

Chile's bleeding eyes: How the street protest crafted a resonant symbol of political communication

Los ojos sangrantes de Chile: Cómo las protestas callejeras forjaron un resonante símbolo de comunicación política

Os olhos sangrando do Chile: como os protestos de rua forjaram um símbolo retumbante da comunicação política

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This article describes how the “bleeding eyes” symbol was crafted during the social unrest that took place in Chile in October 2019, when hundreds of people suffered from ocular trauma after being shot by the anti-riot police with plastic pellets. This seminal moment of symbolic production has been under-studied in the field of political communication. It draws upon concepts from the so-called “culturalist” approach to social movements studies and conducts an ethnographic account describing the dynamics that gave birth to a symbol.

KEYWORDS: Symbolic production, frame alignment, social movement, cultural resonance, ocular trauma.

Este artículo describe el proceso de creación del símbolo de los ojos sangrantes en las protestas de Chile en octubre de 2019, cuando cientos de personas terminaron con daños oculares por balines disparados por la policía. Este momento de producción simbólica ha sido poco estudiado en el campo de la comunicación política. Se incorporan conceptos de la tradición culturalista de los estudios de movimientos sociales y se ofrece una observación etnográfica de las protestas que dieron lugar al símbolo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Producción simbólica, alineación de encuadre, movimientos sociales, resonancia cultural, trauma ocular.

Este artigo descreve o processo de criação do símbolo dos olhos sangrando nos protestos no Chile em outubro de 2019, quando centenas de pessoas ficaram feridas nos olhos por balas disparadas pela polícia. Esse momento de produção simbólica tem sido pouco estudado no campo da comunicação política. Conceitos da tradição culturalista dos estudos de movimentos sociais são incorporados e é oferecida uma observação etnográfica dos protestos que deram origem ao símbolo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Produção simbólica, alinhamento de molduras, movimentos sociais, ressonância cultural, trauma ocular.

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The Hospital del Salvador is the closest public health facility to Plaza Baquedano in Santiago de Chile, where the largest and most frequent protests of the 2019 social revolt took place. Between October 18 and November 30 of that year, its Ocular Trauma Unit admitted 259 people whose eyes had been penetrated by rubber pellets shot by police who repressed the protests in Plaza Baquedano. In half of those cases, the pellets caused severe visual impairment or total blindness, and in 13 percent, the medical decision was to eviscerate the eyeballs (Rodríguez et al., 2021). Although there were no figures as systematized as those of Hospital del Salvador, this situation was repeated throughout the country and extended beyond November 30. The revolt, which began with protests in Santiago on October 18 and spread to all cities in a matter of hours, left an unprecedented legacy of horror: civilian protesters were blinded by the police.

This article describes how protesters in the streets forged the “bleeding eyes” symbol to denounce this situation. It is based on participant observation in protests during the social upheaval that began in Chile on October 18, 2019 and whose most diverse expressions lasted until March 2020, when the COVID-19 emergency made mass gatherings risky. Material included here was produced between the first week of protests and mid-November, when the symbol was already consolidated. The article aims at contributing to the field of political communication, as it allows us to understand the emergence of a symbolic resource that is now available to those who exercise or dispute power. Its conceptual frame of reference is articulated from the “culturalist” approach to the study of social movements (McAdam, 1994; Melucci, 1985; Polletta, 2008) and from there it is concluded that the symbol of the bleeding eyes was forged from three elements: “experiential commensurability”, “empirical credibility” and “narrative fidelity” (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986).

The next section presents a review of studies that have addressed the phenomenon of protest and social movements in the field of communication. They are grouped into those studying media representation and those investigating their relationship with Internet social networks. From there, it is concluded that there is a gap in the field regarding the moment of the creation of the symbols with which

a movement deploys its political communication. Then, the most characteristic elements of the “culturalist tradition” of social movements studies are presented, revealing the importance and complexities of their symbolic production. The methodology section describes the ethnographic observation conducted in Santiago de Chile between October and November 2019, with emphasis on personal and collective reflection on how to investigate in a context of social upheaval. The narrative of the case mixes field notes and relevant literature that provides the concepts to help organize the material. The article has a strong descriptive emphasis but concludes by suggesting avenues of reflection and future research for the field.

