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The role of protests on the journey to a politics without violence

Las protestas sociales en el camino hacia una política sin violencia

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Violence, politics and critical democratic peripheries. 1.1. Violence, the State and legitimacy. 1.2. Violence as a phenomenon with its own distinctions. 1.3. Critical democratic peripheries and the potential for politics without violence. 2. The social outbursts in Chile and Colombia: from the barricades to the ballot box. References.

Abstract: This article explores the relationship between protest, violence and the possibility of a politics without violence. It argues that protest is not only a valid but also a necessary vehicle for the journey towards a politics without violence. Nevertheless, violence can emerge within protests as well as in response to them. The article will propose a thinking tool for understanding violence as a phenomenon with multiple expressions. It discusses movements to de-sanction violence and the research that has highlighted the role of non-violent protest, constructive nonviolent action and civil resistance in the history of social change. It will reflect on recent data bases which record the rise in protests in recent years and the role of violence within them. Finally, it will take the social protests in Chile and Colombia in 2019 and 2021, where although violence erupted mainly as vandalism and looting, with severe violent

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police responses, both protests, we argue, contributed to delineating a politics without violence through generating intermediation channels between the demands of the street and the institutional mechanisms for processing social change.

Keywords: Protests, violence, Chile, Colombia, social change.

Resumen: El artículo explora la relación entre protesta, violencia y la posibilidad de una política sin violencia. Argumenta que la protesta social no solo es válida sino necesaria en el camino hacia una política sin violencia. Sin embargo, la violencia puede surgir dentro de las protestas y en respuesta a ellas. El artículo propone una herramienta para pensar la violencia como un fenómeno con múltiples expresiones. Discute los movimientos para sancionar la violencia y las investigaciones que han destacado la protesta no violenta, la acción no violenta constructiva y la resistencia civil en la historia del cambio social. Reflexionará sobre bancos de datos recientes que registran el aumento de las protestas en los últimos años y el papel de la violencia dentro de ellas. Finalmente, se estudiarán las protestas sociales en Chile y Colombia en 2019 y 2021, pues aunque hubo violencia en forma de vandalismo, saqueos y violentas respuestas severas policiales, ambas protestas, argumentamos, contribuyeron a delinear una política sin violencia al generar canales de intermediación entre las demandas de la calle y los mecanismos institucionales de tramitación del cambio social.

Palabras clave: Protestas, violencia, Chile, Colombia, cambio social.

Introduction³

This article explores the relationship between protest, violence and the possibility of a politics without violence. It will argue that protest is not only a valid but also a necessary vehicle for the journey towards a politics without violence. This is based theoretically on the proposition that social change will not take place only through the consolidation of representative democracy. Social protests must be understood as a normal expression of citizen frustrations in contemporary democracies, not always an exceptional or extraordinary eruption in the face of specific circumstances. Democracies need their critical peripheries⁴ in order to extend participation and responsiveness to change. Authoritarian regimes are unlikely ever to change without them. At the time of writing (July 2022), a peaceful mass protest in Sri Lanka led to the resignation of the President deemed responsible for corruption and economic catastrophe. Tens of thousands joined peaceful protests against authoritarianism and the ethno-majoritarianism of the government. The challenge is whether the mobilisation can be sustained in order to deepen democracy over the long term. The same month, London marked the 50th anniversary of the first Gay Pride march, a moment which began the process of changing mindsets towards gay rights and opened a completely new debate on sexuality. In the latter case, a long-term change began. Arguably, protests are more effective in the field of culture and values. Can «de-sanctioning violence»⁵ in society be an example of this?

While authoritarian governments by their nature are geared to preventing social and political change, representative democracies are often also resistant to demands for greater social and economic equality, for instance. State actors in many parts of the world use violence when challenged or to defend the status quo, even in established democracies⁶. Democratic peripheries within the latter, as

³ Our thanks to Eleanor Douglas for help with translation.

⁴ The idea of «critical democratic peripheries» refers to social action outside mainstream political institutions and electoral processes, in which people seek to subject the functioning of purportedly democratic systems to scrutiny through methods which respect democratic norms but which highlight their limitations.

⁵ The idea of «de-sanctioning violence», is when social action visibilises violences previously not recognized as such and which are often implicitly accepted socially and politically (Pearce 2017).

⁶ In the US, the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in 2020 while he begged for his life, sparked a wave of protests in the US and other parts of the world, around the treatment of black people by the police, that became known as the Black Lives

well as within authoritarian or partially democratic political systems, enable new voices or silenced voices to emerge and claim the active practice of citizenship as essential to democratizing representative democracies as well as to challenging the concentration of wealth and power and homogenized social identities. This includes addressing the conditions that reproduce violence in any polity. In their study of key protest issues in the 21st century, Ortiz *et al.* (2022) find evidence that the world has been shaken by protests since 2010, occurring in all world regions and across all country income levels but with a greater prevalence in middle- and high-income countries. The main grievances that led to protests in the 2006 to 2020 period were: failure of political representation and political systems, economic justice and anti-austerity, civil rights, and global justice⁷.

