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Deciphering Social Protest: Insights from the Field of Sociocultural Intelligence

by Dr. Carlo Tognato

INTRODUCTION

Responding to social protest may face state authorities, and especially public security forces, with the difficult task of juggling the preservation of the public order, the need to push back on insurgencies, and the demand to safeguard democratic practices in society. To maintain that tricky balance, authorities need to decipher it. This, however, is less straightforward than it might appear at a first glance.

The way state authorities understand civil dynamics is shaped by the political cultures that orient how people come to accept certain motives, social relations, and institutions as legitimate and dismiss others as illegitimate. Such a process of cultural attribution impacts the intelligence process by which public security forces makes sense of social protest and inform responses to it.

The fact that culture plays a role in the choice of the lenses that state authorities use to understand social protest indicates that the task is not just a matter of professional competence. Instead, it also involves a subtle game of cultural communication that sets a peculiar relational challenge for public security forces. Here is why.

To convince their fellow citizens that they actually understand civil dynamics and are responding appropriately, public security forces need to prove they have internalized democratic civil culture. This, in fact, will reassure society that the lenses they will choose to decipher civil dynamics will not distort what they see.

Proving such internalization of civil ideals may demand more than just showing they permeate doctrine and regulations. In fact, public security forces may need to demonstrate to the public that their civil commitments come alive in their practices, as well. This plays out at two levels: in the way officers, retired and active, engage in public discourse, and in the organizational practices that are critical to cultivate those commitments within their institutions.

To unpack this argument, I will refer to a concrete case. In May 2021, Colombian and international media hotly debated how influential members of Colombia's ruling coalition and of President Iván Duque's cabinet interpreted the social protest that had convulsed the country over many weeks. Such interpretation resonated quite broadly among the Colombian public security forces and relied on an idea that a Chilean entomologist and publicist (as well as Holocaust denier) brought to Colombia after being invited by the Nueva Granada Military University in Bogota to deliver two talks on social mobilization. This case provides a unique vantage point to observe the stakes for state institutions, and particularly for public security forces, in choosing appropriate lenses to decipher social protest.

Addressing this matter will also allow me to show the potential that the field of sociocultural intelligence may hold and its shifting mission at a time when authoritarianism is on the rise, democracies around the world are weakening, their publics are increasingly disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of democratic leaders, civil practices are degrading at an accelerating pace, and public security forces are more necessary than ever to defend them and prevent them from degrading even further.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENSES (AND OPTICS): A CASE

On April 28, 2021, thousands of Colombians took to the streets of major cities to protest against a tax bill they perceived to be punitive for the middle and lower classes at a time of heightened hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the government pulled the bill, demonstrations carried on and the list of grievances only expanded to include poverty, inequality, and unemployment more generally, which the pandemic had acutely worsened. Some activists joined, hoping to corner the government into paralysis or capitulation, thereby paving the way to a new era of radical change after the 2022 presidential election.

To contain the violence that began punctuating the demonstrations, the government deployed the anti-riot police. Violence, though, did not wane. On the contrary, it increased on both sides in scale and severity. In addition, national and municipal authorities began disagreeing over the appropriate response. On the one hand, local authorities saw the demonstrations as a political matter to be managed through mediation and de-escalation tactics to defuse violence. On the other, national authorities viewed the demonstrations mainly as a security issue—early signs of a potential insurgency attack against Colombian political institutions. This is why the authorities set out to respond much more assertively.

According to López, the 2019 student mobilizations in Chile, the 2019 indigenous protests in Ecuador, the 2020 Black Lives Matter marches in the U.S., the 2020 public mobilizations over women’s rights in Mexico, and the 2021 social protests against the tax bill in Colombia followed a common radical plan by the Left to take over democratic institutions and plunge societies into a state of permanent civil war.

On May 3, 2021, a “tweet” by former President Álvaro Uribe triggered a public debate in national and international media over the interpretation of the situation. Uribe’s reading of it caught the attention of influential members of the ruling coalition and President Iván Duque’s cabinet and resonated quite broadly with the Colombian public security forces.¹ Uribe warned against the “dissipated molecular revolution” that “impedes normality, escalates, and crowds out.”²

The concept of a “dissipated molecular revolution” came from a Chilean entomologist and publicist, Alexis López. It had first circulated in Chile and later in Colombia, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Mexico.³ In July 2020, López had been invited to speak at the Nueva Granada Military University in Bogotá. He delivered a paper titled “Violence in Social Protest: Law and Order between the Sword and Legitimacy.” In February 2020, López was back talking about the same topic.⁴

