RESEARCH ARTICLE

STUDENT MOVEMENTS AND THE POWER OF DISRUPTION

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ABSTRACT: We seek to clarify the nature of militant student protest by proposing a theoretical distinction between two types of student-movement-initiated disruption that are too-often viewed as similar: structural disruption within educational institutions, centered around students' refusal to perform their role as such; and invasive disruption of other institutions, in whose functioning students do not have a routinized role. By drawing on a newspaper-based database of student-initiated protest in Argentina, triangulated by analysis of secondary accounts of these events and in-depth interviews with the activists who planned and implemented the protest, we seek to understand the strategic logic that leads to disruptive protest and to explore the differing dynamics that characterize structural and invasive disruption.

Both structural and invasive protest by students (and other organized social groupings) can successfully interfere with the normal functioning of society and can therefore create usable leverage against institutional power holders. However, the tactical choice and the outcome of such confrontations derives from a complex equation of situational variables. The variables specific to student protest include the institutional target designated for disruption, whether the target has the formal authority and/or resources to grant the demanded reform, whether non-students who work or otherwise participate in the targeted structure support or oppose the demands and tactics of the students, and whether the protesting students have active allies among various non-student stakeholders.

We conclude that structural disruption on campus can be a surer and less difficult-to-implement strategy, that it can generate leverage without the creation of alliances with outside groups and can force concessions if the administration has the authority and resources to deliver meaningful reform. In many circumstances, however, the institutional educational leadership cannot deliver meaningful concessions, and students therefore consider invasive disruption of neighboring structures aimed at delivering more compre-

hensive reforms, and consequently face far more complicated strategic and tactical decisions if they wish to generate productive leverage. These strategic and tactical choices rely on congealed experience from current and prior student protest and their capacity to generate alliances mediated by their understanding of what can succeed.

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1. Introduction[1]

Student activism has played a crucial role in many major social and political movements in most locations in the modern world system. This widely noted prominence derives, in the studied opinion of most social movement scholars, from the unique social location that students inhabit (McAdam 1988; Boren 2001; Calhoun 1997; Taylor and Van Dyke 2007). Students are young and relatively unencumbered; they occupy a high-visibility social location; they inhabit a transitory identity that they will soon leave, usually without sticky stigma; and their organizations are infused each year with an energetic new cohort. These features help to explain why student movements emerge and re-emerge, but they also help to explain why student movements have so often failed to achieve their social change goals (Taylor and Van Dyke 2007, 277). In this paper, we seek to begin an analysis of how student-initiated social movements make tactical choices between differing protest strategies available to them; how they choose which institutions to target; and when and how they attempt to mobilize non-student allies. We focus particularly on the structural relationship between the students and the complicated educational power structures they inhabit, with specific focus on the impact of this relationship on the protest choices they make.

We begin by briefly considering the circumstances that make the disruption of 'business as usual' so central to social protest in general, and why students are so often involved in disruptive protest. We then distinguish between two different types of student-movement-initiated disruption that are too-often viewed as similar by social movement scholars. We then utilize these tools to understand the variety of strategies students adopt in pursuit of various reform goals in Argentina and further discuss these findings by offering a brief comparison with the US student anti-war movement. We conclude by identifying some key situational variables that grant students leverage against institutional power holders.

Piven (2006, 23) defines disruption as 'withdrawing cooperation in social relations,' arguing that the fact or threat of disruption is the chief mechanism for coercing concessions from large institutions (or from society as a whole). Working from this premise that disruption is the epicenter of successful protest, we argue that student movements – and many other protest groups – have utilized two distinct forms of disruptive protest that have differing profiles and differing consequences:

❖ Structural Disruption by students typically takes place within educational institutions and derives from students' refusal to perform their roles as students, thus preventing the school or university from conducting 'business as usual.' These protests generally involve refusing to attend classes, and/or using the student status to interfere with research or administrative functions on campus or at school.

❖ Invasive disruption typically occurs when students seek to interfere with the functioning of other institutions in which they do not have a routinized role. These protests generally involve leaving the campus and occupying public spaces, government buildings, and private institutions in an attempt to prevent them from conducting 'business as usual' in that space.

Both forms of disruption can successfully interfere with normal functioning and can therefore create usable leverage. Despite this similarity in potential impact, we wish to demonstrate that there are very different situational dynamics determining the outcomes deriving from these two forms of disruption; and that students' reading of these variables, based on immediate past experiences and institutional learnings, is a major determinant of their strategic choices.

While our argument relies on a comparison across three distinct periods of a national case (Gerring 2004), all contained in one decade of Argentinian student protest, we contend that the dynamics at play have broader applications: to student movements elsewhere, to social protest by many groups occupying other demographic segments, and to most societies in 21st Century world system.

We wish to specifically underscore four important conditions that determine the strategy and outcome of most student protest: the type of demands they wish to raise; choosing an institutional adversary capable of granting their demands; assessing and enacting potential alliances with other social groups in pursuing these demands; and choosing the form of disruptive (or non-disruptive) protest capable of delivering the desired concession.

2. The Power to Disrupt

The question of how power is exercised by collective protestors has been an endur-ing one within social movement studies since modern social movement theory arose in the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights movement (Zald and Ash 1966; Schwartz 1976; McAdam 1982; Morris 1986; Tilly 1986). Nevertheless there has been little direct dis-cussion of how and when social movements exercise power, beyond the debates around the role of disruption initiated by the now classic books by Francis Piven and Richard Cloward, Regulating the Poor (1971) and Poor People's Politics (1977). Their work has been extended by case studies of successful protest, notably Schwartz's study of southern populism in the 1890s (1976), Morris's work on the Civil Rights movement (1981; 1986), Kimeldorf's (1985) study of Pennsylvania coal miners in the late 19th cen-tury, and the Murray and Schwartz (2019) study of the auto workers in the 1930s[2]. These studies, while substantially extending our understanding of when disruption translates into power, they do not pause to look at the processes by which this power is produced and sustained; nor do they explore the distinctive profiles of structural and invasive disruption[3].

Some important studies about social movements in Latin America have looked at the variables determining protest tactics, placing the focus on whether disruptive tactics were employed. Somma and Medel (2016), for example, use data on protest events in Chile to analyze the effect of significant variables on tactical choices, finding that the target, the actor making the claim, organizational presence, and the number of partici-pants are all important determinants of tactics. They explore the intersection between restrained (conventional and cultural) and transgressive (disruptive and violent) tactics and find that protests against private companies and with smaller number of partici-pants are more likely to utilize disruptive and violent tactics, while workers 'specialize' in disruptive non-violent tactics. While pioneering studies such as these have empha-sized disruptive versus non-disruptive tactics, we wish in this paper to expand our un-derstanding of different types of disruptive tactics while unpacking the deliberative mechanisms and variables that determine actors' choices.

