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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Ones Who Put Their Chests in Front of the Bullets: A Microstructural Analysis of Colombia's Primera Línea and Their Path to Activism

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, massive mobilizations have taken place worldwide as neoliberal governments fail to ensure democratic rights and basic living conditions. In Colombia in 2021, an event unprecedented in the last decade transformed the course of national policy. Thousands mobilized in a national strike that witnessed the formation of a new political actor: the Primeras Líneas. This article represents one of the first attempts to understand the formation and dynamics of these groups. Taking the Primera Línea of Puerto Resistencia in Cali as a case study and using narrative interviews, this study analyzes the factors and mechanisms shaping members' pathways to activism (i.e., political transformation). Treating these protests as eventful (della Porta 2008, 2020) and applying Fillieule's (2023) activist career model, this paper highlights three key findings. First, previous involvement in violent networks and contexts equipped actors with resources essential for participation in this contentious episode. Second, recruitment in Social Movement Organizations can occur spontaneously, relying on actors' individual traits and resources without preexisting organizational ties. Third, emotional and contextual factors influence how actors perceive risk and make decisions about engaging in action. This research examines the cognitive, affective, and relational effects of these protests in shaping Primera Línea members' subsequent perceptions of politics and political engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** Activist career, affective dynamics, eventful protests, recruitment, repression.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On April 28, 2021, a historic event began in Colombia that came to be known as “the social explosion.” Different sectors—including teachers, retirees, peasants, and workers—called for mobilizations all around the country, under what was called the National Strike Committee (Semana 2021). The motivations for the protests were the worsening of Colombians' cost of living due to COVID-19 and a fiscal adjustment proposed by the president at the time, Iván Duque, that, instead of alleviating the general population's situation, offered the rich and big capital tax breaks, subsidies, and exemptions while burdening the middle and lower classes with indirect taxes and income taxes (Valencia 2021). What began as a march evolved into the establishment of blockades nationwide. These barricades—or “resistance points” as participants termed them—became the primary form of collective action employed to pressure the government.

One of the most interesting and visible aspects of the mobilizations was the participation of “unemployed young people from low-income sectors, who have not had access to academic training, have poor job skills and come from homes with multiple precariousness” (Ibarra and Recalde 2021, 81). These young people, who joined the protests without having political training or experience, became a driving force that helped to sustain the demonstrations for several months. Motivated by economic necessity and deep distrust of the government, they formed what became known as the *Primeras Líneas*.<sup>2</sup>

These strikes had important consequences. They opened a space for discourses on inequality, poverty, and social inclusion, and they shaped the 2022 legislative and presidential election results (Restrepo Sanin 2022). For the first time in the history of Colombia, a leftist candidate and a Black woman—a victim of the Colombian armed conflict—were elected as president and vice-president respectively. Their election signaled a shift from the traditional conservative hold on power toward a transitional and democratic phase aiming at addressing deep-rooted social injustices (Ronderos 2024).

But the effects of the protests went beyond transforming Colombia's political context. They also signified the politicization of marginalized sectors traditionally forgotten and rendered invisible by the government. The mobilizations provided a space for exchange and interaction between actors from different social backgrounds, enabling the acquisition of new frames and the politicization of “forms of sociability and social networks in everyday life that were not necessarily oriented toward collective action or political participation” (Cruz-Rodríguez 2022, 8).

The *Primeras Líneas* (PLs), actors of profound importance during the mobilization due to their role of protecting protestors and confronting the state's repressive response,<sup>3</sup> are a clear example of the transformative effects of these events. These actors, mostly belonging to marginalized sectors, underwent a politicization process that reshaped their understanding of politics and their perspective on the country's social reality. It was thanks to this episode that the PLs transformed into a relevant political force and became the main symbol of resistance and the most iconic figure from the protests. The goal of this article is to examine their politicization

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I will repurpose parts of my master thesis.

<sup>2</sup> The defensive front-line of protestors who protect other demonstrators from police violence. “Primera Línea” can refer to both the group and the individual participants in the group.

<sup>3</sup> According to the human rights organization Temblores, between the dates of April 28 - June 26, 2021, 4,687 actions of police violence were committed, 44 of them lethal (Espinosa, 2021). A United Nations (UN) report made in December 2021 indicated that between April 28 - July 31, 2021, 63 allegations of deaths were received at the UN high commissioner office (Flores, 2021). Organizations like Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and Human Rights Watch published reports denouncing the violation of human rights by the Duque government during the protests (Human Rights Watch, 2021; IACHR, 2021; Amnistía Internacional, 2022).

process. How did these individuals become members of the *Primeras Líneas*? Why did they continue their engagement despite the high risks of their activism? Was there a change in their interest in politics after joining the group?

Drawing on studies of eventful protests (della Porta 2008, 2020) and political socialization (della Porta 2009; Fillieule 2013, 2023), this research seeks to connect the meso-level outcome of these mobilizations—particularly the empowerment of a new political actor (della Porta 2020)—with the micro-level process of individual activist development and political transformation. My intention is to highlight the transformative effects of these events at the micro-level by examining the process through which young people from marginalized communities transformed from non-political actors into activists. Rather than testing hypotheses, this research takes an exploratory approach to investigate how participation in the 2021 protest cycle transformed marginalized young people and shaped their paths toward activist engagement.

