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Student movements in the age of austerity. The cases of Chile and England

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ABSTRACT

Several recent episodes of massive student protests in countries in Europe, Latin America, and Africa, raise the question of whether we are witnessing to a new surge of student protests. This profile offers an interpretation of the socio-economic and political processes that have caused contentious reactions among students, paying special attention to changes in the major characteristics of the higher education sector. In last decades, governments of all colors have enacted laws promoting the outsourcing of personnel, the managerialization of governing bodies, and the introduction of tuition fees as well as cuts to public funding. These changes are inspired by a new paradigm, which promotes the 'discipline of the market place, the power of the consumer and the engine of the competition.' In this context, various forms of resistance and opposition can be observed. Here, we focus on three dimensions: (1) financing and autonomy of universities; (2) governance and managerialization; (3) precarization of labor conditions. The profile shows how recent protests in Chile and England are related to changes in the aforementioned dimensions. We conclude that the reappearance of students as political actors is related to the emergence of a range of distributional conflicts stemming from the implementation of the neoliberal agenda in the field of higher education.

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1. A global neoliberal turn in higher education

We have recently witnessed the reemergence of massive student protests opposing the process of privatization of higher education (hereafter, HE), demanding equal conditions of access and greater state involvement. Most of these protests have centered on the growing costs of post-secondary education for students and their families, which is related to the general shift from a state financing system to a system centered on individual student responsibility. The assumption is now that, given that education credentials increase individual incomes, HE should be treated as a consumer good. More broadly, this trend has been identified with a process of marketization of HE. Marketization has been characterized by one or more of the following measures: (1) introduction of a greater competition into the provision of student education; (2) supplementation of public sources of funding of universities with private sources, especially tuition fees, and (3) concession of greater institutional autonomy from government steering (Klemenčič, 2014).

The outburst of the economic crisis in 2008 has represented a decisive watershed in the process of marketization, to the extent that many governments across the world have adopted one or more of these measures as a way out of the crisis by pursuing the dominant political creed of the neoliberal and pro-austerity agenda. Austerity measures, following the crisis, have in fact accelerated the implementation of neoliberal reforms in countries where they previously did not exist. Although differences between countries continue to be pronounced, national HE systems are becoming more alike in the sense of being more market-oriented, even in countries with a strong welfare tradition. Fighting back against these processes, student protests arose in several countries across the five continents ranging from South Korea and India in Asia, Chile and Mexico in South America, Canada and US in North America, to South Africa and Nigeria in Africa, and Italy, UK, and Germany in Europe (Brooks, 2016; Klemenčič, 2014). Thus, recent years have witnessed the rise and proliferation of student mobilizations as a collective response to the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and its political solutions, also in the field of higher education.

By contrast to the dominant research trend in social movement studies of devoting little attention to the political economy of contemporary societies (della Porta, 2015), we contend that a model of explanation embracing and assessing the effects of political-economic changes is useful to better understand the rise, variety, and decline of these mobilizations. To do so, we argue that the analysis of the political economy of HE and of its recent transformations is a key point of departure. More notably, we focus on three political-economic dimensions of HE whose changes have triggered collective responses at various levels, intensities and scales: (1) financing and autonomy of universities; (2) governance and managerialization; (3) precarization of labor conditions. In this profile, we aim to show how and to what extent the recent wave of student protests has been set in motion by market-oriented changes in these dimensions. By providing examples of these changes from the cases of England and Chile, we suggest that the reappearance of students as political actors is related to the emergence of a range of distributional conflicts stemming from the implementation of the neoliberal agenda in the field of higher education. In this respect, the explanations of the proliferation of recent student protests differs from the interpretations of the 1968 wave, which emphasized the emergence of cultural and post-materialistic grievances as major causes of mobilization (Rootes, 2013).

2. Neoliberalization of the English HE system

England was the first European country beginning a radical process of privatization of the public sector in the early 1980s (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2016; Shattock, 2012). This shift started with the Conservative government of Mrs Thatcher. This government implemented a neoliberal agenda of reforms in the field of higher education, on which also the New Labor governments of the 1990s and 2000s based on their policy orientation. More specifically, the British governments have achieved three aspects of the neoliberal agenda in this field over the course of the last three decades: the privatization of the channels of public funding, the implementation of managerial principles into the system of university governance, and the precarization of the academic workforce (McGettigan, 2013). In essence, the combination of these three aspects are the hallmark of the neoliberal university in English HE. As for the dismantling of public funding, the main intervention of the British governments was the introduction of a regime based on student fees: in the course of only 12 years (1998–2010), higher education passed from being freely provided to becoming a service charged up to £9000 per year.