Structural disruption

[2] For other voices in this ongoing discussion, see Meyer and Tarrow (1998); Tarrow (1998); Morris and Clawson (2005); Van Dyke et al, (2001); Luders (2010); Alexander (2006); Morris (2007).
[3] For scholarship that develops the concept of structural disruption, without speaking to the contrast with invasive disruption, see Schwartz (1976); Perrone (1983); Perrone, Wright and Griffin (1984); Silver (2003); Morris (2007).

Modern institutions (government, economic, social, cultural, among others) require the routinized exercise of power by those at the top of a (typically Weberian) hierarchy. Orders enunciated by the organizational leadership have no tangible consequence unless they are enacted by their subordinates. This reliance of leadership on the rank and file of any organizational hierarchy therefore implies the possibility of disobedience on the part of those who inhabit the organization and perform its necessary functions. And this possibility of disobedience can lead, under certain circumstances, to unmanageable disruption of the organization's functioning[4].

'Structural power implies that the power holder is an integral part of the system that his or her day-to-day activities are necessary for the system to work. A strike is an exercise of structural power, while bombing a building is not' (Schwartz 1976, 133). The classic and most often invoked example of such structural power is a strike by manufacturing workers. In the stereotypical scenario, assembly line workers stop performing their appointed tasks and remain idle at their work stations until their demands – typically for higher wages or better working conditions – are met. The disruption and the leverage for policy change derive from the fact that the company would soon have no product to sell, and therefore no income and no profits.

But not all – or even most – work stoppages create sufficient disruption (for sufficient periods of time) to exercise leverage on corporate management. Consider, for example, the contrast between a tightly coupled and fast moving auto assembly line and a clothing factory with hundreds of stand-alone sewing machines. In the clothing factory, if one or two or even one hundred operators stopped working, the other machines would continue churning out finished products ready for sale. The pressure on top management would be minimal; since the executives would be dealing with a modest bottleneck. For the workers in the clothing factory, then, a successful strike would require the coordinated work stoppage of a large proportion of the machine operators, as well as a mechanism for preventing those who did not join the strike from continuing to work. Following Murray and Schwartz (2019, 112), 'the higher the structural leverage of a group, the fewer members it needs to mobilize in order to disrupt normal function and therefore command changes in the system'.

We know from literature on strikes that workers in factories and other subordinate groups in hierarchical organizations possess latent power that can only be activated if they occupy a strategic location; if they can organize the active or tacit support of a critical mass of their co-workers to ensure massive coordinated non-compliance; and if

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[4] For an insightful discussion of this interdependence between executives and their subordinates, see Barnard (1938) and Esparza (2013)

they are able prevent their replacement from outside. In the end, then, the activation of the structural power of workers in factories – even in the most tightly coupled assembly line – depends on the coordinated action of a large proportion of the workers, and a degree of support from the outside community that prevents their replacement for a sufficient period to threaten long-term disruption of 'business as usual.' These ideal types of structural disruption by manufacturing workers are less vulnerable to the repressive efforts usually available to management. If no replacement workers are readily available, then firing, removing, and/or arresting the striking workers prolongs the disruption while potentially provoking supportive work stoppages by other workers. This points to one of key strengths deriving from structural disruption: there are few coercive actions that can force workers to start working again.

We can now look at how students can gain power within their educational institutions by refusing to play their appointed role in the organization. Consider the two most common student protests: strikes and building occupations. A strike that effectively disrupts the education process depends on a critical mass of students refusing to attend class, with sufficient militancy or widespread support that prevents a sufficient number of their non-activist classmates from crossing their picket lines. This disruption of 'business as usual' translates into pressure as soon as the administration believes that only concessions will result in students returning to class. We note here the direct analogy to workers – in both cases the leverage derives from the refusal of subordinates to enact the prescribed organizational routines.

Occupations operate differently from (student or worker) strikes because they do not involve direct refusal to perform their institutionally prescribed roles. In building occupations, students engage in routine behavior by entering the building to request a change in university policy or practices. These requests are sometimes as straightforward as instituting new courses or curricula; while other times the changes are more complex and not as directly related to students' daily life (such as opposition to foreign intervention or budget cuts). Nevertheless, such demands are well within the accepted routine of student behavior. The disruptive protest begins when students refuse to leave the building after their claim is filed and instead remain until a favorable decision is rendered. If a enough students engage in this behavior and sustain it beyond a few minutes or hours or days, their continued presence disrupts normal business and therefore pressures the administration to deliver the desired decision.

We can see, then, the similar logic between workers' latent power in a factory and students' latent power in a school or university. In both cases the power is activated by a refusal to follow the prescribed routines in ways designed to disrupt 'business as usual'; and to continue the disruptive behavior until concessions are granted. But

the differences in the structures and functioning of factories and educational institutions also lead to different dynamics when this latest power is activated.

Just as the structural differences between auto assembly line and the clothing factory created different dynamics regarding the activation of latent worker power, the different structure of the education system creates contrasting dynamics for the activation of latent student power as compared to the power of manufacturing workers. Most significant for our discussion, a school or university houses both administrative employees and instructors who are also essential for conducting the institution's educational and other functions. The instructional staff can accomplish the same disruption as student strikes, if they can gather sufficient critical mass to ensure that most classes cannot be conducted; and the administrative staff can accomplish the same disruption as occupations if they refuse to perform their appointed tasks.

This cohabitation of different subordinate groups within the same structure creates the possibility that support by teachers or administrators can strengthen the leverage of the protesting students (and vice versa); while simultaneously creating the possibility that lack of support can undermine that leverage. Take, for example, the actions of instructors during a student strike. If teachers actively join the protest or tacitly support the strike by staying home, they significantly enhance its strength, since students who do not want to join the strike will have no classes to attend. But this same cohabitation can undermine the student strike if teachers cross picket lines (using physical force if necessary), deliver lectures (even to half empty classes), punish non-attendance (with scheduled quizzes), and place material from missed lectures on examinations. The same dialectic applies to instructors' strikes, with student reaction either aiding the teachers or undermining their ability to stop the education process.

