bennett and Checkel, 2015; Hall, 2003). It is both theory-driven and open to inductive insights, and helps dealing with the issue of equifinality, that is, the potential existence of multiple paths leading to the same outcome: ‘Process tracing can address this by affirming particular paths as viable explanations in individual cases, even if paths differ from one case to another’ (Bennett and Checkel, 2015: 19). Process tracing allows for the reconstitution of the properties and concatenation of a sequence of mechanisms and processes leading to a given outcome or, to use Gross’s wording, the ‘structure of causal chains’ assessed in terms of length of time, number of mechanisms or processes, level of complexity and pattern (Gross, 2018: 345). It is this structure that is being analysed and compared across cases rather than static variables or reified entities.

The 2011 Chilean Winter

Chilean student federations have historically cultivated an antagonistic character, forged in decisive struggles against governments in various periods over the twentieth century. In the 1980s, students played a leading role in the popular struggle against Pinochet’s

dictatorship (Moraga, 2006; Muñoz, 2012). Hence, student associations are more aligned with organizations of the social movement-type rather than with the interest group-type. Strong connections between political parties and student associations developed over most of the last century, but after the transition to democracy these ties started to sever. The first decade of the twenty-first century thus witnessed a restructuring of the linkages between student politics and the party system (Von Bülow and Bidegain, 2015).

Unlike in Quebec, federations do not have legal protection, have limited access to financial resources, and the student body does not possess access to policymaking. As its name suggests, the national organization CONFECH is a confederation of federations, and not a supra-organization of rank and file students. Their speakers are designated by the federations. CONFECH does not possess a headquarters or offices, does not collect fees and does not receive public or private subsidies. The very existence of this organization is based on a shared belief in its role and importance. In 2011, near 30 federations were members of CONFECH, all from public universities.

The 2006 Penguins revolution (Donoso, 2013) was a major contentious episode staged by high school students, that contributed to shaping the 2011 episode. It was then that the demands for free education and a radical restructuring of the education system were first massively represented in national discussions. Several of those involved in the Penguins revolution would later participate in the Chilean Winter as university students. The Chilean Winter started with protests against the system of scholarships and loans. CONFECH agreed on a calendar of mobilizations over April and May 2011, and a list of demands, but the government did not respond. The conflict rapidly escalated. Students occupied several campuses in June and high school students joined the movement with strikes and school occupations. Protestors successfully denounced the main problems of the education system, including indebtedness, profit-making practices among private universities, the lack of funding for public schools and universities, and an excessive role of the private sector. Between June and August, massive demonstrations were met with repression, which generated a deadlock. Students started to resume their normal activities in September, without substantial concessions from the government. 2011 witnessed the largest student protests in recent years (see Figure 1), and most scholars agree that this is the largest episode of popular protest since the restoration of democracy in 1990 (Guzmán-Concha, 2012; Vera, 2012).

Mediation

The government assumed that divisions would eventually undermine CONFECH's position and strength. The heterogeneity of the field of student politics, with various groups competing for leadership and often accusing each other, combined with high levels of ideologization, have often conspired against their capacity to act in coordination. Since the beginning, President Piñera's administration attempted to trigger such a process – in the first weeks, ignoring their demands, and later, with repression. However, both the main leaders and political groups that controlled the student federations at the time acted to prevent this outcome. Despite disagreements over the course of the conflict, a core leadership consolidated among the federations in the main universities of Santiago (FEUC, FECH) and particularly among the most influential groups acting in them

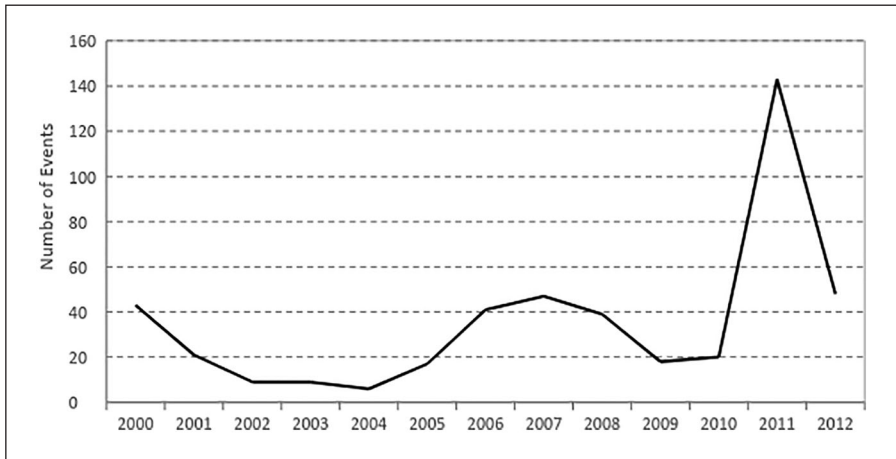


Figure 1. Student protest activity in Chile (2000–2012).