However, do such peripheries also polarize society more and potentially or actually generate violence rather than question its role in politics? Over the last decades, more and more protests have overtly aimed to be non-violent and many have actually emerged precisely to name violences previously not recognized as such or ignored, and ultimately to de-sanction them (Pearce 2017). The World Protest Platform (2022) records that between 2005 and 2021 there were 906 protests worldwide, in which violence was a method in 146 and vandalism and looting took place in 140. Police violence, however, was used in 176 protests; there were arrests in 369 and there were deaths in 150.

Violence here is understood as a phenomenon with its own distinctions and multiple expressions (Pearce 2020). The first part of this article will briefly discuss a working tool for thinking about violence. It will discuss movements to de-sanction violence and research that has highlighted the role of non-violent protest, constructive nonviolent action and civil resistance and action in the history of social change (eg. Chenoweth and Stephen 2011). Nevertheless, there is also evidence (the 146 cases above) that violence emerges within protest movements as well as being used against them. The next part of the article will discuss selected data bases on violence and protest and evidence of the role of critical peripheries in democratic change.

Matter movement. In the UK, the rape and murder of a young woman (Sarah Everard) in 2021, when she was walking home at night, by a serving police officer in the London Metropolitan Police led to a vigil/protest that was heavily and controversially policed, and subsequently a deep debate around attitudes towards gender, race and sexuality in that police force.

⁷ Of course, protests also take place in favour of denying rights, although the data base does not suggest these are the most frequent.

Finally, the ambiguous cases will be discussed of two recent and very significant protest movements in Latin America that both took their countries by surprise: Chile 2019 and Colombia 2021. Both movements involved a new generation of young people, touched by the rising cost of living and lack of opportunities. The protests were sparked by the proposed rise in metro prices (Chile) and a tax reform (Colombia). However, they reflected deep disillusionment with the politics as well as the economics of their respective countries. In the case of Colombia, there was a long history of violence in politics. The Peace Accord of 2016 between the Colombian State and the FARC armed group, despite its weak implementation, arguably took the issue of insurgent violence out of the struggle for social change. While there were acts of violence in the protests, this was relatively limited, and it was the violence of the police against the protestors that captured attention. That was similar in the case of Chile (Landaeta and Herrero 2022), where the police had undergone reforms in a country which had suffered a brutal dictatorship but which was known as one of the less violent countries of the region. Both protests thus raise questions about what was achieved by the protests, the role of violence within the protests, the violent responses of the police and the extent to which they contributed to new thinking about politics and violence in each country.

1. Violence, politics and critical democratic peripheries

1.1. *Violence, the State and legitimacy*

Violence is of course a subject of much research and attention. However, it is notable how difficult it is for us to «face up to violence» as Etienne Balibar (2015) expressed it. We are deeply uncomfortable as human beings with the ongoing role of violence in our societies. Our tendency is to be selective about which violences matter to us and/or to politics. The violence that has preoccupied theorists of the State is «political» violence, which is most commonly understood as violence organized against the State or particular governments/ regimes. In the course of history, violence by the State came to be understood as «rightful» violence in the name of both protecting the State against political violence and in addressing ongoing violence within society. Weber termed this «legitimate» violence, although the German word for violence, *Gewalt*, is also often translated as force, and the word itself conveys capacity to overcome resistance through force (Imbusch

2003, 16). Force and coercion are thus often used interchangeably with violence when discussing the State. This has embedded much ambiguity in our understanding of the State, politics and violence, although consent to rulership and its underpinning by rules is also central to Weber's definition.

Hannah Arendt argued that «force» is better used to describe energy released (Arendt 1970, 45), such as the «force» of an explosion. If *Gewalt* is translated as «violence», the use of «force» by the State conveys a different meaning. It raises the question as to whether the distinction between violence which is «legitimate» because it is carried out by the State and violence by other actors, obscures the fact that violence by state and non-state actors, remains violence. The «common sense» that the violence of the State is legitimated coercion or force to contain other violences, and that its monopolization is «legitimate» because it rightfully manages and orders other violences is at the heart of our acceptance of selected violences as integral to political life and protection by the State. And at the heart of this discussion lies the question of how we recognize «legitimacy» and whether it can be coupled with violence or whether it is undermined by its association with violence. Weber came to argue that legitimacy rests on a foundation of voluntary agreement of the interested parties which is then imposed by an authority held to be legitimate. Obedience to the legally established order, including to those exercising the authority of office, is the basis for legitimacy in the modern state (Weber 2013, 216).

However, in practice experiences, expectations and fear of violence constitute our understandings of the «rightfulness» of rule. Can and should «legitimacy» be decoupled from all connection with violence? Weber certainly maintained that legitimacy is based on non-coerced belief. However, he did not seek to give it a distinct and transcendental meaning but rather to recognize it in terms of the belief in and social fact of, acceptance of rule. Legitimacy is thus a partial attempt to give politics a non-violent foundation within the «given» of violence for Weber in human interactions (Pearce 2020, 256). However, it has left us with the idea of «legitimate state violence», in which the latter is easily conflated with the idea of «legitimate violence».