A particularly important aspect of this cohabitation relates to the scope of disruption – and therefore the nature of leverage – students can generate through their structural role in the education system. Students can develop leverage against the administration by organizing their fellow students; and expand that leverage to the educational system as a whole by creating an organization that allows for nationally coordinated protest. Such national coordination produces potential leverage against the entire national Education Administration. But if the educational administration cannot grant the demanded concession – for example a larger educational budget, which in Argentina is controlled by the national government – students cannot gain leverage of their institutional adversary by engaging in structural disruption.

This delineation of the scope of leverage for students underscores the limitation of student movements in Argentina and elsewhere, who famously raise demands that extend beyond the confines of the education system and into the broadest reaches of the

national (and sometimes international) political economy. If students wish to extract concessions that educational elites cannot grant (including some educational demands and many broader programs), students must develop protest strategies that can apply pressure to government or corporate elites; and/or form explicit or tacit alliances with groups that can generate disruption that targets their key adversary. For example, if students need to exert leverage in the political system, it is likely that they will exercise their power as a bloc of voters or activate alliances among their political party allies (and students very often have double militancy)[5]. The primary mechanisms that students utilize to develop this power against outside elites is to establish alliances with other groupings, and then apply invasive disruption that extends their leverage to the targeted institutions. In many instances, the potential or actual allies possess a kind of leverage that students lack. In these cases, an active or even tacit alliance can effectively transfer the structural leverage of the ally to the students[6].

Invasive disruption

On-campus strikes and building occupations are not effective tools when students' choice of demands and targets take them beyond the borders of their specific academic institutions or the more generous confines of the education system as a whole. Students therefore regularly target other institutions and raise their broader demands before larger audiences. Many of these sojourns into the outside world are aimed at calling attention to a specific problem through loud protest that attracts media and therefore public attention – that is, to force debate of an issue among the relevant audiences without necessarily upsetting 'business as usual' within their educational centers. Many other such sojourns are, however, designed to disrupt the functioning of major institutions, and thus utilize the power of disruption to extract concessions from the relevant adversary. Here we wish to focus on these latter, disruptive, demonstrations and to inquire into the conditions under which they are utilized, and the circumstances that determine their effectiveness.

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[5] Yet another example of this form of power is when Chilean students called on national strikes in order to demand for radical changes in the education system and they united with the miners who threatened to disrupt one of Chile´s most important sources of income. This strategic necessity is not limited to students; it applies to all insurgent groups, as Schwartz' comment about Southern Populism in the United States indicates: 'Different organizing strategies can be developed in order to effect different changes in policy…' (Schwartz 1976, 175).

[6] Additionally, these alliances often rely on pre-existing networks and historical and political affinities (Gonzalez Vaillant 2015).

Experienced student activists understand the disconnect between on-campus and off-campus protest. One of our interviewees, Florencia[7], explained how the ideological and identitarian traits of the student fraction in power mediates the decision over strategies; and also how, ultimately, it is about searching for the most effective way of gaining concessions in the light of the demand and target: *'it was common sense, when they touch your house, you occupy; if the issue is outside, you need to expand outwards and gain support.'*

In a similar tone, former secondary and university student activist Juan[8] noted: *'There is a correlation of forces to consider based on your objectives …. Sometimes occupations become isolated but if you have the capacity to combine them with street mobilizations then you begin to gain visibility and you catch people's attention…'.*

The two student leaders pointed to the two different functions of extra-campus protest. On the one hand, the usefulness of 'street mobilizations' in producing 'visibility' for the students' demands, therefore gaining the attention and support – and perhaps a formal alliance – of outside groups, who might then help win concession using their own, perhaps more powerful, structural leverage. On the other hand, moving outward requires a correlation of forces and degree of social support to successfully disrupt 'everyday life' for long enough to win concessions.

Taken together, these complementary observations by two experienced student activists allow us to glimpse the dynamics of invasive disruption, and to understand its differences from structural disruption. Consider, then, the on-the-ground reality of 'taking to the streets massively,' which involves large numbers of students exiting the campus, blockading traffic on very busy streets, and resolving to continue the disruption until their demands are met. A sustained demonstration of this sort could disrupt all aspects of 'everyday' life and exert pressure on the elites occupying the decision-making positions in government, corporations and other powerful institutions, since the latter would be deprived of the workers, tools, products and/or services needed to conduct 'business as usual.'

Also consider, however, the warning subsequently raised by Juan that such a 'massive street blockade' would 'take far more effort and militants to sustain.' In comparison to a campus strike, blockading sufficient streets to disrupt even one city for one day requires a much more elaborate organization and far more students with much

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[7] Florencia Polimeni is a former activist of an organization called Franja Morada, and former secretary of both the Buenos Aires University student federation (FUBA) and of the Argentine university student federation (FUA).
[8] Independent student from an autonomous university organization in the early 2000s, with previous secondary school militant experience.

higher levels of commitment. This daunting organizational problem is multiplied by the vulnerability of street demonstrations to easily-activated repressive actions, such as using local police to expel the students from the intersection and to restore the traffic flow. And, even if this police action takes hours, and therefore disrupts city life for a day, the students' repeat-attempt the next day could be frustrated by posting police on vulnerable streets to prevent the blockade. We note that such a scenario – short-term disruption of city life – might not wrest concessions from institutional elites, but it can attract media and public attention and, therefore, confer the 'visibility' that both of the activists cited above considered so important.

Other invasive disruption tactics developed by the students in Argentina and elsewhere have similar dynamic profiles. One of the most relevant and most illuminating of these tactics are sit-ins, which typically involve disruptive invasion of government buildings. Large and well-organized sit-ins – analogous to those conducted on campus – are often initially effective in disrupting the invaded agency's functioning. The favored response by executives is physical expulsion. While often successful, this tactic, when utilized against large sit-ins, can create considerable further disruption. The better method is the preventive tactic of placing guards at the entries and only allowing entry to people with 'legitimate business' in the building. Since the students have no organic right to enter these buildings, the sit-in cannot be replenished, and its disruptive impact must subside.

This vulnerability of off-campus sit-ins to barring students from entering the target building points to a small but significant contrast with on-campus or in-school sit-ins[9]. The structural role of students confers upon them access to the services offered in the administration building, and therefore students have a much better chance of sustaining the disruption for long enough to extract concessions.

This difference illustrates a key element in the distinction between structural and invasive disruption. Many counter-actions available to pressured executives against invaders are either ineffective or counter-effective against disrupters who play an integral role in the disrupted structure.

