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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Battle for Memory in the 2019 Chilean Social Outburst: Infra-repression, transitional vacuum, and the Rearticulation of Counter-memories

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ABSTRACT: Taking the 2019 Chilean social outburst as a case study, this article examines struggles over memory in post-authoritarian Chile. It analyses how official memory constrains how the past can be articulated, shaping political subjectivities and discouraging engagement, while also exploring how demonstrators resist and rework counter-memories during the mobilization.

The article is structured in two parts. The first, drawing on James Scott, conceptualises official memory as part of a transitional transcript that functions as a form of infra-repression by demobilising dissent. Building on scholarship that has highlighted the role of transitional memory projects in stabilizing post-authoritarian elites, this dynamic is examined in the Chilean transition, particularly through the Concertación's mnemonic project and its role in containing dissent after the dictatorship.

The second part presents an abductive thematic analysis of forty semi-structured interviews with uprising participants, revealing three main processes. First, prior to the uprising, participants' socialization was marked by a "transitional vacuum" in which primary socialization spaces failed to provide opportunities to thematize the past, potentially discouraging engagement while also prompting the search for alternative memories. Second, during the mobilizations, police brutality fractured the transitional narrative and the uprising functioned as a social space where counter-memories were reworked through collective assemblies, conversations with families, and self-directed information practices. Finally, in the post-uprising period, public discourse shifted toward more conservative framings, a development that does not indicate hegemonic consensus but instead propels the retreat of counter-memories into hidden transcripts.

By theorising memory as infra-repression and analysing the interaction between official and counter-memories at the micro-level, this article sheds light on how repression and resistance operate within societies shaped by authoritarian legacies. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and studying hidden forms of resistance, particularly in contexts of rising authoritarianism and far-right threats.

KEYWORDS: Chile, Social Uprising, Hidden transcripts, Counter-memories, Soft Repression, Transitions to democracy.

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1. Introduction

Collective memory has been recognised as a central element in legitimizing the power of ruling elites within nation-states. This is particularly evident in societies with violent pasts, such as those undergoing transitional processes (Grodsky, 2007; Adler, 2012; Kovras, 2013; Marszałek-Kawa and Wawrzyński, 2016; Belmonte and Rochlitz, 2019; Bueno, 2021). In these contexts, narrating the past serves not only to consolidate the authority of the elites leading these transitions, but also to construct a narrative aimed at reducing conflict in societies marked by political violence and the impunity of perpetrators. Such processes often entail the demobilisation of civil society (Kovras, 2013; Jara Ibarra, 2019).

This highlights the potential of memory as a tool that discourages political participation—or, in other words, its repressive effects. Scholars have emphasised the need to move beyond classical forms of repression to explore more subtle mechanisms that operate beyond protest events (Ferree, 2004; Earl, 2011; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020; Gunzelmann, 2024). One such case is soft repression (Ferree, 2004), which involves the stigmatization and ridicule of protesters and their demands, but also surveillance and legal repression. Unlike conventional repressive strategies, this type of repression infiltrates the organisation and discourse of activists and social movements, thereby preventing mobilisation. Collective memory, insofar as it shapes shared interpretive frameworks of the past, may produce similar effects to this form of subtle repression.

This article argues that official memory can operate as a demobilising mechanism that takes on a specific form in post-authoritarian societies. The argument draws on James Scott's (1990) distinction between hidden and public transcripts, where the former constitutes the basis of resistance—infrapolitics. It is proposed that, in transitional contexts, official memory is a central component of the public transcript, operating through the infiltration of the culture of the oppressed—what is here conceptualised as infra-repression. In turn, protesters resist these dominant interpretations through counter-memories, which constitute a core component of the hidden transcript.

This dynamic will be analysed through the *Chile Despertó* movement, also known as the Estallido Social, which began on October 18, 2019, and led to the largest protests ever recorded in the country's history (Joignant et al., 2020). The movement brought together a wide range of demands challenging the foundations of the neoliberal model imposed during the dictatorship and maintained by political elites during the transition. This article unpacks how the official mnemonic project of the transition shapes participants' subjectivities and how protesters resist and contest these interpretations during the mobilisations. While focusing on the 2019 social outburst, the discussion situates these events within longer-term historical and political processes, illustrating how collective memory and patterns of repression are shaped by Chile's broader authoritarian legacy.

2. Memory and repression in the Configuration of Public and Hidden Transcripts

The possibility of progress through 'the struggle' was central to modern conceptions of social change, premised on the idea that the contradictions of capitalism propel history (Marx and Engels, 1848[1967]). Yet the wars, genocides, and dictatorships of the 20th century challenged this assumption, questioning the capacity of structural material inequalities to produce such progress and prompting a further theorisation of the role of culture. Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971[2020]) was pivotal, revealing how cultural domination is

necessary to produce consent and compliance among the oppressed. In contrast, Scott (1990) argues that the appearance of consensus does not equate to genuine consent. Distinguishing between the discourse of power—the public transcript—and the discourse of the oppressed—the hidden transcript—he demonstrates that domination cannot exist without resistance.

On one hand, public transcript reflects the self-representation of elites, reaffirming and legitimizing their power. It stems from the stratification present in all societies, which divides those who rule from those who obey—that is, domination. On the other hand, this does not mean the dominated are complacent; rather, the public sphere is a dangerous space for expressing dissent. Scott argues that a clandestine dimension of discourse—the hidden transcript—is key to understanding the politics of the oppressed. It functions as a subculture that reinterprets the hegemonic order, rejects dominant ideology, and remains in constant tension with it. These protected spheres provide the ground for infrapolitics, from which insurrections and revolutions may emerge.

