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Student Violence and Attitudes in Latin America

Note: This is an INR working draft on student violence and attitudes in Latin America. It was completed in mid-November 1968 and contains only information available as of that date.

The Nature of Recent Disorders

Student disorders of unusual ferocity have plagued a number of Latin American nations since April 1968. Extensive property damage, hundreds of arrests and injuries and more than one hundred deaths have resulted from police/student clashes in Mexico, Brazil, and Uruguay. Similar but less violent disturbances occurred in Bolivia, Chile, and in several other countries. Political tensions heightened in all five countries and--while tempers have cooled since October 1968--the present atmosphere remains unsettled and the possibility of renewed violence cannot be discounted.

Mexico. Of all the countries in Latin America Mexico has experienced the highest degree of student unrest. Massive demonstrations by Mexico's university students have troubled the Diaz Ordaz government since late July 1968 when communist youths celebrating the July 26 anniversary of Fidel Castro's revolution managed to take over a peaceful student demonstration which had been authorized by the government. When police tried to disperse the crowd, rioting students burned buses and barricaded a four-block area of downtown Mexico City. About 4,000 students again demonstrated on July 29, at which time federal troops were used to restore order after police lost control of the student mob. Press accounts of the deployment of tanks and armored cars against student barricades served to picture Mexico as a battleground, not unlike Paris during the disturbances in the Spring of 1968. Several Mexican students were killed and more than 200 were injured during these battles with security forces.

Demonstrations, accompanied by occasional violence, continued throughout August and September, with the number of participants approaching 100,000 at times. Student grievances at first focused upon local issues of police brutality, release of arrested students, and a recognition of university autonomy which was violated on July 29. Cries were raised

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for the dismissal of the chief of police and the mayor of Mexico City and some radical students attempted to enlist labor support for their cause by calling for a 40-hour week and better housing. By August 15, however, the first student animus against the President was evident, a criticism which reached unprecedented heights of scathing vulgarity (for Mexico) on August 27 when student poster attacks depicted Diaz Ordaz as dishonoring the Mexican Constitution and openly called for an end to his government.

The student/government conflict grew in intensity and ferocity during September and October. With the October 12 opening of the Olympic Games fast approaching, the government seemed to abandon all hope of resolving the matter through negotiations and opted instead to use whatever force was necessary to put down what was then assuming the proportions of a student revolt. Such tactics had always worked in the past and the government probably assumed that they would be equally as effective again. Moreover, the timing of the student protests was linked to the Olympics and the continued agitation was extremely embarrassing to the Mexican Government which was most anxious to impress the world as a deserving host to the prestigious international games. The occupation of the national autonomous university by government forces on September 18 sparked new violence which continued intermittently until the bloody clashes on October 2 in which perhaps as many as 100 persons lost their lives. The October incident did considerable damage to Mexico's reputation as the most stable and progressive country in Latin America and brought into question the suitability of Mexico City as the Olympic site. Student agreement not to disrupt the games helped to cool tempers and an uneasy calm returned to student/government relations.

Seeking to justify its actions and its inability to resolve the situation, the Mexican Government raised the specter of foreign elements and domestic communists who it alleged were responsible for student activism. The administration seemed not to realize that extremists, even with the aid of foreign elements, could hardly have sustained the unrest over such a long period if student dissatisfaction were not deep and widespread.

The positions of both sides are intransigent and it seems unlikely that a fundamental solution to the problem can be brought about without changing the widespread conviction that the PRI is entrenched, stagnant and primarily self-serving. Despite the enormous graft and dishonesty which have become PRI hallmarks, students will have to be convinced that the party is still, or will again become, a vital force for political and social change as well as economic growth.

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Brazil. Anti-government student disorders have plagued the administration of President Costa e Silva on and off since early June 1968. Open clashes between police and student demonstrators have resulted in about six deaths, numerous injuries and more than a thousand arrests. Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Brasilia have been the scenes of the greatest violence, but large and sometimes violent demonstrations have been staged in major cities throughout the country.