This discussion raises the question, that if «legitimacy» was to be reconsidered in the light of our enhanced sensibilities towards violence, rather than putting all our faith in the State's right to use it, we might begin to find tools to measure a state's legitimacy in terms of whether it reduces violence rather than reproduces it. «Legitimacy» might then be said to reside in the state's capacity not to use violence to address social and political problems but rather to enhance the capacity of the

population to participate in politics as an arena of positive deliberation. The possibility of a politics without violence thus needs to be linked firstly to a reconsideration of how violence is conceived in relationship to the idea of its «monopolization» and secondly, how this is given «legitimacy». Thirdly, it requires a critical engagement with the belief in the right of the State to use violence as of benefit to all citizens. This, in turn, involves a discussion on how we understand «violence» and why it is possible for us to select the violences that «matter» and accept violences exercised by the State as «legitimated».

1.2. *Violence as a phenomenon with its own distinctions*

We are very accustomed to seeing violence in terms of its particular expressions. The debate on violence has tended to focus on political violence, war-related violence, criminal violence, etc. Over time we have gradually recognized other violences, eg. rape and sexual violence and intimate partner violence. Today non-lethal forms of abuse are increasingly accepted as «violence». The debate has also widened to include structural, cultural and symbolic violences, to show the systemic harm inflicted by entrenched inequalities for example (Galtung 1969); the social norms that make direct and structural violence natural and justifiable, for instance against people considered culturally and racially «inferior» (Galtung 1990); and the way violence can be misrecognized as such when someone is persistently subjugated by another and made to feel worthless (Bourdieu 2004). These efforts to widen and deepen our understanding of human suffering have had a considerable impact. One of the reasons is precisely that the use of the word «violence» in association with structural, cultural and symbolic oppressions give these a significance and seriousness that they might otherwise lack. Violence is potent. How can this be explained?

The potency of violence it is argued, lies in its roots in our sense making bodily selves, in turn with origins in our social body (Pearce 2020, 161). The idea of the «social body» is to distinguish between the natural forms of aggression that are observable in our biological bodies and the way this can become violence through the social relationships we encounter in our lives and which have often traumatic impacts on our emotional lives and social bodies. An interdisciplinary approach to researching violence can bring together a wealth of research by natural scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political scientists and others, which reveal how acts and actions of somatic harm generate meanings for us as well as carry or

communicate meanings. Although it has multiple expressions, this character of violence gives it its distinctions as a phenomenon, and leads to a suggested tool for thinking about violence as: «meaning laden and generating acts or actions of somatic harm which potentially constitute, normalize and/or destroy social orders» (Pearce 2020, 161).

This formulation aims to encompass the micro and macro socio-spatial dimensions of violence in social orders, eg. from the intimate and the street to the school, to the prison to the very construction of the nation state, as well as the individual and collective expressions of violence, such as warfare. The aim here also is to offer a tool for thinking about violence which highlights what is critical about its potency. As Galtung argues, his concept of «structural violence» does capture important somatic impacts, such as those on those who die avoidable deaths from hunger, for instance. Violence and inequality have been shown to be correlated (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). However, it is not the inequality per se that is «violence». Rather it is the constantly repeated actions within a social and political order which by their harmful somatic effects create and maintain a politics of domination and exclusion, bolstered and supplemented by direct and sometimes sanctioned violences, including by the State. This in turn reproduces violence through the spaces of socialization.

The violence that erupts in social protests and in response to social protests needs to be analyzed in terms of its meanings for the actors involved and the meanings it generates for the wider society. The aim of putting violence in the centre, is to better understand the potency of violence and in turn, to enable us to address violence through all the knowledge we now have about its reproduction. By so doing, it becomes possible to further democratize a public sphere less weakened by the violences within it and within the intimate or so-called «private» spheres, and make room for more voices and participation to further act on violence and the inequalities and injustices which reproduce it. If protesting becomes less and less about the conscious use of violence and more and more about social communication, and if this in turn, leads to changes in the way the State reacts to social protest, there is progress in the journey towards a politics without violence.

By focusing on the meaning laden and generating acts and actions of somatic harm and their impacts on and constitution of, social and political orders, it is possible to rethink the meaning of politics and the way politics perpetuates inequality, social injustice and discriminations of all kinds by not addressing the violences they generate and which in turn constitute politics. The goal would be to resignify politics according to new sensibilities around violence and the recognition

that all violences matter. This recognition enables us to reassess the meanings it generates and thus we can designify these meanings, ie weaken their potency by understanding their origins and impacts on the social body. Politics thus becomes the arena where violence is reduced rather than seen as necessary to human interactions through the state monopolization of its use.

The idea of the «body politic» is a political metaphor first used around 2,500 years ago (Harvey 2007). Here is it can be used in order to bring the social body into the foreground of thinking about politics. Somatic harm can be recognized in the way politics is conducted as well as in the Weberian conceptualization of the unavoidable coupling of politics and violence. The relationship of somatic harm to our sense making social bodies encourages us to think more about our social as well as political relationships and how both reproduce violences. In the political sphere, this ranges from the selective cultures of punishment which continue to preserve power structures in many parts of the world, to the assumption that violence is essential to statecraft, to the selective blindness around violences committed by the State compared to those from within society. And in the broader spheres of our socialization spaces, we can recognize the somatic harm generated by bullying in school, for example, and how domination and neglect diminish and control others in all kinds of social and institutional spaces. Somatic harm also encompasses the organized violences of war, as well as paramilitaries, mafia cultures and gangs. It includes also insurgent violences in the name of social justice and eliminating structural violence.