According to López, the 2019 student mobilizations in Chile, the 2019 indigenous protests in Ecuador, the 2020 Black Lives Matter marches in the U.S., the 2020 public mobilizations over women’s rights in Mexico, and the 2021 social protests against the tax bill in Colombia followed a common radical plan by the Left to take over democratic institutions and plunge societies into a state of permanent

civil war.⁵ To López, Marxism-Leninism, anarchism, and new identity movements had fused into a new “Communism 2.0” and spearheaded a new offensive against Western Christian civilization. He noted that this dangerous Left was infiltrating education, the media, the art world, and even the Catholic Church,⁶ and it converged with globalist interests in undermining nation-states with an eye to replacing them with a single world government.⁷

Such takeover, López argued, starts by injecting new ideological and behavioral practices into everyday social interactions. These progressively escalate and end up crowding out the entire social space. It begins with evading everyday obligations, such as refusing to pay a metro ticket, for example. It then moves up the ladder through contempt for the law and regulations, resistance, disobedience, insubordination, rebellion, and finally insurrection. Along that path of escalation, he noted, social collectives and human rights organizations play a particularly critical role in pushing the “ignorant” public toward rebellion.⁸ This is why, in López’s mind, it was so important to crack down on “molecular changes” as early as possible before they escalated.⁹

Thus, López insisted that protesters ought to be regarded as disarticulated urban micro-guerrillas who “fight the system at the molecular level in order to impose their own domination”¹⁰ and attack the established order on a myriad of fronts, thereby making containment impossible.¹¹ López concluded with a warning: “Public security forces are not trained, prepared, or conceived to face dissipated, dispersed, mobile, fluid, horizontal insurrectional models. The only thing they can do is wearing themselves down and ending up being accused of human rights violations.”¹²

In spite of the political and institutional traction of his ideas in Colombia, López is little known within the community of defense experts in Chile. His neo-Nazi links, though, are notorious,¹³ and international media were quick to pick up on them, particularly on his negation of the Holocaust.¹⁴ Recently, in Chile, José Antonio Kast’s Republican Party denied any formal or informal connection to López.¹⁵ In 2006 members of the Chilean Congress and the group Jewish Youth sued his movement, Patria Nueva Sociedad (PNS), before the Chilean Constitutional Tribunal. In 2005 a journalist writing a profile of him noted Hitler’s photo displayed in his house. Then in 2000 López was arrested just before participating in the First International Ideological National Socialist Meeting in Concón, Chile.

Juggling different objectives, such as preserving the public order, pushing back on insurgencies, and protecting liberal democracy, faces decision-makers with the complex exercise of choosing the right lens to assess the reality on the ground and formulate appropriate responses. In addition, the

optics of that choice may turn out to be quite relevant and certainly worth some careful consideration and due diligence.

JUGGLING SOCIAL PROTEST, COUNTERINSURGENCY, AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Open societies have a unique capability to adapt and change, which has allowed them to reap the fruit of peaceful relations over the long term. They have entrusted all citizens with deciding what is in their own interest. They have given them rights and the promise to work toward their progressive realization while setting in place institutional incentives which ensure that such promises cannot be put indefinitely on hold. They have granted people the freedom to voice their grievances publicly whenever those promises are not met, and corrective actions are necessary. Open societies have also allowed citizens to join forces to make their plight visible before the court of public opinion. They have taught people they need to persuade their fellow citizens about the legitimacy of their own causes and that the solidarity of the citizens can never be taken for granted and is not owed. At the same time, they have given people the opportunity to disagree over what is legitimate, desirable, or satisfactory. This is why the arc of the moral universe in open societies is inevitably long and its bending toward justice is never unilinear. Rather, hopeful progress alternates with frustrating backlash, which is why citizens in open societies need to match their focus and determination with patience and hope. Most importantly, open societies are a live experiment that crucially relies on learning by doing as their members engage in everyday civil practices across all scenarios of social life.

Such practices, in turn, may include a broad repertoire of radical actions such as contempt for certain laws or regulations, resistance, disobedience, and insubordination. It is important to recognize, though, that civil radical action is markedly different from the kind of radical action which militant revolutionaries carry out.¹⁶ Both engage in some breach of the established order. However, revolutionary breaches seek to provoke violent reactions by the defenders of that order to justify violence by those who want to take it down. Civil breaches, instead, seek to test the legitimacy or authenticity of the civil justifications behind the norms, regulations, laws, or institutional practices they target. The endgame, in other words, is to show their lack of civil credentials and, based on that, to convince the public about the need to change them. Many famous acts of civil disobedience in world history did just that. For example, Gandhi's challenge to the British Empire's monopoly in India over salt production or Rosa Parks' refusal to play according to Alabama's rules of racial segregation in public

transportation pushed defenders of such orders to articulate their civil justifications openly, thereby exposing their inauthenticity. Unlike revolutionary breaches, Gandhi and Parks did not seek to provoke a violent response by state authorities to justify violence on the part of their supporters.¹⁷

The problem with López's concept of "dissipated molecular revolution," and the recommendations that derive from it, is that he fails to differentiate between civil radical practices and militant revolutionary ones and sees lesser breaches of the civil order as necessarily and inevitably paving the way for more serious instances of rebellion and insurrection.¹⁸ Most importantly, he fails to recognize that in open societies such practices work as fuses. Instead of undermining democracies, they spur them to adapt, change, and self-correct before violence sets in and widespread coercion becomes necessary to reestablish the public order. As a result, López throws out the proverbial baby with the bath water while claiming that he is out to protect the baby.

