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# POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES THROUGH THE LENS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

The discussion regarding the necessary conditions for mass mobilizations is increasingly recurring in the public debate, notably after the eventful years of the 2000s, characterized by almost uninterrupted cycles of protests since 2008[1]. This scenario offers renewed incentives for reflecting on the conceptual tools of the sociology of movements and protests. In this regard, this article aims to discuss the concept of Political Opportunity Structure, first by tracing its conceptual genealogy in social movement theories, addressing its main criticisms, and finally proposing a formulation related to mobilizations in Latin America. This formulation aims to address the conceptual limitations in explaining protests in the region, suggesting additional considerations for societies marked by polysemic violence[2], as well as higher rates of poverty and inequality than Europe and the United States, where these theories were developed. Our aim is to grasp the political opportunities in motion, their variations, and the limitations of the political environment and its conjunctures.

We begin with a definition of activists that includes individuals identified with one or multiple causes, or those without any affiliation to a movement or political party, although affiliation can be distinctive both offline and online. The category of militants, as proposed by Matonti and Poupeau (2004), serves a similar purpose, encompassing the diverse struggles of individuals involved in both longstanding and more recent categories. Activists have achieved unprecedented visibility, resulting in the emergence and proliferation of new organizations and forms of action, despite not being necessarily tied to existing political associations. Social movements are understood

in their original sense as forms of contentious politics, involving collective development of demands that, if successful, would conflict with the interests of others and the governments involved in this process (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2003), as well as in the context of New Social Movements. The emergence of these movements in the 1990s relates to collective identities, such as feminism and anti-racism, expressed with various groupings and actors, making demands to the state, but not exclusively (Alonso, 2009).

The discussion on mobilizations and activists cannot disregard the definition of Political Opportunity Structures. In this text, it refers to the configuration of political-institutional conditions, encompassing the following dimensions: i) institutional and non-institutional access openness to new actors; ii) scale of value of political resources and evidence of power realignments within the political system; and iii) support/opposition among political elites, with emerging divisions among them (Brockett, 2005). To these contributions, McAdam (1996) added: iv) the relative openness or closure of the political system; v) the emergence of influential allies; and vi) the decline in the capacity or willingness of the state apparatus to repress dissent.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the initial debate from the late 1960s within the Political Process Theory. We turn to the criticisms made by key authors involved with the concept, including Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, as well as Oliver Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, and Éric Agrikoliansky. The debate shifts its focus to the Latin American context, aiming to incorporate violence as a central analytical category, whereas also highlighting the Eurocentrism of the concept's formulation. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the diverse uses of violent practices in social movements, as well as in their repression, and their relationship with opportunity structures.

**STRUCTURE AND OPPORTUNITIES: FOUNDATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This section presents the initial contributions of the concept and contributions of its main authors: Peter Eisinger, Charles Tilly, and Sidney Tarrow. Initially, Political Opportunity Structures symbolized the inclusion of a "political environment" in theories of social movements (Eisinger, 1973). The concept sought to understand how actors are hindered or encouraged to protest based on their resources, limitations, openings, and the political system in which they are embedded. The environment refers to the formal political structure, government responsiveness, and social stability that may explain why some American cities experienced systematic uprisings motivated by race and social class in the late 1960s. With the dichotomy of openness or closure to participation, Eisinger stated that localities with a relatively open institutional structure for participation were more prone to mobilization, whereas closure repressed or discouraged participation. The necessary

conditions for the eruption of protests gained centrality, proposing a link between the environment and political behavior. Mobilizations would involve the potential for confrontation, including violence, among the actors involved. According to Eisinger (1973):

> Protest is not likely to occur in extremely closed (repressive) systems or extremely open (responsive) systems. Hence the relationships of system characteristics and the incidence of protest will be curvilinear. Protest occurs in a mixed system because the pace of change does not keep up with expectations, even though change is occurring. As the political opportunity structure becomes more open, previously powerless groups begin to acquire influence. The acquisition and development of influence, however, is likely to come slowly. Conventional strategies of political influence may appear too slow and unwieldy to effect significant gratification. In a system which is opening up, the realization that the system may be vulnerable or responsive to political efforts combined with the persistence of inequities becomes intolerable for some groups (Eisinger, 1973: 15).

At this initial stage, an underlying dichotomous conception of stability or rupture underlies the contextual understanding. Initially, the concept sought to understand the political environment in which social movements operate and which, according to the conjuncture, exerts a positive or negative influence on their emergence and development (Fillieule and Mathieu, 2009). Its use was widely found in the Theory of Political Mobilization—also known as the Political Process Theory. Certain types of protests are encouraged and others discouraged, as protesters recognize their ability to mobilize a larger number of sympathizers and obtain state concessions. In addition to using available channels, they can also seek alternatives or change existing arenas (Jasper, 2016). Starting from the idea that mobilizations depend on understanding the political-institutional environment that defines the conjuncturally available opportunities, literature has investigated the different dimensions of the political environment.