The similarities and differences between on and off campus sit-ins also points to another key element in the dynamics of disruptive protest. We noted in our discussion of structural disruption that educational institutions contain at least three different groups with the potential to generate leverage: students, teachers, and administrative

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[9] In Argentina, on-campus university occupations have a further advantage, since Argentinian law which preserves university autonomy prohibits police from entering the campus, and thus removes an important repressive tool that is available off campus. The role of memory is also important here, as infringement of university autonomy is associated with the last dictatorship and therefore deeply socially condemned.

personnel[10]. Routine interactions among members of these groups is a constant feature of educational life, creating enduring relationships among the groups that can have important consequences for the successful application of structural leverage.

This history of symbiotic interaction among students, teachers, and administrators produces what is often the most important difference in dynamics between on- and off-school building occupations. When students sit-in at school, the workers they are disrupting have been observers of the (usually prolonged) series of non-disruptive protest, have personal relationships to many of the protestors, and are therefore fully cognizant of (and often sympathetic to) the students' complaints; they may even hope to benefit from the concessions demanded. These long-standing relationships significantly increase the probability of overt or tacit support from the workers employed in the occupied building. This contrasts sharply with invasive building occupations, since a symbiotic foundation for such support may not exist, and – even if present – has not always been constructed.

We see, then, that the optimistic view that street blockades can 'begin to gain visibility' implies that unsustained invasive disruption serves a purpose analogous to non-disruptive protest on the campus – a device for building support among potential allies. We note that such support on campus among teachers and administrators can be built by routinized personal contact, as well as by more purposeful petitions, rallies, and face-to face organizing; but these methods are too taxing off-school, and invasive protest, even when it cannot create effective leverage, can generate widespread awareness, understanding, and support for student demands. Once this support grows into an alliance with groups that have structural leverage over the targeted elites, sustained disruption can be achieved from joint action.

Armed with this analysis of the dynamics of disruptive protest, we seek to demonstrate that these strategic and tactical considerations are understood and enacted by student protestors.

3. Methods and data

This study focuses on the student movements in Argentina during the second half of the 1990s and the early2000s, a period marked by significant but episodic student mo-

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[10] We note that there are still other groups with disruptive potential, including various kinds of non-academic employees, among them maintenance and residence hall workers.

bilization[11]. While Argentina maintained free access to public education at all levels, underfunding and often institutional neglect have undermined both completion rates and educational quality (Tedesco, Filmus and Aguerrondo 2005). The country has a history of strong and active university students' federations since the beginning of the 20th century, including the University Federation of Argentina (Federación Universitaria Argentina – FUA) and the University Federation of Buenos Aires (Federación Universitaria de Buenos Aires – FUBA), two key organizations that played a pivotal role during the three phases of protests discussed here[12].

Argentina experienced several major cycles of large, visible, and disruptive student protests between 1990 and 2010. To understand the dynamics that determined the strategy and tactics undertaken by the student protesters, we rely on a quantitative dataset as well as on intensive field work conducted between August 2012 and April 2013. The dataset was collected by the Collective Protest Project at Stony Brook University[13], which compiled samples of contentious protest events reported in the national news in Argentina during the three protest cycles between 1997 and 2007[14]. Among the 3,469 events included in the larger dataset, the 260 events involving student organizations are analyzed here. The dataset includes events from student movements from different educational levels[15].

A long tradition in the collective action literature has demonstrated the usefulness of newspaper archives for the collection of event data (Earl, Martin, McCarthy and Soule 2004; Mueller 1997; Olzak 1989; Tarrow 1989; Tilly 1995). Though news reports cannot be interpreted as a mirror image of reality (they distort and also construct it), they do provide a reliable account of how contentious politics is 'staged' in the public space

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[11] For a detailed discussion of the methods used in this study, see Gonzalez Vaillant (2016). Chapter 1, section 1.6.

[12] The University Federation of Argentina (FUA) is composed by the local federations that correspond to the different provinces of Argentina. The Federation of the University of Buenos Aires (FUBA) is the most numerous of the federations and it its composed of thirteen student centers, one for each of the public universities in Buenos Aires (e.g. Agronomy, Engineer, Psychology, Social Sciences, etc.).

[13] National Science Foundation (U.S.) Grant 'Food Riots in Contemporary Latin America: A Comparative Analysis of the Political Dynamics of Collective Violence,' 2008-2011.

[14] For the Stony Brook study, a 'protest event' included any gathering of more than 3 people that made public demands from an identified institution. Protests conducted by the same group against the same institution(s) over more than one day were counted as a single event. See Gonzalez Vaillant (2016); Page-Poma (2015).

[15] Events in which university students were reported as the main protagonists (39%), events in which secondary school students were protagonists (33%), events carried out by other educational sectors (such as primary or technical school, 5%), and events in which students from different sectors mobilized together and/or in which students are reported in generic terms (24%).

(Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Okamoto 2003; Oliver and Meyer 1999). Extensive assessment indicates that newspaper reports are valid in reporting 'hard' data such as actors, demands, and tactics, which are the main concerns of this study (Earl et al. 2004). Lack of availability of alternative types of continuous and systematic information on events of this type (for example, police and intelligence data are not usually available and were not forthcoming despite efforts made to obtain them) makes this source a privileged one in the study of national conflicts in Latin American countries (Schuster et al. 2006).

Fieldwork was conducted in Buenos Aires during 2012 and 2013, involving interviews as well as attendance at events and meetings. The evidence analyzed here derived from 15 targeted interviews with identified leaders in the student and allied movements aimed at understanding the strategic logic underlying the chosen tactics. All interviews were carried out in Spanish, tape-recorded and then transcribed for their post-coding and analysis[16]. Interviewees were selected because they were prominent leaders in different student movements in Argentina in the 90s and 2000s. Though all subjects were explicitly prompted to explain how decisions about tactics were made, we focus in this text on those who dwelled in detail on decision-making around tactics. Using multiple methods can help capitalize the strengths of the different approaches employed (and transcend their limitations), as well as help account for greater degrees of complexity and for nuances in social issues and problems. While the data on protest events allows us to understand some general patterns and trends, the interviews allow us to unravel some of the mechanisms at play and understand students' rationales behind their actions.

4. Students' power of disruption in Argentina

We begin by noting that our Argentine dataset covers three distinct periods of contention in an attempt to sample protest events from very different political, economic and social contexts. The Neoliberal Period (code from August 1, 1997 to December 31, 1998) recorded the cycle of protest during the presidency Carlos Menem, when active protest against neoliberal reforms grew and spread among many sectors of the popula-

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[16] We provide general information about their political and organizational adscription and experience as a way of framing their discourse and because ideological and political cleavages influence students thinking about tactics. We have not attempted to be representative of the different student organizations when selecting the interview fragments. We do not use the name of interviewees unless they explicitly expressed their willingness to be referenced.

tion, including students. The period of huge economic and political crisis (coded from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2002) included the crescendo of general protest and strikes that resulted in the downfall of Fernando De la Rua's administration, and the unseating of four subsequent presidents. The Progressive Turn (coded from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2007), represents the peak student protest period during the more 'progressive' Néstor Kirchner Administration, focused mainly on issues of students' university representation and governance.