Several *Primeras Líneas* groups were formed throughout the country in various cities; although extensive research on each of these groups and their possible differences could have been very enlightening,<sup>4</sup> this study focuses on the PL group of Puerto Resistencia (PR) in Cali. This selection was based on PR's prominence and visibility as one of the most heavily repressed and iconic blockades during the protests, as well as its location within one of Cali's most marginalized sectors (Distrito de Aguablanca). While its members share the common background of being from marginalized communities with participants in other PL groups, their activism involved a slightly higher risk than those faced in other blockades. In this sense, Puerto Resistencia's PL group can be seen as both a unique and representative case. On one hand, by sharing social and contextual conditions with other PL activists, this case can illuminate the factors that drive the politicization of marginalized youth in Colombia. On the other hand, PR's experience of repression provides insight into the mechanisms that sustain political engagement despite high risks—mechanisms likely operating in other contexts as well.

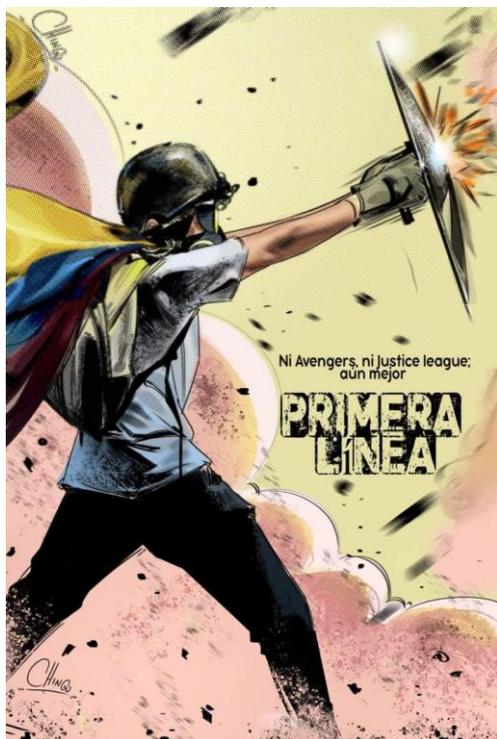
My findings reveal a two-phase process of protest participation shaped by participants' prior exposure to violence and the relational-emotional dynamics that emerge during collective action. In the initial phase, characterized by spontaneous group formation and membership acquisition through demonstrated courage and action, participation is primarily influenced by actors' previous encounters with violence and the repertoires and resources acquired through experiences rooted in street culture. The second phase, marked by sustained engagement despite intense state repression, is influenced by risk perception (mediated by previous experiences with violence as well), positive incentives, and the emotional and affective bonds forged within the protests. These mobilization experiences generated significant cognitive, relational, and emotional transformations, converting previously apolitical individuals into politically conscious and engaged actors.

A total of nine in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with PLs. In these interviews, participants recounted key protest events, their pre-protest life experiences, and the personal transformations resulting from their involvement. Interview transcripts were prepared following Mayring's (2014) selective protocol and analyzed using Schreier (2012) qualitative content analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> Under the limitations of partially-sponsored research, reaching this scope was an impossible task. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) sponsored the flight tickets to Colombia, but accommodations, transportation and amenities were paid by the author.

Figure 1. PLs' representation within the protests, about here<sup>5</sup>



Source: Felipe Pineda Ruiz's Twitter post of 05.25.2021. Consulted on 01.13.2023. Link: <https://twitter.com/pinedaruizbog/status/1395157233349103619>

## 2. The social explosion as a transformative event

The mass protests of 2021 can be understood as a critical juncture with effects on both national policy and the participants in the mobilization. They constitute eventful protests, following della Porta's (2008) conception, as they transformed social routines and opened space to challenge established structures. They represented a break from the traditional continuum of political power and signaled a transformation of the actors involved (della Porta 2008, 2020).

The significance of this event is evident in the substantial research dedicated to understanding the conditions that facilitated it (Álvarez-Rodríguez 2022; Cruz-Rodríguez 2022; Gomez 2023; Restrepo Sanin 2022; Ronderos 2024; Valencia 2021) and the structural effects it had on the Colombian political landscape (Cruz-Rodríguez 2022; Freeman 2023; Laurent 2022; Ronderos 2024). For instance, Restrepo Sanín (2022) in her study of this 'critical juncture' explains that the 2021 cycle of protests resulted from three converging crises: COVID-19, the ensuing health crisis, and the economic crisis they triggered. Laurent (2022), in his analysis of Colombia's left turn, highlights the role of the protests in enabling the electoral victory of leftist candidate Gustavo Petro.

Most research on Colombia's 2021 social explosion focuses on the structural conditions that produced it and its structural effects, leaving micro-level dynamics largely unexamined, with notable exceptions (Ibarra and

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<sup>5</sup> Image text translation: "Not Avengers, not Justice League, even better, Primera Línea"

Recalde 2021; Salama 2022; Scribano 2021). This study seeks to address that gap and contribute to scholarship on this episode by analyzing the political transformation of Primeras Líneas. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the factors and mechanisms shaping individual participation and demonstrate the impact of these protests on participant trajectories.

In line with della Porta (2008), this research treats protests as the independent variable and examines their cognitive, affective, and relational effects on participating actors. By analyzing PLs' political transformation from non-political actors to activists, this paper connects one meso-level outcome of the protests—the emergence of a new political actor (della Porta 2020)—with individual-level trajectories of activist development and political transformation. I argue that one effect of the 2021 social uprisings was the politicization of marginalized young people, providing them with opportunities for political engagement and transforming their understanding of politics. To examine this micro-level outcome, I trace an activist career using Fillieule's (2023) framework of political socialization.