Source: Disi Pavlic (2018), based on data from the Chronologies of Social Conflict of the Latin American Social Observatory, CLACSO. Includes rallies, occupations, blockades, etc.

(Communist Youth, Autonomous Left, New University Action). The main spokespersons coordinated their messages to the public and government, avoiding any show of discrepancies (Somma, 2012).

To be sure, there was constant quarrel within CONFECH. With the extension of the conflict, the capacity to coordinate decisions became more difficult. Moreover, dissenting groups emerged in some federations. But most of these episodes occurred in small campuses. For the great majority of federations, CONFECH was a space of coordination to be preserved at all costs. To prevent further fragmentation and preserve the unity of the movement, the nationally organized politico-ideological groups acted to prevent local rebellions against the official federations. This meant giving support to local groups that endorsed the goal of preserving a basic sense of unity within CONFECH. Meanwhile, students progressively started their return to normality (from September 2011 onward) while the government did not make concessions. Tacit agreements among leaders and politico-ideological groups, and a predominant sense of responsibility vis-à-vis CONFECH among the student base (especially among local leaders in schools and local campuses), allowed the student movement to reduce damages in face of the decline of a protest wave that finished without policy gains (Della Porta et al., forthcoming).

Polarization

The 2011 academic year started with the usual complaints from student federations against the deficiencies of the scholarships and loans system. Students mobilized to create momentum around the yearly presidential address to parliament of 21 May, when presidents announce the government's legislative initiatives. The CONFECH demands included: an increase of public spending for public universities and a restructuring of the system of loans and scholarships; a reform of the admissions system inspired by

principles of equality; and the democratization of university governance, including the repeal of the law that impeded the participation of students in these bodies (DFL2) (Vera, 2012). President Piñera ignored these requests, but discontent did not vanish.

In a sign of escalation, the movement expanded to high schools in June, making the demands of the movement more complex. High school students demanded free education, the proscription of for-profit schools, and greater public investments to improve the public school system. By the end of July some 140 schools were occupied in Santiago alone. Already in June most federations in public universities had gone on indefinite strike and many campuses had their buildings occupied. In the marches of 16 and 30 June, over 100,000 people demonstrated in Santiago, with massive rallies in all major cities. Important actors demonstrated solidarity: the largest trade union (CUT), associations of public sector workers, MPs from opposition parties, chancellors and academics of several universities, television personalities and sportspersons. These events contradicted the government's expectations that the protests would soon fade away. It was already apparent that the country was witnessing the largest episode of social unrest since 1990 (Durán, 2013).

As the conflict persisted, the government moved from disdain to repression. The government expected that repression would radicalize some fringes of the movement, eventually backfiring on students themselves. However, the president was forced to dismiss his Secretary of Education (Joaquín Lavín) amidst a scandal regarding his role as owner of a private university (UDD) and profit-seeking behavior – a practice forbidden by law. In turn, President Piñera's position in public opinion surveys sunk to historic lows, while the movement's approval climbed to 70% in July (Guzmán-Concha, 2012).

The new Education Secretary announced a set of reforms (on 1 August) but CONFECH rejected them. For the students, it was too little too late. Spontaneous demonstrations took place around several campuses that same evening. The CONFECH leaders feared that the national day of protest of 4 August would show the first signs of decline. But the repressive turn backfired on the government. The governor of Santiago did not authorize the demonstration, so police forces were deployed to prevent crowds. Students were detained by police in indiscriminate arrests. Clashes between students and police forces, often using tear gas and water cannons, ignited. Using social media (Twitter and Facebook), the CONFECH leaders called for a popular protest (*cacerolazo*) to denounce repression for that same evening. The events of 4 August revitalized the movement for another few weeks. The repressive turn of the government thus polarized both the government and CONFECH's positions. What started as a disagreement on scholarships and loans became an extensive popular protest that questioned the foundations of the entire education system. Students embraced demands for tuition-free university and radical reform of the education system, while the government did not budge from its pro-market position (Kubal and Fisher, 2016). There was deadlock.