This turns out to be more problematic when open societies and their liberal democratic institutions are in the process of consolidation. Hence, civil practices are in even greater need of being safeguarded by state authorities. López's understanding of social protest sacrifices the pursuit of democratic consolidation for the sake of counterinsurgency without factoring in the potential loss of legitimacy which such imbalance might bring to public authorities among the liberal-minded segments of society. Also, it fails to consider that such loss may corner public security forces into increasingly turning for support to the least liberal-minded in society. This ends up accelerating their loss of legitimacy among the liberal-minded, thereby reducing their incentive to keep balancing the counterinsurgency struggle with the need to uphold democratic consolidation.

Colombian guerrillas have traditionally seen large public demonstrations and outbursts of social discontent as a juicy tactical opportunity to undermine the legitimacy of state authorities and gain new sympathizers. To achieve that goal, insurgents have regularly sought to infiltrate public demonstrations, sow violence within them, and force the military's and police's hands, hoping for excesses and mistakes. This dance has regularly led to both fronts radicalizing, which has benefited the insurgency. In fact, when exposed to violent repression, some peaceful protesters begin to resist violently against it in self-defense, thereby adding more violence to the demonstrations. Moreover, when they are repressed by state authorities while peacefully demonstrating, it ends up aggravating their grievance for injustice and makes it resonate even more broadly across society. On the opposite side, the broadening of the front of violence and chaos, and the targeting of members of the public security forces who are

merely doing their job, may convince other citizens to switch away from dialogue and mediation and turn to repression in order to reestablish the public order. In the end, the strategic goal of the insurgency is met, that is to squeeze the political space where grievances may be staged and heard, to show that politics is not the realm in which conflict may be resolved but war is, and thus to catapult all political interactions into the arena of an all-out confrontation between antagonist forces in which all means of struggle become fair game and violence primes among them all. Each time this routine is repeated, the political space for peaceful civil competition becomes thinner and thinner.

To prevent the insurgency from slashing away that political space, public authorities must take a different route from López's. They must carefully differentiate between civil protest and militant revolutionary actions, and credibly show that they can staunchly safeguard the former while cracking down on the latter with total resolve.

U.S. joint doctrine on counterinsurgency recognizes this. While it states that "when an insurgency intentionally uses violence in demonstrations, it could be considered an insurgent objective in challenging the state," it also emphasizes the importance of not confusing an insurgency "with peaceful demonstrations that might evolve into acts of civil disobedience, even if the demonstrations lead to riots, looting, destruction of property, and physically challenging law enforcement."¹⁹ The reason for differentiating the two, and driving a wedge between them, is to make sure public security forces keep their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, and particularly among those who cherish liberal democratic ideals.

HOW CULTURE GETS INTO THE WHEELS OF CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENSES

Even if public security forces in Latin America were to dismiss López's misleading perspective on civil dynamics in democratic societies and recognize their complexities—as U.S. joint doctrine on counterinsurgency does—they would still stumble upon a non-trivial hurdle. They would still need to know when demonstrations that are drifting into violence are becoming an actual threat to society, thereby requiring a more decisive response. There is no clear-cut quantitative metric to identify these inflection points, and political culture plays a role in it.

Liberal democracies value individuals for their autonomy, rationality, self-control, and reasonableness; social relations for their openness, trustworthiness, and truthfulness; and political institutions for their being bound by rules, based on law and contract, and oriented by principles of equality, inclusiveness, and impersonality.²⁰ When motives, social relations, and institutions distance themselves from such

attributes, they are regarded as anti-civil and thus deserving of social condemnation. In liberal democracies the public sphere is the space where members of society engage in this process of civil attribution, persuading each other about the civility or incivility of motives, social relations, or institutional practices.

In Latin American societies, this civil tradition has had to compete since the 19th century against a more traditional and illiberal conception of society the region inherited from being European colonies.

In Latin American societies, this civil tradition has had to compete since the 19th century against a more traditional and illiberal conception of society the region inherited from being European colonies. This other worldview does not understand members of society as citizens but rather as patrons and subjects, if they uphold social harmony, or bandits, if they undermine it. Patrons are praised for their compassion, generosity, and consideration toward their subjects and the latter are valued for their modesty, docility, humility, good will, and reverence. Social relations are approved if inspired by paternalism, loyalty, and charity. Political institutions are valued to the extent they are based on tradition, authority, personalism, and order.²¹ This competing worldview is not particularly comfortable with public debate and open disagreement. Instead, it favors more discrete exchanges of opinions outside the public sphere.