Charles Tilly expanded this notion with national comparisons and the use of temporal criteria, an indicator of when opportunities may change, focusing on formal institutional rules. Furthermore, Tilly (1978) coined an important notion for the study of social movements, repertoires, that is determined spatial-temporal patterns in which people have a specific number of means to be heard. The consolidation of these patterns leads to more regular protests. Tilly pointed out the limitations of a recurring fallacy in studies of mobilizations, which considers poverty and deficient structural conditions as sufficient for the emergence of protests. No matter how urgent the demands of a particular population may be, considering the matrix of political relations in which it is embedded, its previous struggles, and the state's responses to them is necessary to assess its mobilization potential. However, Tilly adopted the same theoretical framework as Eisinger, in which the frequency of protests follows a curvilinear relationship—like a downwar-

d-facing parabola—with political openness. Thus, neither complete access nor total closure would be optimal conditions for collective actions. According to Tilly, highly repressive environments hinder mobilizations, and a delicate balance would be necessary for the emergence and functioning of social movements, with the institutional apparatus being not entirely open to repression but also unwilling to incorporate popular discontent (Ramos, 2008).

Both worked with the perspective that when the institutionalized system offers opportunities for access, few people protest due to the direct avenues of influence. On the other extreme of this same spectrum, the government can suppress individuals with excessive violence, hindering their ability to protest.

In turn, McAdam (1992) and Tarrow (1994) addressed other developments of opportunities in the context of the civil rights struggle in the United States[3] and in a protest cycle in Italy between 1965 and 1975, observing the different phases of these struggles. In both cases, their empirical research tested political opportunities, contributing to the conceptual debate. Tarrow proposed a widely accepted conceptualization of political opportunities as "consistent dimensions, but not necessarily formal or permanent ones, of political struggle that encourage people to engage in political confrontation"[4] (Tarrow, 1998: 19-20). When activists gain some power, they seek to overcome difficulties, and as actors with fewer resources, they confront powerful individuals alongside changes in political opportunities (Tarrow, 1994).

Opportunities appear as incentives for the participation of individuals, who, when mobilized, would resolve the issue of "when" social movements occur. On the other hand, Tarrow emphasizes that the created opportunities can compete with or be hostile to the initial opportunities, due to the lack of unidirectional movement in creating these gaps. They can also be open to other movements with social networks or mobilization coalitions, creating space for the emergence and action of movements, counter-movements, and equally for the response of local elites. Despite these variations, a *sine qua non* condition is that movements only emerge when there are conditions for mobilization in a specific context, opening the possibility to mobilize resources, as in the civil rights struggle in the 1960s in the United States (McAdam, 1988; Morris, 1986).

Eisinger, Tilly, and Tarrow broke with the perspective that saw popular discontent unidirectionally as an indicative of mobilizations, since it is the opportunities that regulate their possibilities. The most important factors are the opportunities, which vary according to time and place, rather than the underlying social and economic structures. However, more stable elements such as state strength or weakness, repressive capacity, and the needs of individuals are more constant than the movements they supposedly generate. This perspective, which consequentially links mobilizations to opportunities for activists, considers that they occur due to access to external

resources, with struggles related to major divisions in society, around inherited cultural symbols, and when dense networks can be built (Tarrow, 1994).

In Tarrow's continuum of mobilization, initiated with the opening of opportunities, workers, students, and movements occupy the streets, provoking an initial positive response from the government, which is then interrupted by violent actions. Repression overlays acts of violence and disorder[5], increasing the costs of collective action, and then activists reduce or moderate their demands. For individuals who seize opportunities prematurely, opening the doors for others[6], repression is bigger. According to Tarrow (1994), activists challenge their governments not only as the ultimate target of their demands but, with changes in opportunities, increasingly seek to impact other actors by using the state as an intermediary.

The concept of political opportunities has broadened perspectives focused on institutionalized organizations, resource mobilization, and the rational logic of collective action. The positive reception of the literature was mainly due to its departure from a narrow and non-relational causality in the political-institutional field and social movements, surpassing the predominant dichotomous view in previous American studies.