Figure 1 allows us to scrutinize the comparative rhythm of general protest and student mobilization during these contrasting periods. We note that, overall, protest follows predictable patterns while student protests do not. Mobilization was modest during the Menem regime, averaging fewer than 20 newsworthy protests per month over the 17-month period. The Economic/Government Crisis period, in contrast, registered a more than 400% increase to over 60 protests per month – nearly three per day[17]. The rate of protest did not decline significantly (averaging just under 60 per month) under the progressive regime of Néstor Kirchner. These data fit well with the patterns that political opportunity analysts have documented and predicted, both in the patterns of repeated cycles of protest, and in the widely varying levels of protest reflecting the specific political opportunity structures – and other society-wide factors – during the different moments (Zolberg 1972; Tarrow 1989; Tarrow 1995; Tilly 1995; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) .

This being said, the data on student protest recorded in Figure 1 contrast sharply with received wisdom. Considering that students are ideally situated to engage in protest, it is particularly surprising that their behavior does not follow the national trends, especially during the Crisis Period. While the general rate of protest tripled, student protest reports in the media increased by only about 50%[18]. But then, when protest stabilized during the Kirchner regime, students' patterns recorded another 40% increase.

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[17] It is important to note that large, multiday demonstrations, including those with many demands and multiple participating groups and organizations, count as a single event in these data. The data in Chart 1 thus underestimates the magnitude of the explosion in 2001-2002.

[18] It is worth reiterating that we included in 'student protests' all newspaper-covered demonstrations that included any student organization or an articulated demand associated with student organizations. The meagre increases thus reflect the failure of student groups to endorse and join demonstrations by unions, unemployed workers, and community groups.

Figure 1 – Student protests in Argentina (per month)
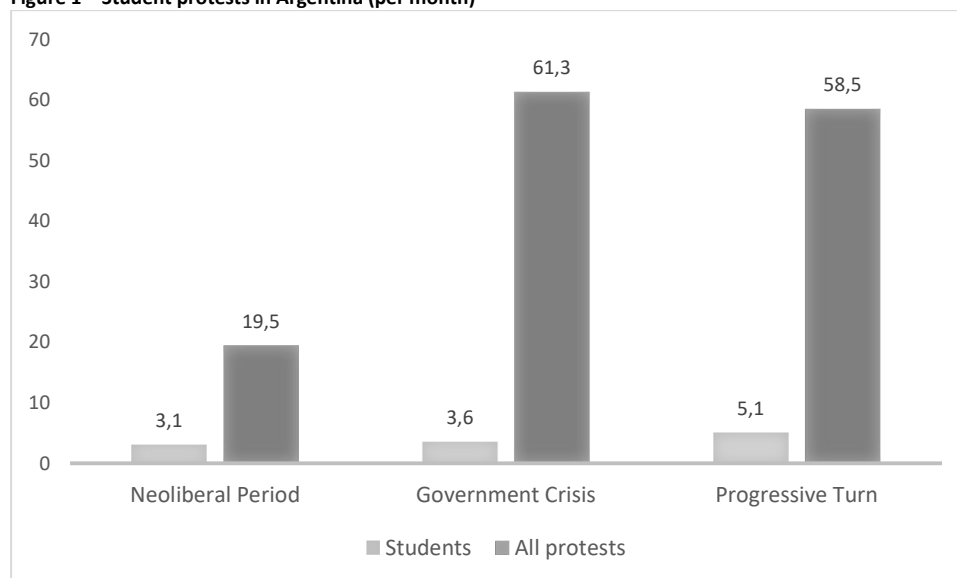
These make it clear that the rhythm of protest among students is anchored in dynamics largely orthogonal to the broader patterns[19]. While the qualitative data reveals that students were very active during the time of the crisis, they did not necessarily mobilize as students. This is due to the double militancy of many student activists, who also maintain active participation in political party structures and other social movements.

To further document these independent dynamics, Table 1 displays another apparent anomaly, this time in the incidence of disruptive and non-disruptive student protest in each of the three periods[20]. During the non-crisis periods only about 10% of the newsworthy student protests were non-disruptive – with about 90% involving some kind of disruption, either on or off the campuses or schools. This pattern reflects both the well-documented propensity among student groups for militant action and the

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[19] Multivariate analysis on student protest suggest these findings are robust (Gonzalez Vaillant 2015).

[20] Tactics were classified as disruptive if they involved interference with the educational functions (occupation of educational buildings, student strikes, blockade of access to educational building and interruption of school assemblies) or interference with outside structures (marches, piquet, escraches, public mobilization and concentration). They were coded as symbolic if they did not disrupt any institution (e.g., orderly assembly, pot-banging, petition signing, public classes). For a full discussing of coding, see Gonzalez Vaillant (2015).

well-known propensity of news media to ignore non-disruptive student protest. But this pattern was violated during the period of Government and Economic Crisis: at a time when disruptive collective actions permeated the country, the student groups were twice as likely (22%) to choose non-disruptive, rather than disruptive, tactics.

Table 1 – Disruptive Protest by Period

	Neoliberal Period	Crisis	Progressive turn	Total
Type of tactics	1997-1998	2001-2002	2006-2007	
Disruptive Protest	92%	78%	89%	86%
Non-disruptive Protest	8%	22%	11%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N.	52	86	122	260

Note: chi square (2 df)=7.6, p<5

Interviews with leaders of student protests shed considerable light on the strategic and tactical logic that produced these anomalous results. Hernan Scorofitz[21], a veteran of many student mobilizations, described the parameters of debate that determined whether disruptive or non-disruptive or symbolic tactics were chosen:

There is always a debate about methods. We all agree [on goals], but it's a melting pot of different opinions when it comes to tactics. Some want to block the street, or occupy [a key institution], while others say we must be more creative, more symbolic.

If you have more specific demands, … then you might opt for a disruptive tactic…. But at the end of the day, the chosen methods are always subordinate to politics and your demands;… [and the choice] will always be linked to [generating] power.

