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The stranger the better: support and solidarity in the 2011 students’ protests in Chile

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the legitimation dynamics of the student protests in Chile 2011, explaining how the support of ‘strangers’ strengthened its position and endurance. By analysing interviews with both activists and uninvolved citizens, I describe a steady pattern whereby they express the strength and legitimacy of the movement by assessing the ‘abstraction’ of the link between protesters and their supporters. The more abstract these relations – the stranger supporters are – the most relevant and meaningful is their support. Beyond establishing the worthiness of protesters’ claims, strangers provide protesters with a mandate, fostering the movement’s cohesion and thus affecting its ability to endure through the conflict. While the literature has mostly looked at adherents as only potential (or failed) constituents, I argue that support that remains external plays a crucial role in social movements’ chances of success. This support needs, however, to avoid being framed as insufficient engagement. Further analysis shows that the distinction between protesters and strangers often requires active boundary work, allowing the movement to maximize the benefits of strangers’ support while managing its risks. The relation between these boundaries, the efficiency of different contention tactics and their adaptation is analysed here. The study argues that strangeness can involve very different, even opposed phenomena, which are often confounded, namely ‘otherness’ and ‘abstraction’. Critically drawing upon Simmel, I explain how it is ‘abstraction’ in particular that helps our understanding of the role of strangers in social movements and consider how this distinction could enrich research on the symbolic aspects of contentious politics.

As social beings, humans lust for the validation of each other. And while the recognition granted by those closer to us is often considered particularly important, this holds only partially. It would be peculiar if I, for example, interpreted my parents’ interest in my work and a more distant person’s interest in the same way. Strangers – those with whom we share no personal ties – serve as a representation of potential general recognition. Their valuation of our merits is detached from the recognition ‘biases’ which personal relations entail. A stranger’s recognition serves as a potentially replicable token for ‘public response’.

Strangers are usually associated with hostility and exclusion in social research, which makes the previous idea counterintuitive. Critically drawing upon Simmel’s The Stranger (1908/1971), I argue...
that we often equate two very different forms of strangeness: otherness and abstraction. Abstraction refers to the broadness and generality of the links involved in relations between strangers and thus is associated with features such as impartiality and publicity. It is precisely abstraction, rather than otherness, that helps in explaining the role of strangers in legitimation dynamics. This study builds upon Simmel to analyse social movements and their legitimation, exploring how the notion of ‘strangers’ can foster our understanding of contentious politics. It does so through the empirical analysis of a single case of social mobilization: the Chilean students’ movement in 2011.

By analysing interviews with both students who participated in the protests and uninvolved income earners, a steady pattern emerges in which actors express the strength, orientation towards the common good, bargaining power and legitimacy of the movement in general by assessing the ‘abstraction’ of the link between protesters and their supporters. The more abstract these relations – the stranger supporters are – the most relevant and meaningful for social movements is their support. This effect goes beyond establishing the worthiness of protesters’ claims: by providing them with a stronger mandate, it fosters the movement’s cohesion and thus affects its ability to endure through extended conflicts.

There is a tension, though, between the roles of supporting strangers and potential recruits. While literature has mostly looked at adherents only as potential (or failed) constituents, I argue that support which remains externalized plays a crucial role in social movement success. This support needs, however, to avoid being framed as insufficient engagement. Further analysis will show that the social boundaries separating protesters and strangers (and thus establishing abstraction) often require active boundary work allowing the movement to maximize the benefits of strangers’ support and manage its risks. The relation between these boundaries, the efficiency of different contention tactics and their adaptation is also analysed.

After the ‘Chilean Winter’

In 2011, massive protests shook Chile. Student demonstrations with up to 200,000 participants became common in every major city. Protesters demanded free tertiary education, effectively banning profit at educational institutions and returning public schools from municipalities to central government. In 2014, educational reform remained a central issue on the public agenda.

International analysts dubbed the protests the ‘Chilean Winter’, shocked by the events in the country ‘regarded as one of the most orderly and stable’ (Long, 2011) in South America. Since 1990, student, and other, protests in Chile had been frequent but limited in size, duration and impact (Donoso, 2013, pp. 5–6).

There are multiple factors behind the 2011 outburst. In 2010, Sebastián Piñera took office as the new President – the first from the right wing to be democratically elected in over 50 years in Chile. The exhaustion of the centre-left Concertación (which among other issues had failed to address educational inequities) (Donoso, 2013, p. 16), rather than greater support for right-wing politics, explained the voters’ shift. Piñera thus took office with low and markedly ‘residual’ support, amid a general crisis of trust in the political system (Jara, 2014, pp. 30–34; Mira, 2011, pp. 191–193; Ruiz, 2013, p. 62).