One of the innovations of the concept of opportunities relates to the incidence of protests based on the nature of the political opportunities in a given city, for example, considering its degree of openness or closure, considering the stability of a population with potential for mobilization. Thus, this perspective remains relevant by providing an analysis that considers contexts conducive to initiatives aimed at normative and institutional transformations. From the point of view of the actors involved, these modifications indicate political windows from which activists can try to advance their demands (Tavolaro, 2008). We will now move on to some of the main criticisms and reformulations of the construct, which prioritize non-structural dimensions and the actions of activists (Shawki, 2010; Brockett, 1991).

**CRITIQUES AND OPPORTUNITIES: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE 1990S AND 2000S**

This section aims to present some of the main criticisms of the concept of Political Opportunity Structure, starting from its initial formulators linked to American theories of social movements, up to the critique made by French sociologists. Some of the initial formulations constitute a "self-critique," considering that they come from authors with theoretical and methodological perspectives aligned with those of the founding team. Despite the limitations and gaps identified, and alternative proposals put forward to enrich the debate, the theoretical foundation from which they start remains similar.

At first, American authors criticized the concept for the absence of mediations of mobilization conditions, moving from frustration to demands

(Kurzman, 1996; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, 2003; Goodwin, Jasper, and Poletta, 2000; Goodwin, 2012). A dataset with 50 cases of opportunities served as the basis for testing in different mobilizations, revealing that opportunities would not always be necessary for protests to emerge, despite contributing, in some way, to their eruption (Goodwin, 2012).

The initial criticisms focused on the relationship between activists and social movements. Goodwin and Jasper (1999) mention that opportunities can occur for activists or collective actions at different times. The authors highlight what would be an analytical indistinctness of the notion, making it a construct that indiscriminately amalgamates structural and non-structural factors. The analyses pointed out an excessive structuralism and, therefore, neglect of the mediations of activists in the face of structural difficulties. Subsequently, the notion began to be used without the term "structures," reconsidering a focus on relatively stable factors over time and beyond the control of activists (Brockett, 2005; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999; Tarrow, 1996).

Tarrow (1996) reformulated his notion of political opportunities, dissociating it from formal structures such as government bodies and linking it to alliances and conflicts that reduce limitations and enable favorable changes for individuals. Thus, the author emphasized multiple sectors of mobilization, their variations, protest cycles, and transnational connections. In the 1990s, it was already understood that mobilizations are not merely reactive, and the agency of activists must be considered. On the other hand, Rucht's (1996) critique points to the treatment of mobilization as a primary dependent variable, where opportunities are relegated to environmental goods rather than activists' goods. The result is a theory whose premise—that external opportunities would affect dependent variables—neglects the possible structure for mobilizations, including social, political, and cultural factors. The structure is not neutral to opportunities but seeks to provide regularity and order principles based on information with a common and relatively stable pattern (Rucht, 1996).

Replacing structure with processes and configurations does not solve the false causality attributed to opportunities since structures, as suggested in the early definitions of the concept, convey a hermetic idea. Jasper (2016) emphasizes how structures imply that institutional constraints determine actions regardless of what protesters think or how they act, thereby diminishing the role of emotions in movements. Although a few elements are subject to change, structural elements such as particularities of the political field are more challenging to alter (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999).

The cultural critique attributes a lack of emphasis on non-structural aspects to opportunities (Poletta, 1999; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999). Poletta (1999) emphasizes that structures are also cultural, shaping perceptions and evaluations of political formations.

Gamson and Meyer (1996: 275) criticize the extent, a primary analytical challenge of opportunities: "The concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment." The excessive number of dimensions considered, although aiming to enhance its explanatory power, ends up reducing its specificity and analytical potential (Meyer, 2004; Meyer and Minkoff, 2004).

Meyer and Minkoff (2004) highlight how an actor or social movement can act against others, and how movements can also be coalitions of divergent interests. What stimulates the emergence of one mobilization may be irrelevant to a second movement and even discourage a third, and therefore, a unidimensional understanding of opportunities can lead to analytical inaccuracies.

The homogenization of strategies and actors loses explanatory power since a government may appear open at one moment to a specific agenda while being deaf to the demands of other movements. Meyer (2004) and Meyer and Minkoff (2004) emphasize the need to specify intervening variables such as government structures, public policies, geography, and intra-movement relations. In its *a priori* unidirectional and asymmetric nature, opportunities presuppose opposition and the dependence of movements on the institutional political system.