1.3. *Critical democratic peripheries and the potential for politics without violence*

It may seem utopian to imagine that we could address the violences that remain in our human interactions and build a politics without violence. However, we know a huge amount more today about how violence is reproduced through all the spaces of socialization. There is potential for an interdisciplinary conversation which could further enhance knowledge and be translated into everyday lives as well as into policy and practice. Despite the evidence of ongoing violences with multiple expressions in the twenty first century, there has also been a rising sensibility towards these violences. This is in large part an outcome of social action on violence. This includes social action in the form of protest. In this article, we are exploring whether and how

social action as protest contributes to the *journey* towards a politics without violence and the particular value and contribution of critical democratic peripheries. At the same time, we need to understand why violence erupts in some protests, even when they are committed to non-violence.

A preliminary question is how do we distinguish between the various ways that protest enhances sensibility towards violence reduction and protest which promotes it? This requires some reflection on the varied forms of protest. If we begin with the contemporary situation, the most recent protests give us insight into patterns. Between 2017 and 5 July 2022, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace⁸ recorded over 230 significant anti-government protests worldwide. More than 110 countries have experienced significant protests. The Carnegie Endowment found that 78% of authoritarian or authoritarian leaning countries have faced significant protests (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2022). In their review based on these findings of the dynamics which impacted on protests in 2021, Press and Carothers (2022) also note the geographic breadth of protests, ranging from Malaysia and Paraguay to Georgia and Malawi. Unrest, they conclude like the World Protest Platform, has reached every corner of the world. Roughly two-thirds of all countries have experienced at least one major anti-government protest since 2017. They also argue that despite this diversity, many protests in 2021 shared one of four crosscutting drivers: resistance to coups and rising authoritarianism; fierce political contestation⁹; frustration with public health responses over lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccine requirements (particularly in western democracies) and with insufficient or mishandled government efforts elsewhere; and economic insecurity including rising costs of living, chronic unemployment, shortages of goods and government spending cuts. While fuel price increases

⁸ The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is not the only data base for tracking protests and non violent action. The authors selected this data base for its focus on protests, however other data bases gather data on non violent action eg: <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>; <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/navco>.

⁹ For instance in Georgia, protestors took to the streets in 2021 on the issue of electoral integrity and the arrest of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, in Peru, supporters of presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori alleged improper interference in the 2021 presidential election; in Bolivia, supporters of former president Jeanine Anez criticized her arrest and detention that year, in the US, the transition between the administrations of Donald Trump and Jo Biden were marked by protests around electoral integrity and led to the riot at the US Capitol 6 January 2021 (Press and Carothers, 2022).

sparked nationwide protests that year in Ecuador, it was tax increases in Ghana and broader economic failure elsewhere, such as Cuba where shortages of food and medicine led to the largest demonstrations in that country on record.

And since the Global Protest Tracker and World Protest Platform reported and at the time of writing, on 9 July 2022, as mentioned previously, the Sri Lankan President was forced to resign following the storming of his house and offices by protestors. There was some violence against property. The home of the caretaker prime minister (the previous PM was the president's older brother and a former president himself and was forced to resign in May 2022) was set on fire. However, considering the thousands who took part, there was relatively little violence from their side, although the UN accused the police of disproportionate use of tear gas and water cannons, and using live ammunition against protestors resulting in deaths. The protest was sparked by rampant food and fuel shortages and protestors highlighted the contrasting luxury lifestyle of the President by cooking curries in his kitchen, jumping into the outdoor pool, jogging in his private gym and lying down on beds and sofas. The president had fled the night before under military protection. He was a member of the Rajapaska political dynasty, and a former military man who was accused by protestors of corruption and economic mismanagement that led the nation to bankruptcy and economic collapse. Protests had been underway since March 2022; some two thirds of the country were struggling to feed themselves, with inflation at 54.6% by July (The Guardian 2022).

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's global tracker classified the protests into three different categories: economic, political and corruption. Protests such as the abortion ruling protests in the US in May 2022 and violence against women protests in the UK in March 2021 are placed under «political». Just on the basis of this data set, it is clear that protest can take place for a wide range of demands for change, ranging from the rights of women, to the anti-abortion «right to life», to complaints by right and left about electoral irregularities, to the broad impacts of economic hardship, to anti-corruption to defense of libertarian values (so-called anti-vaxers in the wealthier countries) and to anti authoritarianism. Does such a multiplicity of protests tell us anything about violence and attitudes towards violence?