The aim of this section is to extend Scott's approach to analyse cultural domination and resistance in relation to social movements. While social movement research largely overlooked the cultural character of social movements, both the new social movements' literature (Melucci, 1989) and the "cultural turn" of the late 1990s (Johnston, 2016) brought cultural dimensions, including collective memory, to the fore. These studies have contributed to characterising how cultural factors such as identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p. 287) and memory (Daphi and Zamponi, 2019) impact the emergence and maintenance of social movements. However, studies have also explored the potential of such cultural factors as a form of repression (Ferree, 2004; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020), positing that culture can function not only as a means of liberation but also as a factor of domination.

Thus, this article proposes two theoretical keys drawn from Scott to analyse cultural domination and resistance in post-transitional contexts, focusing specifically on the role of memory. First, it frames official memories and counter-memories as central to public and hidden transcripts. Second, it conceptualises the violence used to suppress the hidden transcript as Infra-repression—a systematic effort to dismantle infrapolitics. While Scott has examined infra-resistance, this study elaborates a novel theoretical link between hidden transcripts and memory as a form of infra-political repression.

2.1. Collective Memories: The Contentious Relationship Between the Canon and Counter-memories.

Collective memory, as proposed by Halbwachs (1925 [1992]), implies that individual memories 'make sense' within socially constructed frameworks. Assmann (2008) further develops the concept by theorizing the role of culture and distinguishing between two types of memory: cultural memory and communicative memory. While cultural memory is long-lasting and maintained through institutionalized means, communicative memory refers to short-term recollections transmitted orally in everyday interactions.

Assmann (2008) conceptualises cultural memory as the canon, involving processes of archive selection and institutionalisation undertaken by those who hold power and authority. Within this framework, modern states canonize memories as part of their projects of nationhood and collective identity (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Huyssen, 2003). The canon is reinforced through means of consent (Miliband, 1990), including museums, archives, school curricula, and commemorations (Huyssen, 2003). Official memories are selective and hierarchical, excluding subaltern or dissident memories that do not fit this mnemonic project. This works argues that the canon functions as a key component of the public transcript and may operate as a mechanism of domination.

Memory, however, is conflictive and contested (Rigney, 2016). Various agents with diverse agendas seek to define what the past is. As Jelin (2003) notes, memory does not exist on its own but is produced by specific social actors—memory entrepreneurs—who struggle over what is remembered, how, and for what purpose. Specifically, social movements are a key agent in mnemonic struggles or battles by undertaking memory projects (Daphi and Zamponi, 2019). Therefore, exclusion from the canon does not eliminate counter-memories; they continue to be produced in an interaction with the canon.

Beyond these more elaborated mnemonic projects, some memories do not seek hegemonic contestation but are rather disorganised and fragmentary—emerging, in Scott's terms, precisely from spaces of infrapolitics. Pollak (2006) conceptualises silence as a form of memory under trauma and repression. These "subterranean memories" remain marginal out of fear, shame, or inaudibility—making silence a form of expression, not mere absence. Thus, the fact that not all memories reach public inscription due to symbolic and political inequalities does not erase them. Memories, as also explored in Scott's study, could be hidden from the public transcript.

The canon thus serves as an instrument for elites to inscribe power within the public transcript. However, counter-memories excluded from the canon emerge and persist within the infrapolitics of the oppressed. This article analyses how memories are produced and contested in post-transition Chile, focusing on the Chilean uprising.

2.2. The role of Repression in Public transcript: Infra-repression.

Repression has conventionally been understood as political violence by the state during protests. Davenport (2005) defines it as actions by authorities that restrict behaviour or beliefs through sanctions (e.g., curfews, arrests, banning organisations) or by physically harming citizens (e.g., torture, disappearances). Earl (2011) expands this definition, noting that repression may aim to prevent social movements from emerging, not only to suppress existing protests. This section conceptualises this as Infra-repression, in dialogue with novel perspectives on repression within social movement literature.

As repressive strategies have grown more complex, attention has turned to less conventional forms, commonly referred to as soft repression. Ferree (2004) conceptualises this as non-violent or symbolic tactics that undermine social movements, including ridicule, stigma, and silencing, as observed in the US feminist movement. While Ferree highlights the role of non-state actors, Jämte and Ellefsen (2020) adopt a multilevel approach to examine soft repression in Sweden's radical left-libertarian movement. They show how labelling and categorisation processes can contribute to activists' self-policing and self-silencing, while also reinforcing divisions between militant and moderate factions.

Soft repression has also been enacted through legislative powers and surveillance. García (2014) analyses the Spanish government's response to the 15M movement, including municipal by-laws, fines, and increased identity checks. These measures channelled protests into acceptable forms, divided radicals from moderates, and fostered paranoia within movements. Gunzelmann (2024) studies the impact of surveillance on the Catalan independence movement, focusing on the feeling of being watched, which internalized a sense of threat. As a result, activists developed a security culture that weakened internal democracy and hindered recruitment.

The previous studies show that even when repression moves beyond protest events and does not rely on overt physical violence, these strategies profoundly affect the organisation and tactics of social movements. This study extends these findings to theorise infra-repression as the infiltration of the hidden transcript by power, intended to prevent infrapolitics (Scott, 1990) from escalating into broader insurrection or mobilisation. The final part of this section therefore proceeds in two steps: first, it justifies the application of this framework to liberal democracies; second, it distinguishes infra-repression from related concepts.