PROTEST AND COMMUNICATION: STRUGGLE OF FRAMES AND CONNECTIVE ACTION

The symbolic production of social and protest movements has been little investigated in the field of communication. For the most part, these studies have rather focused on examining the press coverage of these phenomena with a view that is informed by the notions of journalistic framing and protest paradigm. A second line of research has been concerned with the impact of virtual social networks on the formation and functioning of social movements. Central here is the notion of connective action, which emphasizes the role of social networks as structuring organizations. This section reviews those studies and groups them around these two concerns.

The protest paradigm hypothesis assumes that the media act as agents of social control against defiant groups. This would result in a pattern of coverage in which “the more a group deviates from the status quo regarding its goals, tactics, appearance, etc., the more likely the media will act to marginalize and deprecate the group” (Boyle et al., 2005, p. 639). A central concept to observe these dynamics between social movements and the media is that of journalistic framing, specifically the concept coined by Entman (2003) referring to social actors “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (p. 417).

However accepted the thesis of the protest paradigm is, social movements must seek the attention of the media since this impacts citizens' support for their demands (Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2014; Brown & Mourão, 2021). The size of the call and the disruption they cause are two important predictors of appearance (Wilkes et al., 2010; Wouters, 2013; Wouters & Van Camp, 2017). And the coverage can indeed be unfavorable (Brown & Harlow, 2019), which is explained by the media's specific factors (Cárdenas & Pérez, 2017; Di Cicco, 2010; Hughes & Mellado, 2016; Mellado et al., 2017), but also due to mistakes committed by the protesters themselves (Wagner, 2008; Waisbord & Peruzzotti, 2009).

The literature acknowledges that social movements have been creative in their use of social networks to disseminate their messages (Cárdenas, 2016; Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Smith et al., 2001). However, the idea of "connective action" expands beyond this instrumental relationship. Coined by Bennett & Segerberg (2012), this notion distinguishes between traditional social movements that emerged from solid organizational structures and the new forms in which virtual social networks constitute their very backbone. The construction of these definitions was clearly influenced by the occurrence of protests such as the Wall Street occupations in the United States, or the Indignados movement in Spain, where one could see "technology platforms and applications taking the role of established political organizations" (p. 742).

This logic of connective action is verified in cases where participation in protests is mediated by participation in virtual social networks (Gerbaudo, 2015; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). This connective action can give rise to horizontal and direct communication (Theocharis, 2013), but it can also be determined by its internal inequalities (González-Bailón & Wang, 2016; Larson et al., 2019). This is how these networks shape the coordination and internal disputes of the movement (Neumayer & Stald, 2014) and influence the deployment of its activities (Little, 2016). There are also those who question the primacy attributed to networks, since it is considered that social movements still benefit from traditional structures (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013; Grömping & Sinpeng, 2018), or because their members' offline lives also determine their type of participation (Mercea, 2012).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THEIR SYMBOLIC PRODUCTION: OF TRANSGRESSION AND REPRODUCTION

Whatever their demands, social movements must produce symbols to communicate their interpretation of reality. As seen in the previous section, this process of symbolic production has not been among the primary concerns of political communication research. That is why it is necessary to review the studies on this type of movement in other disciplines that have probed the complexities they have faced for decades. It can be concluded that the production of symbols requires transgressing the symbolic structures present in a community, but at the same time respecting them so that their innovations are understandable to the audience. This balance between transgression and reproduction has been debated in the studies of social movements, especially in the so-called “culturalist tradition”, about which this section presents its main conceptual contributions.

The concern for this symbolic dimension emerges from what a series of authors considered to be the ‘limitations’ of the dominant approaches in the study of social movements. For Melucci (1985), the emergence of these phenomena is not explained only by economic crises, social disintegration or as an expression of interests shared by a group. The author calls for questioning the constitution of a collective identity based on a shared definition of the field of opportunities that is offered for action. For him, social movements influence symbolic production, since they “affect the meaning of individual action and the codes that shape behavior” (p. 810).

Just as the configuration of the political system can facilitate or hinder the emergence of new actors, the inventory of symbols available to a community can give rise to “cultural opportunities” for social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 629). As Johnston and Klandermans (1995) argue, the challenge is that culture tends to be highly structured and stable over time, while social movements are essentially transformative, which poses a dichotomy. For Polletta (2006), this is an artificial dichotomy, since culture is embedded in the entire process of a movement: people “use culture practically and creatively to pursue their interests. But culture also defines what

counts as practical and what counts as an interest”, observes the author (p. 10). To resolve this apparent dichotomy, Tarrow (2011) proposes understanding the balance “between developing dynamic symbols that can bring about change, and evoking symbols that are familiar to people who are rooted in their own cultures” (p. 147).

