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COLOMBIA: THE “CATALUÑA MOVEMENT”

Santiago Castro-Gómez

The student movement of 1968 was the first movement that was able to set off critical self-reflection on the global system. Although the struggles of students in different parts of the world ran different courses, they all had something in common: they rejected the primacy of the economy over life.

The center of this social and cultural unrest inhered in the criticism of consumption, the rejection of achievement-oriented society, and the search for alternative lifestyles free from the encroachment of capital. The students’ utopia was a world in which science and technology were used to reduce work hours to a minimum and to make it possible for all people to have equal access to resources and the fruits of collective labor. At the same time, they protested against the greed of imperialist powers, especially in Third World countries, and dreamed of nations living together in peace.

Students on strike

The reverberations of the French May of 1968 were also felt in Colombia, especially within the student movement of the 1970s. However, in contrast to comparable movements in Latin America, the Colombian student movement was relatively weak, never maturing into a united, political front. Even so, in 1971, during President Misael Pastrana Borrero’s administration, the movement held a protest—perhaps the only one—that stirred the entire nation. Students of the Universidad del Valle in Cali went on strike because the Consejo Superior Universitario, the university’s highest administrative board, refused to consider candidates for the position of rector that the students and professors had put forward. The strike had the support of all the country’s student councils, mobilizing the students as never before.

Students at public universities, such as the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, the Universidad de Antioquia, and the Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS) in Bucaramanga, went on strike as well—even students at the private universities of Bogotá, like the Universidad de los Andes, Externado, and the Javeriana, supported them in this. Everywhere, students decried the “cultural infiltration” of North American imperialism, as well as the government’s

inability to reform an educational system whose higher levels they denounced as anti-democratic. At the same time, they lobbied for support of the workers' and peasants' struggles.

The "Cataluña Movement"

At the Jesuit Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, the students in the sociology department had already started organizing in 1970 to demand a more practical orientation in the curriculum from the university administration. In an open letter addressed to the dean of the sociology department, the students asked him to fire a professor of political sociology whose approach, they complained, was "too dogmatic," and who left no room for student opinion. This same year, the conflict between the student committee and the administration exploded in the strike known as the "Cataluña Movement," which was named for the building in which the students held their meetings.

Although the strike was triggered by a tuition hike, students' underlying dissatisfaction with and challenges to the structures of the university also played a fundamental role. They complained that there was no participation whatsoever by professors and students in institutional decisions—in fact, the university's bylaws were even written in Latin. In a letter addressed to the dean of the university, Father Alfonso Borrero, some of the sociology professors declared their support for the movement and demanded greater participation in academic questions and university administration.

The protests spurred other university departments to express their solidarity, which included organizing some "action days of reflection." Alarmed by the unprecedented situation, and in view of the momentum the protests gained in other universities across the country—not to mention the fear that spread in church circles because of the close relationship between Marxism and liberation theology—the Javeriana's administration promptly decided to close the departments of sociology and social work completely in 1971. At the Universidad de los Andes and at the Javeriana, several professors were dismissed, and at several public universities, there were severe confrontations between demonstrators and the police. Pressure from students grew so great that the Colombian secretary of education Luis Carlos Galán promised to review a reform plan for higher education that he had been presented with.

In the end, however, the protest had no concrete results. Rather, the government reacted with a decree that granted the secretary of

education the power to close any and all institutions of secondary and higher education where strikes or activities that generally disturbed “the public order” occurred. On this basis, the Universidad de Antioquia, the UIS, and the Universidad Nacional de Bogotá were closed. The countless assemblies, protests, and demonstrations all over the country were unable to do anything about it, since the government imposed its will by force. This precipitated the gradual decline of the Colombian student movement so that, by the end of the decade, it left almost no traces in national memory.

Decline of the student movement

It is not hard to understand the reasons for this decline when one considers the various ideological tendencies competing to influence Colombian students:

there were communists (through the Juventudes Comunistas [JUCO, the Communist Youth], Trotskyists, Maoists, “Camilists” (admirers of liberation theologian and guerrilla fighter Camilo Torres), nationalists (generally from the Right) and anarchists. One could argue that it was precisely this fierce ideological quarrel-



ling that prevented the student movement from finding a unified structure with which it could impact public discourse in the 1970s.

There were various points of contention. Some guerrilla groups, like the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional [National Liberation Army]) and EPL (Ejército Popular de Liberación [Popular Liberation Army]), recognized the student movement as an opportunity to recruit new supporters among the university youth. Yet groups opposed to armed struggle resisted this. On the other side, Trotskyist and Maoist factions, especially the MOIR (Movimiento Obrero Independiente Revolucionario [Revolutionary and Independent

Demonstrators in the Colombian capital Bogotá march for freedom of the press in 1957 during the civil war (1948-1958) that racked the country.

Workers' Movement]), accused the student movement of being “blind to reality” because real changes would not be effected by students (that is, the “intellectual sector”) but by workers and peasants. In their view, the only reasonable political path for the movement was for students to join these sectors in their revolutionary fight. Still others preferred direct actions in street fighting, like burning cars and throwing stones, but the JUCO attributed the government’s violent suppression of the movement precisely to these provocations. In the end, the student movement of the 1970s succumbed to this internal ideological trench warfare and the influence of leftist extremist trends.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that, although the Colombian student movement achieved only short-lived renown, it became one of the most important forces opposing the Frente Nacional [National Front]—the coalition of the liberal and conservative parties that governed the country from 1958–1974—in the 1970s. Moreover, it managed to generate, even at elite universities like the Universidad de los Andes and the Javeriana, a great deal of critical reflection among students, not only specifically about higher education but also about social conditions in general in the country. Colombian universities have never been the same.

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