

What Role Do Political Parties Play in Social Protests? Recent Trends in Argentina and Chile

Sofia Donoso*  ^a

Nicolás M. Somma  ^b

Federico M. Rossi  ^c

^a Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Chile (Chile)

^b Instituto de Sociología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile)

^c Departamento de Sociología II, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid (Spain)

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Abstract

There is a growing consensus about the complementary nature of institutional and non-institutional politics as means to push forward policy agendas. However, the bulk of research tends to concentrate on one aspect of this relationship, namely, how social movements influence the political arena, for example by impacting different stages of the policy-making process and creating new political parties. There is comparatively less understanding of the reverse dynamics: the degree to which political parties also influence the protest arena by adopting and utilizing strategies and tactics commonly associated with social movements and by connecting to demonstrators. Focusing on Argentina and Chile, two countries that have experienced massive protest waves in recent years, this article examines the presence of political parties in the organization, staging, and channeling of demonstrations. Given that the reception of political parties in demonstrations is closely tied to whether they are welcome in the protest arena or not, we also analyze how Argentine and Chilean protesters perceive political parties and the level of identification they feel with them. Our primary data source comes from 1935 surveys conducted as part of the *Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation* (CCC) network between 2015 and 2017. We found that political parties in Argentina exhibit stronger ties to social movements compared to those in Chile. We seek to link this outcome to divergent and historically rooted patterns of protest dynamics in both countries and discuss the implications of our findings in the conclusion.

Keywords: Protests; political parties; surveys; Argentina; Chile.

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*  sofia.donoso@uchile.cl

1 Introduction

On October 18th, 2019, Santiago was engulfed in massive protests sparked by an increase in metro fees, which quickly spread throughout the country. Metro stations came under siege, and in an escalating sequence of events that is currently under investigation, certain stations were deliberately set ablaze, resulting in substantial damage. The violence spilled over onto the streets, where supermarkets, pharmacies and other businesses were looted. The escalating chaos compelled the government to shut down the entire metro system, leaving stranded passengers to endure hours-long walks home. The following day, right-wing President Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency and enforced a curfew, initially in Santiago and later in many other cities nationwide. The military was deployed to the streets with the aim of restoring order. The intensity of the violence and destruction, along with the response of the Piñera government, left the nation in a state of shock. While Chile had experienced growing protests since the emergence of the student movement in 2011 (Donoso & von Bülow, 2017), the scale of these demonstrations was unprecedented. Following an almost month-long period of extensive street protests in 2018, the political parties represented in Parliament united and forged an agreement to initiate a constitutional process as a way of exiting the political crisis.

As the country came to a standstill, academics and pundits alike drew parallels with the *¡Qué se vayan todos!* (All must leave!) protests that occurred in Argentina nearly two decades earlier. Over the course of several months, protests against corruption in the Supreme Court prompted the coordinated efforts of unions, political parties, and social movements in their pursuit of judicial democratization. Subsequently, the depletion of dollar reserves and the International Monetary Fund's refusal to support the Argentine government resulted in the closure of banks and the loss of personal savings held in dollars. The severity of the situation led bank savers to actively participate in protests, and the *piquetero* movement, composed of poor unemployed people, played a key role in providing a broad collective action frame criticizing the marginalization of vulnerable sectors resulting from neoliberal policies (Rossi, 2017). The culmination of these mounting tensions arrived when during a week of lootings to supermarkets across the main cities, the government declared a state of siege in December 2001. The population vehemently reacted to this authoritarian decision, resulting in a social upheaval and widespread rejection. The center-right President Fernando de la Rúa resigned after two days of intense protests, during which the police killed nearly 40 persons (Schuster et al., 2002).

