



# Student movements and politics in Latin America: a historical reconceptualization

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## Abstract

Student movements have played a significant political role in the history of Latin America. Since the beginning of the 20th century until now, students have transformed their universities, resisted totalitarian and authoritarian regimes and struggled against US military occupations. In the early 1900s these movements promoted university reforms, autonomy, shared governance, Latin Americanism, and university obligations towards social change. During the 1960s and 1970s, they fought for democratization and committed to attempts for profound radical transformations of society in many countries. In the 1980s student movements resisted structural adjustment policies and attempts to increase tuition. A decade later they continued to defend public universities against privatization and marketization brought about by the neoliberal model. In spite of these historical facts, mainstream literature in the 1980s and 1990s predicted the decline and even death of student movements in the region. A historical reconceptualization of student mobilization is presented in this article in order to fully grasp the impact and sustained presence of student movements in Latin America up to the present day. In this way it is possible to understand the existing links between movements over time and across countries, the continuity and shifts in student discourses, demands and strategies, and the emergence of new struggles for gender equality and to eradicate violence against women.

**Keywords** Student movements · Politics · Latin America · History · Universities

In 2018 two anniversaries of significant consequence for student movements in Latin America occurred: the 100th anniversary of the University Reform movement in Córdoba, Argentina, and the 50th anniversary of the 1968 student movements, which were particularly relevant in Mexico. For one century after Córdoba, student movements have continued to impact national and university realities in Latin American countries. The mainstream literature on student activism in the region, however, has been set on declaring the end of student movements in the region. This is a consequence of their analytical perspectives.

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We contest both the views about decline and disappearance. Alternatively, we attempt to apprehend the existence, relevance, richness, and variety of one hundred years of student activism; to look at its continuities and interruptions; and to show that student struggles have reemerged—with enormous creativity, vitality, and consequence—throughout the century. In order to do so, we first present an alternative conceptual approach for the study of student movements—drawing from political sociology and collective action theories—by looking at political conflicts, contexts, identities, traditions, demands, and repertoires, through the analytical lens of historical cycles of mobilization. Secondly, we take this conceptual frame as a means to identify and select some of the most salient student movements in Latin America, from 1918 to 2020, in order to distinguish such cycles that highlight the presence, societal impact, and depth of student activism over time.

In this article it will become obvious that we hold a favorable stance and sympathy towards student movements, as agents of educational, political, and societal transformation. It should be noted however that our intention is to provide an account of the historical dynamics, and not a positive or negative assessment, of such movements in Latin America.

### **“The student movement is dead...”**

In 1986 José Joaquín Brunner wrote “The student movement is dead, student movements are born” (1986, p. 279), a chapter about 20 years of change in university student movements in Latin America. The main thrust of his argument, 30 years ago, was two pronged. On the one hand, the continuity of student movements, with those that gave birth to the Córdoba Reform in 1918—and to reformist movements almost all over Latin America—as well as with radical student movements for societal change during the 1960’s, had been lost. On the other hand, Brunner reluctantly<sup>1</sup> predicted the decline, and even probable disappearance, of homogeneous, unified, national student movements and the increased possibility of “highly diversified, locally based, institutionally linked movements, oriented towards the defense and promotion of union and corporate interests” (p. 289, translation from Spanish by the author). In his comparative study on student activism, Philip Altbach (1989) argued along similar lines that “[i]n some Third World nations, activism has continued although overall the trend has been toward quietude” (p. 108).

Building on both Brunner and Altbach’s analyses, Daniel Levy (1991) argued that “[a]s other regions witness increased student activism in the closing years of the century, Latin America -long seen as the extreme in such activism- witnesses a notable decrease” (p. 145). In the conclusion of his article Levy presents a conjectural summary of his main arguments:

One way to summarize is to speculate very sketchily in a comparative mode. The decline of Latin American student activism surely has much to do with development. On the macropolitical side there is the diversity of participatory vehicles in civil society. On the higher education development side there is the enormous differentiation stemming from growth and other factors. From both sides we see not only diminished disposition toward activism but, crucially, diminished political weight for potential activists at the public universities (p. 153).

<sup>1</sup> Brunner (1986) explicitly states that it is risky to suggest hypothesis about the future behavior of student movements in Latin America, especially in a context of high degrees of uncertainty (p. 288).

Levy warns that such speculations should “remain very loose for now and very tentative,” only to state in the end that “[n]onetheless, I conclude by emphasizing that diminished student activism has been a sure fact in Latin American politics over the last two decades (p. 154).

The purpose of this article is not to put Brunner’s, Altbach’s, and Levy’s conclusions and predictions into question with the benefit of hindsight. It is true that since 1985 up to the second decade of the 21st century, there have been a large number of important and high-impact student movements in many Latin American countries. The issue here is not to refute or contradict these authors and their stated cautious forecasts but to forward some analytical alternatives for a better understanding of student movements themselves, their historical dynamics, and developments in the region.