Hernan concluded, based on two decades of activism, that students chose disruption when they felt it could win 'specific' demands from a particular target, but chose 'more creative, symbolic' demands when the goal was to broaden support in order to build toward exercising decisive 'power.' This comment sheds important light on the relatively high levels of non-disruptive protest during the Crisis period, since the students – when they mobilized as students – knew that 'more creative, more symbolic' protests

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[21] Scorofitz was the first leftist president of the student government at the University of Psychology during 2001-2002 (UBA), and a two-decade activist affiliated with the Workers Party (PO).

could attract the attention and support of the generally mobilized population, and allow them to borrow and harness the power of the larger movement. From this we see the distinctive role of non-disruptive protest, as a way of gaining support of groups with leverage over institutional elites from whom the students sought concessions.

This point was amplified by Pablo Rabey[22], who had participated in demonstrations as a young secondary student during the neoliberal period, and actively took part in the student movement and the Workers Party during the Crisis. Speaking first to the strengths and weaknesses of structural disruption on the campus, he commented: 'If you are fighting for educational budget and you occupy the university, no one care less.' Unpacked, Pablo's comment reiterated the logic we developed above, which analyzed the ways that students could gain leverage over the local administration by 'occupy the university' tactics. But other times – for example when the students were demanding a higher budget that the university administration did not have the power to grant –, 'they couldn't care less' because the target in many budget fights was the national government, which could continue to function unhindered if students shut down the university. In these circumstances, moving the protest off campus became necessary, as Pablo explains:

But if you do it with massive mobilization outside the university, then occupation has a purpose as it allows you to activate the students, organize the movement and generate debate …. And you also give the impression that you can do something much greater than disrupting classes, it gets media attention and raises the threat of a general strike.

Pablo's answer to the limited leverage exercised by students was a 'massive mobilization outside the university' that would, if it attracted the attention and support of the general public, at least threaten 'a general strike' that could exercise real leverage over the targeted institutions. We see, then, that organizers such as Pablo point to the reality or threat of invasive disruption as a building block to an effective way of building an alliance around student demands with powerful groups outside the university or school.

Table 2, which reports the correlation between the types of demands and the types of demonstrations, confirms that students in Argentina generally followed the strategic rules enunciated by Pablo and Hernan. Considering first the protests involving educa-

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[22] Pablo Rabey, an Anthropologist, a Workers Party activist, was president of two secondary student centers and a youth organizer in Buenos Aires and at the University of Buenos Aires.

tional demands, we note that almost half (46%) involved structural disruption of their home institutions. This comports with Hernan's argument that many 'narrow' demands are grantable by the local administration and can therefore be won through structural disruption. But, as Pablo noted, many educational demands – like increased educational budgets – are not grantable by university administrations, and therefore cannot be won through internal protest. This explains why almost as many militant educational protests (44%) moved outside the university and sought to gain wider support for their protest and then apply leverage to an institutional adversary with the power to grant the concessions they sought.

Table 2 – Student Tactics by Time of Demand

	Type of Demands		
Type of Tactics	*Educational Demands*	*Broader Demands*	*All Disruptive Protest*
Structural Disruption	46%	7%	34%
Invasive Disruption	44%	72%	53%
Non-Disruptive	11%	21%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%
N,	177	82	259

Note: Education Demands: Events where all demands involved educational policy
Broader Demands: Events in which non-educational demands were made by students
Structural Disruption: Students sought to disrupt functioning of their schools and/or universities
Invasive Disruption: Students sought to disrupt functioning of non-educational institutions
Chi square (2 df)=37.3, p<.001

On the other hand, when students raised non-educational demands, which by their nature could not be granted by university or school administrations, they rarely chose structural disruption (7%). Instead they concerned themselves with building support among groups with the power to pressure outside elites, either with newsworthy non-disruptive protests (21%) or invasively disruptive protests (72%).

Table 3 – Types of Demands by Period

	Neoliberal Period	*Crisis*	*Progressive turn*	*Total*
Type of tactics	*1997-1998*	*2001-2002*	*2006-2007*	
Educational	81%	55%	72%	68%
Broader	19%	45%	28%	32%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N.	52	86	122	260

Note: chi square (2 df)=11.8, p<.01

Table 3 provides insight into the process by which the student movement in Argentina developed the strategic orientation enunciated by Hernan and Pablo. Student protests during the Neoliberal Period overwhelmingly concerned educational reform (81%), but this changed dramatically during the Crisis, when students articulated or supported broader demands almost half the time (45%). Once the crisis subsided, and the need and possibility of raising and winning broader demands was reduced, they again restricted their focus to educational demands (72%). During the Crisis period, the newspaper Clarin described this process in terms of the evolving identities of student activists, something also highlighted by the latter:

The university militants of Buenos Aires are no longer the same as in the 80s or 90s.… They are convinced that the University cannot be an island, and that their problems cannot be solved inside the university. These students seek unified action with other popular sectors. 'We are not the working class, but our commitment is with them, and with opening the doors of the university. We are with the piqueteros, we are with the neighborhood assemblies and with the workers of the recuperated factories[23].

The Clarin account makes explicit two elements in the strategic understanding that student activists developed during the crisis period: that many student 'problems cannot be solved inside the university' and that the students sought 'unified action with other popular sectors.' But this logical progression also involved understanding when their complaints could be answered by the local administration and did not require further escalation. Consider, for example, the insight offered by an activist who posited a typical pattern of protest: *'it usually grows in the following way: assembly, petition, meet the authorities, they receive you, they don't listen, then you do a march and, if needed, you occupy.'* But before asserting this as an inevitable sequence, he added a serious qualifier: *'The demand has to have resonance, the tactic a direction and an organization (…). There has to be a correlation of forces, the tactics depends on the particularities of the conflict.'* For each cycle of protest, students argued for the necessity of building support for the use of disruptive tactics – not just among students, but also with faculty and administrative personnel. The profile of support, hopefully producing overt or tacit alliances with non-student groupings, then determined the type of disruptive tactics that could be effectively implemented.

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[23] The quote is from an activist from the Philosophy and Letters University Eduardo Malach taken up by the Clarin, 17th of October 2002. Original in Spanish: 'Ahora hay un nuevo perfil de la militancia en la Universidad'.

This same logic was pushed a bit further during the interview with Pablo, who acknowledged that structural disruption was the key foundation of student power within the university but realized it could only be effectively applied after non-disruptive actions had overtly failed. According to Pablo, undertaking militant action before exhausting all non-disruptive avenues had been proven inadequate, as it ran the risk of depriving the occupation or strike of the critical mass of students needed to create effective disruption:

You know that occupying the deanery is the most effective [tactic]. But if they are hearing your demand [without disruption] and you decide to occupy you lose legitimacy with the passive student and lose power over your target.