Along with this conceptualization, the empirical research of this approach has revealed the complexities and importance of the symbolic production of social movements. Studies show how transgression and reproduction can be virtuously balanced to challenge the social order (Kowalewski, 1980) and increase mobilizing reach (Ebila & Tripp, 2020; Ibrahim, 2009; Kasanga, 2014). But they also warn that by over-transgressing pre-existing meanings, there is a risk that other actors will reinterpret these actions at their convenience (Bloomfield & Doolin, 2013; Wagner, 2008; Waisbord & Peruzzotti, 2009). This is valid for the language created by street protest (Gasaway Hill, 2018; Günther, 2016), collective improvisations (McAdam et al., 2001), or for subversions in everyday life (Jasper, 2010). Even democratic values can be reproduced and transgressed (Riisgaard & Thomassen, 2016), as is the case with nonviolent protest or the occupation of public spaces (Moser, 2003; Rovisco, 2017).

METHODOLOGY: THE RISKS OF OBSERVING CHAOS

The previous section shows how the question about the symbolic production of social movements has been theorized from the culturalist perspective on these phenomena. Although these symbols constitute the raw material for constructing political communication messages, their production is not a primary concern in this field of study. To address this gap, a five-week observation of the protests unleashed in Santiago de Chile, on Friday, October 18, 2019, was conducted, from the banging of pots and pans to the burning of the city’s underground train stations. Although somewhat inorganic, the protests had already begun about three weeks earlier, led by secondary school students who paralyzed the operation of the subway or carried out acts of fare-dodging.

The demonstrations were triggered by an increase of 30 Chilean pesos (four percent) in the ticket prices for public transport in Santiago,

decreed at the beginning of October that year. Until October 18, the actions had been limited to affecting the operation of the subway, but since that afternoon they extended to the entire city, and on Saturday, October 19, across the country. The government of President Sebastián Piñera instructed the armed forces to take over public order – however, the protests did not stop. From Monday, even more massive gatherings were verified in all cities, beginning a state of permanent protest until March 2020, when the pandemic stopped them.

The research question was posed in the broadest possible way: how does a protest communicate? That is, a subsidiary question of the culturalist literature in the studies of social movements. However, as the events unfolded, this evolved to: how does the street produce its symbols of political communication? To answer this last question, an observation of the demonstrations in Plaza Baquedano in Santiago was conducted, where the largest and most persistent meetings occurred. This research technique has been used before in the study of protests and their collective production of symbols (Sarfati & Chung, 2018). The so-called “protest ethnography” allows us to investigate how protesters signify their practices, including emotional aspects, collective experience and solidarity formation (Perugorriá & Tejerina, 2013; Smolović Jones et al., 2021). Contact with protest participants also allows us to capture elements of the context surrounding the observed events and understand their impact on the study site (Danley, 2021). The research can use all the senses, since the protests are a complete display of sensory stimuli through which protesters somehow converge in their meaning processes (Martin & Fernández Trejo, 2017).

All ethnographic observation requires a permanent exercise of self-reflection that accounts for the way in which an observer relates to the social world under study. This self-reflection became more evident at different moments of this research. First, due to contingency, there was no possibility of structuring a research design other than an ethnographic observation, since the object of study could change from day to day. Put simply, fear reigned that a coup would drastically end the protests, demolishing any structured production of instruments or systematic data collection. Another impact of this context was the ethical reflection on research in a scenario of high social conflict,

seeking not to take advantage of those who promoted social change by exposing their physical integrity and even their lives. It was not easy, then, to conduct interviews or take surveys that bothered those who were protesting, so we sought to observe in a participatory manner, without interrupting, but feeling and living the moment while taking notes. At the same time, universities began a reflection on their role in society, expressing the genuine desires of academics to question the categories with which they relate with vulnerable groups. Thus, participant observation combined with permanent self-reflection to reduce the “pathologization, paternalism and extractive exoticization” of the members (Yarbrough, 2020, p. 62).