Spillover

The Chilean Winter had several spillover effects. First, the repressive turn of the government had the unintended consequence of invigorating a student movement in decline, as several activists later recognized (Della Porta et al., forthcoming). Repression levels

were unexpected, generating outrage not only among the students themselves but across public opinion. The national day of protest of 4 August concluded with a massive spontaneous expression of disapproval with the government, the *cacerolazo*. In middle class areas of Santiago that count a numerous student population (such as Ñuñoa or La Florida), citizens banged pans in the streets, squares and balconies. Public personalities expressed their solidarity and indignation, and the opinion that the government had gone too far spread across the political spectrum. This revitalized the movement, allowing students to face August and September with renewed strength and legitimacy, consolidating a negative perception about the government in public opinion.

Secondly, the conflict accelerated the restructuration of the field of student politics. Some groups distanced themselves from the stance of those leaders that appeared in the news,¹ acting as a left-wing opposition to the official CONFECH position. They would be unofficially known as SINFECH (meaning *without* CONFECH). But the group was very heterogeneous, its common characteristic being the discomfort with the national leaders and their organizations. Although the group was unable to sustain itself over time, it sowed the seeds of new politico-ideological groups (e.g. National Student Union [UNE], Rebellious University Force [FUR], Student Councils [CCEE]) (Mella, 2016). Overall, these groups would be more relevant in non-elite, regional public universities (Fleet and Guzmán-Concha, 2017). Furthermore, already established groups such as the Libertarian Students Front (FEL), Autonomous Left (IA) and the Communist Youth (*la jota*) would increase their membership, as reported by their own leaders.

Over the medium- to long-term, the 2011 protests also had repercussions in the political system (Von Bülow and Bidegain, 2015). A whole generation of student activists entered national politics, joining either ‘old’ political parties (such as the Communist Party) or new organizations created soon after the end of the strike – Democratic Revolution (founded in January 2012) was the first, but we can also add the Autonomous Movement, the Autonomous Left and New Democracy. But this pathway was reserved to those groups that were ideologically and organizationally equipped to do so. A group of former activists assumed governmental positions in the second Bachelet administration (2014–2018), especially (but not only) in the Ministry of Education while others would later form the *Frente Amplio*, a new coalition of the Chilean left that participated with relative success in the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections (Guzmán-Concha and Durán, 2019).

The 2012 Quebec Spring

The Quebec student movement has historically been divided between two branches: a partnership branch engaging in lobbying and bargaining and a radical branch engaging in protest and confrontation with the state. In 2012, the three leading provincial-level organizations of the movement reflected this cleavage: the *Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec* (FECQ)² and the *Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec* (FEUQ) represented the partnership branch and the *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (ASSÉ), the radical branch. Although their structure varied – the FECQ and the FEUQ were more hierarchical and had a president while the ASSÉ was more horizontal and had spokespersons – these three federations were financed through the contributions

of local student associations, whose funding is guaranteed by law and derives from student fees, but did not have access to state-regulated bodies or to the policymaking process. They did, however, have informal links with political parties, as the FECQ and the FEUQ had ties with the centrist *Parti Québécois* (PQ) whereas the ASSÉ had ties with left-wing *Québec solidaire* (QS) (Sanschagrin and Gagnon, 2014: 286–291). Finally, in addition to these organizations, there were manifold informal affinity groups operating outside of formal and institutional structures.

The Quebec student movement has a strong mobilization capacity and regularly uses contentious tactics. As Figure 2 indicates, 2005, 2007 and 2015 were important moments of protest, but 2012 clearly stands out as unprecedented. It was the largest student strike and protest in Quebec's history (Ancelovici and Dupuis-Déri, 2014; Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017). The starting point was the announcement made on 18 March 2010 by Quebec Minister of Finance Raymond Bachand, from the ruling Liberal Party of Quebec (PLQ), that university tuition would increase by C\$1625 over five years, between 2012 and 2017. It represented a 75% increase. Although Quebec has the lowest university tuition fees in North America, the increase was perceived as a source of future debt and a threat to student interests. Stopping the hike became the rallying cry of the student movement.