Scott's concept of infrapolitics has been documented in societies distinct from modern Western liberal democracies, where repression occurs within institutionalized frameworks. The conventional approach to liberal democracies assumes the state holds a monopoly on legitimate use of force and symbolic violence (Weber, 1946[1919]; Bourdieu, 1991), but constrained by human rights, pluralism, and the protection of a deliberative public sphere (Habermas, 1985). This means that repression is considered legitimate only when political action threatens the democratic order itself, while the state should still guarantee and respect the right to protest1. Unlike in Scott's empirical cases, the democratic frame allows social movements to emerge within the public transcript and provides conditions for the articulation of a counterculture of the oppressed.

However, modern nation-states consolidate through processes of political and symbolic homogenisation that entail the exclusion or neutralisation of ideologies that challenge their legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). While conventional and soft repression usually target organised collective action, understood as activists or organisations with some degree of structure and ideology, infra-repression, as proposed in this paper, aims to prevent the emergence of a counterculture that could reinterpret the public transcript and challenge the established order. These processes unfold within the realm of infrapolitics as the containment or neutralisation of everyday forms of resistance, producing silencing, self-policing, and the instillation of fear, among other effects. This is central since, as proposed by Scott (1990), infrapolitics may constitute the ground from which uprisings can emerge.

Conceptualising complex forms of repression in this way has three main advantages. First, internalising the public transcript sustains power while reducing the need for overt violence (Scott, 1990). For governments, such tactics are more resource-efficient (Alcántara-Lizárraga & Jima-González, 2024) and help preserve public legitimacy (García, 2014). Second, different forms of repression can operate complementarily. For example, harsh conventional repression, such as forced disappearances, can produce trauma that prevents new generations from discussing politics, functioning as a form of infra-repression. Third, more spontaneous and less organised uprisings, like the one under study, demonstrate that infrapolitical spaces remain crucial even in liberal democracies, as the scale of such mobilisations depends on their existence.

2.3. The transitional canon: legitimizing elite power and structuring public memory

In post-authoritarian societies undergoing democratic transitions, the Canon is central in stabilizing power after collective trauma from systematic state violence (Grodsky, 2007; Adler, 2012; Kovras, 2013; Marszałek-Kawa and Wawrzyński, 2016; Belmonte and Rochlitz, 2019; Bueno, 2021). Such violence fractures the sense of national belonging, breaking the connection between individuals and the collective identity of the nation (Alexander, 2004). As several studies have shown, elites use this rupture as an opportunity to reestablish their dominance, with memory playing a central role in that process (Grodsky, 2007; Adler, 2012; Kovras, 2013).

Although transitional processes vary, transitional memories often aim to prevent conflict to consolidate the emerging social order (Marszałek-Kawa & Wawrzyński, 2016). Elites use various tools to impose these narratives, including control over archives, curricula, and commemorative practices (Adler, 2012). They also establish national myths that personify collective suffering in elite figures (Grodsky, 2007). These narratives typically involve a moderate frequency of memory use—meaning it appears only occasionally in elite

[1] A discussion critically addressing liberal democracy is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the right to protest is systematically violated (Amnesty International, 2023), and Abozaid (2025) compellingly argues from a decolonial perspective that political violence is constitutive of modern nation-states, providing the authority necessary for the expansion of state structures to non-Western democracies.

discourse—primarily to legitimise leadership roles, while avoiding deeper structural issues such as economic inequality (Marszałek-Kawa & Wawrzyński, 2016).

The transitional discourse developed by elites involves an exclusionary dynamic that reproduces its own structures, a logic of path dependence (Bueno, 2021), where dominant narrative frameworks tend to perpetuate themselves. This dynamic is sustained through an elite consensus that hegemonizes silence or a linkage trap (Kovras, 2013) that leads to the demobilisation of civil society. This is particularly evident in negotiated transitions, where truth commissions exclude narratives that contradict transitional discourse, and incorporate the figure of the victim only to legitimise state narratives (Riaño and Uribe, 2016). In this sense, transitional justice reveals not only the exclusion of victims' memories from official discourse, but also their co-optation when included.

However, these studies also show how international pressure, together with the ongoing memory work of organisations excluded from hegemonic narratives (Kovras, 2013; Riaño and Uribe, 2016), creates tensions and produces critical junctures for change (Bueno, 2021). It has also been shown how memories of past political violence resist fragmentarily against being categorized as victims and incorporated into official narratives (Foxen, 2000). Thus, although the canon appears to dominate, counter-memories within the hidden transcript persist and can be articulated into broader mnemonic projects. This was also the case in the Chilean uprising, as will be discussed in the following section.

2.4. Chile: Transitional transcript and Its Reactivation During the Social Outburst

After the dictatorship[2], the *Concertación*[3] coalition led a negotiated transition that ensured the continuation of the neoliberal model. Known as the "Democracy of Agreements" (Siavelis, 2009), these arrangements sought to balance presidential agendas with the interests of right-wing forces still linked to military power. Such transitional transcript prioritized democratic stability and depicted political tensions that challenged the post-authoritarian consensus as threats to democracy that needed to be neutralized.

This transcript was reinforced by the politics of memory (Stern, 2009; Collins, Hite, and Joignant, 2013; Jara-Ibarra, 2019). The Transition's mnemonic project was shaped by the need to avoid conflict with military elites who remained in power; therefore, no effective transitional justice mechanisms were implemented. This enabled both right- and left-wing actors to use memory strategically to legitimize their political authority and resist narratives that challenge their image (Collins, Hite, and Joignant, 2013). However, a central alignment between the two sides was the starting point of the story: the transitional narrative portrayed the 1973 coup as the result of polarization during the Socialist Government, a framing that was reinforced through public speeches, educational curricula, and truth commissions[4]. This narrative therefore explains the conditions under which military violence was framed as necessary; it also presents this violence as belonging to the past under the leadership of the new democratic elites.