The interactions between social movements and political parties are of critical importance in comprehending post-transitional political developments in Chile and Argentina. But these are not isolated cases. Over the past few decades, social movements have surged globally, giving rise to protests and demonstrations on a wide range of issues. These movements have had significant political implications by challenging traditional power structures and paving the way for new political actors. In certain countries, including Spain and Greece, movement-parties have reemerged as activists strive to establish new political formations that can better represent their interests (Della Porta et al., 2017). In other countries such as the United Kingdom, social movements have had an impact on the internal dynamics of established parties, leading left-wing Momentum to gain significant traction within the Labor Party (Avril, 2018). In Latin America, social movements have frequently directed their efforts towards addressing issues of inequality, corruption, and human rights, aiming to challenge and transform the prevailing political and economic status quo. In recent years, social movements have challenged extant political parties and gained power rapidly in countries such as Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and other parts of Latin America. Overall, the rise of social movements has put pressure on traditional

power structures and created new opportunities for political change.

While the relationship between social movements and political parties has been a long-standing topic of debate in social movement scholarship, extant literature has primarily focused on the ways in which social movements can influence the policymaking process and how they might transition into political parties. However, in the context of increasingly intertwined connections, one question that has received relatively less attention is how this relationship unfolds in the protest arena (Hutter, 2013). In this article, we focus on the relationship between social movements and political parties, but in the specific context of demonstrations. We investigate whether political parties are participating in protests and how demonstrators perceive political parties' involvement in these protests. We address this issue by focusing on Argentina and Chile, where there have been massive protest waves in recent years, with varying roles played by political parties. We draw primarily on 1935 surveys conducted as part of the *Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation* (CCC) project. These surveys cover demonstrations between 2015 and 2017 and adapted a standardized methodology defined by the project network¹ to the Argentine and Chilean contexts. This is complemented by secondary literature that allows us to illustrate the role that political parties play in social protests and the use that parties make of movement repertoires and strategies to advance their policy goals. We identify a marked presence of political parties in protest events in Argentina, but not in Chile. Furthermore, our findings indicate a closer relationship between political parties and demonstrators in Argentina compared to Chile, both in terms of active involvement and levels of trust. We seek to link this outcome to historically ingrained patterns of protest dynamics in each country and delve into the implications of our findings in the conclusion.

2 Social Movements and Political Parties: What Happens in the Protest Arena?

Both political science and political sociology traditionally distinguished between institutional and non-institutional politics (Goldstone, 2003; Giugni, 2004). While the former refers to political activity that takes place within established political structures such as government bodies or political parties, non-institutional politics refers to political activity that occurs outside of those structures, such as protests or grassroots campaigns. It was long argued that institutional politics was more effective in passing legislation and creating public policies, while non-institutional politics contributed to raise awareness, mobilize public support, and put pressure on politicians to act.

In recent research, however, there has been a growing consensus about the complementary nature of institutional and non-institutional politics as means to push forward policy agendas (Abers & Keck, 2013; Banaszak, 2009; Borbáth & Hutter, 2022; Goldstone, 2003; Rich, 2019; Rossi, 2017; Tarrow, 2021). This has been acknowledged by scholars studying how political parties drive policy change, the ways in which social movements impact the various stages of the policy-making process (e.g. Giugni, 2004; Uba & Bosi, 2009; King et al., 2007), and the fate of recently risen movement-originated political parties (e.g. Della Porta et al., 2017; Anria, 2018). The mutual influence between social movements and political parties not only signifies that they often collaborate in the task of driving social change. It also means that the ways in which they act are increasingly similar.

1. See <http://www.protestsurvey.eu>.

A long time ago, Meyer and Tarrow (1998) cogently argued that protests had become a normal part of democratic societies and the political game. Yet, as Borbáth (2023, p. 1) states, the thesis on the normalization of protest “mostly focused on the extent to which noninstitutional forms became conventionalized.” Less is known about the use that institutional actors such as political parties make of protests (but see, Semenov et al., 2016; Somma, 2018; Borbáth & Hutter, 2021; Lewis, 2021). Indeed, as Borbáth and Hutter (2021, p. 896) argue, “the key driving forces [of party system transformation] may not only have changed in programmatic terms but also in organizational form and action repertoire.” Put simply, political parties may also be transforming by incorporating elements typically associated with social movements. The participation of political parties in demonstrations is closely tied to whether they are embraced or not. Thus, another crucial aspect to explore when analyzing movement-party connections in the protest arena is how protesters perceive these parties and the level of identification they feel with them.