Regarding education, the situation was and remains contentious. According to the OECD, in 2011, the private cost of post-secondary education in Chile amounted to 22.7% of the per capita GDP: the highest rate worldwide and far above countries such as Japan, the US or the UK (OECD, 2011). Not surprisingly, this led to massive indebtedness (Olavarría & Allende, 2013; Somma, 2012, p. 299). Primary and secondary schools are largely privatized: 85% of educational costs are privately paid – again the world’s highest rate (OECD, 2011). The voucher system allows subsidized schools to charge additional fees, generating inequalities within state-funded schools (Rodríguez & Winchester, 2001; Torche, 2005). Municipalities (the smallest political units) with variant resources run public schools proper, introducing additional inequalities (Puga, 2011; Sabatini & Wormald, 2005).

In 2006, the ‘Revolución Pingüina’ had mobilized secondary students in the largest student protests until then. The movement was short lived (cf. Donoso, 2013, p. 13), however, ultimately settling for a special commission leading to minor reforms (Garretón et al., 2011, p. 134). Donoso (2013) and Ruiz (2012) have convincingly stressed how this earlier protest framed the educational system as in crisis,
making even more comprehensible the 2011 surge. Others emphasize the 2011 movement’s success in strongly establishing two powerful ideas: profit from education is abusive, and education is a social right not a tradable good (Somma, 2012, pp. 300–302; cf. Avendaño, 2014, p. 42).

Student protests had been numerous, but fell short of participants before effecting meaningful political change. The 2011 wave was not unexpected, but rather surprisingly successful and enduring. What the case calls for, then, is not an explanation of why it happened, but an understanding of its inner dynamics of growth and legitimation (Benedikter & Siepmann, 2013, p. 9; Segovia & Gamboa, 2012, p. 82; Somma, 2012, p. 297). On this question, previous analyses agree that the existence of grievances able to resonate across the wider population were important, yet such grievances were also present before. Somma (2012, pp. 303–304) suggests that the students had superior organizational capacities than their predecessors and points especially to the role of democratic organizations with strong legitimacy among their constituents.1 Focusing on legitimacy towards the wider population, Segovia and Gamboa (2012, p. 82) emphasize the characteristics of the students’ leaders, and the expectations that the government discourse had generated.

Instead of providing exogenous causes for the protests’ legitimacy, I focus here on how legitimacy strengthened the movement: how its support among strangers fortified the movement, how it managed this support, and the problems and tactical decisions involved in such management. Social legitimacy is dealt with as an explanatory mechanism rather than a cause or an outcome. I argue that within this mechanism, the concept of ‘strangers’ is central.

**Legitimacy and strangers in social movement theory**

Since Olson’s (1965/1971) seminal work, social movement scholars have mostly grappled with the question of why people join collective efforts in order to explain how movements succeed. While productive, this narrowed the analytical salience of legitimacy dynamics. Resource mobilization and political process theories often assess legitimacy only as a contextual factor in mobilization success, affecting, for instance, the effectiveness of direct action by protesters (Garrow, 1978; Schumaker, 1978) and of repression by states (Bob, 2002, p. 399; Sharp, 1973). When formulating his theory, McAdam (1982/1999, p. 42) stressed that ‘[m]ediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations,’ identifying a process of ‘cognitive liberation’ as necessary for mobilization to start at all. These processes, however, refer mostly to the construction of meaning among (potential) constituents, neglecting the legitimation dynamics transpiring between the movement and the general population.

Framing theory calls attention to ‘the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations’ (Snow et al., 1986, p. 464), marking a powerful shift towards the symbolic aspects of contention and, in time, successfully persuading (former) structuralists to introduce them in their research (e.g. Gamson, 1992; Tilly, 2002). This shift could allow for an understanding of legitimacy beyond a resource for recruitment. In particular, Steinberg (1998, p. 851) emphasizes framing as a discursive process that cannot simply be treated as a movement resource. While framing opens up the possibility of dealing with legitimacy as a process, however, in practice, most researchers deal with frame alignments as either ‘dependent’ or ‘independent’ variables (Scheufele, 1999, pp. 107–108) and not as mechanisms. Legitimacy in social movement theory, then, has largely been assessed as a factor in recruitment only. Beyond this issue, the relation between movements and their wider social base remains largely unexamined.

Several existing approaches address the distinctions between the different audiences of social movements. Turner (1970/1973) distinguishes between bystanders, adherents and supporters within the non-involved public. McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1221) add opponents to this classification, arguing that a ‘conscience constituency’ had become increasingly relevant for social movements, and thus support is no longer limited to potential beneficiaries. However, these different audiences were considered relevant primarily as eventual constituents. Something similar happens with Jenkins and Perrow (1977), who stress the role of outsiders’ support, but only as external resource providers. Klandermans (1984) goes somewhat further, proposing that perceived general support could foster
the recruitment process. Within the resource mobilization literature, Ennis and Schreuer (1987) have explicitly argued for the relevance of strangers and ‘weak support’. However, even in their conception, strangers are relevant in the main because they can be eventually recruited.