Jara-Ibarra (2019), demonstrates that the dictatorship's violence not only dismantled organised collective resistance but also produced a multidimensional collective trauma, fostering fear, mistrust, and social withdrawal among Chileans. During the 1990s, the memory of the transition entailed "forgetting as a mechanism of survivance", which limited public discussion of past violence and, therefore, the processing of

[2] The Chilean dictatorship began on September 11, 1973, and officially ended in 1989 with the plebiscite that defeated Augusto Pinochet.

[3] Coalition of Political parties from the centre-left wind that governed Chile from 1990 until 2010.

[4] Such as the Valech Commission (2003), which documented political imprisonment and torture during the dictatorship and the Rettig Commission (1990), which recorded human rights violations resulting in death or disappearance. Both had limited power to sanction perpetrators.

this social trauma. For the author, such trauma, along with neoliberal modernization and democratic governmentality, prevented the emergence of social conflict and led to the demobilisation of Chilean society. Chile thus provides a compelling case in which the transitional mnemonic project exerted a demobilizing influence.

However, as no hegemony is ever complete, Collins, Hite, and Joignant (2013) show that representations of Chile's violent past are not monolithic but reflect deep social tensions between private and public memories. Scholars have examined how social movements serve as spaces to process the trauma of the dictatorship while also using memories of the past as resources for contemporary struggles (Jara-Ibarra, 2019; Henríquez et al., 2025). It is in this context that a new cycle of social mobilisation emerged in the 2000s[5], increasingly challenging the imposed model and culminating in the 2019 Social Outburst.

The *Chile Despertó* movement or *estallido social* began on October 18, following the violent repression of high school students protesting a Metro fare increase. What began as a specific protest quickly escalated into a nationwide mobilisation demanding the resignation of President Piñera and greater social justice. During the uprising, police brutality was denounced internationally[6], as reflected in the numerous human rights violations reported by participants[7]. This violence did not deter the demonstrators from protesting, on the contrary, they developed several tactics to resist police violence.

November 15 marked an important milestone in this cycle of protest, as, faced with the crisis and the impossibility of stopping the demonstrations, the political elites signed a pact to initiate constitutional reform. The 15N agreement mirrored the strategy of the earlier negotiated transition—carried out without popular involvement—that ended the dictatorship. However, demonstrators continued mobilizing until the COVID-19 lockdown began in March 2020.

3. Methods

This article is based on a case study (Thomas, 2007) exploring how memory shaped protesters' resistance to police violence during the *Chile Despertó* movement. Data for this article primarily come from 40 semi-structured interviews (Bernard & Ryan, 2009) with participants, complemented by secondary documents from organisations and government, and participant observation. Interview questions were developed from five analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: political socialisation, organisational aspects, socio-psychological factors, resistance to repression, and memory. The interview guide was validated by two social movement scholars who supervised the main researcher.

[5] While this article focuses primarily on the 2019 Chilean uprising, it situates the movement within a broader cycle of contention. Scholars have traced its roots to various social movements since the 1990s, including feminist, student, and Indigenous movements, which gradually contested the Chilean model and built-up mobilisation patterns (Pleyers, 2024). This can be observed in the basal level of contentious activity in Chile since 2009 of around 500 protests per semester, with recurring spikes where the most evident and massive is the social outbreak of 2019 (Joignant et al., 2020, p. 4).

[6] Various international organisations such as Amnesty International, the Canadian Human Rights Commission, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have verified these facts and recognised the systematic nature of violations of Human Rights in the actions of the Armed Forces and police.

[7] According to the report 'Figures of Institutional Violence' by the National Prosecutor's Office (July 2020), 8,510 cases of human rights violations were recorded, including 1,315 minors and 1,559 women affected, 6,057 cases of unlawful coercion, 363 cases of sexual violence (including forced nudity, sexual abuse, sexual threats, and aggravated sexual assault), 3,219 firearm injuries, 615 serious injuries, and 411 eye injuries.

A non-probability, quota-based sampling strategy (Bernard, 2013) was employed for the interviews. The inclusion criterion for interviewees was participation in at least one demonstration in Santiago during the social outburst. The study focused on Santiago since it concentrates population density, political institutions, and media visibility, and also hosted the largest demonstrations. Acknowledging that marginalized groups face disproportionate and different types of repression (Earl & Braithwaite, 2022), the sample quotas followed an intersectional approach to capture variation across class, gender, and race.

Fieldwork took place between February and May 2024. Recruitment combined social media advertising and snowball sampling to reach underrepresented groups. Participants received study details, consent forms, and compensation. Interviews lasted 40 minutes to 2 hours and were audio-recorded with consent. Saturation was reached after approximately 36 interviews.

The sample successfully represents diverse political backgrounds and groups, including participants of different genders (cis and trans), social classes (middle and working class), and age ranges (18–24, 26–34, 34–50, and over 50). However, despite this diversity, the sample has some limitations: Indigenous and immigrant participants were underrepresented, and most participants were highly active (i.e., participated more than seven times), which limits the representation of lower-participation individuals. Future research could address these gaps by including less-active participants or underrepresented groups to explore how collective memory and resistance emerge outside highly mobilised networks.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) facilitated by NVivo 15. Coding produced 123 codes grouped into five themes. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the fragmented, interstitial character of the hidden transcript, thematic analysis was considered the most suitable approach. Unlike discourse analysis, which assumes systematically produced texts often originating from powerful institutions, the hidden transcript resists such formal articulation and emerges in dispersed, subtle ways. Thematic analysis thus enables an abductive integration of empirical findings with the theoretical framework while accommodating these concealed forms of resistance.

