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A DIFFERENT TYPE OF STRUGGLE

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On June 14 of this year, street clashes between students and police took place in five Argentine cities. In Buenos Aires, the fumes of Molotov cocktails and tear gas bombs mingled to produce the heady atmosphere of revolution and repression. A nationwide boycott of classes to protest the imposition of new university regulations by the government of General Juan Carlos Onganía had also culminated in numerous injuries and arrests the week before.

"Like the Revolutionary Youth of France we are fighting for workers' and people's unity," read one banner carried by student demonstrators along Avenida Córdoba.

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Herbert Goldhamer and Richard Maullin helped clarify the analysis at an earlier stage.

Unlike their counterparts in France or the United States, however, Argentine students and their similarly active peers elsewhere in Latin America were responding to a specific tradition that identifies them as the guardians of social ideals against the compromises of the past and the partisanship of special interests. Such a heritage must be acted upon. Said one militant about the demonstrations of June, 1968: "No one can accuse us of being bureaucratic about the Fiftieth Anniversary of the University Reform."

Precisely fifty years earlier, in mid-June, 1918, students at Córdoba, Argentina's oldest university, had proclaimed that universities throughout Latin America had become "faithful images of our decadent societies, sad spectacles of senile immobility." In rapid succession they denounced their professors as intellectual invalids, their libraries and research facilities as notable chiefly for their absence, and their curricula as "characterized by a narrow dogmatism which contributes to the insulation of the university from science and modern learning." The remedy, to become with time the central tenet of the University Reform Movement, was student participation in the administration of the university. Proponents of the reform

argued that this would introduce to the cloistered "havens of mediocrity" a hunger for contemporary knowledge as well as a sensitivity to the needs of a more just society. The movement spread rapidly through Latin America's cosmopolitan elite, and adaptations of the Córdoba Manifesto had affected most countries within the decade. Article 143 of the 1945 Ecuadorian constitution described the reformista utopia: "The universities are autonomous ... and will particularly attend to the study and resolution of national problems and the spread of culture among the popular classes."

Ever since the founding of the first "Royal and Pontifical" universities in Peru and Mexico in 1551, a few large universities have dominated higher education in Latin America. As the continent emerged from colonial status, independence reaffirmed the power of the state over the church, but without notably increasing the relevance of the universities to their environments. Around monastic patios in aging buildings, virtually autonomous faculties offered instruction in the learned professions, with little general education and almost no postgraduate training. For the most part, neither students nor professors were full-time, and the irrelevance of the university to modern learning was matched only by its penury. It is small wonder

that by 1918, the students were demanding reform -- sometimes violently.

The intervening fifty years have brought substantial changes in some areas, but striking continuities remain, many of them inherent in Latin American conditions. At the University of Havana in 1960, for instance, students issued a critique reminiscent of the Córdoba Manifesto. In a startling juxtaposition, which nonetheless beautifully conveyed the emotions of the moment, they concluded by denouncing the university authorities as "the great landowners of culture." Harassed administrators admitted many deficiencies, but pointed out that the nearby University of Puerto Rico, certainly not a wealthy institution by U.S. standards, had nearly ten times the income per student. As this example implies, problems of higher education are enormously complicated by political pressures. If the universities have often been marginal to educational and social needs, they have nearly always been central to politics.

Viewed from the United States, this has all seemed pretty chaotic. Latin America has to most North Americans long symbolized political instability and its catalyst, the student riot. In the wake of recent events in the United

States, however, these matters seem less exotic than they once did. Previously complacent American university administrators are rumored to have sought professional advice from their Latin American colleagues on the best means of coping with student activism and violence. Nor have worried conservatives been the only ones struck by seeming parallels. An old friend remarked recently that he was saddened by the appearance on American campuses of undercover police agents as students, a phenomenon with which he and I had first become acquainted in Latin America in the mid-fifties. Are American universities becoming increasingly Latin Americanized? The students of the United States, and with them, their French colleagues, certainly seem bent upon shaking their universities and societies to the very foundations. Ironically, this eruption in the industrial northern hemisphere comes at a time when students in Latin America have been relatively quiescent. Despite recent demonstrations, today's activists are less prominent than their predecessors a decade ago who played key roles in the chain of political upheavals which began with the fall of Perón in Argentina, continued through the assassination, resignation, or overthrow of dictators in Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia, and culminated with the collapse

of Batista in Cuba. Even the student guerrillas of three or four years ago are less and less common. Can it be that while we are becoming more Latin Americanized, they are becoming more Americanized?