Events gradually intensified between December 2010, with a one-day strike, and 13 February 2012, when the first post-secondary school voted in favour of the strike. By March, the mobilization was massive and began to recede only in June. The strike officially ended and classes resumed in September 2012. On 4 September 2012, the PLQ lost the provincial election and the PQ formed a new, minority government.

Mediation

The communication, bridge-building and relative conciliation of projects involved in mediation began early in the process, even before actual mobilization had begun. All student actors knew that it was necessary because of the painful and divisive legacy of the 2005 strike, when the FEUQ and the FECQ accepted to negotiate with the government and sign an agreement without the participation of the ASSÉ's coalition (the CASSÉÉ).

As early as 2009, the ASSÉ decided that it needed to redefine its relations with the FEUQ and the FECQ and thus downplay their critique as well as their political and strategic disagreements in the public debate (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 303). Such communicative practice was not only a requirement for effective bridging work but also served to soften the image of the ASSÉ within the student movement and thereby become more attractive to local student associations. This new tack seems to have worked, as the FEUQ and the FECQ asked for a meeting on 20 October 2010 and talks began (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 303). In turn, in December 2010, the ASSÉ called for a national student meeting, officially to discuss the state of the student movement and unofficially to build bridges with local student associations affiliated with the FEUQ and the FECQ. These initiatives and talks yielded a formal agreement on two points: a *solidarity* point, which involved, in direct reference to the 2005 strike, that each provincial student organization committed to refuse to negotiate with the government without the other organizations being present, and a *non-denunciation* point, which entailed that organizations committed,

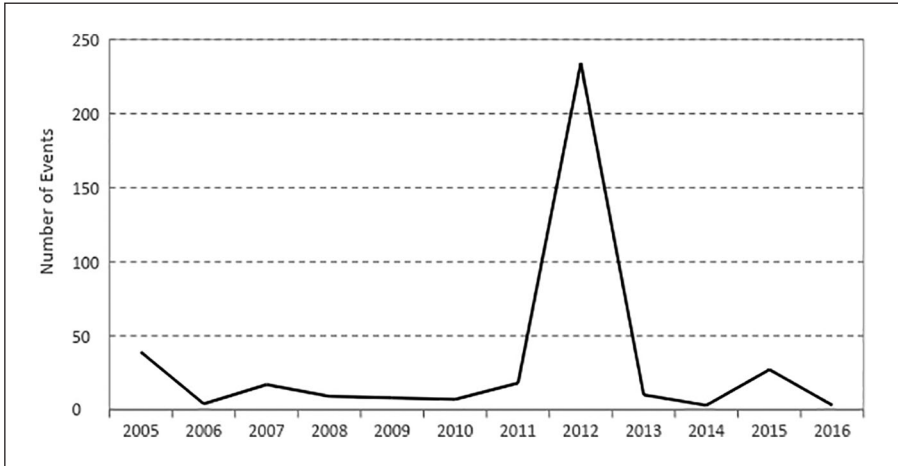


Figure 2. Student protest activity in Quebec (2005–2016).

Source: Based on the Quebec daily newspaper *La Presse*. Includes street marches, rallies, occupations, and blockades (see Ancelovici et al., 2018).

in the spirit of the diversity of tactics, to not denounce in the media the actions carried out by others (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 305–306).

But it is one thing to reach an agreement, it is quite another to abide by it in practice. Mediation requires thus constant work, within and between organizations. For example, the first ever joint march organized by the FEUQ, the FECQ and ASSÉ on 10 November 2011 almost failed before it had begun because of internal conflict, as a more radical faction within the ASSÉ refused to collaborate with the police to plan the march (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 308–309). Eventually, talks and conciliation made the march possible; it turned out to be very successful and anticipate what would come in the winter of 2012. Such internal tensions increased within the ASSÉ as the strike unfolded and demanded more efforts to prevent the organization from breaking apart. But mediation work was also necessary between organizations to maintain a united front with respect to the government. Tensions loomed large as some protestors regularly clashed with the police and the government demanded that student organizations denounce the use of ‘violence’ as a precondition to hold negotiations. Whereas the FECQ and FEUQ condemned ‘violence’, the ASSÉ stuck to the principles of the diversity of tactics and merely condemned actions carried out against individuals. The ties between provincial organizations built over the previous year proved critical, as the FEUQ refused to sit at the bargaining table without the ASSÉ on 15 April and again on 25 April, even though the government tried as much as it could to divide the movement.