A. Firstly, there is the issue of categorization. The three fields of economic, political and corruption do not distinguish «social protests» as a field. However, the latter might capture better the kinds of protests that are more concerned with intra-societal challenges than

directly with intervening in political debates *per se*. This raises the question of what is defined as «political»? On the one hand, all contentious issues in a society could be said to have a political content as they raise issues of state policy, government action and how societies decide on resolving the problems that divide them. On the other hand, there are certain constructions in our mind, that tend to place the violences that matter in the political realm, as previously discussed. However, if violence is understood as a phenomenon with its own distinctions but multiple expressions, then the violence that happens in the intimate sphere, for instance, or in the streets and the school playing ground, matters as much as any other. These violences are often considered «social». The impacts of such violences on other forms of violence have been noted in general and increasingly, they are being studied in detail. Bourgois and Scheper- Hughes (2004) discussed a «continuum» of violences. While this does not imply a linear process where violence in one sphere predicts the likelihood of violence in another, there is an increasing body of evidence on the complex but real ways in which childhood abuse and trauma can impact along with other factors on willingness to use violence in adolescence, notably amongst young men. The latter is a particularly vital field, given the statistics that highlight the high level of violence measured in homicides committed by young men on young men¹⁰ as well as the role of men in committing lethal and non-lethal violence in the intimate sphere.

The social protests that have highlighted gender-based violence, race based violence and violence against the LGBTI+ community have brought some of the violences associated with the social sphere into view. These protests have had two notable impacts. They have visibilized the violence that these groups endure, and on the other, they have generated awareness of how such violence becomes acceptable in different societal spheres. The first has a reactive character and the second, is more profilactic or preventive. Thus, these mobilizations contribute to installing the idea of a politics without violence in the contemporary conversation. They «desanction» violence or question its acceptance in any form. It is difficult to imagine that the issue of rape in war would have been acknowledged and eventually been considered an international crime, without the protests by feminists on a range of issues, of which domestic violence was a central one, and which enabled the mass rapes in Bosnia in the early 1990s to be visibilized

¹⁰ According to UNODC (2019) men and boys make up 80% of victims of intentional homicide worldwide and 90% of the suspects responsible. Men and boys ages 15-29 are at the highest risk of homicide globally.

and analysed. This resulted ultimately in the 2008 UN Security Council resolution which declared that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or constitutive acts with respect to genocide. This has not stopped Russian troops raping women in Ukraine in 2022, but it remains a vitally important advance in naming violences previously invisibilized in war situations, thus paving the way for de-sanctioning them.

Another contribution of protest has been to enhance understanding of the social impact of violences considered «political» but which have deep impacts on all social realms. This is particularly apparent in violences which are not lethal, or which in the case of disappearances probably are, but nobody is ever found. Latin American protest movements have played a particular role in taking to the streets to denounce violences from disappearances, internal displacement, sexual violence and other forms. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo risked much in Argentina in the 1970s when they protested the mass disappearances of a generation of young activists. It was from Mexico and Guatemala, that womens' movements named «feminicide» as a particular form of lethal violence where women are killed because they are women, and thus should not be included in the generic «homicide» statistics. These protest movements are critical peripheries not just under dictatorship but in countries like Mexico and Colombia, considered electoral democracies. The idea of a fixed boundary between the «social» and the «political» in the generation of violence is thus lifted through these movements.

B. A second set of issues in which protests connect with our understanding of violence, is in the violences which are recognized within the protests. There is not a very systematic analysis available of this. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2022) does offer a way of seeing which protests are violent, but does not as far as we could tell, indicate how it defines «violence». The World Protest Platform (2022) just lists «violence» under methods of protest. Protests become notoriously subject to selective denunciations of violence. Thus, with anti-government protests, voices for the status quo will often criminalise the protestors and accuse them of terrorism, vandalism and other violences. Detailing, differentiating and evidencing the violence emerging during protests remains an important task. Vandalism and looting is a separate category in the Platform list of methods. The list then offers a more complete registry of 15 expressions of harm/violence under the category «repression», including deaths, teargas, torture, missing persons, lawsuits and deportations. This more detailed approach to repressive state violence, arguably reflects an increasing

acknowledgement that state actors have overreacted with the use of violence when dealing with protest. Their violence has more often been «justified» in the past as a necessary response to «violent» protestors, whose actions are often highlighted as «violence» in the mainstream media. At the same time, there is a risk that protestor violence is not given the necessary attention, and distinctions are not made between opportunistic acts of looting, the role of agents-provocateurs, meaning generating acts of somatic harm (eg on the bodies of police officers) or emotional responses within crowds.

A serious discussion of the violences that are used by protestors and those that are avoided is rare. Randall Collins (2008, 2009) has done interesting work on the micro sociology of violence, emphasising the situationally specific nature of physical acts in crowds, for example. In particular he has studied the emotions of «fear, tension and forward panic» (Collins 2008) which emerge in certain physical encounters. As sensibility towards violence has grown, attempts have been made by protest organisers to ensure violence does not break out. And here the distinctions need to be made in terms of why, nevertheless, violence of different kinds can emerge in protest situations. Given protestors tend to have limited access to weapons, some of this might involve throwing stones and objects at the police, for instance. Acts of vandalism and looting can also break out, but how far this is integral to the protest or reflects actions by those taking advantage of chaotic situations, remains a topic for much more research. Situationally specific forms of violence enable us to understand violence better, and it is unlikely that protests will be free from all its expressions, given that they bring people together who are deeply emotionally caught up in a cause.

