(IM)POSSIBLE IDENTITIES IN THE MOVEMENT FOR CHILEAN EDUCATION: POSITIONS AND ANTAGONISMS IN ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

In Chile, in 2011–2012, a national social movement developed. It sought to criticize the commodification of education and promote structural modifications to the capitalist-neoliberal model that nourished it. As university teachers and students, the authors of this article supported this movement. This social antagonism put us in a problematic subject position, between the ideals of vindication and revolution of the movement and the managerial logics of academia. For teachers, openly joining the demonstrations would mean biting the hand that was feeding us. It is this (im)possibility of participation and the subjective tensions it implied that we want to narrate and analyze in this work.

INTRODUCTION

During the years 2011 and 2012, Chile became the home of a national movement—mainly among students. This movement sought both to show discomfort

with the managerial logic that shapes higher education policies and to propose structural transformations to the capitalist-neoliberal model that serves as its context. The movement was in complete opposition to the history of reforms and political milestones that have brought about the implementation of numerous control mechanisms within Chilean society, specifically in education. Two acts have framed this horizon and, as a result, have changed the way of teaching in Chile. The Subsidies Act (1980) made it possible, in the beginning, for education to be privatized, while the Organic Constitutional Act on Education (1990) pushed the state from being a patron of education to being in a minimal position with regard to education (Assal et al., 2011; Insunza, 2009).

Many types of demonstrations were developed during this movement (strikes, marches, occupations, hunger strikes, pot-banging protests, and others), which strengthened the movement in a situation of growing violence and police oppression. The Great Social Agreement on Education was created with the initial participation of the Chilean University Students Confederation (CONFECH), the National Coordinator of Secondary Students (CONES), and the Teachers' Association; these were later joined by trade unions and citizens' associations in the construction of the Education Front. Its objective involved generating proposals that were different from those of the government and would make it possible to move on to a comprehensive reform of Chilean education. The social movement for education is seen as one of the biggest demonstrations of opposition since the return to democracy in 1990.

As university teachers and students during 2011, the authors of this article were (not) part of this movement. In particular, one of us was working as a "teacher per hour" (teachers per hour are subcontracted employees in higher education who offer services only in teaching; this situation affects approximately 70% of the country's academics) in one of the schools that actively (and radically) participated in the movement, while the remaining three of us were still students working as teaching assistants (TAs). It is the peculiarity of our educational/professional positions as fragile, precarious articulations produced and reproduced by managerial education that compels us to elaborate on the reflections presented here. The social movement of 2011-?2012 boosted the demands for free education, while criticizing the idea of profit, for it limits educational practice and transforms students into debtors. Teachers are forced to produce and deliver content and to account for their work, which commodifies their role—upon their productivity educational institutions build their competitiveness (Willmott, 1995). The social movement put academic workers in a problematic situation, on a knife edge or in a quandary between upholding ideals and upholding the neoliberal logics of academia. To overtly become part of the protests meant to bite the hand that was feeding us. It is that (im)possibility of taking part and the subjective tensions it implied that we want to analyze in this article.

The theoretical influences utilized here derive from the contributions of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who have been developing a significant and challenging

contribution within the field of discourse theory from a political standpoint, which, at the same time, allow us to reflect on the antagonisms that involve and paralyze subject positions experiencing such conflict. We shall reflect upon the (im)possibilities of resistance and the barriers that a strongly commodified educational system builds up to prevent itself from crumbling: when you bite the hand that feeds you, you not only end up with no food but also risk losing a subjective position, a position from which you can resist.

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985) every social practice has an articulatory character that is every organization (ordering) is contingent and external to each one of its fragments, therefore ultimate determinacy is impossible. This statement is based upon the assumption that there is no essence or a particular and sutured space for the social. If the social is an open and never closed entity, is not possible to sustain that a specific kind of practice, namely economic, political, ideological, etc, has the supremacy to explain or hold the whole social structure. Society and social agents have no essence, and their regularities are just precarious intents to hold a certain order.