Within this tradition almost any instance of social protest is a breach of social harmony, i.e., something in which only bandits engage. Well-behaved subjects plead with their patrons and appeal to their good will and sense of charity instead of challenging them in public. Whether a protester is a bandit or not is left to the patrons to decide, not to the court of public opinion. Attribution does not result from a horizontal process of public deliberation among people with different opinions because it would be perceived as a disruption of social harmony. This is echoed by Sandra Borda, a Colombian scholar, when she notes that the followers of López's interpretation of social mobilizations were "looking for arguments to avoid facing civic protests as a form of political participation."²²

These two understandings of society, one liberal and rooted in modernity and the other illiberal and rooted in tradition, coexist in Latin America at all levels of the social pyramid and often across the constitutional spectrum. Even when people and institutions tap into the discourse of liberal democracy to show a civil face in front of their audiences, in their everyday practices and organizational rituals they may well fall back to their more traditional

worldview. Furthermore, the rooting of the latter in society is so deep that it may even surface in the daily practices of guerrillas, whose understanding of society one would expect to be shaped instead by the militant revolutionary view. A diary written by former Dutch FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) member Tanja Nijmeijer, which Colombian armed forces found in 2007 after the bombardment of a FARC camp, was quite suggestive in that respect.²³

This is why López's idea of a "dissipated molecular revolution" resonated so much with parts of Colombian society. It was not his neo-Nazi inclinations that certain groups identified with; rather, it was the cultural portability of the idea that open demonstrations constituted a breach and an inherent threat. In other words, his lens fitted quite neatly the glasses of the traditional illiberal political culture that still lies beneath the surface of Latin American societies and continues to shape their social reality.

Cultural understandings of motives, relations, and institutions are inevitably bound to influence the entire intelligence cycle, from the stage of intelligence gathering to that of analysis, and then to the presentation of intelligence products to the leadership of public security forces and of civilian authorities in government. If the liberal-minded segment of society were to perceive that the more traditional, illiberal worldview exercised some preponderant influence on state responses to social protest, and on the intelligence process that backed it, then it might come to doubt the appropriateness of that response and could fear instead that the protection of liberal democracy may have been sacrificed on the altar of counterinsurgency. At that point, state responses to social protest would lose legitimacy.

Deciphering social protest is therefore not just a technical exercise. It is also a game of cultural communication. For state authorities and public security forces, more specifically, it is also about signaling to their audiences the true colors of their own political culture—liberal or illiberal.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT LENS IS A SIGNALING GAME

Deciphering social protest boils down to a signaling game. State authorities are expected to show discernment about civil dynamics and to back it with credible civil credentials. Thus, they need to show they understand the human terrain of social protest and recognize that understanding it sets a relational challenge. In other words, state authorities will need to walk the talk of liberal democracy in a much broader sense than it is generally appreciated—at least among Latin American public security forces and possibly beyond.

Understanding the Human Terrain of Social Protest

Social protests that are punctuated by outbursts of violence are a composite phenomenon that involves both peaceful and violent actors, each segmented into different groups. Some violent actors, in fact, may be insurgents or anarchists. Others may bandwagon with them without any intention to join their organizations or submit to them and may instead justify violent actions on civil grounds. Yet others may engage in violence without justifying it either on militant revolutionary or on civil grounds. Their partaking of violent actions may be situational, may follow the flow of the protest, and may merely conform with the practices of those around them. Finally, others may engage in violence against state authorities in self-defense when caught in the crossfire of the confrontation between violent protesters and public security forces.

On the other side, peaceful demonstrators also bring together many different subgroups. Some reject violence unconditionally. Others reject it on civil grounds. Yet others do not practice violence but are willing to justify it under certain circumstances, such as self-defense, or they may be open to understanding it while not condoning it, such as when people are swallowed by the flow of a demonstration that degenerates into violence, for example. Some do not engage in violence directly but sympathize with insurgents or anarchists who do. Others who demonstrate peacefully may not only sympathize with the latter but may also lend them their logistical support. In conclusion, understanding the human terrain of social protest requires delving into its complexity and comprehending the drivers of radicalization and solidarity, particularly what brings those groups together and what might break them apart. In short, it entails grasping the sociocultural topography of the social protest.²⁴

If state authorities are to debilitate insurgents *and* protect liberal democracy at the same time, they need to keep violent actors from coalescing into a common front. Insurgents and their narratives must be blocked from becoming the leading voice among protesters. Peaceful actors must be teased away from violent ones. Furthermore, civil justifications of violence must be contested not only within the broader national public sphere but also within the very context of social protests. It is imperative to initiate such debate among participants in social mobilizations. Ideological support among some protesters for militant revolutionary or anarchical violence must be turned into a topic of open public conversation. When militant revolutionaries disguise their justifications of violence under a civil cloak, they must be called out in the open and their asymmetric commitment to civil principles must become a topic of public debate.²⁵

State authorities do not have the capacity to do so directly but they have the option to throw civil society at those groups, let civil society engage with them, and above all let it draw protesters out in the open in the processes of public deliberation over their justifications and the robustness of their civil motives. The endgame in this case is to separate militant revolutionaries engaging in violence from the rest of the protesters.