Strangers as such also get little attention from framing theory. Snow et al. (1986, p. 465) distinguish adherents and bystanders as potential targets of SMOs, but they deal only with ‘tasks and processes that pertain to participation in general’. Authors like Steinberg (1994, p. 530; 1998, p. 862) look deeper into the legitimation process, but only regarding activists’ recruitment. While classical legitimation theory underscored the role of beliefs attributed to the general public, external support is not included as an aspect of a frame’s credibility (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619). Framing analysts, summarily, emphasize frame alignment with the wider social understanding of issues, yet rarely discuss how exactly such alignment helps a social movement if not by expanding constituency.

Some scholars working on international advocacy networks grant more attention to the role of strangers in mobilization (Florini, 2000; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Sikkink, 1993), claiming that international support fosters mobilization by showing that protesters are not alone – which is key in hostile domestic settings (Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999). Yet besides this presumption, this literature focuses on why some movements garner strangers’ support, instead of looking empirically at how it affects mobilization.

**Strangers and social mobilization**

Collective action involves interaction among strangers. However, mobilization itself can create bonds between participants: calling a group of individuals ‘the protesters’ or ‘the movement’ implies a commonality which others lack. There is the stranger who joins and becomes a part of ‘us’, and there is the stranger who – being supportive of ‘us’ – remains a stranger.

Typically, we presume that, from the movement’s perspective, direct participation is preferable: broader collective action implies greater access to resources and bargaining power than shows of ‘external’ support. The problem therefore is making strangers engage, and breaking boundaries between participants and supporters. However, two qualifications should be made.

First, there are material limits to collective action expansion (Ennis & Schreuer, 1987), from physical distance to the differing costs and benefits of direct involvement (e.g. the costs and benefits of students’ vs. workers’ strikes). External support enables broadening the movement’s reach beyond these plausible limits of collective action. Secondly, there are symbolic phenomena limiting the effectiveness of direct involvement. Political opponents often contest the direct involvement of different sectors in specific issue mobilizations – in our case, a government’s strategy was claiming that protesters were ‘manipulated’ by communists and unions. Furthermore, activists become publicly identified as ‘part’ of ‘the protesters’: discounting the rare scenario of actual majorities engaging in direct action, movements without ‘outside’ support are likely perceived as isolated, radical groups lacking legitimacy.

I argue that ‘strangeness’ is closely related with these symbolic implications of ‘external’ support. Strangers serve movements as tokens of greater social significance and legitimacy because they represent a broader category of social actors. They remain separated either by physical or social boundaries, and the significance of their support is backed by their lack of direct interest and bias. Strangers’ support cannot be reduced to instrumental action or to particular preferences cultivated in shared experiences of partisanship. When interested and partisan motivations are discarded, support evokes substantive rationality and external morality. I will use the word *solidarity* to speak specifically of this kind of support from strangers and its symbolic implications.

Two omissions in previous literature emerge as we consider these problems. First, social movement literature has underestimated the relevance of support ‘as such’, only assessing it as a step towards recruitment: we need to reconsider the role of ‘strangers who remain strangers’. Secondly, while collective identities and boundaries between adherents, bystanders and opponents have gathered attention, the boundaries *within* adherents (between activists and supporters, the group and the friendly stranger) are both relevant and problematic for social movements as well, and the associated boundary work requires further consideration.
The following sections build upon these issues by analysing the discourses of students who participated in the 2011 mobilizations in Chile on the one side, and on the other those of uninvolved Chilean income earners from different social backgrounds. The analysis focuses on the claims about the movement's legitimacy or illegitimacy and its strength or weakness, pinpointing the role of solidarity in the validation of these claims, the movement's endurance and bargaining power.

**Data and methods**

The data analysed include six individual and five group interviews with students, all of whom participated in strikes and/or demonstrations during the 2011 protest wave in Chile. In total, 27 individual students participated. The student sample aimed for heterogeneity regarding gender, current educational level and type of institution attended (public, subsidized and private high schools; private and 'traditional' universities). Their ages ranged between 16 and 24 years old. Each interview contact was made independently, during protest events or at building occupations. Group interviews included participants who knew each other, and often studied at the same institution.

Analyses also include data from 12 individual interviews with Chilean income earners not involved with the movement. Their sampling considered gender, class position (working class, upper middle class and middle class with a working class background) and general political standing, and it stemmed from a larger study on social inequality in Chile. Ages ranged between 25 and 50 years old.

Neither sample aims to be large enough to 'represent' the Chilean population and describe its general tendencies. Instead, analysis focuses on the structure of claims regarding the protests' legitimacy, and how the role of 'strangers' within this structure remains stable across different roles and positions regarding the student movement.

All interviewees lived in Santiago de Chile. I used direct observations and photographic material from four demonstrations in Santiago and conducted research on support displays in online social networks, to contextualize my interpretation. All material was gathered between November and December 2011.

**The stranger, the better**

By November 2011, Santiago was an extremely politicized city. Walls, posters, occupied buildings, everything in the downtown streets reflected the social conflict surrounding education. Everyday interactions had changed: it became common to randomly hear discussions about education, taxation and social justice among the transport system passengers. In their marketing campaigns, universities no longer stressed success stories and employability; instead, they emphasized their commitment to profit-free education and social development. Banks expressed their appreciation for the experience of being indebted.