In their account of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) start from the definition of two central concepts: a) *Articulation*: any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice, and b) *Discourse*: the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice. Laclau and Mouffe following Foucault's (1972) expression, *regularity in dispersion*, conceive discourse as a coherent entity. Laclau and Mouffe stressed the *regularity* (in dispersion) in their account of discourse, pointing out that it can be considered as "an ensemble of differential positions . . . which in certain contexts of exteriority can be signifies as totality" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 106). That is this ensemble is not given by external principles, it cannot be apprehended as a closer system of differences, it is open and this contingency allows the permanent possibility of different nodal points. Now, it is possible to introduce the relational character of all identity. The practice of articulation is possible because its contingency, we mean because is an open system and all of the relational identities are in permanent and never ended process of closeness.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF CHILE AND ITS EDUCATION

A great deal has been written about Chile's sufferings in the recent past (Brunner, 1981; Drake & Jaksic, 1999; Larraín, 2001; Moulian, 2002; Salazar & Valderrama, 2000; Tironi, 1985). As many authors have signaled, the political, economic, and cultural changes imposed by Pinochet's dictatorship (this lasted 17 years, beginning with the coup d'état against the government of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973) can be understood as a revolutionary process (Brunner, 1981; Drake & Jaksic, 1999; Moulian, 2002; Tironi, 1985), given that the experience transformed the country in a peculiar neoliberal way, creating the Chilean model (Drake & Jaksic, 1999). This "Chilean model" features the broad historical

aspects that shaped the neoliberal rationality that inspires Chilean society today. New wealth is created through the formation of new economic groups. By the end of the 1970s, some people were talking about the "Chilean miracle."

Chile went through a long process on its way toward a postdictatorship democracy (Garretón, 2007). Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship ended after a plebiscite in 1988; the majority of the citizens said NO to Pinochet's overt intention to continue exerting power. However, and in spite of this apparent victory, the democratic politicians negotiated with the still powerful advocates of the military regime in order to achieve a peaceful transition. This was the beginning of the so-called democracy of consensus in Chile. One of the fundamental conditions of this democracy was the autonomy of the economic sphere, which would protect it from political changes. In this way, the dominance of neoliberal politics would remain secure (Larraín, 2001).

The following governments introduced social and political modifications after the return to democracy; however, many other aspects of social and political life remained the same. For example, the dominant economic and political groups were not greatly affected, although there were changes in the way they exerted their domination. Terror and fear were no longer necessary, but the democratic wing was forced, in order to achieve its core objective of removing the dictatorship, to secure the neoliberal model in its place.

Through "authoritarian enclaves" (Garretón, 2003), such as the Constitution and the strong influence of certain agents (the political Right, the military, and the dominant economic groups), the social and productive model was "naturalized" and "institutionalized" even further by the postauthoritarian power groups. Hence, it is possible to describe our current reality as that of a technocratic democracy of *low intensity* (in other words, not a full democracy, an order regulated by a non democratic constitution), in which individualism and consumption are lifted above the sense of the collective (Moulian, 2002).

This "capitalist revolution" (Moulian, 2002) particularly influenced the educational system, this being one of the areas where the largest numbers of structural reforms were implemented (Puga, 2011; Redondo, 2009). The reforms ushered in a decentralization of state educational policies toward the municipalities, which changed the role of the state from that of guarantor of education, placing it instead in a minimal position (Larrañaga, 1995). Along with the municipalization of education, the Grants Act of 1981 was implemented (Núñez, 1997; Redondo, 2009). This act legislated a reduction in social expenditure, making room for the birth of national privatizations and guaranteeing free access only to minimum levels of education (Redondo, 2009). In higher education, private universities were created, in addition to the traditional universities founded before 1981. It should be explained that the traditional universities are not administered by the state; instead, they possess a private legal personality. They receive only 30% of their funding from the state.