### 3. Political socialization and the activist career

Fillieule (2013) defines political socialization as "the gradual development of the individual's own particular and idiosyncratic views of the political world, the process by which a given society's norms and behavior are internalized" (p. 1). Political socialization unfolds across multiple spheres: primary and secondary socialization (family and school) as well as other domains including work, affective ties, and political engagement (Fillieule 2013). While socialization research has traditionally focused on understanding why individuals participate in politics, it has devoted considerably less attention to the consequences of political activity itself. Participation in social movements should therefore be understood not only as shaped by prior political socialization but also as "having potentially socializing effects" (Fillieule 2013, 3). Indeed, vivid political events can themselves serve as powerful catalysts of political socialization (Fillieule 2023).

To study the political socializing effects of activism, Fillieule developed a theoretical and epistemological framework rooted in symbolic interactionism. Building on Becker's (1963) work on deviance, Fillieule proposes a sociology of activist careers that takes into account both actors and the different spheres of the social world they occupy (Fillieule 2023). The result is the reconstruction of "a sequence of steps, of changes in the individual's behavior and perspectives, in order to understand the phenomenon. Each stage requires an explanation, and a cause that operates in one stage of the sequence may be of negligible importance in another" (Fillieule 2023, 39).

Thinking about careers helps us see how each life stage builds on what came before and opens doors for what comes next. Our past experiences influence our present attitudes and actions, which then shape our future opportunities. This approach allows us to understand periods of active involvement as connected chapters in someone's overall life story. As Fillieule (2023) notes, "the notion of career thus allows us to address together the questions of predispositions to activism, the transition to action, the differentiated and variable forms of commitment over time, and the diversity of commitment along the life course" (p. 42).

In the case of this study, I identified two phases of Primeras Líneas' activist careers. The first stage, focused on predispositions to activism, analyzes the factors that facilitated PLs' entrance into the group. The second stage, focused on the transition to action, centers on PLs' continued participation despite the high risk of participation and highlights the mechanisms that sustained their engagement.

### *Phase 1:*

This phase marks members' transformation from protesters to *Primera Línea* participants. It begins when individuals join mass street protests and culminates in the formation of groups and their acquisition of membership. Two theoretical considerations are central to understanding this phase.

First, recruitment into the PL group differs from traditional patterns of Social Movement Organization (SMO) recruitment. Rather than relying on organizational ties (della Porta 1988; McAdam and Paulsen 1997; McAdam, Fielding-Singh, Laryea and Hill 2022; Nepstad and Smith 1999; Salgado 2018) or formal recruitment campaigns (Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olson 1980), entry depends upon demonstrated merit—specifically, street-based competencies such as bravery and risk-taking behavior. Membership is earned through performance rather than secured through networks or solicitation.

Second, the skills and values that prove essential for becoming a PL member are resources and cultural codes previously internalized through other networks and contexts where confrontation constitutes part of daily life. Drawing on Fillieule's framework, prior experiences and habitus acquired through involvement in non-political contexts and networks become valuable assets during violent confrontations with police, thereby increasing individuals' likelihood of PL membership.

### *Phase 2:*

During this phase, repression intensifies significantly. However, the affective bonds forged during protests, the positive incentives members experience, and their subjective perceptions of risk help counterbalance repression's deterrent effects, thereby sustaining commitment. Two theoretical frameworks are particularly illuminating here: Donatella della Porta's (2009) concepts of affective dynamics and precipitating factors, and Opp and Roehl's (1990) theory of informal positive incentives.

Della Porta's (2009) concept of affective dynamics captures the emotional bonds that emerge from shared exposure to danger and collective experiences of struggle. These dynamics manifest in multiple ways: through members' sense of mutual responsibility, through commemorative references to comrades killed in confrontations, and through the formation of deep friendships (della Porta 2009). Precipitating factors, conversely, encompass the negative consequences of activism, including the risks of imprisonment and ongoing persecution (della Porta 2009, 182).

Opp and Roehl's (1990) framework of informal positive incentives helps explain the benefits PL members derive from participation. These authors define informal positive incentives as social reactions from significant others—including prestige, approval, and attention (Opp and Roehl 1990, 525). Since most PL members originate from marginalized communities long neglected by the state, the recognition and solidarity they experience during protests constitute powerful incentives for sustained participation.

## **4. Data and Method**

This research aims to generate exploratory hypotheses about the mechanisms and factors underlying the politicization process of members of Puerto Resistencia's *Primera Línea*.<sup>6</sup> Following Small's (2009) framework for qualitative sampling, this study adopts what he terms a 'case-study' design, based on Mitchell's

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, mechanisms represent the analytical decomposition of processual reality into discrete, interacting components whose effects can be examined (Döllinger 2024), whereas factors constitute the underlying conditions and circumstances that shape particular outcomes.

extended case method, suitable for single-case studies focused on formulating logical or causal hypotheses to uncover mechanisms or processes (Small 2009). This inquiry operates on the premise that logical inferences drawn from the experiences of Puerto Resistencia PL members can illuminate processes at play in collective action. Rather than seeking generalization, the goal is to uncover mechanisms and factors underlying individual participation in collective movements. To develop valid logical hypotheses, I implemented Small's sequential interviewing approach, conducting interviews with PLs exhibiting both similar and contrasting characteristics. Accordingly, the sample includes members from additional PL groups (the PLs of Paso del Aguante and Sameco) and PLs with diverse backgrounds, including one female participant and two individuals with bachelor's degrees.