The analysis was abductive (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), moving iteratively between data and theory. Early coding revealed a pattern: although participants had few spaces to discuss the past, their accounts consistently reflected transversal ideas about the coup and dictatorship. This prompted a theoretical turn to Scott's framework on public transcripts and infra-politics, allowing silence to be interpreted as a politically structured outcome. Mechanisms were refined through constant comparison, and themes were triangulated with literature, government speeches, organisational documents, and interviews.

4. *Analysis*

The following section presents the analysis, based primarily on interviews with movement participants, and is structured in two parts. The first develops the concept of the transitional vacuum, showing how the transitional canon shapes political subjectivities—both by restricting spaces to discuss the past and by prompting the search for alternative memories. The second examines the social outburst, first addressing the rupture in the transitional transcript and the role of police violence, and then detailing the mechanisms through which counter-memories were rearticulated. Both parts aim to capture the struggles over memory in this cycle of protest.

4.1. The Transitional Vacuum: Canon and Counter-memories in the Struggle over the Past

As explained previously, within the context of a pacted transition, the new elites in power frame "extreme" political views as the cause of the crisis that led to the coup and the subsequent dictatorship. This narrative highlights the need to protect democracy during the transition in order to prevent a similar crisis. As Aylwin (1990) stated in his first presidential address, Chile had been:

> *'Ideologized and divided by irreconcilable utopias, hatred prevailed over solidarity and force over reason. After years of bloody divisions and the predominance of violence, today we meet again, with a patriotic spirit and a willingness to understand.'*

The interviewees—especially those who lived through the dictatorship and early transition—echo key ideas of this transitional transcript. Kathlyn (woman, middle class, 25–33) recalls *"seeing Pinochet there, as commander-in-chief, standing next to the president of the Republic, where everything had to be done 'as far as possible.'"* The expression "as far as possible" reflects the internalization of the institutional arrangements of what Siavelis (2009) calls the democracy of agreements. Yet, as the next excerpt shows, memories of the coup and dictatorship take on a paradoxical character: while there are some sort of general notions about this period, interviewees report few social spaces in which to articulate any coherent narrative.

> *'Because it was only through reading, or through what television said, or through what the public holidays represented. Beyond that um, it wasn't much—what little information you could get—to really form a concrete idea of what it means to live through something like that [the dictatorship], or, well, to understand what it might feel like in perspective. Um, we lived under the narrative that the dictatorship had committed many excesses, but that it had saved the economy'. (Nano, man, middle class, 34-50)*

Socialization processes through which interviewees formed representations of Chile's violent past were marked by silences, discomfort, and symbolic violence. Despite varied backgrounds, families, schools, and the media offered few opportunities to articulate these events. While previous studies have shown how the transitional mnemonic project hegemonizes silence (Kovras, 2013; Jara Ibarra, 2019), this study shows the specific way in which this project shapes participants subjectivities and their engagement with politics. This phenomenon is referred to here as the transitional vacuum: an absence of explicit social spaces to articulate collective memory that nonetheless influences individuals in two ways. First, it contributes to depoliticisation and demobilisation; second, it generates unease that can motivate attempts to reconstruct silenced histories. These dynamics will be unpacked next.

Overall, most of the study participants reported being unable to discuss the dictatorship with their families. When they attempted to bring up events from this period, they often encountered discomfort and silence, as political topics were frequently treated as taboo at home. In many cases, questions about these issues were met with subtle forms of censorship, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

> *'Never. No one had ever told me about what had happened, and I couldn't believe it. No, no, I really couldn't believe that no one had ever talked to me about this. I truly felt like I had been living in a bubble.' (Iris, woman, working class, 26-34)*

> *'I think that now, very few years ago, people started talking about these things. Because before it was like a taboo, like, I don't know, when I was a girl, I asked who Pinochet was after he died. There were people who celebrated and others who cried. So, I would ask my relatives and they would say: 'No, you have to be quiet'' (Tamara, woman, working class, 25-33)*

Similarly, most interviewees reported not seeing content related to the dictatorship in their schools, and the use of vocabulary aligned with the transitional narrative. For example, the use of military government, a euphemism that equates the dictatorship with other democratic governments. In this way, the transitional

narrative is reinforced through silences but also through symbolic violence or the imposition of legitimate categories of naming (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, when Pedro is asked if they talked about the dictatorship at school, he responded:

> *'No, they talked about the military government. I was never in a school that explained to me what happened during the dictatorship. I had to leave school to understand it.' (Pedro, queer, middle class, 25-33)*

Both family and school emerge as primary sites of socialization that fail to provide legitimate spaces for articulating the dictatorship as a shared past, thereby reinforcing silence and limiting the formation of coherent narratives about state violence. While such vacuum is produced structurally by the canon, it is also a lingering effect from the more conventional repression (Davenport, 2005) from the dictatorship. Silence is sustained by the generational trauma of military violence and impunity, preventing the intergenerational transmission of memory to protect younger generations. Charlie (man, working class, over 50), who worked on a memory project in the *Hornos de Lonquén*[8], reflects on this in the following excerpt:

> *'The third generation is just getting to know the story of their grandfather, because the fear, the terror they imposed there, made people not speak, or became it is a matter that only adults spoke. The children couldn't be there. Out of fear, but also out of protection.'*

The violence of the dictatorship, however, not only had direct effects on its victims but also impacted society by establishing politics of fear. Secret intelligence services such as DINA, along with the threat of infiltration and the risk of being reported by others, produced fear of each other. While Jara Ibarra (2019) suggests that trauma extend beyond those directly targeted by military violence, this study identify how new generations still reproduce such accounts. For example, the next quote shows a reflection about the possibility of people reporting on political activity during the dictatorship by a participant that was not alive during this period.