Alexis López sees civil society as the threat. Instead, civil society is the first line of defense that public authorities have in order to minimize the use of force and apply it surgically only where strictly necessary. In fact, unlike the state, civil society mirrors the same level of complexity of social protests. This is why civil society's toolkit is better equipped from a discursive and performative point to tackle such complexity. Lawrence Sullivan recognizes it when he notes that "Mao Zedong's slogan is perhaps the shortest summary of the road to success for both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism: 'Politics takes command.'"²⁶ The greater the engagement of civil society, and the greater the support that public security forces offer to allow the deployment of civil society under such circumstances, the greater the legitimacy that public security forces will enjoy in their fight against insurgents and anarchists who insist on waging violence on the streets.

How can public security forces *credibly* demonstrate that they have a sophisticated understanding of civil dynamics? In other words, how can they support the role of civil society in the response to social protest and recognize at the same time that civil society actors cannot be used as trumpets for hire or strong-armed as if they were mere human assets? This, in fact, would pollute them in the eyes of the liberal-minded segment of public opinion. It would create the appearance that those actors serve as the long hand of the public security apparatus and would thus void completely their functional potential.

Showing You Understand Is a Relational Matter

To show all that in a *credible* fashion, public security forces must persuade their fellow citizens that their understanding of civil dynamics and of the role of civil society in the response to social protest reflects authentic civil commitments on their part. There are different ways in which they may demonstrate that. One has to do with the way their officers, retired and on active duty, engage in public discourse. The other has to do with the organizational practices that are critical to cultivating those commitments among public security forces.

The U.S. armed forces may provide a useful example. For the sake of concreteness, let us show a few instances of the way the civil ideals of truthfulness, honesty, transparency,

progress, solidarity, inclusion, realism, accountability, criticism, self-reflection, rationality, openness, and individual autonomy surface recurrently in the public discourse of its high-ranking officers.

In his Inaugural Communication and Leadership Lecture at the Moody College of Communication, University of Texas at Austin, retired U.S. Navy Admiral William McRaven came out in defense of the principles of honesty, transparency, truth, and accountability as pillars of communication in leadership.²⁷ Retired Air Force Lieutenant General James Clapper, for his part, stressed in a book the importance of upholding the value of truth: "I believe we have to continue speaking truth to power, even—or especially—if the person in power doesn't want to hear the truth we have to tell him."²⁸ Then too, retired Army General Stanley McChrystal pushed in an interview the point on honesty and truth even further as he qualified the lack of honest communication in leadership as the greatest threat to democracy.²⁹

On a different occasion, Admiral McRaven echoed the civil ethos of progress, solidarity, resilient citizenship, and hope that underpins liberal democracies in his famous University of Texas at Austin commencement address in 2014, when he urged his audience to fight for a better world, be committed to change the lives of other people for the better, respect everyone, and understand that unfairness and failure are a part of life, but also that it is important to take risks, step up, "face the bullies, lift up the downtrodden, and never ever give up."³⁰

Retired Navy Admiral James Stavridis, for his part, hinted in an article for *TIME* Magazine at the importance of active citizenship in liberal democracies: "We paint democracy as a utopia, but it is not. It has been called, as Churchill noted, the worst form of government except for all the others—subject to abuse and manipulation and often sclerotic. We must forgive its failings, and work to improve them, as long as its core institutions further civil rights, guarantee rule of law and are subject to the will of the people."³¹

When five black cadet candidates at the U.S. Air Force Academy's preparatory school in Colorado Springs were targeted with racial slurs on the message boards on their doors, Lieutenant General Jay Silveria, the Academy's superintendent, stood up in defense of the principles of civil inclusion, universalism, human dignity, and openness and stressed the value of engaging in open public conversation on difficult matters in a memorable public address to his cadets that later circulated broadly throughout the U.S. and around the world:

If you are outraged by those words, you are in the right place...you should be outraged not only as an airman, but also as a human being... The appropriate

response for horrible language and horrible ideas is a better idea...we would be naïve to think that we shouldn't discuss this topic. We would also be tone-deaf not to think about the backdrop of what's going on in our country, things like Charlottesville and Ferguson, the protests in the NFL. That's why we have a better idea. One of those ideas, the dean brought people together to discuss Charlottesville because what we should have is a civil discourse and talk about these issues... I have also a better idea, and it's the power of our diversity... If you can't treat someone with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you cannot treat someone from another gender, whether it is a man or a woman, with dignity and respect, then you need to get out. If you demean someone in any way, then you need to get out. And if you cannot treat someone from another race or color of skin with dignity and respect, then you need to get out... Grab your phones, I want you to videotape this so that you have it, so you can use it, so that we all have the moral courage together...if you need it, you need my words, then you keep these words, and you use them, you remember them, and you share them, and you talk about them. If you can't treat someone with dignity and respect, then get out.³²

