Institutional politics, political citizenship and social movements in Chile: 2006-2012

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I want to use the case of recent Chilean social movements to illustrate how the institutional framework of politics affects their political influence. What I want to suggest it is that for social movements to be successful in producing political communication and peaceful social change, the institutional framework must establish some compromise with majority rule. While an active civil society and the exercise of political citizenship is considered necessary in a democracy, the power generated by these should be channelled through adequate institutional arrangements that allow social change. In this scenario, social movements can expect to be recognised by institutions, because institutions are understood as belonging to the people. When, on the contrary, the political system's institutions are isolated from the people and specially set-up to inhibit social change, the political messages of social movements are ignored and their actions criminalised. In this case, the antagonism between social movements and institutions is not fruitfully exploited, nor transcended within the political system.

With respect to Chile, it is observed that despite acquiring international political prestige, attracting massive national support, and creating a popularity problem for the government, the achievements of social movements in the country have been strangely limited. On the other hand, the main reason for the subsequent public's rejection of the demands seems to be the alleged violence of social movements' actions. The explanation for both may be found in two characteristics of the political system: its institutional design and the consequences of this for the formation of public opinion.

Regarding the first, I want to suggest that the Chilean political system has been armoured by the institutional legacy of Pinochet's government. There are three main institutions that prevent democratic institutions be responsive not just about social movements but also about public opinion: the electoral system, the quorums for voting legislation, and an extraordinarily conservative, politically unresponsive and legally obtuse Constitutional Court. These three devices impede any important law being passed without the agreement both government and opposition, entailing the impossibility of either of the coalitions to genuinely identified themselves with the demands of social movements and support them institutionally, while at the same time performing their respective oppositional roles.

In respect to the second characteristic, I consider that as consequence of this political paralysis, the political apathy of the people has modified the social landscape in which social movements are developed. The absence of political interest and consequently regular political action, contribute to the

setting-up of the conservative discourse of social movements as extreme, self-interested and violent factions struggling against the common good represented by the government. This perspective creates a fertile terrain for the criminalisation of social movements under the principle of protection of "public order" inherited from the dictatorship.

This diagnosis should be followed by a project of liberating democratic politics from the ties of authoritarian legacy. Only when the political system is unlocked will the political field be opened to cultivate a culture of institutional responsiveness and public dialogue. The main beneficiary of such a change would be organized social movements. However, experience shows that the current members of political coalitions are unlikely to unlock the systems that guarantee their autonomy in the exercise of state power. The major constitutional reform necessary to modify these aspects of the political system therefore calls for an alliance between all social movements. The identification of this procedural problem, nevertheless, is the major difficulty that such a project face.