

Naval War College Review

Volume 24
Number 4 *April*

Article 7

1971

The Prospects for Student Activism in Latin America

G. Scott Sugden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Sugden, G. Scott (1971) "The Prospects for Student Activism in Latin America," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

More than any single event or person, the University Reform Movement—given birth in 1918 at the University of Córdoba in Argentina—has been responsible for the current status of higher education in Latin America. Motivated by an intense desire to remake universities that had altered little their original medieval structure and curriculum, Argentine student reformers, backed by the Radical government then in power, implemented reforms designed to bring the university into the 20th century. The results of these changes, namely cogovernment and university autonomy, have served largely to politicize the campuses, thereby frustrating the original purpose of reform—training a highly skilled body of scholars and technicians capable of serving the national interests of economic development and growth. (This paper was prepared by the author as an element of research for the National Strategy Study conducted by the School of Naval Warfare. Ed.)

THE PROSPECTS FOR STUDENT ACTIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA

A research paper prepared

by

Mr. G. Scott Sugden

School of Naval Warfare

Student activism flourishes in Latin America. In no other part of the world has student activism, especially in the political sense, become so closely identified with the everyday life of university students as in those countries south of the Rio Grande. For more than half a century, university students in that area have periodically roiled the political waters, often to the consternation of university faculty and administration, and frequently to the chagrin, if not the downfall, of dictatorial chiefs of state.

While influential in the past, what role will be played by the student activists of Latin America in the decade of the seventies? Anyone concerned with or interested in stability and development in the Western Hemisphere

should be concerned with the answer to such a question.

However, in order to assess the future role of student activists, one should consider how they evolved to their present state of influence. It is also desirable to be familiar with the factors which contributed to their evolution. Above all, one must be aware of the role played by the institutions to which they were drawn, the universities of Latin America.

Established in 1551, the first "Royal and Pontifical" universities of Latin America were founded in Peru and Mexico. Similar to other Spanish universities established later in the New World, these institutions were modeled after the University of Salamanca.¹

Initially, the universities served well the colonial society within which they were nurtured. Though insulated by their autonomy, they expressed the need and contributed toward the general well-being of the society by educating selected members of the elite in the fields of medicine and law.

However, as the continent evolved from its colonial status, the universities failed to keep pace with the change. Little affected by academic currents from Europe and North America, they became locked into curricula for narrow professional training, seemingly unmindful of the need to provide broader and more practical educational opportunities. Nor did the universities make any accommodations to adapt to the needs of new professions which were evolving elsewhere, while social and economic problems of the society were equally ignored. As the universities lapsed in their responsibilities to fulfill educational and social needs, they became proportionately more irrelevant to their environment.

By the 20th century, universities had become the most conservative social institutions in Latin America. As citadels for the preservation of the status quo, they became prime targets for those who considered that the educational institutions should serve as instruments of social mobility. The pressure for change mounted most rapidly in those countries of Latin America where old values were in sharpest conflict with a burgeoning middle class. It first gained legitimacy, as the University Reform Movement, in the oldest institution of advanced education in the most developed country in Latin America, the University of Córdoba in Argentina.

The University Reform Movement was given birth at Córdoba in 1918. Its midwives were students and young faculty members of the university and an enlightened national government controlled by the Radical Party whose power base rested upon the emerging

middle class of the country. Once born, the movement sought a variety of goals, probably the most important of which was the conversion of Latin American universities into agents of social change. Half a century later this remains a goal toward which many reformers in the area still struggle.² Significantly, delivery of the Reform Movement also politicized university life, introducing students directly into the university and national politics. As a consequence, it demonstrated to students the rewards that could be obtained from playing a forceful role in these arenas, a lesson that has not been forgotten and has often been demonstrated in subsequent years.