This united front was central both in extending and sustaining the mobilization over time and in fostering a power dynamic more favourable to the student movement. But it was not necessarily intended for such purpose. Mediation took place not purely because of lessons from past strikes but also because the FECQ and FEUQ knew they did not have the capacity to achieve substantial gains by themselves (Dufour and Savoie, 2014:

482). The fact that throughout the conflict about half of striking students were affiliated with the ASSÉ implied that it was impossible to simply exclude it from talks.

Polarization

In addition to the government and most of the mainstream media, the movement very quickly faced a counter-mobilization. First born on the web, it materialized as the Movement of Socially Responsible Students of Quebec (MESRQ). Although its numbers were minimal compared to the mass mobilization opposing the tuition hike, the mainstream media granted it a huge visibility. In line with the government, the MESRQ primarily denounced the allegedly undemocratic and violent character of the strike and student protests (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 328).

During the first two months of the conflict, the government tried to downplay as much as possible the student mobilization and simply restated that tuition would increase as planned, refusing to negotiate with students. On 22 March, about 300,000 students were on strike (out of 450,000 in Quebec) and almost as many people marched in the streets of Montreal to denounce the government's refusal to negotiate. The polarization translated into a very divided public opinion. Although the government's position enjoyed a slight majority throughout the conflict, support for the students was significant and fluctuated between 35 and 49% (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 486). In the wake of the 22 March protest, support for student demands increased anew and up to 78% of the public wished the government to engage in negotiations with students (Theurillat-Cloutier, 2017: 334).

But the government did not yield. Simultaneously, universities and students opposed to the strike started to file complaints in court and get injunctions, denying for the first time the legitimacy of decisions that students made in general assemblies and making it actually illegal to strike (Lemonde et al., 2014: 297–300). Overall, the courts ordered 63 injunctions (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 484). The government's intransigent position and the legal repression were accompanied by escalated police repression, as the police tried to control growing street protests and implement court injunctions. A conservative estimate states that 3509 people were arrested during the conflict, including 471 criminal charges (Lemonde et al., 2014: 308), and many protestors were injured by the police.

Such mix of growing mobilization, on the one hand, and intransigence and repression, on the other, greatly contributed to making symbolic boundaries more salient. Very little political space remained between supporters and opponents of the tuition hike, or between supporters and opponents of the student strike. Paradoxically, this dynamic fed the mobilization insofar as collective political identities consolidated and crystallized. The sense of solidarity and determination amongst students increased and, together with a growing judicial and police repression, resulted in a tactical escalation as protestors attempted to resist the government. Clashes with the police intensified and by April, the number of disruptive actions like blockades and even riots increased.

The polarization was also partly reflected in the positions taken by political parties at the National Assembly, as the opposition *Parti Québécois* (PQ) supported the students and denounced the government's handling of the protests. For a few months, the

polarization seemed to generate a new cleavage in Quebec politics. This cleavage was structured around the left–right axis (the social question) and temporarily coexisted with the traditional nationalist–federalist cleavage (the national question), which then seemed to fade into the background (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 483). However, when the parliamentary elections took place on 4 September 2012, parties focused on traditional issues and the student strike as well as higher education remained marginal topics in public debates (Sanschagrín and Gagnon, 2014: 274).

Spillover

The Quebec Spring had both short-term and relatively long-term spillover effects. In the short-term, it absorbed and redefined recent significant mobilizations such as Occupy Montreal, which occupied a downtown square from 15 October to 25 November 2011 (see Ancelevici, 2016). It also literally boosted several pre-existing movements, such as the environmentalist and anti-police movements. Thus, the annual 15 March protest against police brutality attracted about 2000 protestors (compared to the average 500 that usually showed up; Ancelevici, 2013) and the Earth Day protest on 22 April was the largest in Quebec’s history (with about 250,000–300,000 participants).