In this article, we analyze these issues based on the cases of Argentina and Chile. As noted in the introduction, these countries have experienced waves of massive protests that illustrate divergent movement-party relations. In Chile, after nearly a month of widespread street protests in 2019, the political parties represented in Parliament came together and reached an agreement to initiate a constitutional process. This comprehensive agreement encompassed several key components, including a plebiscite to determine whether a new constitution should be adopted, the election of members of the Constituent Assembly, and a subsequent plebiscite to vote on the constitutional proposal formulated by the Assembly. This agreement demonstrated the willingness of established political parties to create institutional avenues for addressing the political crisis. This contrasted sharply with the notable absence of political party involvement during the protests of October and November 2019. The protests were symbolized by the powerful slogan *No son 30 pesos, son 30 años* (It’s not about 30 pesos [referring to the metro fee increase], it’s about 30 years), which pointedly criticized the policies of all political administrations since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Indeed, disconnection between social movements and political parties, especially with those center-left political parties that were part of the *Concertación*, in government between 1990 and 2010, had been increasingly evident since the protest wave initiated by the student movement in 2011 (Bargsted & Somma, 2016; Somma & Medel, 2017). This was the result of a marked process of demobilization after the reinstatement of democracy in 1990 (Delamaza, 2014) due to fears of an authoritarian reversal (Donoso & von Bülow, 2017).

In Argentina, on the other hand, the collapse of the national government in 2002 resulted in a series of successive, short-lived presidencies lacking democratic legitimacy. The emergence of a grassroots movement organized through assemblies sought to completely overhaul the ruling elite, alongside organizing widespread saucepan banging protests (Rossi, 2005). In response to this tumultuous period, the Peronist and other political parties made the unprecedented decision to appoint an interim President. Eduardo Duhalde assumed office with questionable democratic legitimacy and constitutional legality, governing for a little over a year. However, his resignation was ultimately brought about by the coordinated disruptions orchestrated by the assembly movement, primarily comprised of the urban middle class, and the *piquetero* movement. Duhalde’s resignation followed the police killing of two *piqueteros* and produced a divided elite calling for elections. In 2003, Néstor Kirchner became the weakest President in recent Argentine history, with less than 25% of the votes in the first round. To establish his legitimacy, Kirchner sought to build strong relationships with the main social movements of this contentious period. This process gave rise to what Rossi (2015; 2017) has termed the

“reincorporation” process, leading to the development of robust connections between political parties and movements in the context of an increased centrality of territorialized politics.

In sum, these contrasting developments between Chile and Argentina have meant that Argentine social movements have been actively engaged with political parties, unions, and various other social organizations, while Chile has rather been characterized by a highly institutionalized party system that remained detached from the rest of society until the cycle of protests from 2006 to 2020. We argue that zooming into the relationship between social movements and political parties in the specific case of street demonstrations can help us to shed light on the complex relationship between institutional and non-institutional actors in these two countries. Identifying these dynamics might also contribute to better understanding how these patterns of engagement shape political outcomes.

3 Methods

In this article we draw on survey data we collected following the methodology developed by the *Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation* (CCC) network. This methodology is particularly useful to survey participants in protest demonstrations (Stekelenburg et al., 2012). The data allowed us to identify the presence of political parties in street protests. By selecting a given number of demonstrators following a quasi-systematic sampling procedure, the CCC methodology ensures that each participant has a similar probability of being approached by the survey team. This enables the collection of more reliable information about central aspects of the mobilization process that are not typically recorded in general population surveys.

To adapt this methodology to the Argentine and Chilean contexts, the survey teams deviated from the original European model by conducting face-to-face interviews instead of using a postal questionnaire. This change was made due to the anticipated low response rate if using mail in Latin America. However, the survey questionnaire and part of the selection of issues covered in the demonstrations remained the same as the original CCC methodology. We surveyed protests that were organized around four issues: LGBTIQ rights, education, labor relations, and human rights. LGBTIQ rights and labor relations were also covered by the European teams. The education and human rights protests were selected due to their “functional equivalence” to the demonstrations included in the original project, and because of their importance in the national contexts. Overall, the CCC methodology provides a valuable tool for studying protest mobilization processes. By collecting data at the time of the protest, memory bias is minimized, and more accurate information can be obtained about the motivations and attitudes of participants. Our analysis is based on 1935 surveys conducted in demonstrations between 2015 and 2017. We conducted surveys in eight different demonstrations (four in Argentina and four in Chile on each issue).