Participants, supporters and opponents were aware of the change the protests effected. Interviewees from each group emphasized the movement's relevance in redrawing the boundaries of what could and could not be discussed. Sara, a non-participant who works in a call centre, explains:

*Now one sees* that everyone was tired of everything, of how everything was. But before, I thought otherwise. [...] everyone before was scared of saying nothing. They are, still, but less. People are slack anyway. But now it is kind of different … *people are more conscious*. The politicians were used to doing simply whatever they wanted, and I think that now … *it is like they have to be more careful.*

For most interviewees, the movement's ability to change the political setting was based upon the wide support it enjoyed among 'normal people'. Looking at conceptual oppositions, 'normal people' are not: (a) students, (b) activists, nor radical leftists, (c) the rich, (d) politicians. Normal people have no distinguishing characteristics, designating a general public that holds nothing in common except for being 'the people'. Hence, for most interviewees, if they care about the movement, it is because the movement is by 'normal' accounts relevant, just and worthy of support. The perception that the movement was widely supported was well grounded, as shown in several surveys. But what did this support mean for participants and general citizens? The answer lies with their evaluations of the movement's strength and of its claims to legitimacy and justness.
When discussing the movement’s strengths, most activists immediately refer to ‘popular support’ and solidarity. This was not, however, driving any diffusion of their leadership. To the contrary, students took pride in their role as ‘awakeners’ of a society that they perceived as unsatisfied but dormant. Temporality plays a crucial role in the definition of the protesters’ identity, deploying complex relations of difference and continuity with older projects of political reform (Cárdenas, 2014; see Gonzalez, 2013 for a similar case). They are perceived (by themselves and others) as freed from the fears and traumas of dictatorial repression, while seeing their elders as still trapped in these feelings. The students’ sense of being ‘called’ to redeem the passivity of previous generations was powerful, expressing itself both in sympathy for and critique of the elders. Activists described their generation using terms such as engaged, original, active, organized and open minded, whereas older generations were portrayed as being tired, afraid, traumatized, hopeless and/or domesticated.

This feeling of exceptionalism was deeply embedded in the students’ perception of solidarity from different sectors and places: their valuation by elders, and the ‘normal people’, serves as a measure of their ability to raise support and pressure authority. The support from ‘strangers’ also served as proof of the justness and necessity of the students’ proposals. Of the 95 statements in which they directly addressed the movement’s strength or legitimacy, 57 shared a certain specific structure where these concepts are defined in terms of the broad base of its supporters. Broadness is not defined in quantities of any kind, but as strangeness itself: it increases insofar as the movement gathers support from strangers who only have general connections – both among themselves and with the movement. The basic structure says

The movement is [strong/legitimate], for even people as [far/different/uninvolved] as [example] support us.

Variants of this structure revolve around the distinction between strength and legitimacy and on the type of strangers supporting the claim.

**Solidarity claims as strength and legitimacy**

Among the claims following the structure above, the type of strangers and the level of generality vary, but strangeness is always used to exemplify the universalism of support. There arise two main forms of solidarity, both used to assess the movement’s strength and legitimacy.

The first could be described as solidarity between social groups: boundaries are not physical but pertaining to social structure. Esteban, a public university student, emphasizes solidarity across typically disconnected groups to explain the movement’s ability to challenge the government:

Sure, now the government is scared because they see that people with nothing particular to do with the problem of education are supporting us. People know that what we do is important, that this model cannot continue. The workers, the unions, the actors, professionals, the miners, artists… Who else? Everyone is supporting! Even some cops were recorded the other day, saying they were with the students. And then, sure… all that means the government cannot ignore us forever.

Esteban makes a claim about the movement’s ability to represent a transversal consensus. The strength argument is straightforward: ignoring the movement will have harsher consequences because the wideness of the movement’s support potentially mobilizes a broader political force. The claim can be turned towards the legitimacy of the movement’s demands, as exemplified by Carla, from a public high school:

It is not that we are fighting simply for ourselves; we have already lost our chance. One fights for everyone, and the normal people realize that: that’s why they support us. If you ask, you will see: people with money, poor people, workers, older people… whose children already went to the school, or to the university, or people who already studied… professionals… everyone, get it? They are all supporting us, because we are right; politicians aren’t.

Solidarity across social sectors signals the crosscutting character of the students’ demands, testifying their allegiance with the general interest and the common good. This provides them with an objectivity claim, ensuring they are not pursuing selfish goals.

The second form of solidarity is geographical: claims on the movement’s strength and legitimacy are based on the attention and support it raises abroad. The strangeness involved is not only physical, but evokes distance in terms of culture and national identities as well. Its meaning is twofold. First,
the fact that people from different contexts express their support even though they have nothing to
gain from the possible conflict outcomes is awe-inspiring for both activists and bystanders. Second, it
strengthens the movement’s claims by procuring evaluation criteria which are deemed as more gen-
eral and hence more legitimate. Closely following Simmel’s (1908/1971) description of the stranger,
this solidarity provides standards that participants use to challenge conceptions otherwise taken for
granted within the national political setting. Camila, who studies in a private university, explains:

You see all these videos, people from Argentina, from France, from Mexico, from Russia … kind of from every-
where; they send you their greetings, their support … One cannot believe it … Are we doing all that?! And sure,
then you see … almost everywhere there is good public education. It is … it is ‘heavy’, anyway. As if they couldn’t
understand what happens in Chile: for them, it is obvious that what we ask for is just. But here is not that obvious.