Data collection was conducted over two months; given limited time and resources, theoretical saturation was not achieved. Although the research attempted to capture some of the variation while constructing logical hypotheses about PLs' activism path, there are limitations. For instance, the low variability of the cases. PL groups encompass not only marginalized young people but also other demographic groups, including some middle-class young people, who were not represented in this study's sample. As will be discussed in the results, there are differences in risk-taking and political socialization that are related to gender and education. A more diverse sample would likely have yielded deeper insights into the factors that mediate mechanisms and enabled more nuanced analysis of variations in risk-taking behaviors, political socialization processes, and engagement pathways.

Another limitation is the absence from the sample of former PLs who discontinued their activism. As highlighted by Becker (1963) in his study on deviant career and by Fillieule (2023) in his work on activist career, to understand the sequential steps that lead individuals through different stages, it is important to examine cases where the sequence remains incomplete. This means that the factors and mechanisms driving engagement among interviewed PLs, but absent among those who discontinued participation, remain unclear. Further research examining former PLs would likely illuminate the incentives that sustain continued participation while identifying what distinguishes persistent activists from those who withdraw.

#### *4.1 Study Participants*

Participant selection occurred in two stages. Initially, I employed the Snowball strategy, as access to the members was difficult and obtaining interviews was only possible through referrals from known contacts. After some trust was gained, I implemented 'selective interviewing' (Small 2009), treating each interview as an individual case study and selecting subsequent participants based on potential theoretical variations. Interviews were therefore selected based on gender, educational level, and Primera Línea group affiliation.

From the interviews, it was possible to identify five cases according to social background and PL group affiliation: (1) Puerto Resistencia PL members with no higher education; (2) a Puerto Resistencia PL member with a Bachelor's degree; (3) a female member from the PL of Sameco;<sup>7</sup> (4) a member from the PL of Paso del Aguante with no higher education; (5) one college student from the PL of Paso del Aguante. The backgrounds of these members represent key variations, which is why these cases were selected. In total, nine interviews were conducted: six with members of the Puerto Resistencia PL and three with members of PL

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<sup>7</sup> Another limitation of this research is the minimal representation of women participants. Only one woman PL was interviewed, as access to additional women participants was limited during the data collection period. A broader sample would likely have provided deeper insights into gender dynamics within the analysis. The single interview conducted revealed differences in risk-taking behaviors related to gender roles associated with motherhood.

groups from other resistance points. The decision to interview members from different PL groups was guided by theoretical replication principles—I sought to examine variation across groups and test whether the developed hypotheses could be applied more broadly.

**Table 1- Participants sample characteristics,<sup>8</sup>**

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>PL Affiliation</b>	<b>Highest Education Achieved</b>	<b>Socioeconomic Stratification</b>
Catalina	Female	26	Sameco	Didn't complete high school	2-3
Jaime	Male	38	PR	BA graduate	1-2
Juan	Male	27	PR	High school student	1-2
Samuel	Male	30	Paso del Aguante	High school graduate	2-3
Carlos	Male	18	PR	High school student	1-2
Sebastian	Male	24	PR	Didn't complete high school	1-2
Francisco	Male	26	Paso del Aguante	BA student	2-3
Fabian	Male	41	PR	High school graduate	1-2
Mauricio	Male	27	PR	Didn't complete high school	1-2

*Source:* Created by author

#### 4.2 Data Collection

The data collection instrument for this research was the narrative interview.<sup>9</sup> I selected this method for two reasons: first, because my research participants were people involved in a process, having personally experienced the events and being capable of narrating the occurrences (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014); second, because my study interest focused on individual reasons and motivations, as well as the biographical and contextual conditions that facilitated entry into the group, persistence within it, and political transformation. According to Hollstein (2019), narrative interviews provide a rich approach to understanding biographical decision-making, layers of biographical experiences, and life-planning. They are particularly valuable when researching how individuals connect different spheres of life, or when examining the various forms of agency and driving forces that shape a person's life trajectory.

The interviews were conducted between February 21 and May 2, 2021. They lasted approximately one and a half to three hours. Most interviews took place in a university office, while two were conducted at participants' homes. The interview guide consisted of two parts: an open narrative section in which participants were asked to share their life story and discuss their activism, and a guided section with questions addressing specific topics of interest (political engagement before the protests and perceived transformation after the protests).

The timespan of the study encompasses the protest events, participants' lives before the protests, and the perceived effects of activism on participants' lives at the time of the interviews. The interviews were conducted one year after the protests with PLs who continued their activism and remained politically active during the

<sup>8</sup> Colombia's socioeconomic stratification system classifies residential properties into six tiers to implement differential pricing for public utilities. This tiered approach enables the government to provide targeted subsidies to lower-income households while collecting additional contributions from higher-income properties (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística 2025). Tiers 1-3 receive utility subsidies, tiers 5-6 pay surcharges that fund these subsidies, and tier 4 pays the base cost without subsidies or surcharges (InfoPa'lante 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Interviews have been translated and edited for clarity and brevity.

fieldwork period, working on community projects and/or campaigning for Petro. This study can only account for this specific timeframe. During the fieldwork, PL groups remained active, and in Cali they had organized into a larger organization called Unión de Resistencias Cali. Activism beyond this timeframe would require new data collection to assess current political engagement.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using Mayring's (2014) selective protocol, a technique in which the researcher identifies and transcribes only the portions of the recorded interview that are relevant to the research objectives. The transcriptions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis according to Schreier (2012), a method that combines deductive and inductive procedures to create a comprehensive category system. The deductive component involves creating categories based on existing theory and prior knowledge, while the inductive component allows for the emergence of additional categories based on patterns within the data itself.