4 Street Demonstrations in Argentina and Chile

There is a key difference between Argentine and Chilean political parties in their relationship with demonstrators. In a typical manifestation in Chile there will not be any banners of the political parties, and ever more often, you hear demonstrators changing *El Pueblo unido, avanza sin partidos* (The People, united, makes progress without the parties). This image contrasts sharply with protest culture in Argentina, where there will always be parties, unions and movements with their banners, official symbols, songs, and styles of protesting joining together and,

also, with persons participating with no organic membership to any organization. The streets will include informal food vendors, independent and activist book presses, artisans selling political merchandise, the distribution of party newspapers, pamphlets by parties, unions and movements, open air radios, *artists* actions of photo exhibitions or interventions to public buildings, among several other coordinated actions.

This anecdotal evidence and the aim to contribute to extant scholarship on movement-party relations compelled us to examine this matter in Chile and Argentina. Based on the data previously described, we find that Argentine political parties are much more present in the protest arena than their counterparts in Chile. Specifically, they are often involved in organizing and participating in demonstrations. This contrasts with Chilean political parties, who are less likely to have a visible presence in street protests and are rarely mentioned when we asked demonstrators about the organizations behind a demonstration. This difference is supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. Our survey explicitly asked demonstrators: "Could you tell me which organizations called for this demonstration?". We registered very few names of political parties in Chile. Additionally, during the demonstrations that we covered in the study, we actively searched for and registered signs and flags referencing political parties. We soon realized that this was common in demonstrations in Argentina but not in Chile. The only exception was the May Day demonstration, in which flags of Chile's Socialist and (especially) Communist parties could be seen. These impressions for Chile are consistent with earlier research, which found that party participation in street protests was only present in 6% of all protest events from 2000 to 2012 (Somma, 2018).

Indeed, our survey findings suggest that political parties in Argentina have stronger links with demonstrators compared to their Chilean counterparts. Table 1 shows this by considering three indicators of citizen-party links available in the survey: involvement in political parties during the last 12 months, as reported by the respondent; trust in political parties in general; and closeness to a specific political party (in case the respondent mentioned such a party). These three indicators tap attitudinal and behavioral links to parties, and thus provide different empirical entry points to our subject.

Table 1 shows that a higher percentage of Argentine demonstrators have become involved with a political party in the past year. Specifically, 43% of Argentine demonstrators compared to 35% of Chilean demonstrators stated that they were involved in some way in a political party in the last 12 months. Additionally, 34% of Argentines declared *active* participation in a political party, while only 25% of Chileans did so.

Table 1. Indicators of demonstrator's links with political parties, by country
Source: CCC surveys in Argentina and Chile.

	Argentina	Chile
<i>Involvement in political parties, last 12 months (%)</i>		
Not mentioned	57	65
Passive member/financial supporter	9	10
Active member	34	25
Total	100	100
<i>Trust in political parties (%)</i>		
Not at all	14	42
Not very much	25	24
Somewhat	35	19
Quite	17	10
Very much	9	5
Total	100	100
<i>Closeness to a political party (%)</i>		
No party mentioned	26	45
Not very close	4	8
Quite close	21	13
Very Close	49	35
Total	100	100

The absence of political parties in demonstrations in Chile could be attributed to a lack of trust in them by the protesters. According to table 1, 42% of Chilean demonstrators expressed that they do not trust political parties at all. This may explain why parties feel unwelcome at protest events. In comparison, only 14% of demonstrators in Argentina distrust parties. Similarly, according to our surveys, only 48% of Chilean demonstrators feel quite or very close to a political party, while 70% of demonstrators in Argentina do so.