It is as if people in Chile just now started realizing that here the situation is ‘freak’.5

Camila illuminates the two elements we have just described. On the one side, the sheer amount of
attention from complete strangers signals the movement’s relevance. On the other, we find a link
between strangeness and objectivity: foreigners, as radical strangers, represent a more general stand-
ard providing a powerful confirmation of the movement’s legitimacy. The foreigner’s solidarity allows
protesters to pose what is locally taken for granted as a particularity. This proves extremely relevant
both for the protesters’ cohesion and for their legitimacy before others, as it provides them with both
a sense of ‘truth’ and a powerful tool to question the status quo.

The same forms of solidarity, across social and geographical borders, emerge in the accounts of
non-involved interviewees. Solidarity across social sectors is very relevant for people with opinions
supportive of the movement. These adherents, however, emphasize social distance through age groups
and generations rather than through social classes: they stress what separates them from the students
rather than what separates them from other supporters (whereas the distance between supporters
was more important to the students). Still, the basic structure for reinforcing legitimacy and strength
remains the same: students are supported even by people as different and unrelated to one particular
group or another.

For the interviewees holding critical opinions on the movement, strangers’ solidarity was also
relevant as something to be dealt with for legitimizing their opinions. In their accounts, support
across social sectors was criticized as the result of thoughtless mass dynamics or manipulation. What
is central, however, is that strangers’ solidarity is clearly seen as a valid threat to the legitimacy of the
interviewees’ criticism.

The ‘geographical’ dimension of strangeness has particular effects on the views of uninvolved
interviewees. Both students and Chilean bystanders share links which exclude foreigners, and this
activates two powerful mechanisms. First, as the students expressed, the realization of how the Chilean
educational system is seen from ‘outside’ triggers unsettling questions about political views previously
taken for granted – the effect of the ‘more general standards’. Second, witnessing the support from
strangers with much less to do with the conflict generates feelings of responsibility. This is apparent
in the words of Julia, a professional in her mid-thirties:

Look … of course, it is great. You see … all these people supporting them, even making protests in their own
countries, creating videos. And then, sure, one has to think … Well, and finally what am I doing? Get it? I am
finally doing nothing! There are people from super far away who cares about this, and I am doing practically nothing!
It is like … it is a bit shaming, really.

The previous analysis describes how strangers’ solidarity reinforces the perception of the movement’s
strength and legitimacy, both for activists and for outsiders. This legitimating power of solidarity, I have
shown, is strictly connected with degrees of strangeness. It is through strangeness – rather than num-
bers alone – that support is perceived as broader, more objective, disinterested and oriented towards
the ‘common good’. Support across boundaries and despite distance entails meaningful solidarity.

Appeals to crosscutting support and common good do not work only through the implications of
relations among strangers: it is a general feature of legitimacy claims. Another kind of legitimating claim
found in interviewees’ statements is, for example, support across political sectors. These statements
appeal to objectivity by locating the movement’s claims above political disputes, directly linking them
with discourses on superior good, technical adequacy or desirability. There are different strategies and situations which allow for claims of objectivity; however, solidarity among strangers strongly reinforces the motif of detached, potentially universal judgments. There is a link between the meaning of support expressions and the strangeness between the movement and its supporters. The impact of solidarity is greater as the social distance grows: *the stranger you are, the better, more meaningful your help is.*

**Solidarity and boundaries**

The distinction between solidarity across geographical or social-structural boundaries, on the one hand, and support across political identifications, on the other, relates to the problem of the legitimacy of boundaries themselves. There are boundaries establishing ‘proper’ strangers, allowing support to be seen as solidarity, and there are boundaries which do not. Political positions cannot constitute proper boundaries in this sense because they exist at the same level as the difference between support and opposition. Expressing political support ‘despite’ your own political opinion has little value.

Meaningful solidarity, then, requires a legitimate boundary between participants and supporters. This boundary helps explain the lack of further engagement. In the case of solidarity from abroad, geographical boundaries provide strong justifications. Expressions of solidarity are, in this context, all one can expect from strangers,6 becoming even more meaningful. With other social sectors in the same national context, these boundaries need to be reinforced. As the students’ demands expanded beyond education and built upon problems such as taxing policies or economic inequality, the boundary got bolstered through claims of this student generation’s exceptional character. As explained, both participants and supporters backed these claims, positing a redeeming role for the students. Several non-participants narrated a mix of relief, excitement and guilt when they saw the protests arise: they often said things such as ‘We should be there, not them’, while signs with phrases like ‘Be bold kids, you are saving us!’ could be found on the doors and walls of Santiago, as well as in the comments of news websites.