> *'Exactly, they were… but what happens is that you could still see them. The neighbours, you could see them—they were the ones who would inform on people—because, well, you could see they had more resources. They lived in the same area, but they were wealthier, dressed better.' (Iris, woman, working class, 26-34)*

Fear induced by surveillance illustrates how the transitional vacuum extends beyond direct victims, shaping broader social caution and self-policing. The trauma and fear prevent socializing spaces from thematizing the past, but also render politics as something problematic, and extremist ideologies as something dangerous. Even when it is difficult to talk about the past, interpretations still permeate the different socialization spaces of interviewees. This can be seen in the next excerpt:

> *'But what she always said was that it was all the fault of the political parties, she always told me that, and a lot of this discourse. She always said that the communists and the UDI [right wing party] were to blame, that was always her topic. And that stuck with me. So, I've never been politically active, but I think it has a lot to do with this.' (Lautaro, queer, middle class, 34-50)*

Lautaro recounts their mother's interpretation of the coup, which aligns with the transitional narrative that frames the crisis as the result of political extremism. In the absence of social spaces to discuss or critically engage with these events, such interpretations filtered and were internalized without problematization, as observed across several interviewees' trajectories. In this case, the participant directly links their mother's perspective to their own political inactivity, as this narrative shapes their understanding of politics as inherently

[8] The Lonquén lime kilns were the site where the remains of 15 campesinos, detained by police in 1973, were found in 1978—one of the first discoveries of victims of enforced disappearance during the Chilean dictatorship.

risky and conflictual. These patterns suggest that the "forgetting as a mechanism of survivance" produces an absence of critical engagement with the past, which can lead to demobilisation, thereby revealing the micro-level mechanisms that Jara Ibarra (2019) identifies at the institutional level.

Paradoxically, the mnemonic project of the transition is reinforced by the impossibility of explicitly talking about or discussing what happened—the transitional vacuum. The use of the term vacuum, however, does not only imply emptiness; rather, it impels and enables the search for representations of the past. While discourse intends to regulate the way to speak about certain topics, it does not produce silence but a compulsion to talk about it (Foucault, 1978). Overall, the imposed silence surrounding the past and its controversial nature generates a sense of unease and highlights for interviewees the importance of this period. This motivates them to begin a personal search for what happened. During this process, they encounter counter-memories in the form of narratives or protest, as the following excerpts illustrate.

> *'And this year in particular, the 40th anniversary, everything was very raw, very intense. My colleagues shared things they had never shared before, not even with others in their circle, simply because it was the 40th anniversary. The milestone gave them an opening to remember and share things they had kept to themselves, like their own experiences of torture.*
>
> *I remember once a math professor, who had been tortured in Placilla, shared his experience. We were all obviously very affected. I later spoke to another colleague and asked how it had been the first time he shared this, and he said he had never told anyone before. It was truly the first time.' (Antonio, man, middle class, 34-50)*
>
> *'I think at some point I saw the relatives, mostly mothers, um, wives of the disappeared detainees, who used to walk around the square in front of La Moneda, along the Alameda. They would walk around the square holding the classic signs asking, 'Where are they?' I was working in a SEREMI at the time, and I remember seeing these very elderly women. And I remember thinking, like, what are they doing? I knew, in a very general way, about disappeared children, but I didn't have any emotional or conscious closeness to it. And I remember that moment really marked a before and after for me.' (Macarena, woman, middle class, 34-50)*

What Macarena observes is a protest, which is also a mnemonic practice carried out by the relatives of the disappeared (AFDD, Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Detainees). Organisations like this one built mnemonic project that contest the canon and its narrative. The exclusion of conflictual memories from the canon does not eliminate them; they simply continue to be produced in other spheres. Thus, although socialization spaces to problematize the past were limited, interviewees encountered counter-memories circulating in different contexts.

As explored in this section, participants' memories of Chile's violent past are marked by a lack of socialization spaces in which to articulate a coherent collective memory. This vacuum contributes to internalizing common-sense understandings about politics, in other words, infiltrating the infra-politics domain. Yet other counter-memories persist and are further developed through organisations' mnemonic projects. The uprising provided both the space and the resources to problematize this past and rearticulate these counter-memories, fracturing the transitional canon. This rupture was mediated by conventional repression, as will be unpacked next.

4.2. The Social Outburst as a fracture in the canon and the reworking of the counter-memories

Police repression in this movement was not only qualitatively more severe (Cortez et al., 2021), but also quantitatively more widespread, affecting larger sectors of the population (Joignant et al., 2020). *Carabineros de Chile*, differently from many Latin American police forces, historically held a high level of legitimacy among Chileans, a situation that started to change once corruption cases within the institution were publicly revealed. Yet this lack of legitimacy became stronger after the outburst, as some quantitative studies reveal (Fundación Chile 21, 2020; Dammert, Elorrieta & Alda, 2021). This illegitimacy of the police is reflected in the interviews across the board. In this section, it is argued that repression during the uprising was perceived by demonstrators as illegitimate, which fractured the transitional narrative and accelerated a process of engaging with counter-mnemonic projects.

Either as observers or as victims, interviewees' accounts of repression describe witnessing how vulnerable people—families, children, and the elderly—were indiscriminately repressed. At the same time, those protesting peacefully were just as likely to be attacked as those engaging in violent tactics. This suggests a lack of guarantees that could protect protesters from repression—such as participating in certain forms of protest or belonging to a vulnerable group. Moreover, when abuses occur, they tend to go unpunished. Interviewees acknowledge failures in judicial procedures and accountability mechanisms, pointing to the impunity of the police for their crimes.