Beyond these baseline differences, in both countries, over 90% of individuals who align themselves with a discernible political party or coalition (excluding “others” and those who don't specify a party) tend to favor left-wing political parties. This encompasses social democrats, parties leaning left of social democrats, and communists. However, there are notable variations between the two countries in the distribution across these three categories. In Chile, the Communist Party holds a significant role, with 58% of party-identified individuals mentioning it, compared to 22% for socialist or social-democratic parties, and a mere 13% for left-leaning parties positioned to the left of social democrats. On the other hand, in Argentina, 56% mention Peronist parties (classified as social democrats for international comparisons), while 39% mention left-leaning parties positioned to the left of Peronists, and only 3% mention communist parties.

In both cases, these differences can be attributed to the efforts of such parties to maintain roots in popular sector organizations since the transition to democracy. In Chile, the Communist Party's outsider status from 1990 until the second Michelle Bachelet government (2014–2018) facilitated this endeavor, since it allowed the party to position itself as the only leftist party connected with popular demands. In Argentina, the dominance of the Peronist move-

ment in popular sectors’ political culture is due to the permanent territorialized presence in poor neighborhoods and the control of most of the trade unions. The fact that unions in Chile are detached from the party system and allied to the Communists might explain the centrality this party gives to its attachment to street politics. Instead, in Argentina the explanation is due to the opposite: politics is organized in the competition between a series of center-right liberal parties and a social movement — the Peronists — with a multiplicity of actors that are crucial to national politics. The Peronist movement contains multiple grassroots actors, social movements, unions, independent and commercial media, cultural centers, and political parties. This positions Peronist parties as just an electoral instrument of a wider and more complex social movement sustained on the dialogue between institutional and street politics (Rossi, 2022).

Furthermore, we investigated whether there are differences in the role of political parties in Chile and Argentina concerning the four issues addressed in demonstrations (labor, education, human rights, and LGBTIQ). Certain issues have been led by social movement organizations that have stronger ties to political parties. This could indicate that political parties have a greater influence on some issues than others and may be more likely to align themselves with particular social movements depending on their ideological positioning. Examining these variations in the role of political parties could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of social and political change in the two countries.

Table 2. Indicators of demonstrator’s links with political parties, by demonstration issue
Source: CCC surveys in Argentina and Chile.

	LGBTIQ	Labor	Educational	Human Rights
<i>Involvement in political parties, last 12 months (%)</i>				
Not mentioned	85	43	56	66
Passive member/financial supporter	6	12	12	6
Active member	8	45	31	27
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>Trust in political parties (%)</i>				
Not at all	43	19	24	32
Not very much	27	21	28	23
Somewhat	18	31	30	27
Quite	8	21	12	11
Very much	4	8	6	8
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>Closeness to a political party (%)</i>				
No party mentioned	44	22	39	40
Not very close	13	2	5	7
Quite close	22	13	20	14
Very Close	20	63	36	40
Total	100	100	100	100

Specifically, as shown in table 2, we found across the same three indicators that demonstrations focused on labor issues are more closely linked to political parties in both countries. For instance, 57% of labor demonstrators reported having been involved with political parties (passively or actively) during the twelve months prior to the survey. The figures are considerably lower for other issues: 43% (educational), 33% (human rights), and 14% (LGBTIQ demonstrators).

This is not surprising since labor movements have historically had stronger ties to political parties, as they seek to advocate for workers' rights and interests within the political system. On the other hand, LGBTIQ protesters are the least connected to political parties. This could be because LGBTIQ issues have traditionally been ignored by party politics until very recently as redistributive conflicts still structures much of party competition. The same trend is replicated in relation to trust in and identification with political parties (table 2). In terms of education and human rights issues, our data shows that they fall in the middle of the spectrum in terms of political party connections.

Our surveys also asked demonstrators about their voting patterns — another key indicator of their connections to parties (table 3). Labor demonstrators are the most frequent voters: considering both countries together, 82% of them reported having voted in the last election. This figure suggests that the protesters are using various means to express their political views, including participating in demonstrations, and casting their vote during elections. Interestingly, labor demonstrators vote at similar rates in Argentina (85%) and Chile (80%) (not shown in table 3), suggesting that Chilean labor demonstrators are not detached from party politics as we found for the other issues in Chile (Somma et al., 2020; Medel et al., 2023). In both countries, demonstrators for other issues showed markedly lower levels of reported voting behavior than labor demonstrators, ranging from 58% (human rights) to 61% (education).