Moreover, since the 1990s, authors of collective actions in French sociology have formulated criticisms of the concept. They range from the dynamics of engagement (Mathieu, 2002, 2004, 2006) to distrust in the positivism of proof administration, the distancing from canonical themes, and the development of research outside the West, the construction of public problems, and the contestatory uses of institutional channels of expression such as law (Seidl, 2011). This debate served as a counterpoint to Anglo-Saxon formulations. For authors like Fillieule (1997), Mathieu (2002), Cefai (2009), and Fillieule, Agrikoliansky, and Sommier (2010), theories of Rational Action and Resource Mobilization have an instrumental view that reduces collective mobilization to calculations of interests. They reinforce the importance of collective identity and the affective dimension of movements, whereas opportunities would be insufficient to account for the diversity of organizational forms and repertoires, which include activists' trajectories (Seidl, 2011).

Their work also criticized the excess of structuralism of the concept. This would imply actors are driven by objective conditions to which they adhere, without considering the obstacles and "imperatives of justification" of public (in)action (Mathieu, 2002; Cefai, 2009). This critique focuses on conflicts in their own dynamics, including less objective perceptions and strategies of activists in relation to the political context. Fillieule, Agrikoliansky, and Sommier (2010) propose a reformulation of the concept that analytically resizes institutional politics as one of the elements capable of defining the conditions

for the occurrence of movements. Attention should be paid to situations in which demands are made to the State, and one of its possible—and more frequent—responses is neglect and denial (Fillieule and Mathieu, 2009).

Other criticisms of opportunities, according to Fillieule and Mathieu (2009), include an airtight separation between the political field and the space of protests; opportunities as a stable construction; and how mobilization structures and repertoires of collective action are products of this elaboration. Finally, the French critique argues that opportunities can be interpreted differently, so that depending on the situation, bringing counterexamples to refute the fact that an opportunity has arisen for activists is difficult. For every movement that emerges, something can be interpreted as an opportunity, as well as its purpose (Fillieule, 2005). In the wake of these considerations, a critique based on realities in the peripheries of capitalism, such as in Latin America, can offer important contributions, as we propose next.

## OPPORTUNITIES FURTHER SOUTH: A LATIN AMERICAN CRITIQUE

A reading that considers Latin American contexts should pay attention to the analytical centrality previously provided to the State, as if the State were the exclusive interlocutor of activists. Since the 1990s, many theories have emphasized alternatives that were not merely reactive to state measures. This section addresses how the state-centric diagnosis presupposes an empirically grounded perspective based on experiences in the United States and Europe, neglecting the characteristics of peripheral societies. Among these characteristics, we highlight high rates of social inequality and conflict, which were ignored when discussing the political environments that shape opportunities.

We highlight a theoretical framework that initiates with scenarios that substantially differ from Latin American contexts, particularly in terms of higher socioeconomic inequalities and of lethal crime compared with countries in the center of capitalism[7]. Even without wars, Latin America is responsible for one-third of the world's homicides (Misse, 2019). From gangs (*pandillas*) in Central America to Brazilian factions and Mexican cartels, the interconnections between the military and paramilitary groups involved in extortion, displacement, and confrontation of individuals are distinct. Misse (2019) proposes understanding this scenario from the disjunction between the State and society, which largely explains the levels of corruption and illegal markets in the subcontinent.

In general terms, Latin America has substantially higher poverty and crime rates compared with high-income countries. Regarding wage employment, for example, 62% are wage workers and 37% are self-employed in the subcontinent, whereas in central capitalist countries, these rates are 87% and 12%, respectively. These indicators suggest a scenario in which wage employment is less central for subsistence, and other forms of informal work are

more common. Furthermore, according to the World Bank[8], the Latin American population living in poverty is 23%, contrasting sharply with 1.2% in high-income countries. Finally, 39 out of the 50 most violent cities in the world are in Latin America, with Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil[9] being particularly prominent where a growing number of Latin American activists are persecuted, kidnapped, and murdered, especially those involved in defending human rights in rural areas, opposing extractivism and mining.

In these terms, when we focus on activism and political mobilization, the effects of colonialism and dependent integration into the capitalist economy define patterns distinct from those of central countries and generate different relationships between movements and political opportunities. Critiques of Eurocentrism in the literature on social movements (Gohn, 1997; Bringel, 2011; Fadaee, 2016) point out how anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements in Latin America and Africa reveal the importance of economic and cultural contextualization of opportunities. Furthermore, understanding the differences in these spaces allows for an analysis of the mediations made by the relationships between place and the framework of heterogeneous actors (state, private, and para-state). This includes some convergences in Latin American contexts, such as associative forms, networks, and community dynamics, which characterize specificities of activism patterns in peripheral societies.