The civil ideals of rationality, openness, and individual autonomy as well as the civil appreciation for critical analysis also surfaced during a House committee hearing in relation to the teaching of critical race theory at West Point. On that occasion, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley stressed that "it is crucially important for those in uniform 'to be open-minded and widely read',"³³ and he added that he was personally offended that anyone would criticize members for "studying some theories that are out there."³⁴ In relation to the topic of white rage and critical race theory, he noted: "I want to understand white rage, and I'm white..."³⁵ Then he added: "I've read Mao Zedong. I've read Karl Marx. I've read Lenin... That doesn't make me a communist. So, what is wrong with having some situational understanding about the country which we are here to defend?"³⁶

Heralding the civil ideals of criticism and critical self-reflection implies refraining from denying, excusing, or normalizing behaviors or practices that are contrary to democracy and being capable of projecting those ideals in public discourse. Former CIA Director John Brennan has insisted repeatedly on the importance of addressing autocratic threats to democracy and on the need for the U.S. to lead by example and push back on authoritarian tendencies.³⁷ When a *Washington Post* poll showed that 40 percent of Americans would support a coup, retired Army General Barry McCaffrey publicly denounced such "absolutely horrifying anti-democracy views by a huge segment of the U.S. population."³⁸ In "My Worry for

America," retired Air Force General Michael Hayden paused on the 11-point drop that the U.S. suffered in 2021 according to the Human Freedom Index elaborated by the Cato Institute and Freedom House: "The U.S. has fallen to a new low for political rights and civil liberties, unequal treatment of minority groups, damaging influence of money and increased polarization. There are real problems with partisan pressure on the electoral process, criminal justice, immigration, asylum seekers and disparities in wealth. There are also problems with discrimination based on race, ethnicity and gender."³⁹ Finally, former Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed his painful role in initiating the war in Iraq based on flawed intelligence and recognized that it was "a blot" that would forever be part of his record.⁴⁰

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As they join public conversations over a broad spectrum of topics, and thus well beyond the very issue of social protest, retired officers may serve as an important transmission belt that conveys to society the civil character of their public security forces. In fact, jumping into the fray of the public sphere may allow them to show that they understand and value its crucial role in open societies, that civil ideals orient the way they look at social life, and that they are proficient at deploying those civil principles to tackle concrete challenges on the ground. In addition, retired high-ranking officers who do so may also provide society with living proof that their public security forces do not weed out people with robust civil commitments, that civil commitments are indeed compatible with ascending the chain of command, and that quite possibly such commitments may have well been internalized in the very practices of their own institutions. Unlike retired officers, those on active duty have less wiggle room to participate in public conversations that may reach out to the general public. Occasionally, though, they may use specific institutional platforms and windows of opportunities to project the civil credentials of their institutions more broadly. Lieutenant General Silveria's address and General Milley's testimony to Congress provide clear examples of that.

Upholding civil principles in public discourse is important if public security forces are to persuade society that their understanding of liberal democracy and its civil dynamics is rooted in an authentic commitment to civil ideals on their part. However, it is not sufficient. Public security forces also

need to show society that the organizational settings which are critical to cultivate those civil commitments within them are actually doing the job. Let us focus here on one such setting.

In liberal democracies with a strong civil tradition, military academies value instruction in history, political science, international relations, sociology, and philosophy to cultivate in their ranks a sophisticated understanding of society, democracy, and its civil dynamics. Thus, they offer such training to their cadets and even support officers pursuing graduate degrees in these disciplines at civilian universities. Military academies recognize it is important for cadets to be widely read and acquainted with all types of theories and debates shaping society. They understand that in open societies cadets need to be exposed to all kinds of ideas, even “bad” ones, and develop the competence to debate them effectively—both in writing and verbally.

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This shows that military academies in strong liberal democracies embrace the civil value of autonomy—a critical trait of open societies—the belief that people are moved by reasons and the idea that there is no short-cut to persuasion by sound reasoning. With that in mind, military academies recognize that the measure of instructional success, particularly in the social sciences, cannot be some automatic recitation by cadets of pre-defined scripts fed to them by instructors. Instructors are not there to fill up empty vessels with sanitized content. Their role is to make sure cadets genuinely buy in to values and ideas by offering them good reasons for doing so.

Cadets therefore learn to participate in discussion and deliberation, often by deploying the Socratic method. Throughout the educational process they develop the capability to listen fairly and diplomatically challenge without personal attacks.⁴¹ They learn to give reasons rather than state mere preferences. They learn to persuade others with different beliefs and identities.⁴² They learn how to “discern and respect the rights of others, and to moderate one’s own claims accordingly.”⁴³ They come to respect truth even when it controverts their own positions. Above all, they learn to take part in uncomfortable conversations and argue convincingly even outside the intimate space of echo

chambers. To them, difference and complexity are not a source of defiance. Such civil pedagogy ensures that public security forces in liberal democracies develop civil commitments and solidify them into civil identities, thereby anchoring the former onto more solid and stable ground.