The coding frame was developed through iterative analysis of each transcription. Through summarizing and subsumption processes, units of analysis were systematically assigned to categories until theoretical saturation was reached. Seven preliminary coding frames were created, each reflecting variations across cases, before arriving at the final version. This final coding frame captured all possible variations within the material and was then systematically applied to all transcriptions.

## 5. Path to Activism

To understand the transformative effects of the social explosion at the micro-level, I analyze PLs' pathway to activism using Fillieule's (2023) activist career framework. Extending Becker's theoretical contributions, Fillieule contends that the career concept offers a robust analytical tool for understanding activism because it "allows us to focus on the process and permanent dialectic between individual history, social institutions and, more generally, context" (p. 39). This approach illuminates how attitudes and behaviors at each life stage are both shaped by past experiences and instrumental in determining future opportunities for action (Fillieule 2023). The phases depicted in this study focus on the questions of predisposition to activism and transition to action (Fillieule 2023). I aim to show what factors contributed to entrance into the Primera Línea and what mechanisms influenced engagement and continuation of political participation.

### 5.1 Becoming a Primera Línea

The first phase of PLs' pathway to activism involves the transformation from ordinary demonstrator to PL member. As interview participants noted, this transformation was unplanned—they did not envision themselves as PLs when joining the initial protests. Instead, their incorporation into these groups emerged spontaneously, contingent upon two key factors: their readiness to assume physical risks and their ability to navigate confrontation, factors which were heavily influenced by their prior experiences navigating violent contexts.

When asked about the reasons why they initially went out onto the streets, the interviewees expressed different motives. On the one hand, they mentioned the high cost of living and opposition to the reform as

important reasons to protest; on the other hand, they also mentioned other motivations, not political per se, such as looking for something to eat, curiosity about who was protesting, and the desire to fight with the police. Among these varied motives, the impulse to confront police emerged as particularly prominent in the interviewees' narratives. Sebastian, for example, explained that he initially joined the national strike because a friend told him they were distributing food at one of the blockades; subsequently, he participated in Puerto Resistencia with the explicit intention of confronting police. Similarly, Fabian attended the protests solely with the intention of fighting law enforcement:

To be honest with you, I went to the protest because I wanted to fight with the police. I've had many situations with the police; they always treat you as if you were worthless. (Personal interview, April 5, 2022)

At this initial stage, the majority of interviewed PLs lacked political interest or engagement. Their participation in the mobilizations was driven predominantly by the desire to join the community and clash with the police. This confrontational impulse, grounded in the interviewees' experiences of abuse and discrimination by law enforcement, was precisely what led them to adopt confrontational positions at the front lines, transforming them into PLs.

Here in El Distrito, the abuse by the police is very high. Police work according to neighborhoods. I lived in Guabal, a good area, you could be smoking your grass in the street, and the police would come and tell you: 'Good evening, do me a favor, cooperate with me, put it out, my friend.' Politely. But you go to El Distrito, and they tell you: 'Walk to the station, faggot. I'm going to give you a ride.' They act according to the neighborhoods where they work. And it shouldn't be like that. (Catalina, personal interview, April 4, 2022)

Recruitment in the Primera Línea of Puerto Resistencia occurred in a way that differs from what is traditionally found in the differential recruitment literature. Instead of being linked to the group through networks and social ties (della Porta 1988; McAdam and Paulsen 1997; McAdam et al. 2022; Nepstad and Smith 1999; Salgado 2018) or through recruitment campaigns in public spaces (Snow et al. 1980), PLs became members of this group by taking positions of confrontation and showcasing bravery and fearlessness. As Juan mentioned:

But they are Primeras Líneas because they were always in front; that's why they are the Primeras Líneas, because they were the ones who literally put their chests in front of the bullets. (Personal interview, March 16, 2022)

The PL of Puerto Resistencia emerged spontaneously as a response to attacks by the riot squad and the police. The protesters on the front line began coordinating among themselves and with the community, preparing for assaults by the authorities. This organic coordination laid the foundation for the group's formation. The PL functioned as the security apparatus of the resistance point, operating through horizontal organizational principles with no designated leaders or hierarchical roles. Membership, rather than being facilitated by ties to existing members, was earned through individual merit. To become PLs, demonstrators had to prove their courage and capacity to navigate the considerable risks posed by security forces.

In other words, the Primera Línea was based on the coordination; from the people that were in front, sticking their neck out if you know what I mean? Those people who were on the front line sticking their neck out, with the community behind them helping them. (Juan, personal interview, March 16, 2022)

Fearlessness, boldness, bravery, and courage were not novel traits that PLs needed to learn or internalize upon joining the protests. Rather, Puerto Resistencia PL members arrived already equipped with these dispositions. Most came from contexts marked by recurrent violence; several belonged to football hooligan groups and gangs where exposure to violence constitutes everyday experience. Within these environments and networks, actors acquire cultural codes and competencies for navigating violent encounters. These skills, developed in such settings, proved invaluable during protests characterized primarily by the state's repressive and violent response. The protesters who became PLs were precisely those who possessed the capacity to navigate confrontational encounters and who embodied street principles of bravery and fearlessness.