Some studies have sought to test, in the Latin American case, hypotheses associated with the theoretical debate on opportunities (Boudreau, 1996; Brockett, 1991; Schulz, 1998; Cuzan, 1990), raising questions that added to their initial formulation (Meyer, 2004). In Brazil, empirical research has focused on, for example, the quilombola movement, the interaction between the Black social movement and the Brazilian state, the abolitionist movement, participatory budgeting, environmental conflicts, among others (Leitao, 2012; Alonso, 2011; Luchman and Borba, 2007; Tavolaro, 2008; Rodrigues, 2001; Baiochi, 2005; Silva, 2010).

However, the perception of the debate on political opportunities on the overlap of poverty, inequality, and everyday manifestations of different forms of violence still has a gap. Tilly (1978) and Tarrow (1994) treated violence as a repressive and demobilizing factor but overlooked contexts in which it is expressed in a daily manner. Brockett (2005) observed how activists in Central America, intimidated by state forces, seize certain opportunities to continue their actions, such as the prior organization of the population in the previous decade, grouped under different demands made to the state regarding the regularization of their lands. Note that these organizations emerged from different fronts such as labor and peasant movements, but they encountered the increasing militarization of the Guatemalan territory and the distrust of local elites, who feared the possibility of guerrilla warfare. However, labor movement activists were the major "agitators" at the time, engaging in extensive grassroots work.

Since the 1980s, several deaths have been recorded in the region by the hands of security forces and death squads. Activists nonetheless persisted their activities with marches, strikes, and occupations. In 1975, a massacre happened in rural Guatemala, in Alta Verapaz, where a strike was harshly suppressed resulting in several deaths. Brockett (2005) questions how many continued to mobilize, under even greater risks, seeking to explain the relationship between mobilization and repression. His hypotheses relate to the broader context of a decade of workers organization in this area and its surroundings, and the variety of practices, including long-term occupations and pressures on the federal government, despite the increasing risks and increasingly selective killings.

Also, the socio-historical, economic, and demographic characteristics, the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1974), and its co-constitutive dynamics of collective action must be considered. Space, seen as a product of incessant transformations, is marked by social inequality and frustration with unfulfilled promises of modernity (emancipation, equal freedom, and social integration). In Latin America, this reality is characterized by a disjunction between society and the state and the emergence of different forms of violence as practices of multiple actors. The literature that addresses space and social movements in the subcontinent, with its struggles for land and territory (Falero, 2012; Bringel, 2006, 2011), contributes to thinking about the production of actions and their dynamics of mobilization/demobilization, as well as the creation of networks and the relationship between identity and place. Space understood as a power device makes it possible to analyze the territorial control exerted over individuals.

When this space is marked by different coercive actors, considering the non-subjection of activists to state repression (Das and Poole, 2004) and the absence of institutions and conditions for mobilizations in a given territoriality is necessary. Living in poor and/or isolated territories implies limited access to the labor market, schools, and housing. Opportunities must be understood as spatialized and contingent. The analysis must consider the resources that actors possess given the circumstances, in order to understand how activists organize themselves even with limited resources.

That said, the discussion of violence needs to consider its polysemy, implicated in a dispute over meanings in which the notion is used to describe an event, without forgetting its normative charge. Misse (2019) emphasizes the expansion of the meaning of violence alongside the civilizing process and the moral reactions it provokes in a given society and time. In Latin America, the experience of activists in countries that have suffered from the absence, ineffectiveness, and/or selectivity of mechanisms for protecting civil rights also matters to the debate. In the 1980s, despite the advent of democratic constitutions in various countries in the region, the poorest population remained vulnerable to human rights violations (Pinheiro, 2002).

Some forms of violence particularly impact the opportunities that activists have for action, exacerbated in certain spaces, such as threats, persecution, and disappearances. Consequently, emerging subjectivities, political dynamics, and socio-territorial complexities complicate the legal relations between the state and society, such as the rigid or narrow application of a law. Thus, we echo Misse's (2019) assertion regarding this effective form of state presence in Latin America, not of a failed or incomplete state, but of a permanent gray zone that needs to be further nuanced.

A substantial part of the theorizations on political opportunities removes the centrality of issues such as poverty, unemployment, and forced migrations from the equation, focusing instead on a "political calculus" carried out under inadequate parameters for capitalist peripheries. In this logic, for the early formulators of the notion, opportunities themselves would be more decisive for political action than popular discontent, the open dynamics of territories, and the potential for individual and collective action.

Furthermore, an Eurocentric approach of the literature eventually may disregard collective actions that go beyond the exclusive representation of mass protests. Those do not always correspond to the reality of activists in conflict--ridden spaces. Actors such as drug traffickers, police officers, colonels, and militias take center stage but are rarely analyzed in social movement theories, despite their presence in many peripheral contexts and their influence on activist organizations. Certainly, these practices interact with the configuration of local institutional politics (for example, identifying which political alliances are viable or who the possible enemies are and who needs to be feared). However, we cannot isolate opportunities and strategies within the institutional/non-institutional dichotomy, relying solely on the centrality of the state.