Consider this comment by Christian Mayer, a former independent activist from the Veterinary University and vice-president of the FUBA from 2003-2006, who offered more nuance to the question of applying structural leverage:

The tactics depend on the response you get from the authorities. You start with a problem … you make a petition, if the dean does not respond, our representative takes it to the Consejo Directivo[24]. If they vote against it… then the next step is a mobilization, with its costs. You search for strategies that are historical struggles of the students and the workers.

Christian's comments reflect the experience of the Crisis, as well as the long history of student activism that the students had sought to re-activate after the end of the Dictatorship (Buchbinder, Califa and Millán 2010). But the congealed knowledge Christian is referencing reflects a nuanced understanding of the relationship between tactics and strategy – and the wildly different dynamics involved when taking the struggle off the educational buildings and considering invasive, rather than structural disruption. The deliberative mechanisms at play are very often dependent on prior choices and inter-actions, but also on the political culture of the student sectors that take action during different periods.

These complexities are discussed in a deceptively simple but profoundly insightful comment by Mathias[25], a former leader of the FUBA, one of the largest and most active student organizations.

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[24] The governing body for Argentine Public Universities.
[25] Former leader of the Federation of Students of the University of Buenos Aires (FUBA) during the crisis in a key role in the organization. Activist from MST and former secondary school activist.

We were very pragmatic, [making all decisions] … in the light of the specific conflict…. In the context of high unemployment, the piquet is a tactic that allows you to hurt the state and employers and, at the same time, it gives you huge visibility. In other cases, occupation was a good strategy because it allowed you to test the correlation of forces with your opponent while giving you visibility; and it does not necessarily exhaust the movement…. One of the things that we always considered from a political perspective is the popular support that you will gain. Winning popular support is not something minor and we considered it fundamental.

According to Mathias, school-based occupations – structural disruption – had real advantages, including being easy to organize, giving visibility to the protesters' demands (because it created media coverage that non-disruptive actions did not), and allowing the students to 'test' their ability to win concessions without further escalation. But what if the 'test' revealed insufficient leverage to win meaningful demands? Then, as one student told us, the issue 'goes beyond' the university, and '*you gotta go outside*'[26]. This, for Mathias, meant consideration of invasive disruption tactics like piquets which, unlike an occupation, could 'hurt the State and employers' – and thus gain leverage over the institutions capable of granting the demands. But, as we discussed above, a piquet required large numbers of unemployed workers (*piqueteros*) coordinating their actions with the students to sufficiently disrupt normal traffic patterns, and thus to prevent workers and supplies from arriving at their destinations. And even with these necessary conditions in place, the popular support beyond the *piqueteros* would still be 'fundamental,' since the blockades could not be sustained unless the disrupted drivers tacitly supported the demonstration by turning back and waiting for the piquet to end instead of proceeding to work, or if repression of the blockade was not condemned[27]. Students' decision-making process does not take place in a vacuum; the tactics available are also situationally and relationally defined. During the crisis period, the repertories of contention of other social movements were deeply marked by the predominance of the *piquetero* movement in Argentina and by a concomitant leftist polarization of the student movement, including a growth of independent/autonomist organizations. Additionally, the overarching effects of the crises often facilitate amplification of demands on the part of student movements and facilitate cross-movement coalitions (Van Dyke 2003).

[26] Former leader of the Federation of Students of Argentina (FUA) from an independent organization.
[27] See Van Dyke et al. (2001) and Taylor and Van Dyke (2007) for a detailed discussion of the nuances of tactical and strategic thinking among Argentine student activists.

The portrait of student protest that emerges from our newspaper data and the logic expressed by student activists document a complex relationship among non-disruptive protest, structural disruption, and invasive disruption. On campus, where students are capable of applying structural disruption, successful protest depends upon two major factors: (1) their ability to recruit sufficient student and other in-school support to definitively disrupt normal functioning of the educational institution(s) being challenged, and (2) the institutional capacity of the educational administration to deliver the demanded concessions. This second condition means that structural disruption, even if it can be effectively sustained for long enough to shut down the target institution, cannot be successful unless the education administration being targeted has the authority and power to grant the students' demands.

Even a powerful student movement capable of paralyzing the educational system would have to 'go out' if the local administration cannot answer their demands. And this necessity of leaving their home institution raises the probability of engaging in invasive tactics, with a whole set of different parameters. Invasive disruption is unlikely to be successful without active or implicit alliances with outside groups with their own leverage over the target institution. Effective alliances can be built by high visibility protest – which could be either non-disruptive or disruptive –, but they also often require the use of structural leverage by the allied groups. It is these groups that can effectively disrupt the powerful institutions outside.

Viewed from the perspective and experience of Argentine student activists, the structural disruption they initiate is a direct exercise of power against the local educational administrations. Strikes and occupations are thus the denouement of a largely non-disruptive campaign aimed at building the support, among students and their allies on campus, needed for the sustained disruption to effectively pressure the educational authorities. But the invasive disruption they initiate off school is not the power-wielding denouement of a campaign, but often the initial foray into new territory (physically and politically) aimed at building the support – among students, but also non-educational allies with structural leverage of their own – that can then be translated into the sort of structural disruption that can pressure political or corporate elites. This points to the interaction between what E.O. Wright called 'associational power' and 'structural power' (2000, 962). It is the recruitment of the needed allies that makes the often-ineffective invasive disruption crucial to off-campus student campaigns.

These situationally-determined tactics that students employ also bring about a shift in the likelihood of repression. Invasive disruptive tactics have had higher chances of being repressed in Argentina, but repression also gives students more visibility and often generates stronger and more assertive support among students as well as the

structurally powerful off-school allies. Both student activists and the elites they target weigh these factors when making decisions about whether to act, when to act, and how to act. Strong support networks among off campus allies is one factor that figures centrally in the calculations on both sides.

These contingencies and others we have not analyzed here make student activists' decisions about whether, when, and how to engage in invasive disruption situationally contingent; and they therefore cannot be made mechanically or fit into an agreed upon formula based on past experiences. In order to gain greater visibility while avoiding repression, student activists argue chronically over specific actions and search for ways to innovate new protest tactics that can capture public and media attention while catching the authorities off guard.

5. Discussion: Are Argentine Students Unique?

We believe that the same patterns we observed in Argentina can be found in a wide range of student protests globally. To illustrate this generalizability, consider the most successful campaigns undertaken by U.S. students during the Vietnam War (Marciano 2016; Catalinotto 2017).