[T]he honor that is given to the Primera Línea is precisely for that—for being warriors, fighters, fierce, bold, with guts, as we say in the street. And as I have said, courage is number one. (Samuel, personal interview, April 25, 2022)

The influence of prior involvement in non-political organizations on subsequent political participation is well-documented. Classic examples include the literature on black churches' pivotal role in fostering the civil rights movement (Calhoun-Brown 2000; Cavendish 2000; Ghose 2017), and studies examining how civic organization membership cultivates political engagement (Jeong 2013; Li and Zhang 2017; Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, and Akkerman 2016). This study extends this line of inquiry by depicting how prior involvement in networks and contexts characterized by violent confrontation and street cultural codes equips actors with resources essential for specific forms of political participation—namely, contentious episodes marked by intense and violent state repression. In the case of the interviewed PLs, all had experienced violent events related to confrontations with other actors. Some had battled rival hooligan groups, while others had experienced gang-related violence. The skills developed in these settings were instrumental in the conflictual context of the protests. PLs possessed the resources and experience necessary to stand up to the police and riot squad.

[T]he guys stood strong against their bullets, against their riot guns, that is something I have to say, they stood up strong and I said those guys are very crazy and that's how they scared [the police] off many times. (Francisco, personal interview, April 14, 2022)

Returning to Fillieule's framework, the first step in PR PL members' activist careers consisted of group entry, facilitated by resources and skills acquired through previous immersion in violent networks and street-based contexts.

### *5.2 Engagement and Risk Perception*

The second phase of Puerto Resistencia PL members' pathway to activism entails sustained engagement in the face of escalating repression. At this stage, the PL groups were already consolidated, yet repression and its associated risks intensified considerably. The costs of contentious action now included the very real possibility of death. Paradoxically, the heightened danger and tragic consequences of confrontation led to deeper commitment, catalyzed by affective dynamics within the group that caused members to forge strong bonds of friendship, and encouraged by positive incentives that further shaped their risk perception. These two explanatory dimensions illuminate why PL members continued mobilizing despite the escalating risks.

### *Affective Dynamics:*

The first dimension explaining the continuation of activism centers on affective dynamics and the emotional mechanisms they generate. According to della Porta (2009), members of underground groups forge strong bonds of friendship and mutual responsibility through shared experiences of danger and risk. Events such as the deaths of comrades, life-threatening situations within the barricades, and direct confrontations with authorities intensify commitment to the cause. Friendships develop organically through ongoing conversations and the sharing of personal narratives. Despite being strangers initially, PLs formed deep connections over time.

Even up to a particular day, I used to talk to other members with a lot of suspicion and even mistrust because we did not know each other; getting to know each other was a thing that happened in the heat of the protest, of the struggle, and later at night, getting to know each other from our shared introspections, as I call it, talking about our intimate feelings, when we shared our thoughts and above all our hearts. (Jaime, personal interview, April 20, 2022)

These emotional dynamics and bonds cultivate profound feelings of mutual responsibility. Fellow activists are no longer mere acquaintances but loyal comrades to whom one entrusts one's life—a trust that is reciprocated. These emotional ties reshape how PLs perceive and respond to risk, proving essential to the emotional mechanisms sustaining mobilization. For instance, when a comrade was injured, rescuing them became paramount; personal safety became secondary to ensuring the wounded received aid.

Of course, I was aware that I could lose my life, but I was aware that I could also save the life of another comrade, because when we went out to other points of resistance, when we arrived, we heard the shots passing by our sides, but in spite of that we didn't care. When a comrade was wounded, we went to where the comrade was; no matter how many police fired, no matter how much gas was thrown, the question was to save the comrade, do you understand? (Carlos, personal interview, April 1, 2022)

The perceived risk of injury or death was mediated by the solidarity forged within the barricades. Shared experiences fundamentally shaped how PLs assessed danger and made decisions to act. Conversely, when a comrade was killed, survivors experienced intense guilt over their perceived inability to prevent the tragedy.

I remember that day I went there ... and I found myself in caseta number one [a caseta is a kind of impromptu medical shed] with the lifeless, bloody body of a boy about 16-years-old ... who had been shot and mortally wounded. I remember that I stayed there and sat on a platform, from about four o'clock in the afternoon until about seven o'clock at night, ... I thought, in a way, it is a stupid thought, but at the end of the day, I was outside, and when I returned to find that child there on that metal stretcher already lifeless, somehow I thought, I felt ... that it had happened because I was not there. (Jaime, personal interview, April 20, 2022)

The deepening sense of responsibility (della Porta 2009) produced by shared experiences and lived situations generates feelings of guilt and solidarity that sustain mobilization. These two emotional mechanisms emerged as the most prominent reasons PL members cited when explaining their continued involvement. Anger and fear also shaped PL members' decisions to persist. Anger provoked by state repression, combined with solidarity toward comrades, motivated PLs to remain and support one another. Meanwhile, fear of police

retaliation and judicial prosecution, though less salient than the growing sense of responsibility, also reinforced commitment and escalated the stakes of involvement.