> *'And when they saw the fact that, I don't know, the same, um, a peaceful protest with, with pregnant women, with children, with elderly people, and when a water tank or a picket arrived, and they threw tear gas, water and it reached everyone... They didn't discriminate, if they were pure adults or, or, no. They threw tear gas bombs.' (Byron, man, working class, 18-24)*

> *'It's not dangerous because protesting is dangerous, but because the repression is so heavy, because the cops are doing whatever they want, taking whoever they want, in an excessive manner, lying in a blatant way.' (Andrea woman, working class, 26-34)*

The fact that people protesting peacefully were nonetheless repressed, and that repression was constant and overreaching, showed interviewees that it is not a specific type of political participation that justifies police intervention, but political participation in general. Interviewees recognise protest as a political right. In this sense, the police violence deployed during the *estallido* was not legitimate within a democratic framework, as Jaime (working class, 34-50) expresses in the following excerpt.

> *'I've always said that I was there exercising my right to protest. And that, here or anywhere else in the world, is something you're allowed to do. I mean, it's not a crime, you know, to go out and express what you feel—it's not a crime. But in a country like this one, where the right wants to rule and only them, they've treated it differently; they've heavily stigmatised and marginalised the act of going out to protest.'*

This renders repression illegitimate not only within a democratic framework, but also in relation to the mnemonic project of the transition. Repression fractures the progressive narrative of the transition, which assured that political violence belonged to the past. As interviewees elaborate, when protest becomes threatening to the political establishment, it is met with repression, as it was under the dictatorship. In this way, the progressive narrative proves inadequate to make police violence intelligible during the mobilizations.

> *'So, in that sense, it really scares me to think, like, democracy only protects us up to a certain point, but if someone comes along with enough power and support, eventually they could overthrow it, and we'd go back to the same thing. So, we're not as safe as they want us to believe.' (Fernando, man, middle class, 18-24)*

> *'And also, thinking about how, damn, the things that right-wing sectors here in Chile used to say, or what we as a more progressive movement believed, that this kind of thing would be difficult to happen again, that the dictatorship was something that had, in a way, already passed. We realized that no, that all of that was just "lip service", and that once something happened that genuinely made them uncomfortable, the police forces were right there, doing and committing the same things again.' (Jose, man, working class, over 50)*

In the context of this fracture of the transitional narrative, counter-memories begin to be articulated through dynamics that emerge amid the mobilisations. First, the mobilizations became social spaces—both culturally and physically—where speaking about the past and politics was legitimate and encouraged. Both in the demonstrations themselves and in other types of gatherings, such as *cabildos*[9], interviewees describe meeting other protesters and exchanging ideas. Within this context, the mnemonic projects of organisations and other narratives of defiance found a space to emerge. As Pedro elaborates:

> *'I mean, I had never been in a cabildo with so many people, talking about what I believe this country could be, and someone who doesn't know me, who's twice my age, listens to me and validates my opinion, and I listen to them and we reflect together on what water is, how we legislate it, and what the limits of companies should be.'*

Such dynamics were extended beyond spaces of protest, allowing not only the exchange of stories about the past in other social spaces such as families and groups of friends, but also the collective construction of political subjectivities by problematising what it means to be Chilean (Pleyers, 2024). In the following quote, Alba reflects on how, after the Social Outburst, her mother spoke for the first time about her political experiences during the dictatorship. It is revealing that Alba uses the term "hidden" rather than "erased," pointing to how these memories had been obscured by fear rooted in the dictatorship.

> *'She hadn't told me before. Of course, it was hidden, like in the background. I feel like my parents were left with a lot of fear from the dictatorship, and so they didn't want me to get involved in anything. Especially my mum.' (Alba, woman, middle class, 26–34 years)*

Another mechanism is self-directed information, often through social media. Most interviewees reported a dissonance between mainstream media coverage and their own lived experiences of mobilisation. This motivated them to seek information independently, using alternative channels beyond the hegemonic media. As a result, interviewees accessed resources produced by organisations on these issues, including materials about the dictatorship's past. While other studies have emphasised the importance of alternative media infrastructure to coordinate backlash against police violence (Anisin, 2016), this case shows the importance of this digital space to articulate collective memories.

> *'But yes, at least I started to, um, uh, um, let's see, to inform myself. Precisely, uh, later, in the period of the outbreak. It was where I started to inform myself the most because information started to come out more, from people that were, precisely, assimilating what was happening with what happened in the dictatorship, with the outburst.' (Byron, man, working class, 18-24)*

[9] Grassroots assemblies.

After the mobilizations ended, the establishment quickly moved to reverse the political momentum of the uprising. Measures included expanding police powers, and criminalising protest through media and official discourse (García-Perdomo et al., 2023; Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Further, the post-outburst period, the pandemic, and the subsequent backlash were marked by a strategy of memory erasure implemented by the establishment (Badilla Rajevic, 2020). A telling example is Pedro's reflection on the "Jardín de la Resistencia"[10] which was later covered with concrete by President Boric's government. As he notes, this erasure effectively blocks any space to honour what participants lived during the uprising.

> *'So, we are here right next to where the Jardín de la Resistencia was, and I feel that a concession to the pain caused by this erasure would have been to preserve spaces of memory that could honour what we lived through as young people, regarding the social uprising. I believe the politics of erasure continues.'*

This policy is nevertheless resisted by the participants in this study as they uphold these counter-memories hidden from the public transcript. The shift toward centre-right positions in civil society—focused on security, order, and rejection of social protest—would seemingly indicate the success of this erasure and conservative discourse. However, drawing on Scott's analysis, it is likely that rather than hegemonic dominance, this shift represents a context in which freely expressing dissent entails significant costs.