Field notes were used as an instrument to collect data. Pictures were discarded as they could affect the anonymity of people who were committing crimes. Although these acts were politically legitimate, a group was being persecuted by the justice system, so no matter how careful the data processing could be, there was always a chance of leakage or loss that would expose the protesters. There was also a real safety risk, so the observation was marked by fear of both police aggression and projectiles or fires started by protesters. Because in this kind of methodological design the researcher’s body is the data collection instrument (Turato, 2005), personal security somewhat biases the data presented. Specifically, in Plaza Baquedano there was a territorial segregation that consecrated its north-eastern area as a more festive and conversational place – therefore making it safer – while its south-western area was one of open confrontation. Given personal protection considerations, many of the observations focused on the safest sector.

In the first week of observation, I understood self-reflection as something that could provide more “objectivity” for data collection, but slowly this was transformed into “looking at oneself” (Davies, 2012, p. 4). Given the dimension of the protest, the concern was not for the classic discussion about what changes the presence of the researcher causes in the scene of analysis, but rather in how the intensity of the events ended up affecting the observer himself. At first, I tried to keep my distance from the protesters, but the horror of people with bloody eyes and the fear that this would happen to me made me

empathize with their outrage. It is necessary to recognize that the limits between observer and observed are constantly negotiated (Nencel, 2014; Shinozaki, 2012) and as this positionality changed, affective elements became more relevant as data to be collected and, therefore, they began to gain presence in the field notes.

The following weeks of data collection turned into something closer to what Gherardi (2019) has called “affective ethnography”. According to the author, this takes place when the process rests on “researcher’s capacity to affect and be affected in order to produce interpretations that may transform the things that they interpret” (p. 743). The challenge is to turn these inputs into relevant data for a community of knowledge, and in this process the comparison with the relevant literature was fundamental. It was there that the chaotic data collection began to take shape, structure and consistency. Hence, it appears that the first week can be understood as a moment of predominance of “master frames” (Benford, 2013) inherited from cycles of previous protests, that in the second week “moral emotions” emerged (Jasper, 2010), and from then on, victims and artists sought to transmit “cultural resonance” (Snow & Benford, 1988).

BUILDING RESONANCE: MEANING BEFORE SYMBOL

This section shows an ethnographic account of how the relationship between the protest that emerged on October 18, 2019, in Santiago and its ways of communicating took place. It is narrated from the initial chaos to the consolidation of the symbol of the bleeding eyes at the end of November. It can be said that the participants in the protest first produced the meaning through the condensation of their own experience on the ground, press reports and aspects of popular culture. Only once these elements were consolidated did the bleeding eyes symbol emerge, especially thanks to the claims of victims and artistic interventions in public spaces. Following the definitions of Snow, Benford and others (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988), it is concluded that the bleeding eyes symbol owes its resonance to its “empirical credibility”, “experiential commensurability” and “narrative fidelity”.

FROM CHAOS TO AWAKENING

In the beginning was the chaos. Arriving at the protests in the first days after October 19 and trying to capture some communication strategy was a futile effort. What reigned was thousands of posters drawn by the protesters, many of them very creative, among which different versions of the message “*son tantas weás (problemas) que no sé qué poner*” or “*me falta pancarta pa’ decir todo lo que me enchucha (enoja)*”². There was a complete absence of collective emblems or symbols, whether political or otherwise. As the week advanced, the absence of collective symbols was filled through the assistance of singers, football club hooligans or artists in general who managed to produce something that captured the crowd’s attention. On Tuesday, October 22 at noon, in Plaza Baquedano, Manuel García and Amaro Labra found themselves singing at the same time; on the other side, the Banda Conmoción entered with a brass orchestra playing cumbia, while the supporters of the Magallanes football club arrived with its musical band, flags and flares. Further on, a group of nearly one hundred people was having a reiki session, and on the concrete floor of the Plaza, architecture students had drawn floor plans of social housing that showed their tiny size. Later, more football hooligans came in, adding more fireworks, drums and stadium chants.