This narrative of exceptionalism is embedded in that of the previous generations’ political defeat, and these specific ‘politics of temporality’ (Gonzalez, 2013) allow activists to legitimize their struggles by providing them with a broader public ‘mandate’. Moreover, they justify the lesser engagement of the students’ supporters, serving as the boundary between activists and strangers.

When this boundary comes into question, the meaning of solidarity dwindles. Several students recall the relative failure of the national strike in which labour unions also participated as the movement’s hardest moment. With the strike, an attempt to incorporate labour beyond the role of supporters backfired. As the boundary between activists and their supporters became blurred, the support itself was called into question. Luis, from a private university, reflects:

> And sure … it didn’t work and then … well, I don’t know. […] It is different to say ‘kids we support you’ than really going on strike dude … when you have a job, a family, get it? Theirs is a different situation. We weren’t ready. We shouldn’t have tried the strike; it was disappointing for the people. Some … some felt like betrayed. I didn’t, but some. Some started to say, ‘See? The people do not support you that much’…

Less frequently, non-participants express similar views, mentioning the national strike to explain the limits of the movement’s political force. Particularly, those critical of the protests used this event to question the movement’s reach.

An interesting contrast exists between this relative failure and ‘family demonstrations’. Family demonstrations were a tactical innovation, designed precisely to express the movement’s popular support by defining instances where ‘external’ supporters could involve themselves *as such.* On websites and social networks, they were among the main sources for videos and pictures used to back the legitimacy of the students’ demands.

Remarkably, family demonstrations were organized separately from student demonstrations, purposely keeping a divide between students and supporters. In the students’ accounts, family demonstrations were regarded as successful and positive, even though much fewer non-students participated in any of these instances than in the national strike. Supporters in family demonstrations act as *supporters* (i.e. ‘normal people’), the boundary between them and ‘the movement’ safeguarded. Therefore, supporters in family demonstrations work as an *addition* to the already existent strength of the movement.
When strangers cross the divide, becoming participants themselves, they no longer count as supporting strangers but as actors (i.e. workers) with direct connections and interests: the risks and dangers of failure soar. The movement seems to have ‘learnt’ from these experiences, adapting its tactics accordingly.

**Cohesion and the labour of solidarity**

As in family demonstrations, other successful activities with prominent participation of external supporters incorporate them as an abstract mass, defined precisely through its non-definition. Specifically, the events of 4 August 2011 mark a turning point in the relationship between activists and supporters. That day, massive student demonstrations were met with extreme police violence. The government had taken a threatening tactical change, and the movement’s leaders bet at their public support by calling the population to perform a *Cacerolazo*.

*Cacerolazos* were common during Pinochet’s dictatorship as a form of anonymous and spatially dispersed protest. Families gathered everywhere, hammered on pots and pans and created as much noise as possible. That night of August 2011, a huge *Cacerolazo* started in every major Chilean city, an event remembered as a complete success by activists and non-participants alike. Indeed, agitation exceeded all expectations: riots and barricades ignited everywhere in support of the repressed students, creating the sense of a social crisis.

During the dictatorship, when public meetings were dangerous to organize, *Cacerolazos* tactics were driven by security concerns. The *Cacerolazos* of 2011 is different. Both students and non-participants understood it as a demonstration whose actor was ‘the normal people’, those who *will not* participate in the protests. The meaning of this and its effects on the Chilean polity were remarkable: three years later, the ephemeron was honoured as the ‘Day of the Students’ Dignity’ with an official act at the state-funded Museum for Memory and Human Rights. More telling even is that in 2012, it was commemorated with a new *Cacerolazo*, as the ‘Day of Citizens’ Awakening’ (El Mercurio, 2012).

Accounts of August *Cacerolazo* are emotionally loaded – a load better understood within the narration of the elders’ defeats and quiescence. Patricia, from a public high school, narrates the story as follow:

> My father smiled and suddenly said, ‘Okay kids, now we all go outside! Let’s go protest!’ [Laughs] It was unbelievable, because dinner at my home is like a mass. You don’t move from the table, you don’t do anything else: you eat. But we went, all laughing, got some pans, and went out to the alley. We were outside clanging and clanging, and my dad said: ‘When it’s enough, it’s enough, isn’t it?’ And, see, my parents aren’t like that, not at all. Seeing them doing that, seeing all the ladies from the *Villa*… So angry, hitting their pans […] I thought, ‘We have them screwed.’

It is *this* action of ‘non-protesters’ that signals the rocketing of the movement’s strength. Scheduled *Cacerolazos* continued during several months as massive displays of support, even though media attention faded with time. They were adopted as a tactic to demonstrate strength and legitimacy.

Beyond *Cacerolazos*, there were many support demonstrations the students regarded as relevant: visits at occupied buildings, food delivered to occupying students or videos of greetings and songs sent by foreigners. While these spontaneous support expressions are more common, activists perceived a particularly strong solidarity during this conflict. Simple but poignant gestures of sympathy were interpreted as ways in which those who were not involved supported those who were. Many students recalled, for example, how as it became clear that a tough and long negotiation lay ahead, people hung signs with encouraging messages at homes and workplaces.