In less open societies, on the other hand, the civil ideals of liberal democracy are not hegemonic and must constantly wrestle for cultural, social, and institutional space against illiberal conceptions of society, such as the alternate traditional worldview in Latin American societies to which I alluded earlier. Whenever the latter is elevated over the former, it becomes more challenging to deploy a civil pedagogy within the academies of their public security forces and thus their walls may become more porous to ideas that may hinder an adequate understanding of civil dynamics. The impossibility of deploying this pedagogy, or even its patchy deployment, in turn undermines the cultivation of civil commitments and their anchoring onto the firmer ground of civil identities. Thus, civil commitments end up being more prone to shift or bend according to the situation and the opportunity. This is when public security forces end up having a harder time proving their civil credentials—and appropriateness of their responses—to liberal-minded fellow citizens.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD OF SOCIOCULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: CONCLUSION

In April 2021, many Colombians took to the streets to protest against their national government. The mobilization continued over many weeks, violence broke out, and state repression did not take long to be brought down on protesters.

At the beginning of the mobilization, former President Álvaro Uribe sparked a public debate with his interpretation of the protest: that it was the beginning of a violent revolutionary takeover that had to be quashed with force before it escalated. Uribe was borrowing his lens from Chilean entomologist, publicist, and Holocaust denier Alexis López, and his ideas resonated with several in the ruling coalition, the current President’s cabinet, and the Colombian public security forces.

López sees social mobilizations as a threat that democracies are incapable of managing.⁴⁴ Mobilizations lead to insurrections and must therefore be decisively stopped as early as possible. Consequently, in his view, saving democracies requires sacrificing democratic practices. That is, democracy, *ma non troppo*. Open society, but not quite. Here, I argued that López’s ideas have gained some traction in Colombia because they

resonate with existing illiberal understandings of society that Latin America societies inherited from their colonial past and that end up shaping how civilian leaders and public security forces read civil dynamics.

Each time the liberal-minded segment of the Latin American public has come to believe that the more traditional, illiberal worldview has managed to exercise some decisive influence on state responses to civil dynamics and on the intelligence process that backed it, that part of the public has doubted the appropriateness of that response, resulting in its loss of legitimacy. This is why it is so important to recognize that deciphering social protest entails a subtle game of cultural communication—a relational challenge for public security forces. If the latter are to persuade the public they actually understand civil dynamics and their responses are adequate, they also need to prove their understanding is supported by a full internalization of civil ideals. That is, their civil commitments come alive in their everyday practices, including how officers engage in public discourse and how such commitments are cultivated within the public security forces.

My last point will address what this article has to do with sociocultural intelligence and in what way it embraces its shifting mission. When Kerry Patton referred to this emerging field back in 2010, he understood it was there to provide “a systematic understanding of the customs, moral attitudes, and cultures of foreign populations to enhance the efficacy of national security initiatives.”⁴⁵ After 9/11 that definition fit well the mission of Western troops in non-Western lands where liberal democracy and the ideals of an open society stood on thinner ice. Today, and for the conceivable future, sociocultural intelligence might help in navigating the political and social complexity at a time of democratic deconsolidation.

Over the past fifteen years democracies around the world have weakened, authoritarianism has been on the rise, and China and Russia have been actively attempting to tilt the balance within the international community in favor of the latter. If we are to protect democratic societies and avert their fall, we need to make sure that civil dynamics within them are safeguarded and that civil society is allowed to prompt the course corrections needed to meet the promises of liberal democracy before an increasing segment of the public becomes irredeemably disillusioned by it. Public security forces have an important role to play in the protection of civil dynamics within their own societies. To fulfill their mission, though, they need to understand these dynamics and convince their fellow citizens that they do. Here, I demonstrated how the field of sociocultural intelligence can help them on that front.

NOTES

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² Uriel Blanco, “‘Revolución molecular disipada’: El término que usó Álvaro Uribe para las protestas en Colombia (y por qué esto podría ser peligroso para el país),” *CNN Español*, May 6, 2021, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/05/06/revolucion-molecular-disipada-alvaro-uribe-protestas-colombia-orix/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Jesús M. Pérez Triana, “Chile y la Revolución Molecular Disipada (2ª parte): Desarrollo del Concepto,” *The Political Room*, June 2021, <https://thepoliticalroom.com/chile-y-la-revolucion-molecular-disipada-2a-parte/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “¿A qué se refiere Uribe con ‘revolución molecular disipada’?”