Table 3. Electoral participation in the last national election (%), by demonstration issue
Source: CCC surveys in Argentina and Chile.

	LGBT	Labor	Educational	Human Rights
Yes	59	82	61	58
No	38	14	31	28
No answer	3	3	8	15
Total	100	100	100	100

In sum, the differences found in demonstrations in Chile and Argentina express protest patterns that have resulted from the relationship between social movements and political parties since the transition to democracy. While the survey data provides only a snapshot of this pattern, it offers insights into potential avenues for further research. These avenues should encompass an analysis of variations in protest scenarios, issues at hand, the specific claims endorsed by political parties, and numerous other factors that may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between parties and protesters.

5 Conclusions

Recent protest waves across the world have significantly reshaped political agendas, and more broadly, the political arena. A growing amount of scholarship has studied what this has entailed

in terms of policy outputs, creation of new actors and reshaping of old ones, and the prospects for social change. This article addressed a less studied dimension of the relationship between social movements and political parties, namely, how the latter engage and is perceived in the protest arena. The presence and level of engagement of political parties in street protests can provide insights into their strategies and tactics for achieving their goals. Examining the extent to which political parties are perceived as a close ally by demonstrators is also central to grasp the prospects of coalition-building. Exploring these links in the specific case of demonstrations can reveal the extent to which political parties view participation in protests as a valuable means of achieving their objectives.

However, our data also raises the question of why the labor movement in Chile did not follow the general national trend of disconnection with political parties. Conversely, in the case of Argentina, data shows a tighter interplay between party politics and street politics. In both countries this could be explained by their types of electoral competition within and beyond political parties. This highlights the importance of continuing to explore the specific historical, cultural, and political factors that may have influenced nationally different relationships between social movements and political parties.

While the survey data affords a momentary glimpse into this pattern, it yields valuable insights that can pave the way for future research avenues. Future research could combine data on survey demonstrations (like those used here) with protest event analysis data. The latter allows tracing changes across time in the extent to which parties show up to demonstrations and exploring variations in party mobilization across the national territory. Qualitative interviews with party and movement leaders could shed light on the organic relations among parties and movements and their reciprocal perceptions. Also, case studies on new populist right or left parties could contribute to this general topic, since both populist parties and social movements share a common goal for connecting with popular grievances (although they pursue it in different ways).

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Sofia Donoso – Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Chile (Chile)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5053-0198>

✉ sofia.donoso@uchile.cl; 🌐 <https://facso.uchile.cl/sociologia/cuerpo-academico/sofia-donoso>

Sofia Donoso (PhD, University of Oxford) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Universidad de Chile, and associate researcher at the Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social (COES). Her research focuses on social movements, participation in protests, and the institutionalization of protests in Latin America. She is the co-editor with Marisa von Bülow of *Social Movements in Chile: Organization, Trajectories and Political Consequences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Her work has been published in *World Development*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, and *Bulletin of Latin American Research*.

Nicolás M. Somma – Instituto de Sociología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Chile)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8717-3868>

🌐 <https://sites.google.com/site/nsommag/home>

Nicolás M. Somma (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is an Associate Professor at the Instituto de Sociología, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and associate researcher at the Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social (COES). His interests are political sociology, social movements, and comparative-historical sociology. His research has appeared in journals such as *Party Politics*, *Social Movement Studies*, *Political Behavior*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Latin American Politics and Society* and *Comparative Politics*, among others.

Federico M. Rossi – Departamento de Sociología II, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid (Spain)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3058-9448>

🌐 <https://federicorossi.site>

Federico M. Rossi (PhD, European University Institute) is a Ramón y Cajal Research-Professor at the Department of Sociology II of the UNED in Madrid (Spain) and a Research-Professor (on leave) of CONICET-UNSAM in Buenos Aires (Argentina). He has published *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Social Movements* (2023, Oxford University Press), *The Poor's Struggle for Political Incorporation* (2017, Cambridge University Press), *Social Movement Dynamics* (2015, Routledge), *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America* (2018, University of Pittsburgh Press), *La participación de las juventudes hoy* (2009, Prometeo), and is advisory editor of *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (2022, Wiley).