The educational policies that were introduced following this period, rather than creating important changes, reinforced the market logic in the educational model, also called the "commodification of education" (Santa Cruz, 2006). This is the scenario that framed the student movement of 2011. The commodification of higher education had permeated even the deepest levels of the internal affairs of higher education. Given that the enrollment of new students represents the most important source of income for a university, most of the university's efforts are put into undergraduate matters. In consequence, the attention of the administration is concentrated mainly on teaching needs and on the enrollment of new students. However, the three traditional university strata—teaching, researching, and extramural studies—linger in the performance requirements. While the undergraduate program, and thus teaching, has undeniable relevance given its monetary contribution, research and extramural studies also have to accomplish their goals. Each and every one of these activities must be profitable in itself. It cannot involve the expenditure of university funds, it has to pay for itself, and it has to produce tangible revenue. Teachers must involve themselves with the three areas simultaneously, with high productivity required. They are always checking figures to rank themselves in terms of competence and always looking, on their own, for a way to finance the supplies they need to fulfill their goals. The market logic that the students criticize and that turns them into debtors before turning them into professionals is the very same logic that turns their teachers into independent managers of academic products.

MUTED ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

This reality of the job of academics was not exposed during the demonstrations. It was not even identified. Within the "neoliberal experiment," and given the broad public and theoretical questioning of the commodification of higher education, the silence that Chilean academics have maintained in relation to their own subordination and opposition to commodification is surprising. To unveil it would bite the hand that feeds them (,see Mandiola, 2011).

The commodification phenomenon has been broadly studied for several decades in Europe and North America. The notions of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and the entrepreneurial university (Henkel, 2000) have brought to the table the ways in which higher education in Europe and North America has adopted business management logics, that is, logics that serve the generation of profit to the detriment of the educational and formative mission of higher education (Thomas & Anthony, 1996), logics that deploy labor submission devices that belong to the emerging ways of exploitation in the 21st century.

In Chile, the silence of academics on the commodification of higher education is evidenced by the lack of problematization of our own practices in academic production and in research, that is to say, in our passive acceptance of capitalistic managing strategies. Our productivity tends to account for the processes of power and resistance in other contexts but not in our own fields. For example, in the context of the 2011–2012 demonstrations, many contributions came from the academy. These contributions were oriented to understanding matters like the role of the state in public education, the students' political organization, the professionalization of teachers in higher education, and others, but there was no clear, meaningful reflection on the way in which academic work is constrained to follow the managerialist logic.

However, among the scarce voices that have proposed a critical analysis of this, we can find pieces by Sisto (2005, 2007), who, in the context of Chilean academic capitalism, has analyzed the discursive construction of teachers' and researchers' identities in the university as those of precarious and trivialized laborers of fluctuating status. According to Sisto, universities in Chile rent laborers' work capacity through a provision of services that legally allows companies to obtain employees without a stable contractual relationship. These are the so-called teachers per hour, or taxi teachers (referring to the means of transport that these teachers need to use in order to get to their many different workplaces). In this same connection, we highlight the article by Guzmn-Valenzuela and Barnett (2013) on the creation of academic identities inserted in the time and space of the national university endeavor.

Following this idea, concerns about the jobs of academics have been widely discussed in studies from England and the United States since the mid-1990s. In the late 1990s, the concept of the "McUniversity" (Parker & Jary, 1995; Prichard & Willmott, 1997) hinted at a vision that deepens the understanding of academics' subjectivities as those of identities permeated by business management logics. From this point of view, teaching and researching are transformed into activities that point toward the production of quantifiable and assessable merchandise (seminars, articles, conferences, etc.), working toward compliance with the efficiency and efficacy standards of the corporate university.

In Chile, the national academy has adopted standards and procedures imposed by an alien model that builds up a stable and unavoidable system of objectivities, identities, and significations. This model has succeeded in articulating an individualistic, competitive, and self-intensified working routine (Hypolito, Vieira, & Pizzi, 2009) nurtured by personal resources. Hence, academic productivity, which becomes visible through research and publications, is mainly envisioned as a means of displaying and assessing performance, which is focused on the quantity and not on the content of proposals.