⁹ Germán Gómez Polo, “Uribe, la revolución molecular disipada y la protesta como objetivo militar,” *El Espectador*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.elespectador.com/politica/uribe-la-revolucion-molecular-disipada-y-la-protesta-como-objetivo-militar-articulo/>.

¹⁰ Camila Osorio and Rocío Montes, “La ‘revolución molecular disipada,’ la última estrategia de Álvaro Uribe,” *El País*, May 6, 2021, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-07/la-revolucion-molecular-disipada-la-ultima-estrategia-de-alvaro-uribe.html>.

¹¹ “¿A qué se refiere Uribe con ‘revolución molecular disipada’?”

¹² See “El ideólogo de la ‘revolución molecular disipada,’ el tema del momento,” *El Tiempo*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.eltiempo.com/cultura/gente/revolucion-molecular-disipada-alexis-lopez-el-ideologo-en-latinoamerica-586225>.

¹³ Osorio and Montes, “La ‘revolución molecular disipada,’ la última estrategia de Álvaro Uribe.”

¹⁴ When prompted by an interviewer to say whether he believed in the existence of the Holocaust, López replied: “I have as many reasons to say yes as to say no, because if you put them on a balance ... (and he made a gesture implying their equal weight).” See Osorio and Montes, “La ‘revolución molecular disipada,’ la última estrategia de Álvaro Uribe.”

¹⁵ See Gabriel Gaspar, former Under-Secretary of Defense of Chile, in Osorio and Montes, “La ‘revolución molecular disipada,’ la última estrategia de Álvaro Uribe.”

¹⁶ Regarding the distinction between the civil and military revolutionary camp, see Carlo Tognato, “Remembering Bolivarian Venezuela: The Strategic Stakes in Shaping the Collective Memory of a Society,” *American Intelligence Journal*, 38(2), 2021: 93-98.

¹⁷ Carlo Tognato, “Radical Protest on a University Campus: Performances of Civil Transition in Colombia,” in *Breaching The Civil Order: Radicalism and the Civil Sphere*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Trevor Stack, and Farhad Khosrokhavar (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 42-69.

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²⁰ See Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53-67.

²¹ See Carlo Tognato, "The Civil Life of the University: Enacting Dissent and Resistance in a Colombian Campus," in *The Civil Sphere in Latin America*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Carlo Tognato (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 153-158.

²² See Sandra Borda in Osorio and Montes, "La 'revolución molecular disipada,' la última estrategia de Álvaro Uribe."

²³ See "La historia de Tanja Nijmeijer," *Semana*, October 26, 2012, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-historia-tanja-nijmeijer/266984-3/>; "La guerrillera holandesa que negociará por las FARC," *BBC Mundo*, October 16, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2012/10/121016_colombia_farc_perfil_tanja_holandesa_guerrillera_aw.

²⁴ For a further analysis of sociocultural topographies in institutional settings where insurgencies may extend their influence, see Carlo Tognato, "Violent Extremist Influence on University Campuses: Sociocultural Topography and Strategic Recommendations for Intervention," *American Intelligence Journal*, 37(2), 2020: 72-81.

²⁵ In order to determine how, see, for example, Tognato, "Remembering Bolivarian Venezuela."

²⁶ See Lawrence R. Sullivan, *Historical Dictionary of the People's Republic of China* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 401.

²⁷ See William H. McRaven, "Inaugural Communication and Leadership Lecture," Moody College of Communication, University of Texas, Austin, February 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax-9gCxZSIg>.

²⁸ James R. Clapper, *Facts and Fears: Hard Truths from a Life in Intelligence* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), 364.

²⁹ Jon Snow, "'Fundamentally dishonest' leadership is 'greatest threat to American democracy,' General Stanley McChrystal says," *Channel 4 News*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.channel4.com/news/fundamentally-dishonest-leadership-is-greatest-threat-to-american-democracy-general-stanley-mcchrystal-says>.

³⁰ William H. McRaven, "University of Texas at Austin 2014 Commencement Address," University of Texas, Austin, May 17, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxBQLFLei70>.

³¹ James Stavridis, "Democracy Isn't Perfect, But It Will Still Prevail," *TIME Magazine*, July 12, 2018, <https://time.com/5336615/democracy-will-prevail/>.

³² "Lt. Gen. Silveria addresses cadets about racism incident," U.S. Air Force Academy, September 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfjZ1otkS3o>.

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⁴¹ See Roche (2010:110-111) in Tognato, "The Civil Life of the University: Enacting Dissent and Resistance in a Colombian Campus," 151.

⁴² See Kymlicka (2002:289) in Tognato, "The Civil Life of the University: Enacting Dissent and Resistance in a Colombian Campus," 151.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Andy Robinson, "La polémica tesis de la revolución molecular disipada," *Ctxt*, no. 273, June 1, 2021, <https://ctxt.es/es/20210601/Politica/36164/alexis-lopez-tapia-revolucion-molecular-disipada-colombia-chile.htm>.

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