Latin American countries are characterized by high rates of homicide and disappearances, as well as the contestation among actors, processes, and territories. Therefore, their effects on public space and mobilizations reveal some particularities, shedding light on the themes that movements might or not address and the alliances that can be forged, considering the uncertainties regarding the physical safety of activists. Botello and Magnoni (2017), reflecting on the symbolic dimension of violence, emphasize the need to consider actions embedded in culturally defined networks of meaning. The authors highlight the misconception of exclusively focusing on the structural order of violence, considering only differentiation, social struggles, coercion, and power asymmetries. Meanwhile, Misse (2019) argues that the Latin American states' policies to control violence fuel violence itself, meaning that its functionality lies in maintaining social inequality. To sum up, we will discuss the political opportunities associated with state violence and violence from protesters in the following section of this article.

### FINAL REMARKS: OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE VIOLENCE OF/IN MOVEMENTS

Considering the debate, we assert that violence is a central element in shaping opportunities but should be regarded beyond static categories such as repression and criminalization. The literature on conflictuality (Della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Sorel, 1978) has addressed violence and movements in a limited way, either as a state reaction or localized in the tactics and repertoires of activists. In the former case, the analysis focuses on protest policing, with police organization, codes, and constitutional rights playing important roles in opening or closing opportunities. In the latter, the emphasis has been on the political use of violence in mobilizations, revolutionary movements, guerrillas, and contemporary repertoires such as the Black Bloc tactics[10]. Tilly (2003) also addressed these movements as examples of contentious politics that can result in physical harm to individuals or damage to objects. These contributions reinforce the analysis of the state and the political use of violence, which overlooks the various ways in which violence manifests or treats violence as a consequence of individual pathologies, material deficiencies, or structural tensions. As Misse (2016) argues, these approaches confine a polysemic notion to its most common sense, avoiding the complications of a broader understanding in the social sciences.

Considering violence as commonplace in protests and the culture in which mobilizations occur draws attention to the singularity of what is perceived as violent in a specific society and historical period (Bosi, 2016). After all, violence, in its normative and structural understanding as analyzed by Sorel, Benjamin, and Fanon, has its origin in the capitalist society. Perspectives emerged in the late 20th century that were interactionist and subject-centered, reducing the structuralist weight of the notion and opening the analysis to actors and situations with no fatalism, incapacity to escape, or avoiding these situations. The interpretation of an act is given by its cultural environment, and as such, its presence carries meaning for society as a whole (Botello & Magnoni, 2017).

This contestation of meanings, according to Misse (2016), understood solely as the exercise of force or aggression (physical or moral), is eminently modern. The author argues that violence should be approached as a category, rather than a concept, to avoid normative and accusatory interpretations. However, Misse questions the isolation of the notion from the social determinants of aggressive interaction or the production of oppressive effects, such as the coerciveness of the state's police apparatus. For Botello and Magnoni (2017), symbolic, structural, or cultural violence should also be considered. Another analytical possibility is "slow violence" coined by Nixon (2011), which refers to incremental and discreet violence dispersed over time and space, often not recognized as violence despite its calamitous repercussions over the years. This category includes environmental catastrophes such as

climate change, deforestation, among others, which challenge conventional notions of violence as highly visible acts worthy of news coverage. The temporal dispersion of slow violence affects how we respond to a variety of social afflictions, particularly environmental disasters. Furthermore, their effects amplify conflicts in which the most affected populations are the poor, with intersections of ethnicity, gender, and race. In Latin America, many communities face difficulties in negotiating their positions with large transnational corporations and their armed actors. Therefore, isolating the violence within/from movements from broader social and political conflicts to observe opportunities—which are not neutral and contextual—as part of more extensive disputes is impossible. Understanding the space of conflicts and the configurations assumed by actors in the field is crucial (Machado da Silva, 2009).

In its early formulations, violence and its relationship with opportunities stem from opposing points on a continuum of violent responsivity among political belligerents. According to Tilly, this is manifested in the extent to which a regime represses or facilitates collective action (1978). Closing opportunities would escalate violent repertoires, particularly during the declining phase of mobilization. However, we observe that both analyses from a criminalizing perspective (with violent movements) and repressive perspectives (excessive state response to militancy) underestimate a multidimensional understanding of violence. This violence has distinct dimensions: a permanent sense of fear, and everyday approaches that go beyond regular repression of protests. Also, it includes contexts with high rates of homicides, robberies, kidnappings, torture, and disappearances. The distinction between the repression and criminalization of interpersonal violence since the 17th century by a state that expanded its monopoly of legitimate violence and collective violence, on the other hand, gains strength in the 20th century. Misse (2016) underscores the growing moral repugnance and political rejection since the Great War that coexist with the legitimate appeal to violence in revolutionary and counterrevolutionary agendas.