The second element characterizing the neoliberal agenda for HE carried out by the British governments was the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) principles into the logic of university governance, with the aim of instilling greater competitiveness and accountability within and among the universities. More notably, the institution of evaluation criteria over research (i.e. the Research Assessment Exercise) and teaching (i.e. Teaching Quality Assessment), alongside the establishment of greater financial accountability for each single institution, have progressively transformed English universities into corporation-like institutions, where a professional cadre of top-level administrators

plays a crucial decisional and managerial role. The management of English universities has thus become a professional career since the 1980s: university leaders are today career managers, whose professional goal is to make their institutions highly competitive within the market of higher education (Cini, 2016). In short, the introduction of NPM principles has contributed to making the field of higher education a neoliberal environment dominated by market forces (McGettigan, 2013).

The last political-economic dimension of the English HE, which has undergone a significant change over the last three decades, is the labor conditions of the academic staff. Strictly connected with the transformations occurred in the other two dimensions, we have witnessed to a steady increase of temporary jobs among the academics, especially in the junior ranks: an increasing number of teaching and research positions have become casualized, that is, consisting of short-term contracts (Martell, 2013). Austerity policies in HE public have forced English universities to build up budget surpluses by suppressing pay and salaries of their staff. University leaders and managers tend to minimize the costs of academic production and maximize the profit of all the academic activities. Employing cheap workforce, such as post-docs, teaching assistants, teaching fellows, and PhD students, in more teaching and research positions is becoming their main policy of academic recruitment.

3. Restructuring the Chilean HE system

The main characteristics of the HE system in Chile stem from two major reforms implemented during Pinochet's dictatorship: the 1981 General Law of Universities and the 1989 Constitutional Law of Teaching (LOCE). The first instituted the principle of universities' self-funding, which forced them to impose tuition fees, and allowed private providers of HE. The regional seats of the two state universities were transformed in 14 small independent universities, in an attempt to combat the strong politicization of campuses. Each public university was given new charters by which they were granted greater autonomy, although their governance remained highly hierarchized and concentrated in the hands of non-elected principals and board of directors. Moreover, academic personnel was no longer given the status of public employees, therefore, universities gained latitude to establish their own policies of remunerations. The second reform established minimum standards for education providers to operate in the system, and delegated in a special agency (Consejo Superior de Educación) the accreditation of new institutions. LOCE sanctioned that all universities must be non-for-profit institutions – unlike other tertiary institutions (professional institutes, IPs and centers of technical formation, CFTs), which were not subjected to the same obligation.

These reforms were radical and effective. In 1990, just one year after the end of Pinochet's regime, enrollment in public institutions already represented only 29% of total enrollment in tertiary institutions (which represented half of those registered in universities). From a number of eight universities (two state owned and six private with access to public funding) existing before 1981, there are now 303 institutions, including 40 private universities, with only 22 universities receiving public funding. The newly elected democratic government recognized the chief role of academic freedom, and the presence of the private sector as structural features of the HE system, while the basic structure remained untouched, i.e. self-financing, subsidiarity, and family's expenditures as the main sources of income of HE institutions.

In the late 1990s, the government introduced new sources of financing both for the pre-1981 universities, (also called 'traditional' universities). These funds (MECESUP, FDI) are governed by a logic of performance-based budgeting, which represents a departure from historical criteria that favored state owned universities. Under President Pinera's administration (2010–2014), the government promoted increments in the participation of private universities, which reached up to 50% of the MECESUP funds by the end of his term.

In 2005, aiming at extending public loans to students enrolled in private institutions, the first Bachelet government created the state-guaranteed loan program (CAE). This scheme works under the assumption that the state lacked resources to subsidize these loans, so the government created a

public policy that could effectively attract the private banks. To dispel the risk of non-repayment, a double guarantor system with the state as final underwriter was instituted. The interest rate was set at an average 5.8%.

CAE spread very rapidly, and already in 2010, it was the state program with the largest number of beneficiaries (216,126 students) and the highest amount of public resources (55.4% of the total financial aid for students). By contrast, the University Credit Solidarity Fund (for students enrolled in traditional pre-1981 universities) amounted only to 14.3% of the total financial aid. In practice, CAE has implied a large transference of resources from the state to private universities and banks over the last decade. The scheme has favored many universities suspected of using illegal mechanisms to make profits, which is not allowed under current laws (Kremmerman & Paez, 2016; World Bank, 2011). Moreover, CAE's expansion has further damaged enrollment in public universities at the expense of private institutions. Between 2005 and 2015 enrollment in public universities fell from 26% to 15% of total enrollment, with private universities growing from 74% to 85% over the same period. CAE is the fastest growing aid program over the last years (CENDA, 2016). A recent study that compared HE indicators in 50 advanced and emerging economies found that Chile is the country with the second highest total expenditure in HE but one of the lowest level of government expenditure (Williams, Leahy, de Rassenfosse, & Jensen, 2016).