As the week went by, two chants managed to coordinate a minimal action of communication. On Monday night, October 21, after the first weekend of protests, looting and violence throughout the country, President Sebastián Piñera, in a televised address and flanked by soldiers, said: “We are at war against a powerful enemy”, without specifying who that enemy was. This led to protesters turning the president into a reincarnation of the leader of the Chilean neoliberal dictatorship, Augusto Pinochet. Chants in Plaza Baquedano, such as “Piñera, you motherfucker, murderer just like Pinochet”, were sung with the rhythm of a football song, followed by an old chant from the protests against the dictator in the ‘80s: “He who doesn’t jump is

² “There are so many *weás* (problems) that I don’t know what to write down”, or “I need another banner to say all the things that me *enchucha* (angers)”

FIGURE 1
BLEEDING EYES PAINTED IN A PROTEST BANNER IN PLAZA BAQUEDANO.
NOVEMBER, 2019



Source: R. Acevedo, personal communication, July 6, 2022.

paco” (*paco* is a derogatory term in Chile to refer to the police). This coordination was fleeting, lasting no more than a few minutes, and then everyone returned to their posters. They were like mere bodies who were there for reasons that they did not individually fully understand.

This showed the persistence of the “master frame” (Benford, 2013) taken from Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973-1989) to interpret the repression that was being carried out, including military action. So strong was this frame that a rumour circulated that a torture centre had been set up in the Baquedano metro station, immediately under the square where protests congregated. A carving on the wall at that station read “Metro Baquedano. Combination to Line 1973”. The rumor was false, but it exemplifies the persistence of the experience of the dictatorship as an interpretive framework for repression. This chaos continued all week. There was an increased presence of football clubs from the most recognized teams in Santiago. They would arrive in large groups at Plaza Baquedano with drums, banners, flags and fireworks and were the only ones able to generate an act of communication to attract attention. The common themes framed President Piñera as a murderer,

dealt with hate for the police, and increasingly the chant “Chile woke up” was heard, which later became more relevant.

This is how the protest of October 25 occurred, ending seven days of demonstrations. It is estimated that in the capital alone, nearly one million people gathered in Plaza Baquedano, with millions more scattered throughout other urban centres across the country. It was the largest protest in the Chilean history. After seven days of protest, the song “Chile woke up”, sung to the rhythm of stadium melodies, had become the message that caused the most unity in communication. That October 25, it was seen on hundreds of posters and on a giant Chilean flag with this motto written as a hashtag.

INFORM YOURSELF TO BE HORRIFIED

During the second week of protests the concept of “eye trauma” began to appear in conversations in Plaza Baquedano, despite the fact that eye injuries had been recorded from as early as October 18. A report issued by Amnesty International stated that between October 18 and November 30, 347 people were registered with eye trauma due to the impact of rubber pellets fired by the police across the country, 168 of which occurred in the first eight days of protests. Forty-eight percent of eye traumas occurred in the first week alone, but somehow, they were not yet a topic of conversation in the site of study, even though a subsequent press review shows that the cases were reported, at least in the main national and local newspapers. When this information circulated in the place of the protests it not only had a cognitive impact, but it also – and, above all – had an emotional one. It gave rise to what Jasper (2010, p. 89) calls “moral emotions”, that is, an evaluative judgement that shows compassion for the victims and hatred against the perpetrators.

In the second week, the conversation in Plaza Baquedano was about stories of protesters asking for medical help while their eyes bled. I met an old photojournalist friend who was reporting the protests in the south-west area of the Plaza, which by that time had become the most violent. “Fucking *pacos*, they’re shooting at the eyes, assholes!” he commented to me effusively, since fear had set in among his colleagues.

At that time, it seemed like another rumor like the one about the torture centre, but the photojournalist quoted his stories and those of his colleagues helping people with bloody eyes. They were risk sensitive as they cannot wear eye protection to take pictures. In those days, eye trauma flared up in conversation at the site of protests, but the fear was restricted to photojournalists and the very few protesters wearing eye protection.

At the end of the third week of protests, fear spread among all the protesters. The input that can explain this change is the press release made by the then vice president of the Chilean Medical Association, who did not provide new figures, but rather presented them as a comparison. "Unfortunately, in Chile, in two weeks, we have had a greater number of cases than in any situation of social unrest that has occurred in the world. The only global data that comes a little closer to what we have seen in Chile is that of Israel, where there were 154 patients with injured eyes, but over six years" said Patricio Meza in a radio newscast. With that comparison, he made evident the enormous dimensions of what was happening, and the attitude of the protesters changed. There was fear expressed when, at the sound of an explosion, people covered their eyes, even if they were fireworks from protesters. There was also unrestrained hatred against the police. Before this news spread, when a person required medical attention from an injury, demonstrators made way for help to pass. Now, the people transported the injured person as if it was a procession to complain of mistreatment and they were accompanied by cries of hatred against the police. Fear and hate were already part of the scene.