The insurgency at Córdoba in 1918 was the first full-fledged confrontation and attack by a Latin American student body against the university system.³ Ostensibly, it was triggered by a student strike protesting the election of an unpopular official to a position of high responsibility in the university. In reality, the student action represented acute dissatisfaction with the general state of the university system, the quality of instruction, and the apparent lack of concern for student interests. This dissatisfaction, as well as a degree of disillusionment with the bureaucracy and society which perpetuated the system, was exemplified in the following excerpt from the Córdoba Manifesto proclaimed by the students:

Up to now the universities have been the secular refuge of mediocrities, have provided a salary for the ignorant and a safe hospital for invalids, and what is worse, have provided a place where all forms of tyranny and insensitivity could be taught. The universities have thus come to be faithful reflections of a decadent society, offering a sad spectacle of immobile senility. Before these closed and silent houses, wisdom

passes silently or enters distorted and grotesque into the service of bureaucracy.⁴

Much of the sentiment expressed by the manifesto was shared by a sympathetic national government in Argentina at the time.⁵ As a result, several of the reform demands were transformed to university law; principal among these were the inclusion of student representatives on governing councils of the university and faculty, the equality of student voting rights in the election of the university rector, and the right of students to attend classes without compulsion or restriction. While not a principal issue of public contention, the inviolability of university autonomy was also reemphasized and reinforced at that time.

The reforms of Córdoba met widespread acceptance and imitation throughout Latin America. Their achievement virtually institutionalized student activism on the continent. Since 1918 successive generations of students have passed on to the next a valued, almost cherished, tradition of fervid political activism. Generally, the activism has concentrated upon defense of the reforms espoused in the Córdoba Manifesto, which have acquired almost sacrosanct or mystical qualities as ideals. However, just as the students of Córdoba found it necessary to enter the national political pit to contest university intransigence and to promote their own ideals and interests, so successive generations of students have become involved, even more easily, in nonuniversity political issues.

Student activism has made some substantial contributions to the socio-political development of Latin America. It has provided a valuable training ground and conduit for the production of national political leaders. Through the promotion of its revered principle of cogovernment (co-gobierno)⁶ it has served as a catalyst for responsiveness to

modern societal requirements within the academic community. Acting as the "agent of change" or the "conscience of the people," student activists have sought to become trustees for the disenfranchised workers and peasants.⁷ This role has often led them to the forefront in struggles against military dictators. In fact, students have sometimes been the sole source of effective criticism of the ruling regime in some Latin American countries.⁸

But not all student activism has been of a constructive nature. Ironically, one of the most serious shortcomings has been its threat to academic freedom through misuse of eogovernment and the resultant intimidation of or bribery by faculty members.⁹ A similar self-defeating inclination has been the dangerous reflexive tendency of activists to imitate their opposition through direct action and the use of force. Above all, the politicalization of the universities, to which activists have contributed immeasurably, has created serious barriers to further advancement of the University Reform Movement by turning campuses into cockpits for competing national political parties and factions.

A multitude of factors have contributed to the numerical size, composition, and outlook of student activists in Latin America. Most of these factors can be expected to continue to influence the motivation and direction of this group in the future. Some factors, such as the Reform Movement and politicalization of the campus, have already been noted; others deserve mention, however briefly.

There is general agreement that a relatively small number of university students in Latin America are activists.¹⁰ There is considerably less agreement on the determination and relative importance of factors that create and influence the activists. However, a profile of student activists would probably show that most of them come from middle-class provincial families;¹¹

attend urban state universities; and study subjects in the humanities, social or behavioral science faculties where entrance and course demands are less demanding and rigid than those for the traditional professions.¹² The greatest pressures that create and shape activists come from their peer group and from the students' relative need for self-realization. While political parties and members of the university administration and faculty exert considerable influence on students, these pressures are considered to be relatively less significant. Finally, the general milieu of the student subculture with its penchant for change, challenge to traditional power and authority, and social mobility also contributes substantially to the promotion of activism among its adherents.¹³

Few factors, however, have had more impact on student activists in Latin America than the Cuban revolt. Castro's assumption of power served as a watershed for student activism in the area. Before 1959 student groups made occasional forays of violence. After that date the Cuban example of organized, sustained violence, especially the role played by the student elite within the university and outside, served as a model for emulation. In essence, student activism became radicalized by the Cuban revolt, and guerrilla warfare was added to the tactical arsenal of the activists. The path to violence was further enhanced by Che Guevara's appeal to intellectuals to take the lead as guerrillas.¹⁴ Whether the time and manner of his death have had any effect on that appeal may be a moot point.