Brazil's outmoded education system is the immediate cause of the student disturbances, although there is clearly an anti-regime bias running through the student protests. The careful manipulation of the protests by student leaders and the government's ill-advised reactions to them have succeeded on more than one occasion in turning public opinion against the authorities and in creating a political crisis which transcends student concerns. During the protests of late June and early July, support for the students came from Church leaders, intellectuals, opposition politicians, and some (but not most) labor leaders. These non-student elements have backed legitimate student demands for educational reforms and their protests against police brutality, but they have drawn the line at vitriolic anti-government attacks.

The arrest, on October 12, of over 700 participants of the illegal congress of the National Union of Students (UNE) provoked a spontaneous reaction of anti-government protests in about ten Brazilian cities. Police handling of the demonstrations has been harsh and the resulting violence has caused renewed bloodshed and property damage. A "rightist" counter-reaction to continued student demonstrations provoked pitched battles between opposing student factions in Sao Paulo, and attacks upon university buildings in Rio de Janeiro and Recife. The emergence of extreme right-wing groups injects a dangerous element into the Brazilian student situation and will probably make it more difficult for police to either prevent or control violence in the future.

The deaths of at least three persons during police clashes with students in Rio de Janeiro during the period October 22-24 came amidst an unsettled political atmosphere in which growing pressures--both internal and external--were being exerted upon the Costa e Silva government. As was the case with Mexico, the strategy of the Brazilian Government in dealing with student disorders has been the use of even greater force than the students are able to put forth. Police violence in putting down student disturbances led to new bloodshed which in turn caused further demonstrations. Occurring against a background of anti-government pressures, the student disorders threatened to become the final straw for the Brazilian military, and top leaders of the armed forces

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warned the President of a possible breakdown in military discipline if energetic measures were not taken to repress agitation and carping criticism from radical opposition elements, including students.

Responding to multiple pressures, the Brazilian Government has used massive police presence in the streets of the country's major cities to prevent the staging of new protests. So far, the strategy has worked but the basic positions of both government and students remains unchanged and it is probably only a matter of time before violence is renewed. The upcoming summer vacations (January, February) may offer however, a much-needed breathing spell.

Uruguay. In the midst of continuing political and economic turmoil, Uruguayan students engaged--in early August 1968--in pitched and bloody battles with Montevideo police. As was the case in Brazil, several deaths and numerous injuries resulted. Although earlier student demonstrations had been directed against the policies of the Uruguayan Government (a limited state of seige and a wage-price freeze), the unprecedented level and intensity of the August violence resulted from alleged police "violation of university autonomy." Police raided the national university on August 9 after anti-government demonstrations and agitation had been common on the campus for over a month. On the following day, the President sought with the Senate's approval, to dismiss the University Directive Council and the university's rector for dereliction of duty.

By mid-August, violence and vandalism had reached such serious proportions that, on August 19, the government arrested the entire leadership of the Uruguayan Federation of University Students. This was intended as a crackdown upon those responsible for student disturbances and vitriolic anti-government criticism and reflected the firm conviction of President Pacheco that he must deal firmly with student and labor agitation which was ultimately aimed at discrediting his government and forcing his resignation.

Demonstrations, however, did not immediately cease, and, responding to rising student and labor agitation, the government closed the national university and all vocational, normal and secondary schools in Montevideo. Press censorship was temporarily re-imposed and several union headquarters were ordered closed by government order. Student disturbances since that time have been minor, and popular sentiment appears to be moving against further agitation. The presence of violence-prone student radicals prevents too sanguine a view regarding the relative calm that prevailed in Uruguay in November 1968, but it is safe to say that support for renewed demonstrations will be increasingly difficult to obtain.

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Bolivia. Student opposition to the government (any government) has long been a Bolivian tradition which has given rise to frequent protest demonstrations. Attempts by the government to deal with these disorders inevitably provide pretexts for further demonstrations protesting "repression" and/or "violations of university autonomy." Such were the demonstrations, fairly easily contained, which took place between the end of May and late June 1968. The August demonstrations, on the other hand, were more difficult to control. Scarcely a day passed during that month without one or more demonstrations in some part of the country, the targets often being US installations. About five students were killed during this period; there were also several injuries and numerous arrests. This agitation was related to university elections, maneuvering of political parties and interest groups and a search for issues with which to attack the government.