Two key conceptual problems about university student movements in Latin America are addressed in the articles discussed above. On the one hand, the problematic search for a linear historical trend depicting the growth, decline or even the death of “the student movement.” On the other, and strongly connected to the first problem, is the historical continuity (or rupture) of contemporary student activism in relation to what some authors (i.e., Brunner 1986; Altbach 1989; Levy 1991; Donoso Romo, 2017) consider to be iconic struggles, such as the University Reform movements that took place Cordoba in 1918 and the rest of Latin America until the 1930s, as well as the massive student movements in many countries in the 1960s.

## Social movements and student cycles

In order to address these issues, and in favor of a better understanding of the dynamics of university student mobilizations in Latin America, it is necessary to approach the subject both from historical and sociological perspectives and to look at student mobilizations as particular forms of social movements.

It is not the purpose of this article to provide a full review of the literature from this field. Studies of student movements have been scarce and attempts to theorize about the subject are minimal (Della Porta, Cini, and Guzman-Concha 2020). While this article may contribute to enrich a political sociology of student mobilization, its main intention is to appropriate some useful analytical categories from selected authors that provide historical and sociological approaches to collective action, in order to reconceptualize the history of student movement politics in Latin America.

Tilly and Wood (2009) have shown that social movements appeared in the late 18th century,

as a distinctive form of contentious politics -contentious in the sense that social movements involve collective making of claims that, if realized, would conflict with someone else’s interests, politics in the sense that governments of one sort or another figure somehow in the claim making, whether as claimants, objects of claims, allies of the objects, or monitors of the contention (p. 3).

According to this perspective, in order to grasp the particularities of this distinctive form of political conflict, a historical understanding is required.

History helps because it explains why social movements incorporated some crucial features [...] that separated the social movement from other sorts of politics[;] because it identifies significant changes in the operation of social movements [...]

and thus alerts us to the possibility of new changes in the future[; and] finally, because it calls attention to the shifting political conditions that made social movements possible. If social movements begin to disappear, their disappearance will tell us that a major vehicle for ordinary people's participation in public politics is waning (p. 3).

Alain Touraine (1995) argued that social movements in conflict with dominant forces shape the historical nature of society at each point in time. "The social movement is the organized collective action of an actor struggling against its adversary for the social direction of a concrete actor's historicity" (Touraine 1985). Wiewiorka (2014) explains that for Touraine,

the social movement is this dimension of the struggle in which a dominated, protesting actor is capable: of defining his or her identity, that is, on whose behalf he or she is mobilizing; of recognizing the social nature of the adversary, the opponent, who is both dominant and in power; and of claiming to manage or monitor the major orientations of collective life. This is what Touraine calls the historicity of society.

According to him this is particularly true for social actors whose identity is based on biology (youth and gender struggles), ethnicity, and local or regional cultures (Martuccelli 2019); he labeled them new social movements. Among these he particularly distinguished student movements (Touraine 1971, 1985, 1995).

For Touraine (1985) and Melucci (1996) the identity of social movements is not much grounded on preexisting ideologies but rather more on shared cultural views, interpretations of reality, values and norms, and selection of traditions (Williams, 1977).

A social movement establishes a connection between past and future, it holds the defense of a social groups and at the same time demands social transformation. Symbols and cultural models are sought amongst a set of traditions that stem from the past. In fact, a new social movement always considers its action as a sort of renaissance, a regeneration of the present through a mythical reinvention of the past. The ideological construct that emerges from this renaissance experience is labeled by Melucci a regressive utopia (Chihu Amparán and López Gallegos 2007, p. 147).

## **A historical perspective on student mobilization**

These categories are significant for the study of student mobilizations. These movements have been expressions of political contestation in which historical contexts and "shifting political conditions" have shaped their "crucial features," operation forms and transformations over time (Tilly and Wood 2009), and their historicity and identities (Touraine 1985; Melucci 1996).

What makes student mobilization particular is the nature of political confrontation, often about education and educational institutions, as well as broader societal agendas (these have frequently included struggles over democracy and other political processes; economics and wealth distribution; human rights, gender equality and racism; or environmental issues); identities based on students' position in society in general, the education process and its institutions; and characteristic forms of political action or repertoires, among other factors.

In a process of historical renaissance and reinvention of the past, student movements continually remerge through public campaigns, "sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities" (Tilly and Wood 2009, p. 3). Students have resorted

to accumulated experiences or selected traditions to make public representations of their worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies (See Tilly and Wood 2009, pp. 3–4). Overall, these representations have established the magnitudes and changes of legitimacy and political strength of student movements through their own particular development in time, as well as in different historical periods and countries. The movements' historicity, identities, demands, adversaries, organizations, and repertoires establish the connections between student collective actions in time and space, their continuities, and ruptures.