As discussed earlier in terms of the World Protest Platform (2022), there is now much more evidence of police violence than protestor violence. A more balanced analysis is needed of whether the violence in protests can teach us more about the specific conditions of its generation, is part of the communication repertoire of protestors or is fuelled by the violence of state actors defending prevailing structures and norms. Another category of protests where violence is more central to the action, is those which generate violence from their inception. These are however, often better described as «riots», such as the riot in Bradford, England of 2001. Even this began as a protest against a far-right group that had threatened to come to the city. Although the far-right were not allowed to march, young Pakistani youths, disaffected for various reasons of which denigration by the far right was one, ended up attending the protest. After seeing that individual members of the far right were in fact present in the city, they took on the police

from a vantage point where they picked up stones and bottles causing the injury of some 300 policemen (Bujra and Pearce 2011). This was labelled a riot in a legal sense: ie. involving 12 or more people who together threaten unlawful violence for a common purpose that causes others to fear for their personal safety. Classification as riot, resulted in prison sentences for a large number. Research showed in detail how the protest became a riot from which much learning could be drawn by groups across the city (including former rioters). This was used to prevent a provocation by the far right doing the same in 2011 (Bujra and Pearce 2011).

C. A third set of issues around protest and the journey towards a politics without violence, is whether the protest actually confronts/addresses problems which generate or reproduce violence. The themes which Press and Carothers (2022) draw out as characterising protests 2017 to 2021 (outlined above), serve as a contemporary reminder of how protests take on unfairnesses, injustices and abuse. This can come from conservative, libertarian, liberal and or socialist perspectives, and also from non-aligned social anger. Liberal systems tend to acknowledge that protest is to be respected as a right. However, this is often not a total tolerance by any means. In the UK, environmental protests known as Extinction Rebellion, have led the government to introduce in 2022, legislation to limit protests that cause «disruptions», including the right to ban «noisy» protests.

Many of the protests over the last 4 years and those in 2022, have tackled issues which directly or indirectly contribute to violence reproduction. Inequality is one of those. Climate change is also likely to impact on violence as some seek to defend their lives and property and have more access to the means to do so than others. Protests have also given voice to those limited in their capacity to participate politically, either directly by the nature of an authoritarian political system or indirectly due to hardship and exclusion. In this sense, it can be argued, protest is an important outlet for the expression of frustrations within political systems which offer few other routes than voting or in authoritarian systems, no routes at all. The question then brings us to the fourth set of issues, which is what kind of change is brought about by protests, in particular non-violent ones?

D. A respected, evidence-based literature has emerged to show that social change can be effectively engendered through non-violent resistance and civil action, even when it is transgressive and extra institutional. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) were pioneers in generating a data base and exploring empirical evidence which made the link between non-violence and enhanced participation for change.

Not using violence, they argued: «facilitates the active participation of many more people than violent campaigns, thereby broadening the base of resistance and raising the costs to opponents of maintaining the status quo» (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 10-11).

Other authors have sought to deepen understanding of what «constructive action» or «prefigurative action» means for activism ie.: «attempting to create in the here-and-now modes of life and relationships that are intended to be examples of how life might be organised, on a far-wider scale, sometime in the future» (Rigby 2022, 224). Avant *et al.* (2019) seek to distinguish between civil resistance as explicitly contentious action aiming at political change from «civil action» which «often dampens the potential for violence» (Avant *et al.* 2019, 15-16). The authors take a relational approach and multilevel analysis of effects that may indicate movement away from (or toward) social processes that are known to produce violence. Thus, the literature on civil resistance, constructive action and civic action has come to put violence and what factors contribute to its reduction within the movements and actions themselves, at the centre of the discussion. This brings the discussion on violence as a phenomenon and the discussion of how protest might contribute to a politics without violence together. Violence becomes not just an associated issue, relevant to but not central to the protest movements. It becomes a subject matter of the protests. This is either directly using protest to de-sanction an expression of violence by naming and visibilizing it (as with rape in war). Or indirectly, it is about how protests can put the relational issues which reproduce violence high on the agenda of the protest or civil action, alongside the particular grievances that led to the protest. Clearly not all protests have this logic. The final section looks at how far the Chilean and Colombian social outbursts (*estallidos sociales*) of 2019 and 2021 contributed to better understandings of violence at the same time as they impacted on the nature of politics in their respective countries.

2. The social outbursts in Chile and Colombia: from the barricades to the ballot box

How far did the Chile and Colombia social outbursts contribute to non-violent change and ultimately a politics without violence, and how far did they show the ongoing challenges to such a possibility?

It is difficult as well as tempting to establish a causal relationship between social and political phenomenon. Even more so when

it concerns violence. As Max Weber (2012) expressed it, violence presupposes a pact with the devil, in other words, that once unleashed, there is no way of going back to the original state. To use a simple metaphor, it's to let the snake out of the box and try to put it back again.

While the outcome of a spiral of violence may be unpredictable, it is not, however, always the central focus of protest, even though the media frequently –and consequently, the public– assign a protagonist¹¹ role to its most spectacular manifestations. Referring to the central issue of this paper, the crucial point is that the protests in Chile and Colombia transcended episodic violence and engendered important political changes: in the short term, in the case of Chile, the summoning of the Constitutional Convention; and in the medium term, in the case of Colombia, the election of the first left president (in 2022) in its republican history. That is, changes occurred despite violence that occurred during the protests¹². This is because in both cases, the protests were guided by a widely shared desire for social change and both Petro and the Constitutional Convention were interpreted by the citizens of both countries as the way to channel such demands. Notwithstanding historical and political contextual differences, both cases present coincidences and similarities that we will expand on in order to explore the relationship between protest and violence.