Castro's Cuba has served as an example to reformers and activists in other ways. Cuba has been the only country in Latin America to have aligned the university system with the requirements of a developing economy,¹⁵ a feat which Cuban leaders have asserted was impossible without a total sociopolitical revolution. Also, the revolutionary regime's dedicated sense of purpose and

total commitment attracted many activists, especially those inclined toward rapid and absolute solutions.

Castroism may be expected to have a continued attraction for future student activism in Latin America. At the same time, students cannot be unaware of the sacrifices that Fidelismo has brought to their counterparts in Cuba. Not only has the university been shorn of its hallowed autonomy, but student activities have come under the direct control of the Communist Party. As a result, student involvement in politics has been reduced to a token level. Dissident elements within the student body have been periodically purged, and any student suspected of "counterrevolutionary" tendencies has been prevented from enrolling in the university. Rigid discipline has been imposed by militia, and students have been kept in a state of flux between national mobilizations and "volunteer" work in the sugarcane fields.¹⁶ Under Castro academic freedom has been repressed and student opposition has been reduced to a state of passivity. These developments are not calculated to attract student activists to the ranks of Fidelismo, but neither can they be expected to deter radicalized students who view them as temporary aberrations or sacrifices made on behalf of the vaunted ideals of a social revolution.

Idealism is often an important trait in the personality of a student activist. Latin American activists appear to be no exception. There seems to be a natural inclination to seek absolute, all-encompassing solutions. Societal changes are sought in immediate, total, and final packaging. Ironically, the presence of this idealism may serve to impede the influence of communism on the future development of student activism in Latin America.

To date, Communists have made some serious inroads within selected student organizations. Particular success has been achieved among university

student groups in Bolivia, Uruguay, and, especially, Argentina since the early 1960's when local and national federations came under their control. This success has been, in part, a result of ardent proselytizing, the creation of hard-core, dedicated student activists, and the ability to direct youthful opposition toward revolutionary objectives. It also has represented acceptance of an ideologically orientated movement to serve as a guide for thought and actions while promoting universal solutions. Already inclined toward the Left, some student activists find Communist ideology an easy and natural refuge, especially when it can be coupled with Yankee-baiting, anti-imperialist demonstrations.

However, relations with Soviet Communists may not be so easily reciprocated. There is a feeling that the Soviet Communist world is inclined to be suspicious of the Latin American student movement because of its dependence upon idealism as a guiding force.¹⁷ While Communists pay lip-service to the idealism, the movement is looked upon as an uncertain ally. While this doubt exists, it is probable that Communist influence on the future direction and guidelines of student activism will be less than optimum in Latin America.

In the meantime, the Communist Party discourages student disorders against national governments in those Latin American countries where it seeks government cooperation. Rather, the party seeks student cooperation by promoting confrontation tactics with valid grievances on the local level.

Student activism on the national level, in fact, may encounter an increasing amount of resistance in the future. This resistance is emerging from developments and attitudes taking place within the university as well as outside of it. The extreme politicalization of student activities, fostered by cogovern-

ment and campus inviolability, is creating much of the resistance.

Within the university, cogovernment by the students has tended to undermine the University Reform Movement and academic freedom. Through student representation on the governing councils, faculty members have been intimidated, efforts to raise academic standards have been stymied, and small numbers of radical activists have achieved considerable influence. Attempts to depoliticize the universities have been frequent causes of student strikes, causing further deterioration in academic standards, faculty "brain drain," and government reaction.

Concurrently, politicalization and autonomy of the campus has attracted external forces which also exacerbated the academic deterioration. Political parties have viewed the campus as a political arena and student groups as a means to exert pressure on the government. At times the situation has been carried to extremes by virtually creating an antistate within a state. This was the case in Venezuela when Hector Mujica, a Communist leader and nonstudent, directed acts of violence and terror against the democratically elected Betancourt government from a base on university grounds, protected from police intrusion by the quasi-extra-territoriality of the campus.¹⁸ In consequence, governments became increasingly reluctant to allow universities to remain sources of extreme political opposition and agitation without any limitations or controls.

Government reaction can be expected to affect future student radicalism in a variety of ways. As resentment of the hostile sanctuaries grows and as it becomes more apparent that student disorders are restricting the supply of trained personnel required for national development, governments tend to establish technical institutes outside of university authority, resulting in the

diminution of university prestige and student political influence. Moreover, as students become more radicalized and violent, national liberal leaders, many of whom were student activists themselves, become disillusioned and less cooperative with the student movement.¹⁹

The resistance of national leaders to student activists is further enhanced by recognition that they are less likely to be spokesmen for nonstudent interests. In the past students have served as representatives for the less articulate worker and peasant. However, as these groups organize, create indigenous leaders, and engage in independent political action, student activists have become less attractive and less necessary as spokesmen.