In the following text, we have decided to go more deeply into the positions occupied by academics in the new working context that is embedded in so-called new public management (Chandler, Barry & Clark, 2002; Court, 2004; Ranson, 2008; Sisto, 2011) and into the way in which academics' identities are performed according to these social and institutional requirements.

POSITIONS, VOICES, AND SILENCES WITHIN THE DEMONSTRATIONS

In order to understand the place of university scholars in Chile during the demonstrations, it is important to note that although we mostly identified ourselves with the students in criticizing the corporate educative model, we also experienced a process of estrangement. Both students and scholars shared a political horizon: a diagnosis of the education crisis and a set of proposals that aimed to achieve free, quality education and democratization. However, as a consequence of our precarious labor conditions, the faculty did not join the students in actions parallel to the demonstrations, namely, the strikes and occupations.

We maintain that, in this context, a conflict emerges and requires that academics establish their political positions in this regard. These positions, following Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 156), can be understood as "subject positions" around an "antagonism." Antagonism, as a discursive formation, is constitutive of any identity and any social objectivity. Its relevance is related to the introduction of negativity into the social, which shows the contingency of all identity and social objectivity (Howarth, 2000). In the case of antagonism the situation is: "the presence of the 'other' prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 125). This blockage of identity is a mutual experience for both the antagonist and the antagonized.

From this perspective, as we stated above, the social is defined as an impossible totality produced by an inherent lack, which, while impeding an absolute satisfaction of political demands, makes it possible for different hegemonic articulations to constantly move (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). We understand that academic identities actually belong to subject moments or positions within the multiple discursive fields that permeate and build the university; it is not possible to fix the sense of such positions once and for all. They constitute themselves from an (im)possibility, which is explained by academics' work conditions and the economic model that supports these conditions.

In the words of one of us:

The student movement found me working as a teacher per hour in one of the so-called traditional universities. The strikes and demonstrations came to alter the usual development of the lessons I imparted, and then the occupation of the building finished up preventing the course from ending according to the norm, while I and the rest of my colleagues were denied access to campus. As a teacher per hour, I would go to the building once a week, when my lesson was due, straight to the classroom and then come back to my personal affairs. The occupation broke this routine, worsening this estranged relationship with the institution. Personally, I overtly and clearly supported the claims the students would make in their activities, so it didn't cause me a problem to suspend my teaching in order to collaborate with their activities. What did become a conflict was this passive and silent position I had to adopt. I was not

a part of the faculty, so neither I nor those colleagues in the same position were included in their meetings. We wouldn't participate in any way in the decision making that would represent the faculty in the events of the demonstrations. Our remuneration was in question. We weren't providing our services so we "shouldn't" get paid. A bite to the hand that feeds you would imply the risk of being completely excluded from the system. I chose silence.

The strikes and occupations were, for the students and for part of the citizenry, ways of protesting against market education and state complicity. These practices constituted ways of getting the attention of the authorities, very different from the protests and marches. Through these strikes and occupations, the participants not only loudly expressed their collective criticism but also prevented business owners from continuing with the ordinary operation of their businesses, in this case, universities. The stoppage of activities confronted us directly as teachers and called into question our position in the face of this conflict; the occupation of buildings confronted university authorities, both directors and owners, in the same way. The occupations and stoppages were much more radical actions than the protests and artistic interventions in public spaces; the radicality resulted from the translation of street protests to spaces within campus. This movement from the streets to the university placed the demands no longer in the public space but inside private property, which not only caused alarm among the authorities but also started to distress us as teachers closer to the students' demands, and even to divide the students themselves.

For academics in general, these actions increased the tension in the facultystudent relationship in at least three ways. First, whoever participated in an occupation not only became a social actor seen as in favor of the student position and against that of the authorities but was also overtly exposed in front of employees and in consequence risked actions that could end in dismissal. After all, stoppages and occupations were actions that the government was currently trying to penalize, describing them as criminal. Second, the strikes and especially the occupations created the possibility of the loss of the academics' workplaces since they continued for several months without any sign of resolution. Instead, the situation deteriorated. Occupation of the workplace led to apprehension about the possibility of dismissal and, in consequence, it highlighted the urgency of maintaining the family economy and surviving in the context of fierce competition between academics in Chile. Third, the occupations involved, on several occasions, the intrusion of students into private spaces, like professors' offices, and into personal belongings; some scholars saw these as violent acts or forms of aggression that violated their personal spaces.

