Complete Interview
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Institute of Development Policy – University of Antwerp

1. Which/what do you think are the underlying causes of these global phenomenon of social unrest?

If you allow me, I do not think that exist just one cause, or even a few ones. Rather, I would like to argue that it is necessary to define what the focus of a social research would be. In other words, we need to establish where we would be placed as social researchers. For this purpose, in my view, there are, at least, two axes to classify social problems: the micro/macro axis, which also refers to the classical distinction between structure and agency; and the short-/long-term axis, which refers to the historical extension of a phenomenon and, above all, its causes.

Having regard to the above, I believe that the vast majority of studies on social unrest are placed in a hypothetical quadrant where the 'micro-agency end' is intersected by the 'short-term end'. For instance, if we observe one of the most studied causes of social unrest, namely 'political disaffection', it is possible to identify a micro-agency and short-term approach.

Roughly speaking, I distinguish two main elements in this regard: citizens and polity. Both are therefore interrelated in several 'institutional' scopes, such as political participation through elections, i.e. in every process of representative democracy. The problem then emerges when such processes and institutions are no longer sufficient to meet social demands. In 2015, the UNDP, in its Human Development Report for Chile, has likewise posed the problem in these same terms. In fact, they wonder how the State "can process" social demands. The shortcoming of UNDP's research question is furthermore that tries to 'forcibly' put agency inside the institutional scope, what I believe is a kind of 'analytic realism'. Stated in another way, they do not consider the possibility that institutions are modified by social interactions, but mainly by improving their performance, although the research problem is precisely otherwise. Sure enough, social movements —albeit not necessarily political organizations that emerge from such movements— want to expand the boundaries of what is possible, outside institutional rigidity. In my opinion, social research should precisely address such a social change, provide explanations of this institutional helplessness and not force the understanding of social movements into near-obsolete institutional arrangements.

Anyways, in order to understand social unrest —or any other!— it appears necessary to also take other explanatory variables into account, which are not only placed in the micro-agency end nor in the short-term end. It seems to be a straightjacket more than a fertile ground for social research. For this reason, and to come back to the abovementioned axes, let me make two points:

Firstly, it is quite blinkered to tackle the study of social movements and social unrest only from an agency approach, as well as it would be from a purely structural one. In

this regard, a more eclectic approach that integrates structure and agency —I am specially thinking on the work of William H. Sewell—, and focuses on the interrelation between both elements —states, markets or beliefs systems, and actors or social groups— would be more suitable for assessing complex social problems. Likewise, both structure and agency should be considered as dynamic elements that provoke several social changes.

Secondly, even though by observing short-term causes can be a useful research strategy, it does not permit us to have a big picture of the whole 'causal context'. Due to the fact that many causes are placed deeper in the past, if we only analyze short-term causes, it would lead us to even a misleading understanding regarding social unrest or any other social phenomenon.

So, I wonder what causes there are in a more distant past and beyond the realm of agency. I distinguish two elements at least: 'political culture' and 'colonial domination'. In order to answer your question, I would like to concentrate on just the latter.

The famous theory of James Mahoney regarding the impact of Colonialism on postcolonial development in America sheds lights on the origin of a common cause of current social unrest. But the connection between Colonialism and social unrest is obviously indirect and requires presenting a minimal causal chain. In a very simplified manner, the type of Colonialism, more liberal o more mercantilist, along with the peripheral or central character within colonial world, can affect postcolonial development. As a result, Mahoney posits that where postcolonial development has been at its worst in ancient mercantilist Iberian America, especially in those imperial centers; unlike British colonies. Then, underdevelopment leads to lack of well-being and social inequality, which can in turn lead to social unrest. This would be a 'structural explanation'. But, you can now ask me, what triggers social unrest? My answer is: that is where short-term and agency causes comes into play.

At this point, I would only like to emphasize that, sometimes, underlying explanations are placed deeper in the past and not at the level of individuals or social groups. Even though this kind of causes does not necessarily determine the behavior of individuals, these can frame the range of what is possible for political actions. Likewise, political actions tend to change those structural boundaries as well. As conclusion, I believe that common causes of social unrest —such as political disaffection that, in abstract terms, is simply a kind of political behavior— are generally framed and interrelated with other underlying factors, which are not often close in time and scale.

2. If you could compare, which are the particularities of the case of the Latin America region and which do you think are the common factors among them?

The particularities of the Latin American cases could be precisely in those dimensions that mainstream scholarly literature does not usually pay attention. As I said before, several scholars focus on recent or short-term causes, but that is only a part of the big picture, though an important one. Even though many of problems related to political disaffection can be triggers of social unrest, as well as several social inequalities, there are also some characteristics of Latin American societies that should be considered in

this regard. In fact, some scholars have asserted that exist a dual and contradictory 'political culture' in Latin America, which has been built during colonial times.

In this sense, there is a tendency towards rebellions or resistance to authority —also known as 'Machiavelism' or simply *caudillaje*— that is opposed to the authoritarian and monistic tradition inherited from Iberian invaders. In my view, both contradictory dimensions were created during colonial times and sedimented in what Alfred Schütz defined as 'life-world', i.e. in our beliefs systems or culture. The same scholars have also argued that, during the history after Independency, Latin America has been fragmented by competing political projects, which are Machiavellian movements of disorder and rebellion at the beginning of their political life, but they commonly change, imposing authoritarian forms of government —even under "democratic" contexts!, something that is quite usual in our countries— once they come to power.