In essence, the future state of student activism in Latin America would appear to rest primarily upon two factors. Firstly, the relative success of the University Reform Movement, especially as it affects campus politicalization, seems critical. Secondly, the extent to which students are able to ally with a broader based²⁰ or more powerful element of society, such as labor unions, an agrarian movement, or the military forces, seems also significant. Where university reform has been most successful, as in Argentina, conditions of higher education have been appreciably improved and students have been more apt to conduct their activities in harmony with popularly accepted in-

terests of the nation and society. But where the Reform Movement has been least successful, as in Colombia, student activists have become increasingly alienated from their environment and less responsible in their actions. Similarly, student activists can be expected to remain restricted to the role of catalyst except in those cases where they may become allied to a mass organization. These factors can be expected to continue to serve as key influences in shaping the force and direction of student activism among Latin American students in the future, even as activism promises to continue to flourish in the seventies.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Mr. G. Scott Sugden did his undergraduate work at Brown University in international relations and holds a master's degree and Ph.D. in history from Tufts University. As an officer of the United States Information Service (USIS) he has served in USIS offices of both India and Pakistan, has been the Director of Student Affairs in London and the Director in Nigeria, and most recently was assigned to the Office of the Director for Africa. Mr. Sugden is currently a student at the Naval War College, School of Naval Warfare.

FOOTNOTES

1. Rudolph Atcon, "The Latin American University," *Die Deutsche Universitätszeitung*, February 1962, p. 9-47.
2. Alistair Hennessy, "University Students in National Politics," Claudio Veliz, ed., *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 129.
3. Kenneth N. Walker, "A Comparison of the University Reform Movements in Argentina and Colombia," Seymour M. Lipset, ed., *Student Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), p. 296.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
5. For more detail on the role of the Radical Party government in power at the time, see Luigi Einaudi, "Rebels without Allies," *Saturday Review*, 17 August 1968, p. 45.
6. Under the *co-gobierno* principle, student representatives on faculty and administration boards share in making policy decisions on university matters.

7. Hennessy, p. 134.

8. For views on the role of student opposition to dictatorial regimes in Latin America, see Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 239; Orlando Albornoz, "Academic Freedom and Higher Education in Latin America," Seymour M. Lipset, ed., *Student Politics*, p. 287; and Einaudi, p. 46.

9. Albornoz, p. 289. Since being a representative on a faculty board offers one of the few prestige roles open to students, it is understandable why this issue of the Reform Movement arouses more passionate controversy than any other. Hennessy, p. 133.

10. Robert O. Myhr, "Brazil," Donald K. Emmerson, ed., *Students and Politics in Developing Nations* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 260; P.G. Altbach, "Students and Politics," Seymour M. Lipset, ed., *Student Politics*, p. 79; and R. Walter, *Student Politics in Argentina* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 201.

11. However, Seymour M. Lipset notes that surveys among Brazilian and Panamanian law students suggest that the most radical activists come from lower class families. See his "Students and Politics in Underdeveloped Countries," *Student Politics*, p. 29.

12. Robert Scott, "Student Political Activism in Latin America," *Daedalus*, Winter 1968, p. 77-84.

13. For more detailed analyses of factors contributing to student activism, see Altbach, p. 76-79; Hennessy, p. 137-140; and Kenneth Walker, "Determinants of Castro Support among Latin American Students," *Social and Economic Studies*, March 1965, p. 105.

14. Feuer, p. 247.

15. Hennessy, p. 119.

16. Jaime Suchlicki, *University Students and Revolution in Cuba 1920-1968* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1969), p. 130-131.

17. Feuer, p. 251-252.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

19. Hennessy, p. 127.

20. In 1960 only 3.1 percent of the university age group were receiving higher education in Latin America. Hennessy, p. 120.



Education, in its finest and broadest sense, should . . . aim to gain for man mastery over his environment.

S.W. Roskill, The Art of Leadership, p. 39.