But the most significant short-term spillover effect took place in late May and early June 2012, as a direct result of the intensification of state repression. On 18 May 2012, the government passed a special law (Law 12), which suspended the academic term and severely restricted the right to protest (Lemondé et al., 2014). The very next day, spontaneous pots and pans protests, similar to the *cacerolazo* in Chile, took place in a neighbourhood of Montreal and quickly spread to the rest of the city and beyond (in addition to other cities in Quebec, there were solidarity pots and pans marches in Toronto, Vancouver, New York City and Paris). These protests were different from the student protests insofar as they involved many adults and even elderly people, took place not around universities but in many neighbourhoods throughout the city, and brought together new groups of people that had not been supportive of the student strike (Drapeau-Bisson et al., 2014). Another indicator of the spillover dynamic was the emergence in late May of a dozen autonomous neighbourhood assemblies aimed at denouncing Law 12, supporting the student strike, and fostering local direct democracy. Drawing its inspiration from the Argentine *asambleas barriales* of 2001, these neighbourhood assemblies also extended the meaning and goal of the ongoing mobilization and some assemblies even outlasted the student strike for over a year and contributed to other struggles (Drapeau-Bisson et al., 2014). What had begun as a *student* struggle was becoming a *popular* struggle. Public opinion polls reflected this dynamic and support in favour of the student strike resurged from about 35% to 42% (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 486).

The Quebec Spring led to early parliamentary elections on 4 September 2012. The ruling PLQ lost and the new PQ minority government cancelled the tuition hike (although tuition fees were henceforth adjusted to inflation). However, the mobilization did not translate into a surge of electoral support for the left, and right-wing parties remained overwhelmingly dominant with almost two thirds of the vote (Sanschagrín and Gagnon, 2014). Nonetheless, another, longer term spillover effect of the Quebec Spring was the

entry of many students into other sociopolitical organizations. Although we lack systematic data on this phenomenon, several activists joined community groups and trade unions as organizers and the left-wing political party *Québec solidaire* (QS).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that a processual approach that focuses on the *how*, rather than the *what*, is required to improve our understanding of the growth and decline of mobilization and to overcome some limitations of conventional theories (see the critiques of Giugni, 2009, 2011; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999). In particular, our perspective stresses relational dynamics rather than static variables. The favourable initial conditions shared both by Chile and Quebec – overlapping networks of formal and informal organizations, political cultures that predispose student towards various forms of more or less radical activism – cannot by themselves explain the protest mobilizations of 2011 and 2012. To account for the emergence and magnitude of these two significant episodes of contention, we draw on McAdam et al.'s (2001) framework and show that mediation, polarization and spillover were processes at work in both episodes. Mediation enabled and sustained the mobilization of larger segments of students and the involvement of groups that would otherwise have taken a back seat. But mediation was also a strategy to manage power relations and imbalances within social movements, deactivating previously salient symbolic boundaries. Polarization, in turn, implied the activation of boundaries between, on the one hand, the student movement and its supporters and, on the other hand, the actors aligned with the government. Finally, spillover processes expanded the initial protests, mobilizing and activating other social groups. Students brought their know-how and skills to other organizations, thus contributing to shaping new sociopolitical struggles and dynamics.

These processes are set off during struggles, as challengers and targets interact within specific political environments. As such, they evolve over time, with their occurrence depending on sets of interactions that take place within those struggles. The concatenation of various mechanisms and processes during a relatively short period of time (weeks or months) helps to explain the magnitude reached by these mobilizations. This concatenation also serves as a crucial characteristic that allows to differentiate episodes of contention – as those analysed in this article – from single or isolated events of protest.

The conditions and contexts vary greatly in the two cases analysed here. While Quebec (and Canada) represents an example of a developed, industrial nation in which the state retains a considerable role in higher education, Chile is a developing country with a market-driven university system. Yet the dynamics of contention are similar in both cases.

We do not argue that identical processes and mechanisms generate identical outcomes regardless of contexts. Although an analysis of the effects of student mobilizations goes beyond the scope and goals of this article, Chile and Quebec differ greatly in the impacts of the 2011 and 2012 protests. This is especially true with respect to their medium- and long-term consequences, at various levels of analysis (including internal consequences, sectoral and policy consequences, and consequences for other social movements,

political parties and the broader political culture). Yet, the comparison undertaken in this article has shown that, provided certain initial conditions, the concatenation of the aforementioned processes within relatively short periods of time can explain the unprecedented magnitude and trajectories of these protests.