Reports of these gestures and about August *Cacerolazo* share something: they mostly appear when the students explain how they managed to keep the demonstrations and occupations going for such a long time. Solidarity serves as an explanation for commitment: strangers’ support expressions are recalled as reasons for protesters to continue. Francisco, who occupied his voucher-system high school, compares the significance of strangers’ and his parents’ support explicitly:

> I know why my family cares: finally they pay for my school… and well, they see my effort, anyways. […] The other people don’t, but they are still with you. When you see so many people supporting you, and … They are … people from so far? You feel great. It is like you know you are right, that you simply have to continue. With the guys at
Solidarity goes beyond the movement’s legitimacy against its contenders; it directly affects the participants’ cohesion and motivation. The common good mandate so obtained reinforces the ‘call’ for action. It is not surprising, then, that gathering and communicating solidarity was an important part of the movement’s tactics.

Expressions of support are spontaneous to some extent only: they demand a ‘labour’ both from supporters and supported. Among activists, accounts of solidarity also emerged while explaining how the movement managed to endure pressures. Students’ organizations dealt with finding and documenting solidarity as a tactic, and one not oriented to the ‘outside’ only: it also aimed at building self-assurance and cohesion among activists. Like Francisco’s quote above, reports frequently referred to how support expressions were registered for later use in internal activities. The cohesive and motivational effect of solidarity cannot be detached from its legitimating effects, but cannot be reduced to them either. Besides legitimacy as a political strength, solidarity provided activists with a substantive sense of mandate; a ‘calling’ whose effects lay mostly within the movement. Activists, on the other hand, purposely developed tactics to maximize these beneficial effects.

**Otherness, abstraction and social movements**

How can we understand the relationship between strangers and social movements? Foremost, strangers as such are influential for the legitimation of movements and their claims. In the studied case, strangers’ support was central in constructing the movement’s worthiness of attention.

As strangers’ solidarity is relevant for social movements, movements benefit from tactics distinguishing activists from supporters while keeping the latter attached to their cause. The boundaries between both groups and the formers’ ability to raise support across social boundaries become crucial. This calls into question a widespread hypothesis proposing that the central problem for social movements is passing from sympathy to engagement: the centrality of recruitment over legitimacy and the equalization of support with participation. Such hypotheses have led to the neglect of ‘weak’ support and, indirectly, to emphasis on recruitment networks over appeals to the strangers’ support (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995).

The point is not, however, denying that engaged collective action is crucial for social movements. In the present analysis, activists and non-participants agreed on the central role of the movement’s massive demonstrations and occupations: these actions made the movement visible and relevant, making its broader support possible. Collective action was crucial in reaching supporters who were, precisely, strangers holding no direct links to the movement. However, the mobilization itself benefited from garnering supporters beyond their own ranks and distinguishing them from its ranks: a virtuous circle between activists’ participation and strangers’ solidarity emerged.

These findings might seem counterintuitive. Often, social scientists deal with the stranger as a problematic figure inciting reactions ranging from ambivalence to hostility. In social movement research, strangers as such rarely play an explicit role – and when they do, this role is often being the target of social hostility, racism or xenophobia (see, e.g. McVeigh & Sikkink, 2005). To better understand this positive role of strangers and to draw better-specified conclusions, I propose turning critically to the work of Simmel to distinguish between two dimensions of strangeness which are often confounded: otherness and abstraction.

Otherness designates the stranger as different: at minimum, someone who does not share ‘our’ common notions of social life. In more hostile situations, the strangers are devoid of commonality, identified as lacking any arbitrary trait and finally as non-persons in comparison to ‘persons-like-us’. This is the notion of strangeness most referred to in the social sciences – a radical instance of alterity. Here, strangers are newcomers who upset previous social structures (Wood, 1934) and do not share a basic understanding of the world (Schütz, 1944; Segal, 1998). At best, the stranger does not fit into the locals’ own cultural schema (Bauman, 1995).
Abstraction instead defines strangers as those we do not know personally, with whom we are connected only through ‘abstract’ links that also connect us to many others (e.g. humanity, women, nation and class). Simmel (1908/1971, p. 147) elaborates this element in The Stranger, in a clearly negative way. Abstraction, to Simmel, equals alienation (Alexander, 2004): the closest relations involve connections never mediated by abstract categories, but by intimate knowledge and shared experience. More distant relations emerge through abstract common features whose bonding ‘effect […] becomes attenuated in proportion to the size of the group bearing the same characteristics’ (Simmel 1908/1971, p. 147, emphasis added). For Simmel, the scope of abstraction is an aspect of and an explanation for otherness.