Partly, of course, the paradox is a false one. The idea that political violence and mob demonstrations are as much part of the rites of passage for Latin American students as were panty raids for American students is a hasty generalization. Most studies of Latin American student opinion and behavior suggest that they are neither particularly radical nor particularly active. But this also describes Berkeley and Columbia. The inactivity of most does not, we know, prevent others from playing major roles in the political turmoil of their respective societies. What is really wrong with our apparent paradox is that it omits consideration of the traditions and roles of institutions and persons acting under very different historical circumstances.

Latin American universities, though they have multiplied in recent years, assuming greater superficial similarities to American ones, have surprisingly little in common with the university tradition with which we in the United States are acquainted. Fundamental differences are

often masked for casual observers by similarities inherent in the physical expression of grievances leading to violent conflicts on university grounds. Youthful élan, the economic and personal freedom implicit in minimal family responsibilities, and student quickness to perceive the inevitable disparities between social ideals and performance all combine more or less everywhere to produce a potential for demonstrations that occasionally erupt beyond the sanctuary of the universities to strike with sudden violence at the societies themselves. Confrontations between students and police, mediated or activated by various third parties, including administrators, faculty, and politicians, inevitably follow common patterns and are often provoked by similar immediate issues.

This increasingly familiar script should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Latin American universities have historically contributed more to the social exclusiveness of ruling elites than to the education of the new skilled masses of industrial society. Although the number of university students in Latin America has doubled in the past decade, allowing for differences in size of population and age groups, the United States still has more than a dozen times as many students. This actually

understates the difference, since many more American students receive degrees than do Latin American students.

Latin American universities have traditionally provided the urban political leadership for largely agrarian societies. Unable to control fully the generous impulses of youthful idealism toward solidarity with those whose exclusion the elitism of the university was helping to perpetuate, this system occasionally led to explosions which, like the medieval peasant Jacquerie, made a great deal of noise but signified nothing. The major coherent challenge to this premodern system, the University Reform Movement, was essentially a protest which assumed the inability of students to communicate with the general population but hoped to modernize society through the use of governmental authority.

Students attending public universities in societies with expanding government bureaucracies have at their disposal the means for influencing government policies at a much earlier stage than would be true in the United States. Ministers of Education are exposed targets for student protest, which can thus be automatically translated into Cabinet instability. Strikes may also affect the functioning of public agencies in which many students are working

while attending classes in the evenings. Outstanding student leaders are quickly absorbed into adult political party structures even if they did not begin as children of the ruling elite. At the same time, student activism allows for the expression of dissent that might be threatening in other forms, but which in the university environment often becomes a necessary means of importing new developments and aspirations from the industrialized centers of the world.

A perusal of student literature and even Latin American commentaries on U.S. student activities reveals similar language and even a similar delineation of issues. But whereas militant students in the United States and France are today questioning the value of imposing or even seeking a completely rational structure for society, Latin American students are still much closer to the optimism of the enlightenment. This difference can be seen most clearly in the case of the machine. In the United States, many sectors of the student movement associate the machine and the technological society it symbolizes as readily with evil as with good. On occasion, as in the case of the air we breathe and the computer cards of the Registrar's Office it seems as though everything has gone out of control and

man is now servant to the machine. In Latin America, where the problems of underdevelopment and of the burdens of human labor are still very much in evidence, the machine is still the symbol of hope and progress, of man's control over nature and his limitless future, as it was for the older generation in the United States.

Differences in time and place alter perspectives on other apparently common issues as well. Anti-Communism seems to be increasingly seen as a stale political residue of a prior age. But whereas in the United States, this has come as a gradual change from what had been a general consensus, in Latin America anti-Communism, although fervently supported by defenders of traditionalism, was never generally accepted as a dominant political myth among intellectuals. In underdeveloped countries, therefore, anti-Communism tends to confuse the rivalries of distant great powers with problems of local social and political change. As a result, today, while the new American left is still in the full flower of its discovery of the irrelevance of both Communism and anti-Communism, Latin American students have already moved beyond, after an interlude of Cuban-inspired guerrilla adventures, to a new political era.

This is best seen on issues of social justice. In the United States today there is an element of urgency, even of threat and potential violence, associated with race and poverty. The universities are no longer immune. Events at Columbia had some echo in Harlem. Black student athletes are increasingly unwilling to be exploited in ways that offend their dignity and sense of solidarity. No such individual link for the transmission of tension between university and disadvantaged society exists in Latin America. The Indian peasant, by definition Latin America's traditional outsider, cannot attend a university. The son of an Indian peasant, should he matriculate, ceases by that very act to be either Indian or peasant. His new culture qualifies him racially as a mestizo just as surely as if he had in the sixteenth century bought a certificate from the King of Spain attesting to his lightness of skin. Simultaneously, his status as universitario automatically leads to absorption into the slowly expanding modern urban world, and to an increasing separation from the idiocy of rural life. It is as if every time a Negro entered an American university, he literally turned white, and therefore could no longer belong to Negro society.