On the basis of these theoretical foundations, as well as historical and empirical evidence, we suggest that the identification of cycles of movements provides a better understanding of the historical development of student activism. The notion of historical cycles in this article does not correspond to the traditional social movement literature, where collective action cycles are essentially defined by political opportunity (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). As it pertains to student movements uniquely, it also does not encompass all of the characteristics of broader societal protest cycles, defined by ample social de-structuration and global social action in the face of systemic crises and imbalances (Fernández Reyes 1995).

In the quest for a better historical understanding of student movements, we identify cycles defined through the commonality of student agendas or demands; the nature of public expressions, communication, and adversaries; the forms of political action and organization; and selection of traditions, accumulated experiences, creation of identities, and public representations of worthiness and legitimacy.

## One hundred years

Year 2018 was a year of important anniversaries for students in Latin America: the centennial of the fight for university reform in Cordoba, Argentina, as well as the 50th anniversary of the 1968 protests in Mexico. It is therefore an appropriate moment for reflection and analysis of the student movements that had such a significant impact on the continent—particularly in Mexico—beginning with the publication of the *Manifiesto Liminar* (Founding Manifesto) on June 21, 1918.<sup>2</sup>

## Case selection

An exhaustive stocktaking of a century of student movements in Latin America is practically impossible. Even a complete inventory of those that occurred or had significant impact in Mexico alone would be extremely difficult to present here. It goes without saying that this review of a century of student movements is by no means comprehensive. It is heavily inclined towards movements that attained more continental or worldwide notoriety, and in those that occurred in Mexico, in particular.

The selection of cases is focused on the direct results different protests had on the political realities of Latin American countries, as well as on the social sciences literature

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<sup>2</sup> Manifiesto Liminar (Barros et al. 1918).

about movements in general, and student protests in particular.<sup>3</sup> Each case was selected in order to demonstrate the most common attributes found in the student movements described, as well as their unique traits: the richness of both unity and diversity in a century of protests.

For these reasons, our focus is on cycles of mobilization and the particular nature of student protests that best characterize the region. This article is organized around four cycles of student movements and protests: the fight for university autonomy in Latin America, the student protests of the 1960s, a series of pro-democracy and anti-structural adjustment policies movements, and the protests that have taken place in the current century. Within the context of each of these four cycles, we will analyze the student movements that occurred simultaneously in different countries or that bore strong resemblances to one another.

These cycles are characterized by the historical contexts in which they were produced, the nature of their demands, the type of political discourse utilized, the identities forged, the manner of organizing, and the actions taken, as well as the means in which the participants communicated their causes.

### **Autonomy and university reform**

The student uprising in Cordoba in 1918 coalesced and at the same time projected the central ideas of previous university reform debates (Rodríguez-Gómez 2019). One of its precursors was the International Students Congress held in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1908, attended by students from nearly the entire continent. Topics ranging from the role of state universities, to student representation in university government, to free tuition and obligatory attendance, the exam systems, and the recognition of degrees and levels, among many others, were discussed during this gathering (Markarian, Jung, and Wschebor 2008).

A decade later, students in Cordoba formally adopted many of those demands as their own, assuming the transformational Latin American spirit originally laid out in the *Manifiesto Liminar*. The exercise of shared university government, academic freedom, entrance exams, autonomy, and social responsibility became the central demands of the student movements throughout the region and a hallmark of the reforms they achieved through their protests.

The reformist movement quickly spread throughout Latin America and, by the mid-1930s, its calls for university autonomy, shared government, and social responsibility permeated into many different countries. There is some debate amongst historians about how central the Córdoba movement was in other nations. Rodríguez Gómez (2019) argues that “the Córdoba principles had an effective irradiation and influence” but that national movements developed within their own contexts that shaped their orientation, agenda, and outcomes (p. 48).

Overall, the Cordoba student movement symbolized the transition from colonial to modern higher education institutions (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi 2018).<sup>4</sup> A Latin American university tradition was born, loosely predicated on the declarations of that pivotal document authored by Deodoro Roca (Roig 1979). Mexico was no exception. The reformist movement sowed the earliest seeds of autonomy and student participation in

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive set of studies about different student movements in Latin America, from the 17th century to the 2010s, has been compiled in five volumes by Renate Marsiske (1999b, 1999a, 2006, 2015, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> According to Brunner (1990, pp. 17, footnote 61), after the colonial period there were only 25 universities and a few other higher learning institutions.

university government by way of the first International Students Congress in 1921 (Pacheco Calvo 1931), the fruits of which were reaped in 1929 when the Mexican government, in response to a large student strike, finally granted autonomy to the National University and formalized equal representation for students and professors in the university's governing bodies, in the Organic Law passed that year (Marsiske 1985).

The university reform cycle was manifest in two waves. A historical review of student activity shows that the first wave symbolically began in 1918 in Córdoba, with the largest concentration of University Reform movements occurring between 1928 and 1930 (Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay). In some countries these struggles were part of the confrontations of liberals against conservatives and the Catholic Church. In others, they ignited or were part of people's resistance against US army direct occupation, military governments, and dictatorships (Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Uruguay, among others).