4. Contestations and movements

The neoliberal transformations in the English HE along the three above-mentioned dimensions have not met significant opposition or resistance from the actors involved, namely students and academic staff, until very recently (Aitchison, 2011). As in the case of other European countries, the thrust to widespread social mobilizations has come from the implementation of austerity measures following the economic crisis of 2008. In England, the *casus belli* was the announcement by the Business Secretary, the Liberal Democrat Vince Cable, of a law providing for the possibility for individual universities to triple their tuition fees on 15 October 2010. Following that announcement, protests spread throughout England. More specifically, from November 2010, a wave of mobilizations, consisting of assemblies, public rallies and marches on campus, took place in many universities across the UK, and especially in the 19 colleges forming the University of London (UL). The target of these protests was not only the government, which was considered mainly responsible for the increase in tuition fees, but also the managerial leadership of the universities, which strongly supported such a measure since it would increase both its financial and institutional powers. Starting as a national movement against the tripling of tuition fees, student campaigns were formed between 2011 and 2012 in several English universities to locally oppose the implementation of this legislation as well as block any other measures supporting the adoption of a neoliberal agenda. These measures included the outsourcing of non-academic staff, the casualization of teaching and research assistants, and the diversification of the sources of institutional financing (Cini, 2016).

The student movement of 2010 constituted a watershed for the university struggles against the process of marketization of the English HE. Thanks to that movement, several mobilizations involving other university actors spread out locally. One of these struggles of which the student movement of 2010 represented a sort of 'spin-off' mobilization was the protest campaign for a fair pay among the temporary academic staff. Between the late 2013 and early 2014, several campaigns for a fair pay, initially promoted by small groups of activists and then relatively massively participated by the rest of the temporary academic staff, started to spread in several English universities. The demands put forward by these workers were: (a) payment for all hours worked; (b) no work without contract; (c) transparency (contracts should specify all tasks required to teach a class); (d) standardization (each worker should be employed with one contract at the same grade for all the classes taught).

In Chile, college students usually stage protests of various intensities at the beginning of every academic year (between April–June), for motives that include hikes in tuition fees (which are determined by the universities), coverage and amounts of loans and scholarships, and the assessment and

payment of various student aid schemes (some funded by universities themselves) including food and transport allowances. But the events of 2011 can be well described as unique given their length and dimensions, as no previous student mobilization involved so many students engaged in a lengthy campaign of nearly eight months, using such a diversity of means to convey their dissatisfaction and hopes of change. Furthermore, the 2011 revolt is unparalleled given its impacts on national politics, which include the discharge of two education ministers, the fall in popularity of Mr Pinera's administration, and the emergence of student unions as key actors of national relevance. This latter point has become particularly apparent in the subsequent debates around education issues, especially in the context of the 2013 elections and the reformist aspirations of Ms Bachelet second term (currently in office) (Bellei, Cabalin, & Orellana, 2014; Guzman-Concha, 2012).

Similarly to England, academic personnel in Chile started to organize themselves and protest only recently, in the context of the overarching education reform initiated by Ms Bachelet government. The expansion of competitive grant funds for research through the state agency CONICYT – open to all kind of universities – in recent years have come with the growth of research assistant, technical support and lab managers positions hired under service contracts that lack social protection and other requirements. Moreover, there has been a proliferation of temporary contracts for postdoctoral researchers, and the generalization of so-called 'taxi lecturers,' i.e. lecturers that teach in several schools (even in different cities). Many private universities do not possess permanent academic staff and rely on these kinds of contracts to cover their teaching needs. Although these issues are not part of the ongoing education reform, these groups and their demands have acquired more visibility in recent years.

5. Conclusions

Chile and the United Kingdom are two paradigmatic cases of early adoption of neoliberalism, with policies of deregulation, privatization, and commodification of areas previously protected being implemented in very radical manners. By introducing tuition and allowing private providers, a market of HE was rapidly established in the 1980s in Chile, while subsequent decades witnessed the shrinking of enrollment in public universities and the development of loan schemes that have greatly favored private schools and the banking sector. In England, the cost of tuition has been growing over last decades, with universities suffering budget cuts that date back to the 1980s. Moreover, measures of managerialization and performance assessment are being applied since then. In both countries, decisive policy changes that advanced HE liberalization occurred under center-left or progressive governments – although protests have been more intense under center-right or conservative governments. In both countries, hikes in tuition fees and problems of coverage of public schemes of loans and scholarships have been triggers of significant opposition from students. The tuition fees problem, and more generally the cost of HE, must be seen as a distributional issue as it refers to the question of who pays: society at large or individuals benefiting from these credentials. This is a crucial normative issue that is often sidelined by policy-makers and politicians. Moreover, in a global context where research and teaching become more scrutinized as sources of institutional competitiveness, the emergence of a two-tier system – precarious positions on one side, tenured positions on the other side – has found hostility especially from early career academic workers. Therefore, struggles in both countries represent a clear case of contestation to the neoliberalization of the academia.

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