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Abstract

Drawing on sociological theories, this paper proposes to analyse the Chilean university movement as an agentic field that has been articulated in opposition to the neoliberal structures that were imposed by the Pinochet regime and reinforced by subsequent democratic governments. Particularly, it examines the interaction between students as agents and neoliberal structures that have naturalised a discourse that has promote the privatization and commercialization of the system jointly with the idea of rational individual choice in a free market. Students have led a resistance movement since 2011 aiming to transform the relationships between the state, the market, and the higher education system. Currently, there is a wide reform process in the higher education system which demonstrates that the Chilean student movement has legitimacy in the political landscape and that it is possible to defy what has been taken for granted for decades and create spaces for social change.

Paper

Chile is currently undergoing a substantial process of higher education reform. When Ms. Bachelet was a presidential candidate in 2013, she committed, if elected, to a policy of equal opportunities in accessing quality higher education independently of social class. Since winning the election, the government has indeed been developing a reform project that includes several dimensions such as governance, quality, access, and financing, among others.

I briefly describe the main milestones that produced a series of protests in the winter of 2011. When looking back, roughly three important moments in the history of the higher education system in Chile can be distinguished:

- 1) A period prior to the Pinochet dictatorship in which, basically, both state and private universities were treated by the state in similar ways in terms of financing. There were few universities and they had very similar missions and enrolled few students (around 100,000).
- 2) The dictatorship period and the change in the constitution in 1980 that allowed the creation of private universities. During this period, there was a disarticulation of the main university of Chile – the University of Chile – and a military intervention in several universities, all of which were considered a threat to the stability of the Pinochet regime. During this time, state financing to universities decreased in a dramatic way.
- 3) A post-dictatorship period, characterized by an increase in the number of new private universities (more than 30) and professional institutes, and also in the access to higher education. Because most of these new private universities are non-selective universities, the academic criterion to enroll such a university was not important but what was important was the students' capacity to pay. A system of loans offered by

private banks to students was created with a high interest rate. The latter gave rise to a stratified system with selective and prestigious traditional universities on the top and mass and non-selective universities below. Although in 2006 a system to certify the quality of higher education was created, this system has been in crisis since 2011 after it was discovered that some new private universities paid for their quality certification. Additionally, it was seen that several non-selective private universities were making profit although profit is banned by law.

These series of events triggered the anger of students who organized massive and continuous protests in 2011 and that were supported by the wider society. The latter destabilized the right-oriented president's Piñera government and created a space for a negotiation between the students and the left-oriented candidate for the presidential elections, Ms. Michelle Bachelet.

In analyzing the political landscape of Chile and the configuration of the higher education system, it is possible to give an account of some key elements that show the neoliberalization of the system. The implementation of policies allowed the empowerment and growth of the private sector, and a reduced role for the state, two main features of neoliberal economic policies (Peters, 2011). These policies were implemented by force by the Pinochet regime and reinforced by subsequent democratic governments in Chile. As a consequence, a whole milieu based on a neoliberal ideology was promoted and, over the years, legitimized and naturalized in the society. In this context, a prevalent idea in the country is that public services are considered to be of low quality while private services are valued since they offer a range of opportunities that allow a rational choice (especially in health and education) on the part of citizens (Popkewitz, 1999).

The rise of the Chilean university student movement has given space to its conceptualization and theorizations around the impact it might have on the political landscape. The Chilean student movement has been pursuing what it considers to be desirable outcomes, namely, a changed relationship between the state, the higher education system and the market. Students have been able to articulate a movement of resistance not only by protesting in the street but also by creating new political and intellectual devices, and using technologies (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013) to promote a new discourse about the need for a quality education for everybody. The latter has generated both a public problematization of the current policies and a set of proposed new policies intended to change the state of society that are already bearing fruit.

I propose to analyze the Chilean student movement as an agentic field in which new spaces of interaction between neoliberal structures and agents have emerged (Guzmán-Valenzuela, forthcoming). According to Bourdieu (1993), a field is a social configuration with its own rules, symbolic representations and principles in which agents occupy certain social positions. These positions are a consequence of a complex interaction between the rules of the field and agents' capital (financial, social and cultural) and their habitus. According to Bourdieu, fields compete among each other to promote their interests and are hierarchically

configured in terms of power and class; moreover, fields might themselves be internally differentiated. The Chilean student movement is an agentic field with its own configuration and acts against other agents (political or financial groups, for example). This agentic field has been producing symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998) through the promotion of practices, values and ideas in which they have invested time, effort and energy and which have been recognized and supported by the broader society. Students, just like other agents who have been historically close to the government, are pushing to change the history of a country and oppose the global tendencies of marketization of the higher education system. As a consequence, the university student movement has left both a political and a social mark on the Chilean landscape.

Although currently the movement has lost force and it has worn thin through the years, it is still alive and aware of the current reforms that the government is implementing in the higher education system and with which the students do not agree. So students continue to try to transform the Chilean society and to defy the commercialization of education.

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