A first coincidence is related to the causes of the protests: the social explosion in Chile and the Colombian national strike occurred, incidentally, within the same timeframe –in October, 2019 in Chile and between April, 2019 and June, 2021 in Colombia. In both instances, a multiplicity of underlying causes had been forewarned: the depletion of the prevailing neoliberal political and economic model, delayed institutional reforms, a political class reluctant to self-transform, social

¹¹ Vandalism directed against Santiago Metro stations and against those of the *Transmilenio* in Bogotá were probably the most widely disseminated by national and international press.

¹² Violence occurring during the protests highlights several difficulties in determining scale, identifying responsible actors, and establishing levels of endogeneity and exogeneity. In the cases of Colombia and Chile, those responsible for the vandalism have not yet been judicially identified, and indeed, a significant number of accusations against police for acts of repression have seen little progress. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find consolidated data on overall damages caused by the protest in both countries and not only about episodes of police violence. Two several reports describe the human rights violations during both social outbursts: Report of the Mission to Chile 30 October-22 November 2019 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2019) and Observaciones y recomendaciones de la visita de trabajo de la CIDH a Colombia realizada del 8 al 10 de junio de 2021 (CIDH 2021).

movement activism among young people specifically, and social unrest, exacerbated in recent years due to the process of modernization in the Chilean case (Peña 2020) and the post-peace agreement in Colombia (Pécaut 2021).

Beyond conjunctural occurrences –the increased price of subway tickets in Chile and the announcement of a tax reform in Colombia in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic– there is no clear, single structural or historical cause that sparked protests throughout both countries. Hence, interpretations abound concerning the causes of what happened those days in Colombia (Grueso *et al.* 2022; Pécaut 2021; Quintana 2021; Garzón 2021, 2022a; Borda 2020), as well as in Chile (Araujo 2021; Vergara 2019; Placencia 2020; Bellolio 2020; Ruiz Encina 2020; Oporto 2021; Landaeta and Herrero 2022; AA.VV. 2021), warning that hindsight remains too limited to refine proposed explanations. For the moment, we are only interested in noting there are, broadly speaking, similarities between the triggering causes of the protests in both countries.

In any event, the Sebastián Piñera and Iván Duque governments, the political and business elites, and the public intellectuals were unable to adequately interpret the malaise, anger, and indignation manifested during the marches, sit-ins and *cacerolazos* (pot banging). Although reasons for what occurred during the Chilean October and the Colombian April outbursts could be traced back several years, almost everyone was surprised by the magnitude, duration and impact of the protests.

Even though we lack longitudinal distance to propose further explanations, we can suggest, nevertheless, that depletion, related to the macroeconomic and social policy model, resulted in citizen demands for greater material equality and for commitments from both governments to develop programs of educational, pension, political, social and police reforms. In Chile it was the Constitutional Convention, convened in 2020, which was charged with developing an institutional overlay to street demands, while in Colombia this role was expressed in the 2022 presidential elections, beyond annual skirmishes commemorating the national strike that exploded in April 2019.

A second coincidence is related to the balance of power. When the social outburst in Chile and the national strike in Colombia occurred, right-wing governments at the Executive level held power in both countries, concurrently with very significant citizen mobilizations –to a certain extent unprecedented. It is probable the ideological orientation of both governments explains police repression, widely documented and denounced by national and international human

rights organizations. Although not exclusive to right-wing governments, in both cases, repression resulting in loss of life was notable: 34 people in Chile (Gutiérrez 2021) and 80 in Colombia (Indepaz 2022).

Therefore, although different types of violent episodes were significant during the protests (vandalism, looting, police repression and irregular arrests), and it is not the purpose of this document to quantify nor to document their occurrence, what stands out is that mobilization in both countries covered a broad spectrum of citizens and assumed a historical dimension¹³. Thus, the magnitude, the geographical, intergenerational and social class breadth, as well as the duration, of forms of peaceful protest far exceeded recorded episodes of public and police violence.

In this regard, magnitude has to do with the number of people who demonstrated in both countries, and in the case of Colombia, with the way in which, in wealthy sectors of large cities, a significant number of citizens accompanied the protests with nocturnal pot-banging lasting several days, something unprecedented in the country's history. This is one factor from the Colombian and Chilean cases, which provides relevance to our question concerning the contribution of social protest to a politics without violence.

That said, it should be noted that reducing the geographic scope of the protests to a capital-city phenomena –that is, occurring only in Santiago and Bogotá– would be misleading, despite the fact that the largest and greatest number of mobilizations and the most spectacular events did take place in the two capitals. Intergenerational breadth has to do with the mobilization of a broad range of age groups, in both cases young people taking a leading role, especially university student organizations. Something similar happened with the multi-class character of the protests, occurring, as they did, in both popular and wealthy neighbourhoods of Colombian and Chilean cities.