### *Positive Incentives and Background Contexts:*

The second dimension explaining PL members' sustained participation despite intense repression involves their background contexts and the positive reinforcement they experienced during the uprisings. Most interviewed PLs came from marginalized communities where violence was a constant reality. Several had been involved in gangs or drug trafficking, some had participated in the armed conflict, and others belonged to hooligan groups. A common thread united them all: the persistent threat of death and the necessity of navigating street codes for survival. Many also expressed a sense of having nothing to lose—the frustration of life in marginalized sectors and its harsh conditions shaped how they understood risk.

*Interviewer:* And in spite of the danger you didn't think of stopping being PL?

*Juan:* I didn't have anything to lose, I had already lost everything.

*Interviewer:* How so?

*Juan:* I am 27 years old ... one year and a half of unemployment ... I had nothing to lose, why? ...In terms of recognition, as young people, as a community, the government, well, unfortunately they have not given us the guarantees, that is, that recognition of fundamental rights, drinking water, health, opportunity. I have been here in Cali two and a half years, and well, there is no job opportunity, there is no educational opportunity. (Personal interview, March 16, 2022)

Becoming a PL required demonstrating courage: advancing to the front lines and putting one's life in danger. For those raised in violent contexts where death could come at any moment and prospects seemed nonexistent, risking their lives in the uprisings felt like a continuation of their everyday reality. Standing at the barricades carried risks not unlike those of simply being in their neighborhoods.

*Interviewer:* Weren't you afraid when you were there on the front line?

*Carlos:* I wasn't afraid because I came from a neighborhood where there was a lot of danger, so for me being in danger was a game.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean?

*Carlos:* I mean, I didn't see it, for me being in danger, I didn't see it as if I was going around and they would kill me; I saw it as if for me danger was a game. I played with danger, you know what I mean? I was one of those that sometimes my hood would fall off, and they would tell me: hey look, the hood, and I would go on as normal, showing my face and fighting with my face, and I was never afraid to show my face, that people would know who I am. (Personal interview, April 1, 2022)

The protests, however, provided them with a new sense of significance. At the barricades, they risked their lives as they had in other situations before, but now their actions earned widespread admiration and appreciation. People cared about their safety and well-being in unprecedented ways. PLs were recognized locally and nationally as playing a vital role in the movement. This recognition and validation provided powerful motivation to continue (Opp and Roehl 1990). Every interviewee described the support and respect they received as profoundly moving and energizing; their narratives consistently emphasized how deeply community solidarity affected them.

The community never stopped believing in us. And I believe that until now, they still have not stopped believing in us. The community said that we were their voice. I mean, it was a great thing when you were at a blockage point, and people would arrive, and someone would arrive and say, 'Resistance!' They would start shouting as if to say: you are the heroes of this country. That made us proud to take another step to change this country, to change corruption. (Carlos, personal interview, April 1, 2022)

Once we received some letters from some schoolchildren. 8-9-year-olds writing to you: 'Thank you for what you are doing for my country. When I grow up, I want to be a Primera Línea. I want to defend my country.' Or like: 'I don't want this to ever happen again in my life. I don't want more people to die in my country.' ... From receiving all those letters of thanks, there comes a moment when you really feel like a hero. There comes a moment when you say that what I am doing seems to be of some use. (Catalina, personal interview, April 4, 2022)

Their backgrounds and prior socialization with violence shaped how they understood danger. The attention and recognition they received as PLs provided powerful incentives that justified the risks. One interviewee described PLs as "the nobodies, the forgotten"—people from marginalized sectors neglected by the state and ignored by broader society. The admiration and visibility PLs gained during the uprisings became significant motivations for continued action. The second phase of PR PLs' activist trajectories therefore involves sustained engagement enabled by emotional dynamics, positive incentives, and the mediated perceived risk.

### *5.3 Protests' Outcomes*

Colombia's 2021 cycle of protests had profound cognitive, affective, and relational implications for PLs who mobilized. First, participation transformed their understanding of politics. PLs entered the protests with little political interest or engagement; in fact, they harbored deep distrust toward politics and doubted their own capacity to shape the country's future. The resistance points, as spaces where diverse actors converged, became crucial sites of political learning. PL members interacted with other politicized actors and, through these exchanges, grasped the significance of politics and their potential role in shaping Colombia's future. A year after the protests, PL groups continued functioning in Cali, organizing social projects, campaigning for the presidential candidate who would become Colombia's first leftist president, and consolidating a broader social movement—the Unión de Resistencias Cali (URC)—that negotiates with municipal authorities. The protests also fundamentally restructured their social networks. As several PLs recounted, their primary networks came to consist of other PLs and those united through the uprisings. In PR's case, these networks encompassed other key actors, such as the women who ran community kitchens and those who helped construct the iconic resistance monument, among others.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that having been part of the Primera Línea, but also the fact of having been part of the social explosion transformed your opinion about politics?

*Samuel:* Completely!

*Interviewer:* In what sense?