A scattered second wave took place from 1943 to 1963, with greatest intensity in the second half of the 1950s (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela), within a context of military dictatorships and US interventions. This second wave of university reform movements was also politicized, but its aims were directed against totalitarianism, authoritarian rule, and for democratization. Since the beginning of the 1960s student Latin Americanism became open anti-US imperialism.

In many cases (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Mexico, among others), the pro-autonomy movements were tied to political or labor opposition. In fact, the student protests advocating university democracy were a prelude to far more profound political changes that included the formation of new opposition parties and coalitions, the promotion of agendas that included broader openness and democracy, and above all, the generation of a far greater social and political awareness on the part of students and young professionals. In this sense the crusade for university autonomy and self-government had a dual outcome: the protection of the university from government interference and the creation of spaces enabling the participation of the younger generations in politics (Portantiero 1978). The latter would manifest itself decisively during the next cycle of student movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Ordorika, Rodríguez-Gómez, and Gil Antón 2019).

### **From reform to revolution: student protests of the 1960s**

The wave of reformist movements gave rise to the higher education system as a product of Latin American developmentalism (Guevara Niebla 1980) and the model of the “state-building” university (Ordorika 2012). Contemporary national systems of higher education in Latin America were established between 1950 and 1975 (Brunner 1990). These were “highly differentiated systems with a diversity of establishments –university and non-university– offering massive services of higher learning and, through some of their units, also performing knowledge production functions through research and scholarly studies” (p. 20). Higher education enrollment in the region grew slowly from 1950 to 1960 and much faster until 1970 reaching 6.9%.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Mexico, Chile, and other countries were swept by new waves of student protests in defense of “popular education” during the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank. Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZJ>.

During the 1960s and 1970s continental student mobilizations focused on university reforms and radical social transformations. Student activism was strongly influenced by the Cuban Revolution and, some years later, the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia. Protests in universities in Latin America were enriched by those carried out in the USA, France, and other countries during the same period (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1969). The struggle for civil rights and freedom of speech, in combination with the opposition to the Vietnam war, spread across US campuses (Gitlin 1987). The widespread condemnation of the military conflict in Algeria, against authoritarianism, and support for labor and student unions, became hallmarks of “the imagination to power” proclaimed by students in France during the May ’68 protests (Bensaïd and Weber 1968). Such widespread public protests by student organizations were met with harsh responses by the conservative establishments in Germany (Bergmann, Dutschke, Lefevre, and Rabehl 1976), France (Bensaïd and Weber 1968), and the USA (Gitlin 1987).

This was the case of the movements during the 1960s (Meyer 2008)<sup>6</sup>—and more particularly in 1968—in Argentina (Bonavena and Califa 2018), Brazil (Martins Filho 1987; Mancebo 1999), Chile (Agüero 1987), Colombia (Acevedo Tarazona, 2009; Archila 2012), and Uruguay (Markarian 2012), among others. Very soon students in Uruguay and Chile (in 1973), as well as Argentina (in 1976), would also face military dictatorships and were forced to adopt different types of resistance struggles.

However, none of them reached the extreme level of mass violence that occurred in Mexico between the months of July and October of 1968. There, the student movement—led by the *Consejo Nacional de Huelga* (National Strike Council, CNH)—demanded democratic liberties, shaking the Mexican government, controlled by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), to its core. The calls for an end to the repression and in support of freedom of speech and the right to protest, combined with the demands for public dialogue, had the political regime’s back against the wall on the eve of the XIX Olympic Games in Mexico City (Guevara Niebla 1978). Just as it had in prior years, the government resorted to the use of public force to quell the protests (González de Alba 1971). But the massacre of students carried out on October 2, 1968—the perpetrators’ identities and the true number of victims of which have never been publicly confirmed—was seen worldwide as a crime of unbelievable proportions, leaving its mark on generations of Mexicans, and causing the erosion, and decades later, downfall of presidential authoritarianism in Mexico (Martínez Della Rocca, 2019; Zermeño 2019).

While most of the participants in mass demonstrations, meetings, and strikes were not necessarily revolutionary, student activists were strongly influenced by the revolutionary left, the movements’ shared icons, like Che Guevara, and symbols from national liberation

<sup>6</sup> Jean Meyer (2008, p. 181 translation by the author) summarized the following movements:

- 1963: Students play a major role on radical political change in Ecuador.
- 1964: They participate (provoke?) de fall of Ecuador and Bolivia regimes.
- 1966: Student struggles in Mexico (Mexico City, Morelia, Culiacán, Hermosillo), Ecuador, Chile (Concepción), Colombia (Medellín) and specially in Brazil (from March to September the protest movement against the dictatorship wins all of the universities and culminates in Rio de Janeiro on September 21 with violent fights between students and the police) and in Venezuela (June 1966, mutinies in Caracas following Ojeda’s (a veteran of revolutionary struggles) alleged suicide inside police quarters. Government occupies the University of Caracas on December 14<sup>th</sup>).
- 1967: Venezuela, March 2, temporary closure of the University. Brazil, May: large demonstrations in Recife against a cultural agreement signed with the USA and a US modeled university reform.
- 1968: Mutinies in Río [de Janeiro] on May, June and July. Very violent skirmishes in Lima starting on July 20. Beginning of the Mexican crisis.



struggles in Cuba, Algeria, and Vietnam. In Latin America, university struggles for university reform rejected higher education models exported by the USA through US Aid programs<sup>7</sup> and furthered agendas that emphasized the role of universities as participants in radical social and political transformations. In many cases student movements were directly aimed at democratization of totalitarian and authoritarian political regimes (Brazil and Mexico) and struggles for social justice, equality, alliances with the working classes, and anti-imperialism.

In almost all of Latin America this cycle was abruptly brought to an end through repression and violence. This is the case of the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 and the student killings of June 10, 1971, in Mexico (Ordorika 2006), heavy repression and the killing of a student in Brazil in 1968 (Donoso Romo 2018), and generalized violence of military dictatorships in Uruguay, Chile and Argentina (Maira 1990).

### Pro-democracy and anti-structural adjustment

The student movements of the 1970s heralded a prolonged period of student activism throughout nearly all of Latin America. During the 1980s, the movements transformed into a new cycle of action that converged in time, such as protests against military regimes in Argentina (Vera 2013; Yann 2017; Pogliaghi 2019) and Chile (García, Isla, and Toro 2006) and other dictatorial regimes (Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Uruguay, among others).

By 1985 higher education enrollments in Latin America had grown to 17.6%.<sup>8</sup> At the mid-decade, multiple mass protests against restrictive university reforms once again coincided at the world level: in 1986–1987 in France, with the massive movements protesting the Devaquet Law<sup>9</sup> and its enrollment restrictions, and in Spain, in protest against a similar highly constraining university reform. Latin America was not an exception for structural reform attempts and student responses (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi 2018).

In Mexico, structural reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund severely reduced spending on education and generated a crisis in the nation's public universities. It was within this context that the rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Jorge Carpizo, attempted to increase fees, restrict application and attendance criteria, and introduce standardized testing, among other changes. Finally, between October of 1986 and February of 1987, a massive student movement organized by the *Consejo Estudiantil Universitario* (University Student Council, CEU) successfully reversed Carpizo's reforms; it also achieved consensus to hold a democratic congress in order to discuss more profound changes in the university (Castañeda 1987). Said congress was finally held in 1990, but by that time the original movement had tapered off and the power of the students to democratize the university had diminished considerably (Ordorika 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For a description of such US attempts to “export progress” through higher education development models, see Levy (2005) and a critique by Ordorika (2007).

<sup>8</sup> World Bank. Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZJ>.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Devaquet was minister of universities under the government of the conservative prime minister Jacques Chirac. The proposed law would have established stricter selection processes for acceptance into universities, an increase in enrollment fees, and the implementation of a hierarchy structure similar to that common prior to 1968. After 2 weeks of protests the government withdrew its proposed legislation before it could be voted on by the National Assembly (Mergier, 1986).

This student movement cycle connected strongly with movements from the previous ones. On the one hand, some were strongly committed to restore democracy in countries that had been governed by military juntas. Students in these countries also removed the vestiges of military control over the universities (Pogliaghi 2019). Shared governance, autonomy, and academic freedom, rooted in the Córdoba tradition, were reestablished. The impact of structural adjustment and later neoliberal policies would be challenged again soon.

On the other hand, the CEU movement in Mexico coincided with movements in France and Spain in their rejection of higher education policies stemming from the adoption of IMF mandates. The Mexican struggle for free higher education soon broadened its scope to include demands for participation in decision making and the appointment of university authorities. In this way it also linked with the Latin American tradition of university autonomy and shared governance. Its organizational forms, demands for public debate with its adversaries, political strategies, and much of its discourse identified with those prevalent in 1968. The confrontation against privatization policies through tuition increases, in what later would be labeled the neoliberal model, set the path that connected the first movement of the new century with this cycle of student mobilization.

### Protests in the Twenty-first Century

Profound transformations within higher education were taking place at the worldwide level. Academic research about these processes portrayed them as “academic capitalism” (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) that set a path towards a “university in ruins” (Readings, 1996). A new wave of higher education reforms took place in Latin America “under the influence of discourses and practices of globalization [...] and commercialization of knowledge and research capacities” (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi 2018, p. 300).<sup>10</sup> In lay terms these reforms were depicted as products of globalization and neoliberalism (Pusser and Marginson 2012).