The following week, the hardware stores located on Avenida Alameda, on the way to Plaza Baquedano, were selling eye protection glasses used by construction workers to the public, but this time to protect themselves from the police. In university classrooms, students commented on the pellet wounds on their limbs and health students gave talks showing what to do when hit by such a bullet or how to help someone in this situation. On Friday of that week, street vendors set up tent shops offering "protection kits" to dodge pellets and inhibit the effects of tear gas, which included lemons, water with baking soda, and eye protection glasses for about eight dollars. On November 19, the

then president of the Chilean Medical Association, Izkia Siches, went with safety glasses to a hearing in the Parliament at which the Home Secretary was being investigated for human rights violations during the protests. She made visible, performatively, a political gesture of denunciation that was amplified by sitting next to Piñera's then Minister of Health, Jaime Mañalich.

To add more relevant information on the subject, a scientific study was published that revealed that the police were lying. Until then, no one had questioned whether the eye trauma had been caused by the impact of "rubber" pellets, but on November 16, the Department of Mechanical Engineering of the Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences of the University of Chile reported the results of research on their composition. The report indicated that "the material of the projectiles is composed of only 20% rubber and the rest are minerals or metals of high hardness", adding that this increased their injury potential. If the declarations of the Medical Association fuelled hatred and resentment towards the police, now the distrust and fear of being involved in a fraudulent institution was added to the mix. Both pieces of information circulated in the conversations among protesters, which were received with disbelief at first, horror later, and resentment at the end. The press information that was reproduced on social networks and in face-to-face conversations not only had a cognitive effect, but also an affective one, feeding loathing against the police.

VICTIMS AND ARTISTS: CONNECTING CULTURAL REFERENCES

On November 12, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) called for a national strike and marches throughout the country. For the first time, a traditional political organization summoned mass demonstrations in this social revolt. Until that day, they had all been self-convened through social networks in the style of what Castells (2012) calls "mass self-communication". This time, better-manufactured banners did appear, supported by leaders who were in the first row of each picket line. The march began in Plaza Baquedano at 11 am and ended two or three hours later, near the Palacio de La Moneda. In that place, the CUT set up a stage from where the leaders would speak, as well as guests

who came from other countries to support ‘the Chilean awakening’. The size of the gathering was obviously a matter of discussion between the leaders and the police, but it was undeniable that it far exceeded the usual attendance at a union march. When the column passed in front of La Moneda, a group stayed there, in silence, disobeying the leaders who called for them to continue. The march was disrupted by some people who were walking in front of the government palace, silent, dressed in black, with patches covering one or both of their eyes. They were victims of eye trauma who cut the march in two, with the result that only a smaller number attended the stage prepared by CUT. The vast majority observed the victims and returned to Plaza Baquedano to close the march there.

Eye mutilation was already a subject of public denunciation. This would be just one of several interventions that were deployed in different settings of the Chilean capital: artists walked with eye patches through exclusive shopping centres in Santiago; dozens of plastic balls painted as eyeballs hanging from electrical cables were installed on Avenida Grecia – an important Santiago street; and on the emblematic Puente del Arzobispo, near Plaza Baquedano, hundreds of eyes were painted on its structure. These artistic actions scattered around the city were in dialogue with the claims raised by the victims, who together with the artists appealed to the significance of the eyes and the act of opening them to support their complaint. There were then mentions of popular sayings, such as “raise crows and they will gouge out your eyes” or “living in Chile costs an eye from your face”, to show that the police had violated a precious part of the body. Other claims asked “how much have we seen that the State wants to blind us?”, alluding to the idea of keeping our eyes open as an act of becoming aware of injustices and an essential step to empower ourselves against them. Thus, references arose to expressions deeply rooted in Chilean popular culture, such as the song *Gracias a la Vida*, by Violeta Parra, where the singer is grateful for her “two stars that when I open them, I perfectly tell black from white”, or *La Voz de los Ochenta*, in which the Chilean band Los Prisioneros lists empowerment actions that include “open your eyes, stand up”. Through these allusions, victims and artists denounced that the State was punishing them in their eyes precisely because “Chile woke up”, as the slogan of the massive protest on October 25 stated.