In this way, the occupations contributed to building up an antagonism between teachers and students regarding the positions that each actor takes in the social practice of higher education. The occupations, in an attempt by students to radicalize their demands, "invaded" a shared space. By invading this space, they expelled from it those who seemed to represent and personify the hegemonic articulation that they were trying to destabilize, that is, the authorities and the faculty. All of them had to be kept out of the occupation. Those of us who belonged in the occupation due to our precarious situation were also kept out. However, that was an identity impossible to adopt, that of a worker dissatisfied with his or her labor context. For academic workers, their discontent with the authorities might mean risking their continued employment and an identity that would be impossible to articulate.

However, occupations allowed the presence of another kind of precarious academic workers: teaching assistants, figures who stand between the workers and the students (Valenzuela & Ortiz, 2012). They are examples of another type of flexible and precarious worker in universities. They are students who belong to the educational movement and who experience identity tensions from both opposing forces.

This is one of their voices:

As a student finishing my program, I joined my classmates in the strike and the occupation. During it, the classrooms usually used by teachers for meetings and decision making, we used [these classrooms] to organize ourselves and our everyday activities, but also to eat and sleep. It is there where my position of employee emerges to reveal its practices: the place of occupation becomes a working space as long as teaching responsibilities are performed by me as a TA. While the rest of the students organized demonstrations, self-formation, and recreational activities, I found myself planning lessons and marking tests. After all, official lectures were still being given in other private spaces (like hotels and offices). The occupation promoted friendship and comradeship among those who participated in it. That is why going back to class during the summer of 2012 affected the spirits of those students. I reencountered friends and classmates with whom I had shared [the occupation], but now I was a TA and they were students. Now, I would teach them and assess their tests and papers. I, or rather we, experienced the position of a TA for months, after I had been an equal to the students in the occupation. However, I never stopped working, be it in a strike, in an occupation, or in a demonstration.

Teaching assistants, while receiving a salary for the activities they perform, are very different from other academic employees. Here, we give two examples of their difference. First, their work cannot be translated into a vital source of income for their salary is too small. Second, as employees devoted to teaching, they represent the bottom level of a crippled university hierarchy; assistants work under no contract, which tends to render them and their demands invisible to their employers. For the teaching assistants, strikes and occupations do not threaten their livelihood. On the contrary, their invisibility allows them to join the

demonstrations and to be physically present in the occupied areas of the university. At the end of the day, they are just students.

For teaching assistants, taking part in demonstrations and diverse expressions of protest does not solve the problem of the antagonism between workers and students. Engaging in activities like planning lessons or assessing teaching activities while taking part in the occupation can be understood as contrary to the interests of students, and so teaching assistants might be placed on the opposite side. Furthermore, the horizontal power relationship developed with the students during the occupation seems like a brief parenthesis, as a vertical relationship resumes once the university is back to normal.

In the case of the teachers per hour, their silence and passivity are openly displayed. Working flexibility and dissociation have called into question the possibility of an overt political presence. Any attempt to take part in protests might imply dismissal, unemployment, and marginality. Strikes and occupations sharpen the dissociation, given that universities are transformed into political spaces for students where teachers have little or no place. In the case of the teaching assistants, the tension and ambivalence are manifested due to the movement between being a student and being a worker. Political activities are possible given the assistants' position as students and the informality of their jobs. However, political activities are impossible for teachers due to the formal aspects of their jobs.

IMPOSSIBILITIES, EXCLUSIONS, AND STRUGGLES IN THE MOVEMENT

The foregoing shows how two kinds of antagonistic relationships existed during the demonstrations of 2011–?2012. On one hand, antagonism was evident between the social movement for education and the economic groups that were associated with the minimal state. On the other hand, antagonism between students and teachers emerged due to the different meanings assigned to the strike and the occupation as legitimate forms of protest. What does this multiplicity of meaning imply for academics?