For a while, in the early days of fidelismo, the chasm between urban modernity and rural traditionalism seemed

on the verge of being successfully spanned by violent revolution led by middle class student activists. In country after country, between 1960 and 1963, and sporadically since then, students went out in an effort to set up rural guerrilla movements to emulate what they thought was the example set by Castro and Che Guevara. In country after country, unable even to communicate with the peasant populations among which they were moving, they were either wiped out, starved to death, or forced into ineffective undergrounds where they were kept alive for the purposes of international and national politics by forces with no interest in their cause.

The late Peruvian dramatist, Sebastián Salazar Bondy, once drew my attention to one of his students, whose fate symbolizes that terrible period. Javier Heraud was born the third child and second son of a successful lawyer in the Lima suburb of Miraflores. He studied first in a Jesuit primary school, then attended the expensive and exclusive Markham School where he excelled in sports and literature, graduating second in his class. While studying in the Faculty of Letters of the Catholic University in Lima, he also taught English in the public secondary schools. In 1960, he published a small book of poems, The River. The

same year, he won first prize in the "Young Poet of Peru" competition sponsored by the magazine, Cuadernos Trimestrales de Poesía, of Trujillo (Peru). The prize collection was published the following year as The Trip. In 1962, the Peruvian Federation of Students (FEP) held a verse competition. Heraud's third book won the prize. Later that year, he left for Cuba on a government scholarship to study cinematography. On May 3, 1963, he reentered Peru clandestinely from Bolivia, by canoe, armed, in the company of six other students, apparently hoping to link up with Hugo Blanco's rapidly weakening attempts to organize peasant leagues among the Quechua Indians near Cuzco. On May 15, the small group of would-be guerrillas arrived, exhausted, in Puerto Maldonado, a border town of about six hundred, and checked into a small pension. Alerted to the arrival of strangers, a sergeant from the local guard post sought them out to ask for papers. When these were not in order, he asked the young men to accompany him to the station house. On the way, there was a scuffle and the policeman was killed. The students fled for the river, pausing at the boarding house only long enough to pick up their guns. By nightfall, however, the youths had all been captured, with the exception of Javier Heraud, who was dead at

twenty-one of wounds inflicted by dum dum bullets from a local townsman's rifle.

This social isolation of the youthful quasi-elite in traditional society is very difficult for the American with his images of equality and revolution to understand. There is a great distance between the realization that conditions in Latin America fall short of these ideals and finding means for doing something about it. The silence of students today, however, stems less from repression or fear of death than from a lack of political optimism. Dozens of Indian languages and local subcultures are only the most apparent obstacles to effective national action. Not for nothing did Bolívar complain he had ploughed the sea. But even those who feel this is an unjust world dominated by the United States with the complicity of the Soviet Union suspect that to try to do something about it is likely to make it even more so. The negative results of May in Paris, when the attempt to break the hold of General de Gaulle laid the basis for the political death of Pierre Mendès-France were long ago perceived in Latin America. When all odds are against one, the only sane solution is to cultivate one's garden.

But is there a garden to cultivate? The perception of Latin America so common in the United States would suggest rather a state of deepening crisis with revolution around the corner. I suspect otherwise. When the establishment cannot be beaten, it is time to join it. And if in Latin America, there is no effective, modern establishment, it must be built. Unlike the students of the industrialized northern hemisphere who often seem nihilistic in their rejection of the adult world as well as of adults, many students in Latin America seem to be seeking an outlet to an expanded modern world, even at the cost of accommodation with their elders.

Given some of the contemporary trends in the universities, the goals of the students may require only a moratorium on ideals, not their betrayal. Despite political turmoil and institutional rigidities, the old educational formula of "classics for aristocrats" has declined even in the historic public universities, where new faculties are turning out accountants, physicists, and members of other modern professions. Since the beginnings of the reform movement also, the desire to avoid the political problems, penury, and resistance to change of the large national universities has contributed to the emergence of

numerous new institutions that have served to diversify higher education and make it more relevant to Latin America's modern development. Technical schools like the military academies of Peru and Argentina have been supplemented by new or expanded engineering universities, while Catholic universities provided stability and occasional foreign contacts. During the last decade, there has been a virtual explosion of new institutions including agricultural and technical schools, private non-sectarian universities for the wealthy and even private medical and business schools.

These changes in higher education reflect gradual economic changes as well as continuing political efforts to induce them. Latin American economies, though still hesitant and weak, are gradually building an industrial sector and modern agriculture alongside their traditional rural backwaters. The future will be determined less by those who sit in cafés providing copy to American journalists than by the increasing numbers of students who are preparing themselves to fill technical and non-elite functions in a future society whose coming no one questions. Whether, once that is achieved, the problems of future generations of Latin American students will become more like ours remains to be seen.