For example, Jaime (man, working class, 34–50), who lost an eye due to police violence, recounts that he lied at his workplace when asked what had happened to him, due to the stigma faced by participants of the social outburst. In other words, he self-censors in response to the public script that criminalizes the movement. However, he is an active part of the *Coordinadora de Víctimas de Trauma Ocular*[11] and regularly participates in commemorations of the police attacks. He describes these commemorations in the following quote.

> *'More than anything, I wasn't looking for recognition, but rather trying to make memory, not just with me, because it's also a strange period. I mean, it's not strange, but it's difficult. Because almost all the commemorations start in October. So first comes the one for a friend. Then it's my turn, then another friend's, then another comrade's, then another one, and so on. And you start realizing that you must be at all of them, because you must make memory, and memory is really important to me in these moments. So, it's done by holding the commemorations, and it brings us a little closer as victims of ocular trauma'.*

Through these commemorations, Jaime emphasises that the acts are not about seeking "recognition", but about creating a shared space of solidarity and care. They are not intended to be inscribed in the public transcript, but to sustain the hidden discourse that preserves collective memories outside official narratives. In fact, as Charlie argues below, it is understood that these official narratives seek to denigrate the history of the social uprising.

> *'This thing of wanting to stain, wanting to denigrate, or that it is a story that they want to impose. They are going to do it all their lives. That's what these bastards were born for. I prefer to stay with this from here, with the people's memories [memorias del pueblo]. I know that there was a learning, that*

[10] The Resistance Garden created by demonstrators during the movement and the site of our interview.

[11] The Coordinators of Victims of Ocular Trauma is a Chilean collective of protesters who suffered eye injuries during the 2019 Social Outburst and advocate for justice and reparation.

> *practices were recovered like the ones that remained in that shelf, the common pots, the class solidarity, and the combative experiences as well. Uh, uh, confrontation.'*

These people's memories (*memorias del pueblo*) are not only expressed as narrative accounts but also conveyed through practices of solidarity and struggle, which, in his words, teach new generations that confrontation is necessary. Thus, counter-memories constitute a core component of the hidden discourse, sustained not only through narratives but also through practices. Furthermore, the social outburst not only enabled the rearticulation of counter-memories but remains for many interviewees a historical milestone—one among many memories of rebellion. Within this framework, repression reminds them that this is—and continues to be—a struggle.

5. Conclusions

This article has explored how the transitional memory project infiltrates the culture of the oppressed, fostering demobilization in post-authoritarian Chile. Conceptualised as the transitional vacuum, the analysis has shown how the cancellation of social spaces for elaborating the violent past allows narratives that render politics as inherently risky to permeate common sense without problematization. However, the analysis also suggests that this vacuum can incentivise a search in which individuals may encounter counter-memories that exist outside the canon.

Moreover, the transitional narrative laid the groundwork for its own fracture: repression question the progressive narrative of the transition, as the right to protest was violated within a democratic framework. After this fracture, protests became spaces where counter-memories were rearticulated through collective assemblies, conversations with families, and self-directed searches for information via non-hegemonic media. This allowed fragmented individual and family experiences to be reworked as a collective counter-memory. After the outburst, and despite the establishment's efforts to erase these counter-memories, they endured through practices of solidarity and remembrance, challenging dominant criminalizing narratives and re-signifying the uprising.

By theorising memory as a form of Infra-repression and documenting its contestation from below, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of repression beyond conventional approaches. It also highlights how different forms of repression work together in shaping subjectivities. Alongside this, the study invites further exploration of how memory can simultaneously serve as a tool of domination and a site of struggle, particularly in societies marked by the unfinished legacies of authoritarian rule. Understanding repression as infiltrating the fragmented counterculture of subalterns is crucial for analysing resistance in individualized societies where the social fabric has been disrupted by military violence.

Likewise, the resistant quality of memory challenges perspectives that assume apparent conformity with the social order reflects the hegemony of dominant classes. The Chilean case exemplifies a broader pattern of social uprisings and mass unrest since the 2010s which have struggled to consolidate into a transformative political force (Bayat, 2021; Bevins, 2023). Social movement scholars have identified internal factors behind this failure, such as the lack of clear structure and leadership (Bayat, 2021), which hinders the construction of leftist hegemony. Consequently, punitive and anti-rights rhetorics have gained hegemonic traction precisely because the left has failed to offer a compelling alternative in this domain (Mouffe, 2018).

The recent conservative shift in public opinion in Chile—centred on demands for security, order, and the rejection of social protest—might suggest the success of a conservative discourse. However, the inability of visible left-wing projects to mobilise these majorities does not imply the absence of counter-memories or

counter-hegemonic frames. This research shows that narratives and mnemonic practices constitute a central part of the hidden discourse, serving as useful repertoires in the struggle to resist cultural erasure. Moreover, the dominance of a regressive political climate does not signal the disappearance of subversive meanings; rather, it may reflect a strategic decision not to publicly contest a discourse that could put life and dignity at risk.

This is not an invitation to romanticise resistance—interviews also reveal how various forms of violence work to dismantle the hidden transcript. Rather, it is a call to study subalternity carefully, even in contexts of apparent conformity. As Scott (1990) suggested, when scholars focus exclusively on the public transcript, canonical narratives, or the effects of repression, they risk reinforcing the illusion of hegemony. Studying the hidden transcript becomes especially important in contexts of far-right policies and violence targeting vulnerable groups such as immigrants. This study could not access these perspectives, likely due to the risks involved in participating openly in political life. A deeper inquiry into the infra-repression of the oppressed is urgent in the face of rising fascist discourses. Resistance is always present; domination is never total.

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