Nevertheless, the unusual number and intensity of the demonstrations were undoubtedly related to the lengthy government crisis set off when Antonio Arguedas, then Interior Minister, fled the country amid statements that he was responsible for the delivery of the "Che" Guevara diary to the Cubans. The students thus were acting in an atmosphere of political turmoil to which President Barrientos responded swiftly and vigorously. While initially this seemed only to incite the students to increased protests, Barrientos' forceful actions ultimately resulted in a return to something approaching normalcy both in the political and student sectors.

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The Student As A Member of Society

Protest demonstrations by university students are reflective of the conditions of the societies in which the students live and of the relationship between students and those societies' institutions and values. To understand the society, therefore, is to gain a clearer perspective on the causes of student unrest and of the students' self-conceptions.

In Latin America, the acceleration of social and technological change during the past two decades has tended to emphasize the contrasts and contradictions between the centuries-old institutions and cultural patterns of the region and the vision of what can and should be accomplished to broaden political expression and to effect fundamental economic improvements. These changes have brought into question the relevance of existing forms and institutions, not only by students but also by other disaffected elements. Dissatisfaction--often vaguely articulated--is becoming generalized in many Latin American countries, but given the paternalismo and ingrained fatalism of these societies, such feelings have rarely found expression in political activism. For the greater part of Latin America's population, the "revolution of rising expectations" is not even today a reality. So long as the masses of Latin society continue to hold God, luck or fate responsible for poverty, ignorance and disease, the only realistic expectation will continue to be what it has always been: the perpetuation of a rigidly structured class society. Indeed, for the peasant, the absence of a correlation between hard work and material success is seen as positive proof of this thesis. The "fairy godmother syndrome," the eternal hope that instant wealth and happiness may be bestowed upon one by a benevolent patron or by the action of luck or occult forces results from this attitude. It is not by accident that lotteries, soccer pools and Brazil's famous numbers game, the jogo do bicho, are so popular among Latin America's lower classes. But for an increasing number--mainly students and other elite elements--the phenomenon of rising expectations does exist.

Appreciative of modernity and conscious of his superiority to the uneducated masses, the student conceives of himself as a responsible leader of the future. He protests the injustices of present society in the name of the people, his people, the people for whom he is the appointed leader. Since Latin American universities have historically provided political leadership training grounds for their societies it is at least understandable that students see themselves in leadership roles.

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Of all of the elements in Latin society, students are probably the most responsive to pressures for change. Student demonstrations are symptomatic of youthful impotence and impatience in the face of structures, institutions and organizations which they are unable to influence in normal ways. In contrast to the anarchistic bent of radical American and European students, however, Latin American students generally are protesting for a greater voice in their societies' institutions, not their destruction.

The role which students exercise in LA societies is unique. Despite superficial similarities with US universities, the universities of Latin America are products of quite a different cultural tradition. Historically, they have contributed more to the social exclusiveness of ruling elites than to the education of the masses. University enrollments in Latin America have doubled during the past decade, but students in Latin America are still a minuscule element drawn from the privileged classes. While university education is generally free or provided at nominal cost, secondary schools are mainly private and the tuition payments and loss of earning power are intolerable burdens for most poor and lower class families. Unable to surmount this obstacle, poor students are generally denied (save for scholarships) the opportunity for education beyond a rudimentary, grade-school level. In this way class stratification is preserved and upward social mobility rendered exceptionally difficult.

Obviously, the Latin American university student occupies a privileged position in his society, a fact which psychologically conditions both his self-conceptions and his degree of political activism. In many ways, university students constitute a well-defined class, much in the fashion that lawyers, doctors, labor leaders, military officers and government workers do. They form an important (generally disruptive) pressure group in society. Regardless of his social or economic origins, once an individual enters the university he becomes ipso facto a member of the intellectual elite. This realization conditions (some would say warps) his perception of reality, giving him an inflated sense of destiny and importance. In gaining admittance to the university, the student has in a very real sense "arrived." Thus, the university assumes many of the characteristics of an ultimate objective, it becomes less a means to a goal and more an end in itself. Despite a tradition of political activism on Latin American campuses, the majority of university students express little interest in politics. Accurate figures are impossible to obtain, but it is widely believed that no more than perhaps 10% of Latin American students are politically active. This figure includes both organizers and demonstrators. The silent majority remains apathetic except when their leaders are able to arouse their anger or enthusiasm in connection with

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specific issues, i.e., the killing of a student colleague by police, an unpopular government action, etc. Otherwise, they appear to enjoy a vicarious participation through their student leaders. In the abstract, however, student activism is highly valued by most students and there is considerable admiration for those who are articulate in voicing student complaint. Spanish ideals of "honor" play no small role in the bravery of some student leaders and in the adulation they receive during their brief span of glory.