Additional features of strangeness in Simmel’s classical essay are mobility and objectivity. Unlike abstraction, objectivity is a positive element, enabling the stranger to judge from a distance. One could contest, however, that it is precisely abstraction that powers the stranger’s ‘objectivity’. Through abstraction, strangers carry with them the idea of the general public, a more universal and objective evaluation of issues that is symbolically lost by those engaged in them. It is because they lack closer bonds with ‘us’ that strangers are deemed more objective. It seems more useful to oppose abstraction and otherness than abstraction and objectivity.

Abstraction is precisely the kind of strangeness that interviewees have constantly referred to in the previous sections. The meaningfulness of solidarity, and thus the movement’s legitimate mandate, is not measured only by the sheer numbers of ‘public support’ as traditionally envisioned: it comes explicitly from the distance between us, from how abstract and detached the connections are between activists and supporters. The stranger you are – the more abstract our connection – the better for solidarity, because it implies a wider spectrum of consensus.

With this distinction, three other conclusions can be drawn. First, the objectivity stemming from strangers’ abstraction carries a ‘call’ for action: strangers’ solidarity provides cohesion and self-assurance to the movement through the sense of representing the ‘common good’.

Second, and because solidarity might be seen as a failed case of direct involvement, the less engaged support of strangers is problematic: it often requires an active labour of boundary building between activists and supporters. These boundaries are already given in some situations (i.e. foreigners), but in others require their own legitimation. The ‘boundary-work’ (Gieryn, 1983) of social movements has been studied regarding the formation of identities in opposition to others, distinguishing adherents and outsiders (Swarts, 2011). These boundaries establish ‘otherness’ rather than ‘abstraction’ – even if sometimes strategically managed to minimize otherness (Bernstein, 1997; Stein, 1997). The relevance of ‘boundary-work’ within adherents, between activists and supporters, has been instead overlooked.

Third and deriving from the need to actively build boundaries within adherents, the movement’s relation with strangers and its management are both powerful drivers for tactical decisions and a useful concept to understand the (unintended) effects of those. Somma (2012, pp. 306–307) identified five main tactics of the 2011 movement: marches, Cacerolazos, occupations, hunger strikes and creative performances. Present findings speak for adding the purposeful search, documentation and diffusion of strangers’ solidarity expressions to this list: these ‘solidarity seeking’ tactics build upon the legitimating and cohesive functions of strangers’ support. Specific decisions regarding other tactics also reveal the purposeful management of the boundary between activists and supporters. Family demonstrations, as well as Cacerolazos, optimize the political impact of strangers’ support while keeping this central cleavage enacted. Tactical decisions ignoring such boundaries, on the other side, can be risky.

Conclusion
These findings also permit reflection on the general topic of strangers in social theory. Strangeness as otherness plays no role in the Chilean students’ movement, whereas strangeness as abstraction certainly does. I suggest, thus, that abstraction and otherness represent truly different phenomena. Otherness is constructed through negation, it is based on the exclusion from some real or imaginary field and therefore is not reciprocal. In the case of the student movement, the stress is on the lack of direct links and the generality of shared connections, not on incommensurability. The legitimating force of solidarity builds upon the precise opposite: we share only these ‘abstract’ connections, yet we still agree.
Opposing otherness and abstraction allows better describing, then, the paradoxical role of strangers. Strangers by abstraction are not those with which, as Schütz claims, we share no common world of meaning and reference, but rather those with whom *all we share* is this common world and nothing else. Whether our common world is strong and complete or sparse and uncertain varies, thus, the question is how powerful our abstract connections are.

Strangers interact with each other without the knowledge that personal ties provide: I only know about strangers what I know about ‘people like us’ and ‘people like them’. The former is the ‘knowledge’ of otherness; prejudice, archetypes and labelling, either positive or negative. The latter is the ‘knowledge’ of abstraction; the broad bonds that link people together, through normative and behavioural *shared* presumptions and *despite* the lack of personal bonds. Neither politics and collective action nor everyday interactions with strangers are possible without this knowledge of abstraction: strangeness as abstraction describes and delimitates the realm of publicity. Hence, political collaboration – if truly political – is necessarily based on solidarity or agreements through abstract relations. In some way, *only the political support of strangers can be truly political*, just as only the recognition of strangers can be strictly seen as part of ‘public’ recognition.

**Notes**

1. Donoso (2013, pp. 5–12) made a similar case regarding the 2006 protests.
2. In Chile, the main distinction among universities is between ‘traditional’ institutions established by law (private or state-owned, but mostly publicly funded and regulated) and ‘private’ institutions opened after dictatorship’s reforms which deregulated education in 1981. Traditional universities include the most prestigious.
3. All names are aliases.
4. A survey from Adimark GfK (2011) reported a 79% of support for the movement in September 2011, while another from CERC (2011b) reported 89% for roughly the same period. The latter source reported as well that 73% of Chileans thought that education was the most urgent problem in Chile: three months earlier, the same studies series registered that only 34% of Chileans thought so (CERC, 2011a).
5. *Freak* and *heavy*: in English in original.
6. There are other specific situations when foreigners can be expected to engage in more direct activities.
7. *Villa*: mostly used for public, low-status housing projects in Chile.

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