Additionally, the potential complicity between governments and drug trafficking agents, along with environments of permanent exception, make activists frequent targets of threats. This closure of political opportunities is significant given that violent actions occur legally, illegally, and/or para-legally, with a notably demobilizing effect (Gomes, 2018). This recognition is relevant in contexts where the actions of actors and repressive apparatuses are daily occurrences, and the costs of sustaining protests increase. Misse (2019) sheds light on various forms of illegality that elude—or are not of interest to—state criminalization and enable exchanges of political commodities of different values, produced for the convenience of the parties involved, such as clientelism and influence trafficking. Thus, political commodities are frequent, bypassing the state and pricing power relations, particularly evident in the criminalization of drugs, whose production activates the economy in

Latin American cities. This economic circuit strengthens the supply of political commodities for protecting their circuit, from production to consumption, and enables the financing of groups such as gangs, factions, and cartels operating in collaboration and competition with state power.

Violence, understood in a contextual manner and within its own *continuum*, can have repression as a reference but does not exhaustively reside within it. Social movements theories have established two postulates on the subject: on the one hand, democratic regimes would have more political opportunities compared with authoritarian regimes (Boschi, 1987); and on the other hand, collective action, political opportunities, and peripheral and central societies would have a differentiated relationship, considering that in "stable" democracies, the risk of continuous repression would be the same (Goodwin, 2012). However, both need to be nuanced.

Firstly, the rigid separation between democracy and authoritarianism has shifted the discussion on violence—whether state violence or violence by activists and movements—almost exclusively towards the description of authoritarian regimes. Secondly, the idea persists that Western democracies have no repression—an assumption that implies that environments where democratic institutions function, such as in central capitalist countries, have no repression of activists. Meanwhile, in Latin America, the confrontation between an authoritarian state and its opponents is frequent. During the struggles for democratization in Brazil, collective action—which presupposes the existence of stable institutions—was hindered during the Military Dictatorship.

In Latin America, in increasingly militarized urban and rural contexts, coercion operates in a segmented manner, distinct from the coercion monopolized by the nation-state (Misse, 2016; Machado da Silva, 2008). Paramilitary forces, such as militias, security agents of commerce, among others, are more present, with multiple effects on social movements. In this scenario, the experiences and expectations of activists must be analyzed more attentively considering the complexity of relationships, threats, and possibilities. The increase in homicide rates in the subcontinent since the 1980s serves as a counterfactual to Collins' micro-sociological approach to violence (2009), which neglects "non-pacified" contexts in the sense of Norbert Elias, with the internalization of self-control complemented, in exceptions, by the state's legitimate monopoly of violence (Misse, 2019).

Machado da Silva (2008) discusses violence as a social representation, without confining it to a univocal meaning in empirical research, based on the idea of "violent sociability." This refers to a set of representations of urban violence stemming from transformations in the social organization of urban crime since the 1980s when it allegedly replaced the previously dominant language of rights. On the other hand, Misse (2019), with the concept of the "social accumulation of violence," understands violence as constructed from practices represented and accused as interpersonal violence, state vio-

lence, and the coerciveness of social structure. This can lead to a circular and cumulative causality by the social agents and practices involved. Such actors (paramilitary groups, militias, and extermination groups) have state origins, which explain their power and impunity, while also revealing the connections between market logic and state resources, linking the criminal subjection of socially excluded populations, illegal markets, and political goods. This is a central dimension of the social accumulation of violence that operates at the margins of the separation between society and the state in Latin America (Misse, 2019).

Therefore, the subcontinent has been a source of reflections on political violence that emphasizes criminal violence in shaping social and institutional relations in the region, including citizen and justice dimensions. Thus, its effects cannot be understood as flaws in the design of democracy but as central components of its organization that involve different social actors (Arias and Goldstein, 2010). The analytical category of violence, based on the regional experience, has a decisive impact on collective actions and the political opportunities that arise from them, considering the ongoing process of monopolization of legitimate violence by the state in Brazil and Latin American countries in general.