With few exceptions, student activists in Latin America espouse political ideals which may be considered under the vague heading of "leftist." The reasons for this are varied but the natural latino student inclination towards opposition movements per se is an important contributory factor. While the case may be overstated, there is a tendency for students to oppose established authority of whatever type (from the parental to the political) during the few years in which they are still exempt from responsibility and enjoy much of the license accorded to students in medieval days. For the ambitious, particularly those from modest or lower class backgrounds, the positions staked out in university life are an entering wedge into the established order, the common morals and mores of which acknowledge threat and pressure to be the principal road to acceptance and a share of power. Leftism, representing the maximum risk-taking, can bring the highest payoff from those who dole out privilege in later years. Herein lies the explanation of ardent radicalism in the university and sedate conformity in maturity for most of Latin America's student leaders. It is important to stress the most, for we cannot dismiss all student activists so easily. While it is true that most student leftists will eventually become conservative--indeed apathetic--after graduation, it is equally true that the minority of student activists of deep, ideological motivation will continue to supply the future leadership for domestic communist parties and other organizations of the left. For these students, there is usually no payoff by society's establishment.

Radicalization of Student Protests

In Latin America as elsewhere, there has been a pronounced radicalization of student protest which has resulted in the rejection of non-student political leadership. Student condemnation of the structures and institutions of present society is not limited to the so-called "establishments" of Latin America, but includes in many cases* the Moscow-line communist parties

*The degree of communist control over the student movement varies widely from country to country. In some cases, the student organization has had traditional ties to the youth wing of the local communist party.

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and other political organizations generally considered to be of the "left." There are evident strong elements of this attitude, for example, in the dissident student-wings of such liberal political parties as the Christian Democrats and other parties whose "openings to the left" are viewed by students as too cautious.

Confronted with the unexpected violence of demonstrating students, Latin American governments have consistently failed to appreciate this new phenomenon and have attempted to console themselves with the charge that student disorders are the work of communist and "foreign elements" who use disaffected students to carry out their sinister schemes. In the four countries under consideration, clandestine reporting does not support this comforting view. While there has been communist involvement in all of these student disorders, the communists have not universally been able to maintain control of the student protests. In Mexico and in Brazil, the communist role--probably because of the sheer size of the student bodies in those countries--has been less important than in Bolivia and in Uruguay where the university student organizations are dominated by communist leaders.

For the communists, the new activism of Latin American students offers as many threats as it does opportunities for organizational expansion. The radicalization of the student movements has forced the domestic communist parties to renewed efforts of recruitment and propaganda in order to give at least the appearance that they are still the revolutionary vanguard. And while the communists have not been notably successful in controlling the level of student violence--increasing it and decreasing it in accordance with party policies and objectives--they have universally been blamed by the governments for fomenting student disorders. Thus, the communists run the serious risk of a government crackdown upon their organizations (usually fairly exposed) every time student disturbances get out of hand, whether or not the parties were responsible. Radical student leaders--some of whom are dissident members of local communist parties--will cooperate with the communists so long as there is a mutuality of interest, but will not hesitate to take independent actions which the parties may oppose. Retaining some mutuality of interest is and will continue to be an important communist objective.

Common Denominators and Conclusions

Student demonstrations--sometimes violent ones--occur with a fair degree of frequency in Latin America, but the recent protests in Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay and Bolivia seemed to have been more violent than most. Is there a common denominator among these four countries which led to such violence? The answer to that question must of necessity be a tentative one. Analysis of several hypotheses fails to produce conclusive responses. Listed below are the results of some of these investigations.

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Size of Population Hypothesis:

Countries with large populations are more violence-prone than countries with small populations. Likewise, university enrollment as a high percentage of total population is more conducive to unrest.