The campaign against Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), which trained about two-thirds of the officers serving in the war, utilized structural disruption on campus to pressure university administrations to discontinue the program. The campaign began in Spring of 1969 with a striking exercise of student structural leverage at Harvard University. The disruptive phase of the on-campus protest began with the paralyzing occupation of the central administration building, which was ended with a spectacular middle-of-the-night police intervention that resulted in the arrest of nearly 200 students. The students responded with a month-long strike (which received substantial tacit support from professors) in which no classes met, and no finals were given. The administration restored order in time for graduation by agreeing to discontinue the Harvard ROTC. For the next two years, students targeted ROTC on hundreds of campuses, and produced a chronic shortage of front-line officers in Vietnam, a shortage that was publicly recognized as interfering with the conduct of the war.

The parallel campaign, designed to deprive the military of foot soldiers by disrupting the draft system, could not rely on on-campus protest because so few college students

were eligible for the draft[28]. The students therefore sought to use invasive disruption by entering army bases and interfering with the pre-induction processing of draftees. The effort foundered because it was so difficult for enough protestors to enter the bases where the pre-induction proceedings took place, and due to the ease with which the relatively few demonstrators who breached the barriers could be arrested. However, these failed efforts did accomplish bringing the question of resistance to the actual targets of the draft system, the inductees.

Eventually, the student activists began encouraging the draftees to stop cooperating with the induction process and to organize their own resistance, either by refusing to report or by attending and then refusing to participate in the pre-induction process. This transformed the invasive disruption of students into structural disruption by draftees. This tactic substantially contributed to the dramatic decline – in some cities by as much as 50% – in draftees reporting for duty. The resulting shortage in foot-soldiers (and the collateral rebellion of US soldiers within Vietnam) became a major consideration in the decision of the US government to withdraw.

The varying fates of student-led Vietnam War protests point to critical distinctions between the dynamics of on-campus and off-campus activism. When attempting to leverage educational administrators, students could rely on their own structural power to force concessions; but against outside targets, students required alliances with other groups – in that case, non-student draftees – to overcome the resistance of these alien structures. The use of invasive disruption, therefore, depended for its success on the creation of bridging organizations to collectivities with strategic leverage in the target institutions.

6. Conclusions

Students most often utilize structural disruption (e.g. strikes and occupations) when their demands are 'grantable' by the educational sector and/or the educational institutions they are embedded in. When their demands transcend the educational field, they must harness other forms of power to gain effective leverage over non-educational authorities. Only disruption of the target system can yield progressive changes to that system. During the period we have studied, Argentine students concentrated their attention on educational demands, except during the Crisis period, when they deliberately sought to raise demands resonant with the broader profile of protest taking place in

[28] Until late in the war, undergraduate students in college were granted automatic deferments from the draft.

the country as a whole. But even during the periods of educational focus, student activists found themselves engineering an amplification of what the 'educational problem' encompassed, driven by the necessity of challenging non-educational authorities who had the institutional power to answer the students' educational demands. As the demands amplified by portraying the educational issues as an expression of broader structural problems, students sought out strategies outside of their institutions, including invasive disruption aimed at unsettling 'business as usual' beyond the confines of the education system. Consequently, student protest – even when initially focused on educational issues – tends to leave the home institution in search of effective points of leverage against non-educational elites. As the brief comparison with the US anti-war student movement suggests, this mechanism has been present in other student movements as well.

This processual understanding of when students decide to leave the confines of their schools and invade the 'outside world' allows us to understand the key differences between structural and invasive disruption. Student activists in Argentina and elsewhere learned, through decades of experience, that the structural leverage available to them on campus could deliver meaningful concessions from the educational authorities, provided they had built sufficient support among fellow students and at least tacit support among the collateral groups on campus or at school. But the same decades of experience taught the student activists that many of the demands they raised could not be answered by educational authorities, and that effective leverage required pressure on outside authorities, most often either government or corporate institutions. And the same decades of experience eventually taught the veteran activists that invasive disruption by students alone, even if they could temporarily upset business as usual outside of school, could not generate effective sustained leverage. Instead, exiting the manageable confines of their educational institutions placed them in a much more vulnerable position vis-à-vis the disruption-clearing counter-measures available to the relevant authorities. This problem could only be resolved through recruiting off-campus allies capable of sustaining the kind of disruption needed to create and maintain the requisite pressure on off-campus elites.

The strength of structural disruption is also one of its greatest weakness. On the one hand, it allows students by themselves – sometimes even a relatively small number of students – to extract demands from the institutional leadership of the educational system. On the other hand, structural disruption of educational institutions can remain insular, and is ineffective when the target and the claim transcend the institution.

It is in this context that invasive disruption becomes a necessary tool of student movements. Upsetting 'business as usual' with invasive protest, even when it cannot

be sustained long enough to generate real pressure, brings the students' demands to the attention of those whose lives were disrupted by the protest; and often attracts the kind of media attention that can place their issues on the public agenda. This can secure the visibility and public support needed to build alliances capable of forcing concessions from elites foreign to their immediate institutions, in particular rally support from key groupings that have the kind of structural leverage needed to force concessions.

As student activist Pablo commented, invasive disruption can create the threat of a 'general strike.' But invasive disruption by students does not usually disrupt the targeted structure unless it is produced in alliances that possess structural leverage over the targeted institutions. At the same time, it involves very high costs for student movements, notably the greater likelihood of repression, the need for a much larger student base, and the ever-present possibility that needed allies will not become activated. These considerations are exactly the factors that student organizers weigh into the decision-making process.

In this context, even invasively disruptive demonstrations that are spectacularly visible, sometimes including weeks or months of varying tactics, may be not so much effective or even intentional efforts at exerting leverage over targeted institutions, but rather preliminary to the denouement of off-campus or off-school protest. In these cases, the students move beyond 'base building' actions to activating the alliances that these actions have been forging. Often, the hallmark moment when off-campus student protest matures into an exercise of power occurs when protests are jointly populated and sometimes even led by allies with the intention and the capability of wielding structural power to put sustained pressure on the relevant authorities.

We have shown that students have a well-developed sense of the leverage they can exercise and that their debates and decision-making over tactics are not devoted to – or even mainly concerned with – the disruption versus non-disruption debate that social movement literature has focused on. In light of the deliberative mechanisms at play, which include the students' political identities and organizational affiliations and the path dependencies created by the history of protest against specific institutional targets, students are strategic actors who place their understanding of the particularistic efficacy of different types of disruptive protest at the core of their choice of protest tactics.

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