The most salient student protest movement that closed out the 20th century once again took place at the UNAM. A new attempt by the university administration to increase fees in 1999 resulted in the most intense and prolonged protest in the university’s history. Led by the *Consejo General de Huelga* (General Strike Council, CGH), the student opposition to tuition increases rapidly escalated into an offensive that seized upon university enrollment and attendance restrictions as its banner issue, demanding greater participation by students, professors, and non-academic personnel in university decisions (Meneses 2019). A general strike was called that lasted 10 months, from April 20, 1999, to February 6, 2000, finally ending when the Federal Police entered the university’s main campus and ousted the strikers. Months prior to that event, the protesters had already achieved all of their demands, the sole exception being the holding of another university congress (Moreno and Amador 1999; Rosas 2001). Nonetheless, the movement had the distinction of being both the last of the 20th century and the first of the 21st century. It may in fact be said that its conformation and political discourse, as well as its organizational methods, effectively closed out democratic traditions that had been transmitted through generations from the

<sup>10</sup> From 1985 to 1995 higher education enrollments in Latin America remained almost stagnant. World Bank. Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZJ>.

student movement cycle that had begun in the 1960s, while at the same time ushering in a new era of protests in terms of organization, discourse, and practices (Ordorika 2006).

It can be argued that the CGH movement closed the cycle of student movements from the 20th century given the commonality of its demands, the adoption of similar forms of organization, and the reference to 1968 as the iconic Mexican student movement. Other characteristics, like the confrontation against faculty, the radicalization of discourse against sectors of the left, the adoption of vanguards strategies that alienated its own constituencies, and more significantly the rejection of any publicly recognized leadership, seems to set it apart from the previous cycle and announce some of the features of the coming movements.

Nearly 10 years would pass before the large student movements in Chile and Colombia would mobilize for free higher education, an end to neoliberal policies, and the banning of for-profit universities.<sup>11</sup> In 2011, the historically powerful *Confederación de Estudiantes Chilenos* (Confederation of Chilean Students, CONFECH) succeeded in generating wide consensus around the proposal to make higher education free for all students and for the closure of all for-profit institutions (Urta Rossi 2012). The movement enjoyed strong popular support that completely modified the balance of political power in the country, thus paving the way for an electoral triumph by the left, in the presidential elections of 2013 (Durán Migliardi 2012). Several student leaders were elected to congress and enacted reforms that enabled a large number of students in economically precarious circumstances to attend universities, free of charge (Lloyd 2019).

Also, in 2011, the Colombian government, under the president Jose Manuel Santos, prepared reforms to the 1992 law—Ley 30—that governs higher education there. Before sending the legislation to Congress, a number of meetings were held with university leaders and members of academia, all of whom questioned the government proposal due to the restrictions it aimed to impose on university self-government and the criteria it established to optimize human resources and infrastructure in public institutions, thereby allowing public investment in private universities as well as a system of student vouchers. Both university authorities and the academic community and, eventually, the students themselves, foresaw in the reform a clear intent by the government to privatize the Colombian higher education system (López Mejía 2019).

In March 2011 the National Forum of Students “Carlos Andres Valencia” was held in Colombia; there the *Mesa Amplia Nacional Estudiantil* (Broad National Student Table, MANE) was established with the express purpose of leading the fight against the proposed reform. It was decided that mass protests would be held during the month of April to give voice to the demands of both the student movement and academics. In spite of this opposition the government moved forward with its proposal to Congress in October. In doing so it only added fuel to the conflict, provoking public debates and protests, phased national lockdowns, and, eventually, a prolonged strike of all public universities that same month. The pressure generated on the government reached such heights that Santos withdrew his initiative from consideration, thus enabling Colombia’s universities to resume classes after nearly a month-long suspension of activities (Cruz Rodríguez 2012).

The same year another movement of students and young people developed but with different demands, although both did agree on the strategy of “occupying” public spaces to protest in a pacific, non-violent manner. What the protestors did share was the view that

<sup>11</sup> By 2010 higher education enrollments in Latin America had grown to 41%. World Bank. Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZJ>.

the neoliberal policies of developed nations, when implemented in less developed nations, had economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally destructive ramifications. Occupy Wall Street, a large-scale protest held in New York during the months of October and November of 2011 that was widely covered by the press all over the world, was the catalyst for similar causes: the deterioration in public health and welfare programs, escalating unemployment, and, in some cases, the student loan crisis (Earle 2012; Pusser 2016; González-Lesma and Vera 2019).

Movements such as 15-M in Spain, also known as *los indignados*,<sup>12</sup> were similar in their demands, organization, and representation of sectors of society harmed by globalization and in protest of public policies significantly reducing social welfare spending. In this case, the primary concern of the youth contingent was the elevated unemployment rate experienced by university graduates and the enormous difficulties they faced in finding work in their profession. Occupying protests multiplied in different cities and countries over five continents; nonetheless, they rarely achieved satisfaction in their demands (Taibo, Vivas, and Antentas 2011).