Analysis: No correlation was found between the size of the country and the violence of student disorders. Nor is there any evident connection between student unrest and the size of university enrollments expressed as a percentage of total population. The same is true for rates of population growth. Argentina remained relatively quiet amidst the disturbances of its neighbors, Brazil and Uruguay, yet Argentina's population is large and the country ranks first in Latin America in university enrollment. Among the four countries being considered, no pattern was discernible. Summary figures are:

Country	Population (actual)	Population (annual % increase)	University Enrollment *(actual)	University Enrollment (% of pop.)
BRAZIL	83.9 million	3.1%	(1965) -158,100	.18%
MEXICO	42.2 million	3.2%	(1966) -128,300	.30%
BOLIVIA	3.7 million	1.4%	(1966) - 10,400	.28%
URUGUAY	2.7 million	1.4%	(1965) - 12,500	.46%

* date of information in parentheses

Population data: Population Reference Bureau - December 1966

University Enrollments: IDB Social Progress Trust Fund Annual Report-1967

Government Reaction to Students Hypothesis: Forceful government repression of student demonstrations provokes further violence.

Analysis: This hypothesis appears to be the most promising explanation put forth for student unrest. If we accept as a given fact that students--in whatever Latin American country--are likely to demonstrate frequently, the reaction of individual governments to such protests becomes critical.

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Police resentment of student challenges to their authority (demonstrations, even physical attacks, insulting signs, etc) in the countries being considered undoubtedly contributed to laying the groundwork for a violent confrontation. Inevitably, it occurred and the vigorous suppression of protests by police touched off a vicious circle in which larger and more violent protests required the use of greater police force to control them. The resultant deaths and injuries served to guarantee further demonstrations until violence reached such a high level that the students were no longer willing to go to the streets for their cause.

Degree of Political Expression Hypothesis: Student disorders are more likely to occur in countries where students feel that their degree of political expression is restricted. Since the ability to demonstrate is predicated upon the existence of certain freedoms, dictatorships of the right and the left must necessarily be excluded from consideration.

Analysis: The hypothesis is correct to the extent that when students feel alienated from the government and the country's major institutions, they tend to demonstrate. But it does little to explain the reasons why students do not demonstrate (at least violently) in such countries as Argentina where conditions for such activism appear to be prevalent.

The foregoing discussion permits the drawing of some very tentative conclusions regarding student unrest and violence in Latin America. First of all, it is evident that the student protest movements were relatively spontaneous and uncoordinated affairs. They appear to occur more frequently, however, in societies where dissatisfaction with the government or its policies affects sizeable numbers of non-students as well. Moreover, government awareness of popular feelings of dissatisfaction tends to encourage in government leaders a defensive and somewhat hostile position which vaguely conceives of student demonstrations as a threat and increases the probability of a harsh police response to them. Such was the case with Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay and Bolivia. Such dissatisfaction of itself does not always cause political action, but the heightened social sensitivity of students contributes to an atmosphere conducive to massive protests by them. The student, conceiving of himself as a spokesman for society, tends to assert his leadership in times of real or imagined crisis.

Secondly, encouragement of student activism, particularly of an aggressive nature comes from many quarters. "New Left" intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse and others (whose ideas are parroted but whose works are seldom read) provide students in Latin America with a rationale for action, with the certitude that they are fighting for a just cause

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against the supporters of a sick and hypocritical society. Communist influences are also evident in attempts to direct student activities against pre-selected targets, whether they be the government, university reform or police brutality. But the communists have been unable to control the student demonstrations; indeed in some cases, the presence of rational direction was undiscernible, from whatever quarter. Mob psychology appears to have played an important role in determining the extent of violence associated with protest demonstrations.

Finally, the factor of emulation of foreign colleagues seems to be particularly important in provoking student demonstrations. Extensive media coverage of the French and German disturbances showed Latin American students the potential of student activism and it is likely-- although the hypothesis cannot be proved--that this awareness strongly contributed to the environment in which such protests were eventually launched. It should be stressed, however, that mere awareness of student riots elsewhere was not alone responsible for the disturbances in the four countries being considered. The coincidence of broad uneasiness or dissatisfaction, new left influences and dynamic foreign models are apparently necessary to create an atmosphere in which demonstrations accompanied by some violence can (not necessarily will) result.

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