By "antagonism" we understand a rupture in the social, which accounts for the impossibility of opposing subjects constituting themselves as political totalities. Laclau explains that by antagonism we are not to understand an opposition of material forces or a conceptual contradiction: "in the case of the antagonism, we find a different situation: the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being myself completely. The relation does not come from full identities, but from the impossibility of constructing them" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 168). The impossibility is not about an apparent nonexistence of the identities, or a future impracticability of their subjective projects. It rather refers to their precarious, partial, or incomplete nature in the face of the multiple tensions they experience.

The antagonisms reveal multiple identity impossibilities in each of the participants. In the first antagonism, the students and the rest of the social actors cannot

constitute themselves as full identities because they are not involved in their desired type of education, that is, a free democratic education that does not pursue profit. It is because of this that they "stop" and "occupy" their identities, abdicating their student state while this antagonism persists. As a consequence of their actions, the subjectivity of businessmen is threatened as the profitability of universities could cease. In the second antagonism, the impossibility of articulation of the teachers' demands and their constitution as political actors within the movement hinders the construction of a chain of equivalence with the students' demands that would admit the accentuation of the antagonism with the economic groups associated with the minimal state.

However, in this second antagonism, academics define themselves from a double identity impossibility. First, they define themselves from the impossibility of being what they were before the demonstrations because of the way in which the strike and the occupation have disrupted the set that represents the things that shape their identity as university employees. Second, they define themselves from the impossibility of being what they could be during the demonstrations, that is, relevant actors who overtly criticize the system in which they work. By openly criticizing the system, they would explicitly articulate their demands with those of the students. The double impossibility can be explained given the position that academics occupy in relation to both of the antagonisms mentioned above: their place is not the place of the social actors in the movement, nor the place of the university authorities and owners. Thus, even though the impossibilities permeate various identities in this field of antagonisms, the case of the academic workers deserves special attention.

A transition from this identity impossibility to an identity possibility in the political field introduces the problem of exclusion. As expressed by Lacan, when referring to alienation logic: "The bag or the life! If I choose the bag, I lose both. If I choose the life, I get the life without the bag, an amputated life" (Lacan, 1964: 79). It is the logic of resistance and subsistence. If I choose resistance, I am excluded; then, I am no longer able to resist. If I choose work, my resistance is impossible.

According to Contu (2008), biting the hand that feeds you could be a real act of resistance, where the consequences imply important changes to the social-symbolic fabric in which our lives find meaning. The cost is associated with how far our constitution as subjects depends on these very same meanings. A real act of resistance, says Contu (2008: 374), is an "impossible act, an act that cannot be predicted or controlled." It is an act of devastating consequences.

To ratify our dissent by taking part in the students' movement would have meant a constant fear of exclusion. To leave productivity unattended and to defy the organizational hierarchy to join the opposition constitutes a double fault: it is to abandon one's responsibilities and to promote changes that destabilize the way in which things are done. Resistance within the academy has constantly been wrapped in silence and cynicism. It is a strategy that ends by promoting the very practice it was trying to destabilize (Contu, 2008). The passivity, tension, and

ambivalence expressed in both of the experiences described above tell us about how we are forced to occupy an (im)possible position within the movement. Both experiences reveal an impossibility of being and doing in political spheres as an employee in academia, a university teacher. Impossible identities are prevented from taking part in anything political and prevented from putting themselves inside a social movement that confronts them directly as protagonists. Biting the hand that feeds you implies eating out of it while biting it. In this case, to bite means to stop eating: that is, exclusion. To eat means to stop biting: that is, impossibility. The academic identities in Chile are built as subjects that can either bite or eat. The two options negate each other. To bite the hand that feeds you is a metaphor of that tense and rigid position. The construction of new antagonisms that make room for new subject positions within this articulation would defy that metaphor: to represent the possibility of showing the teeth to the hand, but not to go as far as biting it.

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