Bleeding eyes appeared for the first time in different forms in the posters made by victims and in the artistic interventions, in many cases with an appeal to these popular cultural references. Victims and artists drew upon popular culture as a set of resources to build political symbols, as suggested by the culturalist tradition on social movements, but also drawing on the emotional experience of being at the site of the protest, processing the information about the ocular trauma to transform it into compassion and hatred. The eye then appeared as the place where a horrific atrocity had been committed, but which remained open as resistance and awareness of social injustice. From the initial communicative chaos, the protest had managed to produce a new symbol about its own experience of repression and its own desire to resist. From data and graphs counting the victims, the innate physiological response of covering their eyes in the face of a roar and the cultural references alluded to when victims claimed justice. All of this was condensed into one eye.

A year later, on October 18, 2020, a crowd gathered again in Plaza Baquedano to commemorate the start of the protests. This time, at the centre of the celebration, the demonstrators mounted a giant eye, which in its pupil showed the *wünyelfe*, an icon of the Mapuche culture that refers to the morning star, with a few drops of blood falling from it. Since the chaos of a year ago, the protest had produced its own symbol.

CONCLUSION: THREE REASONS FOR THE RESONANCE OF A POLITICAL SYMBOL

Data shows how the meanings that later materialized in the symbol of the bleeding eyes were constructed. First, protesters assembled the signified and then artists and victims provided the signifier. To understand its political potential, one can turn to the notion of resonance, developed by Snow, Benford, and others (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988) within the “culturalist” tradition. For these authors, social movements must produce a “frame alignment” among adherents so that they are in tune with their interpretations of reality. The resonance – that is, the success – of this frame depends on three elements: “empirical credibility”, that it adjusts to the events of the real world;

“experiential commensurability”, which emerges from the verification that the problem affects me; and “narrative fidelity”, expressed in whether the frame resonates with narratives, myths or popular stories that are part of the cultural baggage (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 208).

“Empirical credibility” ultimately refers to the veracity of the proposed framing. Press information was available from the first days of the protest, but it was not until the second week that they began to be incorporated into the conversation. Only then did the idea take hold that what was happening was an abuse beyond all limits and not just isolated cases of police officers’ misconduct. Although the frame gained verifiable empirical credibility, it was not a situation that happened to everyone, so its “experiential commensurability” did not consist of being shot, but rather the experience of horror, fear, compassion, and hate. The information transmitted by the press provided the cognitive ‘empirical credibility’, while the “experiential commensurability” was provided through the physical sensations experienced when facing the police at the protest site.

The “narrative fidelity” corresponds to the harmony between the interpretation made by social movements and the culture in which they occur. Here the contribution was from the victims in the way they presented their claim, as well as from anonymous artists who made denunciation interventions. Judging by what was observed in Plaza Baquedano, it was the police who transgressed the precious and sacred meaning of eyes in popular culture, while the victims and the artists reproduced the idea of the eye as a place of awareness. Those who went beyond the limits of appropriate behavior were the security forces, and those who tried to straighten them out were the protesters through appeals with “narrative fidelity”. Contrary to what the literature proposes, the transgression of meaning came from the repressive system and the reproduction was made by the protesters.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to show how the bleeding eyes symbol was forged in the streets during the October and November 2019 protests in Santiago. The police shot the eyes because “Chile had woken up”.

This is how the argument raised by the protesters could be summarized and condensed in the symbol of the bleeding eyes. The work has had a descriptive emphasis that, on the one hand, allows deepening of the observed case, but which can also limit its application to other contexts. The specific symbol forged by the protesters may be the result of an idiosyncratic process that does not occur at other protest sites, and this limitation of this work is recognized. However, this article does indeed represent a contribution to the study of political communication, since it has observed the initial moment of the symbolic production of social movements, which has not been investigated in this field. Likewise, incorporating literature from the “culturalist tradition” enriches the type of questions that can be formulated to address the social unrest that has occurred not only in Chile but around the world. Finally, this research shows the contribution that ethnographic observation can make to research in political communication, allowing us to understand how political actors generate the solidarity, affectivity and symbolism necessary to participate in disputes over power.

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PROFILE

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