In this article, we discuss the concept of the Structure of Political Opportunities, which emerged in the 1960s in the United States and has been widely echoed by social movement theories globally. After more than half a century since its initial formulation, being attentive to an uncritical importation of theoretical constructs from the Global North is important since they may not be replicable in the activism observed in the capitalist peripheries. Following the presentation of the notion and subsequent debate, we analyze how everyday violence, stemming largely from the polysemy of violence actors in Latin America, should be considered as an obstacle, functioning as a demobilizing factor in the region.

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**NOTES**

1   In 2008, the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, comprising a series of mobilizations in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa. These events were followed by protests in Turkey in 2013, focusing on Taksim Square, and later by the June 2013 demonstrations in Brazil. Other mobilizations in the following years had converging characteristics, but these are the ones most frequently cited in recent social movement theories.

2   Although violence is not a uniform parameter in the region, affecting Latin American countries in different ways, military and paramilitary actions show converging interconnections, which are more pronounced than in countries like India or China, for example. The history of state violence in the 20th century, subsequent civil wars, and the pattern of disappearances and persecutions of activists and human rights defenders in the region support the use of the region as an analytical category.

3   Since the 1950s, the struggle for civil rights in the United States gained prominence with the rise of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, three leaders of the Black movement in the country who, with different approaches, confronted racial segregation in the country.

4   Among other translations of the term "Contentious Politics," Bringel's (2011) translation claims "political confrontation" due to the emphasis it places on opposition, conflict, and demands, as opposed to the more legal sense of "Contentious Politics" or "Political Contention" used by other authors.

5   Violence and disorder should be seen as complex phenomena in mass demonstrations, and, particularly, the mainstream media and governments have a perception that attributes the primacy of violence in mobilizations to the protesters.

6   McAdam (1992) considers this possibility, suggesting that the opening of political opportunities by certain movements (initiators) is also seized upon by others (derivatives). This idea was expanded by Bringel (2013) to explain what the author called "societal overflow" after the June 2013 protests in Brazil.

7 Note that this does not exempt countries in the Global North from distinct forms of violence and inequality, although differentiating the levels of criminality and urban violence in Global South countries is noteworthy.

8 World Bank data, 2019. Available at: https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators Accessed on May 4, 2022.

9 Data from the NGO Seguridad, Justicia y Paz, 2021. Available at: http://www.seguridadjusticiaypaz.org.mx/sala-de--prensa/1604-metodologia-del-ranking-2021-de-las-50-ciudades-mas-violentas-del-mundo Accessed on May 4, 2022.

10 The Black Bloc tactics gained prominence in Brazil during the June 2013 protests, but their origin can be traced back to the anti-globalization and anti-militarist protests in Europe in the late 1990s. The tactic, which has come to be known by the name of the groups that use it metonymically, involves the formation of a human block to protect others in a street protest. The block is typically dressed in black, and its formation is often spontaneous, without prior organizational meetings. The violence associated with these groups can be further discussed in Dupuis-Deri (2014).

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## POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES THROUGH THE LENS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

### Abstract

The article discusses the concept of Political Opportunity Structure, central to the Political Process Theory, which emerged in the 1960s, in North America, and is essential to the study of social movements. Its objective is to nuance the use of this concept, after presenting its context of initial formulation and addressing the main criticisms, reformulations—internal and external—and a proposal to include the category of violence, notably from Latin American experiences. From a qualitative approach, with an extensive bibliographic review, it concludes that the neglect of the polysemical category of violence provided an often mistaken reading of the classic questions of this field, namely, how and why subjects mobilize. Furthermore, we come up with readings that definitely include the different uses of violent practices both in social movements and to repress them in the analysis of political opportunities.

### Keywords

## AS ESTRUTURAS DE OPORTUNIDADES POLÍTICAS À LUZ DAS VIOLÊNCIAS NA AMÉRICA LATINA

### Resumo

Este artigo discute o conceito de Estrutura de Oportunidades Políticas, central na Teoria do Processo Político, surgido na década de 1960 na América do Norte, e importante para o estudo dos movimentos sociais. Seu objetivo é matizar o uso dessa conceituação após apresentar seu contexto de formulação inicial e abordar as principais críticas, reformulações – internas e externas –, e uma proposta de inclusão da categoria violência, notadamente a partir das experiências latino-americanas. Por meio de uma abordagem qualitativa, com uma extensa revisão bibliográfica, conclui-se que a negligência da polissêmica categoria da violência propiciou uma leitura muitas vezes equivocada das perguntas clássicas desse campo de estudos, a saber, como e por quê se mobilizam os sujeitos. Ademais, é proposta uma leitura que inclui definitivamente os distintos usos de práticas violentas, tanto nos movimentos sociais, quanto para reprimi-los, na análise das oportunidades políticas.

### Palavras-chave