Nevertheless, this singular cultural context by itself does not explain social unrest in Latin America neither several social gaps, so that further refinement of this argument is required. To do this, we need to look at the past.

In this regard, certain authors have pointed out that the reception of liberal and positivist ideas was very singular in our continent, because these ideas clashed against abovementioned cultural patters. Notwithstanding this clash, liberalism and positivism were finally adapted to the colonial way of being. For these reasons, despite the fact that new republics were conceived liberal, these were indeed strongly authoritarian and centralized, pursuing order instead of democracy in a very contentious context. With the arrival of positivism during the second half of the 19th Century, the authoritarian pattern was heightened, pursuing an order that Liberals did not achieve. Therefore, both liberalism and positivism then sustained the colonial oligarchic hegemony, which led to build 'censitary democracies', as well as strongly unequal societies.

Then, I believe that one of the most striking singular factors of Latin American social unrest is our own culture. Such a culture has shaped democratic projects, from Independence onwards, by becoming more authoritarian and unequal. In this way, I assert that culture has an important —albeit not direct— impact on current inequalities and on several constraints and shortcomings of our democracies.

In short, a bigger picture can be distinguished more clearly. Colonial culture, as well as Colonialism in general, has an impact on several kinds of inequalities of Latin America, leaving many people unsatisfied without any possibility to access the well-being, even nowadays. A chronic institutional helplessness along with political elites with a low 'governance ability' completes a 'perfect storm'. All of this leads Latin America to volatile social situations, i.e. the part of the historical cycle that corresponds to *caudillaje* or Machiavellism. Nevertheless, we all nurture hope in the expectation of major social changes, because it remains to be seen if these revolts could mean a vanishing point of the cycle Machiavelism-Authoritarianism.

Due to the above, I would simply like to stress that a complete perspective of social unrest is more complex than mainstream scholarly literature thinks that it is. Recent social problems —more surface structural changes or conditions— along with several challenging social groups —the 'agency'— are unfolded under a particular type of social structures, not only political or economic ones, but also 'deeper cultural

structures' that are more silent and less visible. And this kind of causes is a long-term one, which allows us to observe a bigger picture of the problem.

3. What are your thought and considerations on the mass mobilization effects? Do you think there is any collective agency potential on them to achieve significant changes? (e.g. social, economic, cultural, environmental even psychological)

It is really hard to predict effects of a developing phenomenon. I indeed think that social sciences in general do not have essential methodological elements to conduct this type of research. Instead, I believe that an alternative thinking to assess this phenomenon is in a more encompassing fashion, i.e. from a more macro perspective. In my opinion, this particular event, namely the rising social unrest of recent months, is also part of a 'larger process' —to paraphrase Charles Tilly— that runs against the neoliberal wave.

For instance, this neoliberal wave has been characterized by the 'New Public Management' in the field of state administration, which has been established in several countries, and of course in a great part of Latin America from seventies onwards. In recent decades, however, this tendency has been reverted in some state administrations of European countries. Nonetheless, except for a few countries, in Latin American it has firmly preserved by even 'self-proclaimed progressive' governments.

In concrete terms, it has involved social cutbacks, reductions of social rights, the implementation of cash transfers programs, and so forth. On the other sidewalk, we know that discourses of social movements go against this kind of neoliberal state organization that has favored macroeconomic stability instead of social welfare, what have defined as a kind of 'productivist' (non-)welfare states by some scholars. For this reason, I maintain that demonstrating movements are precisely claiming the dismantling of this kind of state organization. To put in another way: to expand the boundaries outside neoliberal-institutional constraints.

4. How do you think that the coronavirus crisis affects these phenomena of social unrest in LA/Asia/Africa? What new scenarios or social processes may result from this pandemic?

It is clear that the way in which people interacts is changing. But, as Simmel would say, it is a change in 'the form' of social ties, although this 'formal change' is neither new nor rare. In this regard, by observing these first weeks of lockdown, I see an acceleration of several social practices that, previous to coronavirus outbreak, were more emerging. As a matter of fact, notwithstanding new communication technologies are utilized more intensively, greater use of it is nothing new. Rather, I have a main concern regarding privacy. In fact, a major risk is the existence of several video conferencing platforms that channeled human interactions. Specifically, I mean those that correspond to 'closed source' software, which can transfer personal information to governments, such as Zoom or Teams; unlike Jitsi or others that are 'open source'.

Additionally, I do not observe a 'content change' of such demands. At least in the case of Chile, pro-business government actions during coronavirus pandemic have only intensified the 'social ebullition'. Moreover, from a non-systematic ethnographic view, I have witnessed that social distance measures have accentuated the ability to organize and to prepare a second wave of protest in Chile. This preparatory stage may extend till a vaccine will be create or 'partial lockdown' implemented in Chile will be lifted. If I may make a political consideration: the obvious respond will be more repression, we know about the lack of ideas of current Chilean government.

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