*Samuel:* Completely! I can answer that one with a clear answer, Completely! Because before that, it didn't call my attention at all; before that, I loved going to the stadium, every time, every 15 days, when América played here at home, and every 8 days when we traveled. I loved it; the truth is, thanks to that uprising, thanks to the experiences with the people who were next to me, I changed that perspective, that way of seeing things. Now, I

want to learn, to improve myself, I like to read, to participate in discussions, listen to the opinions of other people. The uprisings made me understand that we are not alone, and that together we can do anything, that is why I'm a representative of the URC. (Personal interview, April 25, 2022)

#### 5.4 Variations

Though efforts were made to achieve variation during data collection, most interviewed PLs were young people from marginalized sectors. The findings presented here emerge from commonalities across cases. However, given that most interview partners were male PL members with limited formal education, differences related to sociocultural factors such as class, gender, education, and race likely exist but remain underexplored in this sample. Within the available data, two notable variations emerged: first, motherhood distinctly shaped how women understood and navigated risk; second, the university functioned as a socializing institution that cultivated political awareness and consciousness among student participants.

Of the PLs interviewed, four had children at the time of the protests; however, only the female PL explicitly discussed her children as a factor prompting withdrawal from action. Her narrative revealed concern for her sons' future should she be killed, and she expressed empathy for other mothers who had lost their children during the protests. Motherhood fundamentally shaped how she understood danger and influenced the risks she was willing to take. In contrast, while the male PL fathers acknowledged having children, fatherhood did not appear to constrain their risk-taking behavior.

Many times I didn't get in front to throw rocks or to fight. I thought about my children. I said: What if they kill me? My brothers have my mother, and yes, they may not leave my children on the street as such, but nobody, I mean, nobody called me to tell me: Cata, do you have enough money to pay for a room today? Are you going to work today? So I said: Whatever happens to me, the only ones who will be affected are my children. (Catalina, personal interview, April 4, 2022)

The PL members who were university students demonstrated notably higher levels of political consciousness prior to the protests. Both identified with leftist politics and maintained active interest in social and political issues before the uprisings, with one having participated in organized political groups.

Since university, I became very interested, and not as an academic interest, I became very interested in these types of causes from a social perspective, in terms of what would be social justice and so I integrated myself with study groups, with activist groups, I began to participate in every march at the local and national level. (Jaime, personal interview, April 20, 2022)

These differences reflect the influence of gender roles and the civic effects of higher education. Motherhood mediated how the female PL understood the stakes of action; carrying expectations of emotional and caregiving labor. The minimal impact of fatherhood on male PLs' approach to danger similarly reflects gendered expectations—societal pressure to be a "good mother" far exceeds comparable imperatives for fathers. University campuses, meanwhile, function as sites of political socialization where students develop into civic actors (McAdam et al. 2022).

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes to ongoing efforts to understand the dynamics, factors, and effects underlying Colombia's 2021 "social explosion." Its significance lies in its analytical approach: existing scholarship on this event predominantly adopts a macrostructural perspective, examining the uprisings through political, economic, and cultural contexts (Ortiz 2021, 2021; Valencia 2021; Cruz-Rodríguez 2022; Restrepo Sanin 2022; Álvarez-Rodríguez 2022; Ronderos 2024) while leaving questions of individual engagement and participation unaddressed. This research addresses this gap by treating this episode as eventful and analyzing its micro-level effects. In analyzing PL members' pathway to activism, I found:

First, recruitment into SMOs occurs not only through ties to existing members or public campaigns, but also spontaneously, absorbing individual actors who possess the traits and resources needed in contentious action. PLs became members of these groups by assuming high-risk positions and demonstrating courage and fearlessness. The PL groups emerged spontaneously in response to repression without any pre-existing organizational ties among members. Instead, certain protestors transformed into PLs by leveraging their skills in navigating confrontational situations. This case also illustrates how prior involvement in non-political organizations—particularly networks and contexts shaped by violence and street cultural codes—can furnish actors with critical resources for specific forms of participation, especially during episodes of intense and violent repression.

Second, engagement and sustained participation also depend upon emotional and cognitive dynamics. Emotions arising from shared experiences with comrades, combined with actors' cultural and social backgrounds and informal positive incentives they receive, shape how individuals perceive risk when engaging in contentious actions. In the case of PR's PLs, several components mediated risk perception: a growing sense of responsibility toward other members, positive reinforcement, socialization in violent contexts, frustration over limited economic prospects, and prevailing gender norms. Risk-taking varied across members. For instance, Catalina sometimes withdrew from the front lines to safer positions when thoughts of her children arose. In contrast, male PLs with children showed no such influence from fatherhood on their risk assessment.

That said, this research has important limitations. By focusing on the Primera Línea of Puerto Resistencia, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other PL groups or mobilization contexts. Furthermore, since saturation was not achieved, other factors beyond those examined here may influence how individuals perceive risks. Research on PLs with different social characteristics—for example, women with higher education—is necessary to further develop the mechanisms identified.

Primeras Líneas have emerged in other countries as well. In Chile and Hong Kong, for example, similar groups formed, sharing traits of spontaneity, horizontality, and an emphasis on action expressed through bravery and courage (Bevins 2023; Choi 2020; Claude 2020; Sepúlveda E. 2022; Ting 2020). The formation of these groups across multiple contexts invites discussion about alternative recruitment pathways and the diverse ways SMOs emerge and structure themselves. However, more research on the individual dimensions of these groups is needed. Among the consulted literature on the Hong Kong and Chilean uprisings, only Mok and Wai (2022) analyze the individual dimension of mobilization, finding that emotional mechanisms sustaining participation arose from actors comparing their actions with others. While analysis of movement structures and conditions remains important, social movement scholarship would benefit from greater attention to individual actors' experiences and accounts.

## Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author used Claude (Anthropic) in order to assist with language editing and proofreading. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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