A new modality of student protest materialized in Mexico, denominated #YoSoy132 (#IAm132),<sup>13</sup> which quickly evolved into a protest against political and governmental authoritarianism. The innovation of #YoSoy132 originated from its use of information technology to successfully communicate—via digital social networks—its demands and proposals, as well as its calls to action. Although it began as a form of protest against the media campaigns utilized during the 2012 Mexican presidential elections, the movement quickly transformed into a protest calling for the democratization of the media, which was a position contrary to that favored by the candidate of the ruling party in power. The expansion of the movement and its organizational dynamic created a new space in which broader demands could be made and heard. For example, in the early assemblies organized by the newly created *Coordinadora Interuniversitaria* (Interuniversity Coordination), participants demanded changes that ran the gamut from national public policies to modification of the country's economic development model, to the diffusion of art and culture. Delimiting the proposals developed during the early assemblies was, needless to say, no small task, and they ended up being overtaken by the immediacy of the election process. As a result, #YoSoy132 became focused on two issues: diffusion of the importance of voter participation and oversight and defense of the right to vote. Despite the fact that the movement's leaders sought ways to ensure its continuity and the possible articulation of other struggles and causes, once the elections had taken place, student participation began to fade.

On September 26, 2014, students from the *normal rural de Ayotzinapa* (rural teacher college of Ayotzinapa) were violently attacked by local, state, and federal police, as well as the army, in connection to organized crime groups, in the southern state of Guerrero, Mexico. Six people were killed (one of them a student), and 43 students were kidnapped and have remained missing to this day. These crimes, committed against some of the poorest students in Mexican higher education, acquired international notoriety and were

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<sup>12</sup> The outraged.

<sup>13</sup> Following a disastrous appearance by the PRI's presidential candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, in the Universidad Iberoamericana in which he fled the auditorium after being met by students protesting him with signs and boos and whistles, various politicians claimed to the media that the protesters were not students but rather outsiders brought in by the opposition candidate to cause problems. Indignant, the students launched a call to action on Facebook for their fellow students to upload videos of themselves with their university I.D. as part of a campaign called "131 students of the Ibero respond." A majority of the country's public universities joined the movement, hence the name #IAm132.

condemned by students, politicians, and celebrities in many countries. The Mexican government conducted a botched-up investigation (Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts GIEI, 2015, 2016). Almost 6 years later there has been no credible account of what happened to the students and who were responsible for these actions. The attack against the *normalistas de Ayotzinapa* has consequently been labeled by many as a State crime (Ordorika and Gilly 2014).

### Emergence of a new cycle?

At the time of the writing of this final part of the text, new movements have occurred in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Large demonstrations against structural violence within and outside of campuses in 2018, as well as struggles against gender violence within the National University in 2019 and 2020, have set a completely new political agenda for students in Mexico.

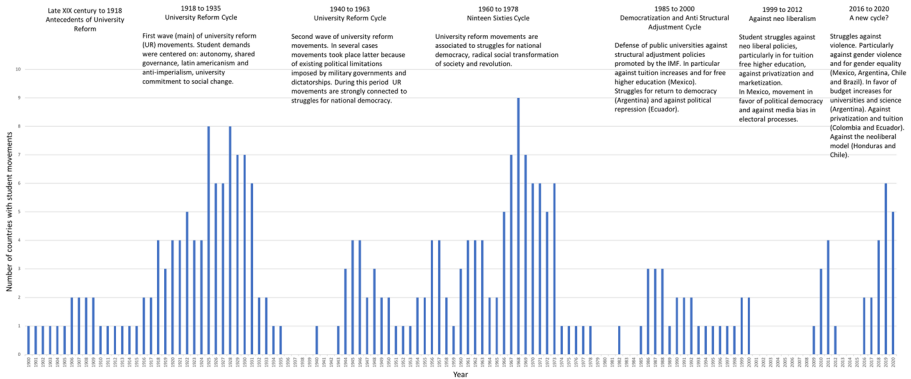
At the same time student activists have been at the core of broader social movements. Since 2018, students have risen up for democracy and against authoritarianism in Nicaragua, to which the former leftist Sandinista government has responded with criminal repression causing more than 350 deaths, and leaving at least 500 protestors in jail and tens of thousands without jobs. Also, in 2019 and 2020, students have been part of new movements against inequality and the neoliberal project in Chile and Honduras and have brought these countries into deep political crises.

It is still too soon to establish if this is a new cycle of student mobilization and what are its main characteristics. In the case of UNAM in Mexico, demands about gender issues are in tune with female student mobilizations in Argentina and Chile, as well as with women's activism at a broader international level (Pogliaghi, Meneses Reyes, and López Guerrero 2020). The movements are female-based and even exclusive to women's participation (separatism); their organizations (based on small collectives and not on student assemblies), discourse, and forms of struggle are more legitimately radical and confrontational. While gender is at the core of the struggle many participants in this movement share an anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse with the movements in other countries.