Comparing relatively similar movements and contentious episodes in very different contexts is a way to assess the robustness of the proposed set of processes. We advocate for such comparative analysis of cases – from the North and South, cutting across traditional area studies – as a way to assess the relevance of sociological theories that claim a global scope.

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Notes

1. Namely Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson and Francisco Figueroa.
2. This federation represents students in *cégeps*, i.e. two-year post-secondary but pre-university level schools.

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Résumé

Cet article vise à expliquer l'émergence et l'ampleur des manifestations étudiantes de 2011 au Chili et de 2012 au Québec. Ces deux sociétés ont connu une mobilisation étudiante sans précédent que les ressources et les cultures politiques existantes ne permettent pas d'expliquer. Bien que celles-ci aient assurément joué un rôle dans la mobilisation – sachant qu'au Chili aussi bien qu'au Québec, le mouvement étudiant est bien organisé, constitué autour de réseaux très développés d'organisations formelles et informelles, et caractérisé depuis longtemps par la pratique de la contestation – elles ne peuvent à elles seules expliquer le moment auquel les manifestations de 2011–2012 ont eu lieu ni leur durée. Nous proposons donc de considérer les ressources organisationnelles et la culture politique comme des conditions initiales et, dans la lignée de McAdam, Tarrow et Tilly, de nous concentrer sur trois processus qui ont joué un rôle déterminant dans le développement et l'évolution du conflit : (1) la *médiation*, comme résultat du travail de communication et de coalition entre les organisations étudiantes et de l'émergence de nouveaux collectifs qui ont redéfini les lignes de division passées ; (2) la *polarisation*, comme résultat à la fois de la structure fermée des opportunités politiques et d'une radicalisation des revendications étudiantes ; et (3) le *débordement*, dans la mesure où les mouvements étudiants se sont étendus au-delà des enjeux et des objectifs initiaux et ont donné lieu à d'autres mobilisations. Ces trois processus n'ont pas évolué de manière séquentielle mais en parallèle, les uns conditionnant les autres. En montrant que des mécanismes similaires peuvent avoir des effets relativement similaires dans des contextes différents, nous contribuons à évaluer

leur solidité. De plus, en comparant un cas du Nord global avec un cas du Sud global, nous contribuons à rendre les études sur les mouvements sociaux moins provinciales.

Mots-clés

Chili, débordement, médiation, mouvement étudiant, polarisation, protestations, Québec

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explicar el surgimiento y magnitud de las protestas estudiantiles en Chile en 2011 y en Quebec en 2012. Estas dos sociedades experimentaron niveles de movilización estudiantil sin precedentes que no pueden explicarse simplemente por los recursos existentes y las culturas políticas. Aunque ambas desempeñaron un papel en la configuración de la movilización – en la medida en que tanto en Chile como en Quebec, el movimiento estudiantil está bien organizado, está compuesto por densas redes de organizaciones tanto formales como informales y se ha caracterizado por prácticas contestarias desde hace mucho tiempo, éstas no pueden explicar por sí solas el momento en que surgen las protestas de 2011–2012 ni la duración de las mismas. Por este motivo, proponemos tratar los recursos organizacionales y la cultura política como condiciones iniciales y, siguiendo a McAdam, Tarrow y Tilly, centrarnos en tres procesos que fueron críticos en la determinación del crecimiento y la trayectoria del conflicto: (1) la *mediación*, como resultado del trabajo de comunicación y coalición entre las organizaciones estudiantiles y el surgimiento de nuevos colectivos que redefinieron las líneas de división del pasado; (2) la *polarización*, como resultado tanto de una estructura cerrada de oportunidades políticas como de una radicalización de las demandas de los estudiantes; y (3) la *propagación*, ya que los movimientos estudiantiles se extendieron más allá de los objetivos y metas iniciales y dieron lugar a nuevas movilizaciones. Estos tres procesos no evolucionaron secuencialmente sino en paralelo, condicionándose mutuamente. Al mostrar que mecanismos similares pueden generar efectos relativamente similares en contextos diferentes contribuimos a evaluar su robustez. Además, al comparar un caso del Norte Global con uno del Sur Global, contribuimos a que los estudios de movimientos sociales sean menos provinciales.

Palabras clave

Chile, mediación, movimiento estudiantil, polarización, propagación, protestas, Quebec