Finally, the protests in both countries had an unusual duration. Not only did they last for several days and weekends, but undefined protest foci persisted for several months, accompanied by the resignification of public spaces such as the Plaza Baquedano or the Plaza Italia in Santiago (renamed Plaza Dignity), and the Monument to the Heroes and the Portal of the Americas in Bogotá (the latter renamed Portal Resistance).

¹³ On October 25th, 2019, a week after the initial social outburst, approximately 1.2 million people gathered peacefully in the Baquedano Plaza of Santiago, in what has been called «the largest march in Chile».

Therefore, all evidence would seem to indicate that it was precisely the magnitude, breadth and duration of the forms of protest, civil disobedience and mobilization, which changed the balance of power in favor of institutional reforms demanded by the protesters. In other words, it was not only looting, vandalism and monumental iconoclasm that provoked a starting point for institutionally –channeled social change in both countries. In fact, both in Chile –83.6% on October 24, 2019– (Activa Research 2019), and in Colombia –73.1% on April 26, 2021 (Datexco 2021)– surveys revealed the majority of citizens were in favour of the protests. This broad social support explains why the balance of power tilted in favor of the citizenry and against their respective governments as they pressured for social change, ultimately demonstrating the effect of the protests in contributing to a politics without violence, based on wider and deeper citizen participation.

Besides, this all happened in a political environment in which the governments of both Sebastián Piñera and Iván Duque –barring some exceptions such as the withdrawal of initiatives that unleashed public anger– were reluctant to undertake institutional reforms that would modify the status quo of high-affinity political sectors such as the pension funds (AFP) or the police forces. Hence, it is not merely coincidence that reforms, persistently demanded post mobilizations, sit-ins and *cacerolazos*, were directed mainly towards private pension funds, the riot battalion of the Police in Colombia and the Carabineros in Chile, as well as changes in health and education systems (La Propuesta de Chile 2020).

Notwithstanding, for the purpose of this article, the main coincidence is that in both countries the protests had profound institutional effects: for example, in Chile, the plebiscite to approve a new Constitution on October 25, 2020 –called the «entry plebiscite»–, as well as gender election parity among 154 Convention members on May 14 and 15, 2021. And in Colombia, the election on March 13, 2022 of the Historical Pact as the first left-wing caucus in the Congress of the Republic and on June 19, 2022 of the first left government in its republican history with Gustavo Petro.

This similarity, however, requires precision: initially, the Colombian national strike did not produce significant institutional effects, since it did not generate any important political or social reform¹⁴. Accordingly, the

¹⁴ The social assistance policy of the second phase of the Sebastian Piñera government and the free university, technical and technological education policy for students in strata 1, 2, and 3, announced in 2021 by the Iván Duque government, could be seen as two exceptions to this statement.

acts of violence in the protests –such as vandalism, looting and different forms of aggression against police– paradoxically brought about a kind of radicalization of the status quo, as well as a hardening of sectors critical of the Iván Duque government and of its supporters (Garzón 2021), who saw in the protests a reason for dismissing citizen demands. However, a study from June, 2022 (*Cifras & Conceptos* and the Institute of Political Studies and International Relations-IEPRI of the National University of Colombia, 2022) concluded that 54% of those surveyed recognized that the national strike significantly or somewhat influenced their vote during the first round of presidential elections held on May 29th. Therefore, the changes promoted by the protests in Colombia and specifically the triumph of Gustavo Petro, must be interpreted as a transition from the street to the ballot box (Garzón 2022a; 2022b).

In conclusion, the political and institutional effects of protests are difficult to predict and we lack reliable parameters to define their influence in shaping a politics without violence. But unquestionably, social protest can generate institutional processes for reforming the social contract, assigning to them a significant political role, as witnessed in the convening of a constitutional convention or an unprecedented electoral about-turn.

At the same time, social protest, especially when penetrated by episodes of violence, can leave behind a burden of illegitimacy, which translates to criticism of the way changes are implemented or interpreted as an epic of the barricades that attempts to convert the acts of street violence –such as vandalism, looting and different forms of aggression against police– into a sort of re-foundational political mandate, irrespective of the violent responses of the police. The former has been seen in allusions to the barbaric origin of the Constitutional Convention in Chile (Torres 2022) and in criticism received by Colombian political leaders who openly supported the youth of the First Line (*Primera Línea*, as the protest organisers were called) to cite just two examples.

But in both Chile and Colombia, it can be affirmed there is a notable correlation between the social protests and the subsequent political changes, which were developed within existing institutional channels. Although, as we warned, establishing a causal relationship can be very risky, not only because of the nature of the protests but also because of the still incipient nature of the social changes, given these remain ongoing processes. However, it is possible to suggest a correlation between the social protests and the 2022-2026 Congressional elections and the election of Gustavo Petro in 2022 in Colombia, as well as between the social eruption and approval of the

call for a new political Constitution and the subsequent election of the Constitutional Convention in 2021 in Chile.

For these reasons, the Chilean social outburst and the Colombian national strike are political events that contributed to delineating a politics without violence or specifically in these cases, a politics that finds intermediation channels between the demands of the street and the institutional mechanisms for processing social change.

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