At the same time movements in Honduras and Chile also involve female-based organizations. These mobilizations are also composed of many small independent collectives and social organizations, in which student organizations have played a significant role. The movements share a strong critique of social, political, and economic inequalities produced by the neoliberal model, and collective demands are aimed at the eradication of neoliberalism, its foundations, and its policies.

## Historical cycles

Student Movements Historical Cycles in Latin America 1900–2020



## Student movements: alive and well

A historical account of student movement cycles in Latin America moves away from linear predictions of decline or death of student movements. This approach also enriches the study of continuities and interruptions in the selection of student traditions, identities, agenda repertoires, and actions. Altbach (2016) entertained the idea of student movement cycles but did not abandon the notion of an international trend towards quiescence since de 1960s. Historical evidence on movement cycles seems contrary to this view, at least in the case of Latin America. The historical evidence and analytical approach presented in this article allows us to convincingly state that student movements have been very much alive, and a continuing presence in university and broader political life, in almost every country in the region.

The table above shows that student movements in Latin America have been a constant social phenomenon from 1900 to 2020. The concentration of student mobilizations, in time periods and around common agendas, provides evidence for the identification of shared traditions and identities, as well as similar political strategies across the region and over time. While each of the cycles has highlighted the centrality of a set of demands (i.e., autonomy, social change, national struggles for democracy and human rights, free tuition and increased public funding, or gender equality), student activism has drawn from strong traditions that have brought together historical references and experiences from preceding movements.

Drawing from previous experiences and traditions, students' movements in various countries have attempted to publicly express their legitimacy, their organization and mobilization capacities, public support for their causes, and political strength in different times and diverse historical settings. Movements have been able to successfully incorporate changes in means of communication and the media. Their public campaigns however still rely heavily on mass street demonstrations, occupation of buildings, and strikes. Like previous or other regional movements they have employed different forms of political action, or repertoires such as the "creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to

and in public media, and pamphleteering” (Tilly and Wood 2009, p. 3) or more recently concerts, kiss-a-thons (López Mejía 2019), and other innovative forms.

Higher education policies, systems, and institutions in Latin America have changed significantly since the early 20th century to our days. While universities and colleges are still in many ways elitist, enrollments, and the number of higher education institutions (HEI's) have grown and diversified enormously (Brunner 1990). In most countries, however, student movements have struggled for access, against tuition increases, for autonomy, university reforms, and democratic governance.

For more than one century, students have faced rectors and institutional authorities. Local and national governments have also been their adversaries. One of the most striking facts in dealing with the history of student movements in Latin America is the recurrence of totalitarian and authoritarian political regimes, as well as direct US military intrusions and occupations, in almost all of the countries in the region, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the nineteen nineties. Students in different countries have constantly confronted extremely dangerous conditions, have been completely suppressed for years in some cases (i.e., Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Paraguay, among others), or have been at the core of struggles against repressive regimes and for democracy (i.e., Brazil, Argentina, and Chile). Student movements' historical cycles are strongly influenced by these political phenomena.

Through this historical account it is possible to see that each student movement has its own historicity. It also shows that the creation of collective identities, the construction of organizations, the selection of demands, and the definition of strategies and actions are based on historical contexts and shifting political conditions. At the same time these processes expose continuities and breaks between movements in different times and locations.

These historical links, characteristic features that endure and those that are interrupted or transformed, as well as similarities and differences in the selection of traditions that give birth to each particular movement, allow us to move beyond a limited and unfruitful search for a historical linearity of expansion or decline. It is also through a rich understanding of the processes in which identities are built and movements recreate traditions, that we can bridge skewed differentiations between historical and iconic student movements and the diversified, fractioned, localistic, and interest-centered student mobilizations that supposedly were to follow.

## Final reflections

In the study of historical cycles and student movements, there are themes that appear again and again, such as: the constant disqualification of the legitimacy of the protests by national governments and authorities; the characterization of students as agitators or as not actually being part of their university communities, or, even worse, as representing nefarious interests or as seeking to satisfy questionable political aspirations; or, in the case of the movements themselves, the high level of politicization of student movements, the ongoing debates regarding the extent of social alliances, the incorporation of new demands, and the inclusion of other sectors in the cause. Even if it was not possible to make it explicit in this article, in each movement we can identify differences in the social compositions of the student bodies; their wide range of philosophical, political, and ideological beliefs; the often-dissimilar protest strategies; and—perhaps most tellingly—the resources available to make

known their ideas and demands to the public at large. These remain as critical questions for necessary future research on student mobilizations.

That being said, the common threads presented in this work are of the utmost relevance. For more than a century we have witnessed the disposition and capacity of students to mobilize, the intelligence and creativity of this prepared and informed youth, their intensity and commitment to achieving their objectives, and, above all, the fundamental role of student protests as instruments of change, not only in their institutions but also within society as a whole.

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