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## VENEZUELA: A SOCIOLOGICAL LABORATORY

**Félix Allueva**

In 1968, student protests helped bring about changes in participatory procedures in the university community, in the decision-making process, in student co-administration, and in the relationship between university and society. Despite moderate successes for this movement known as the Movement for Renewal of the University, however, Venezuela at that time was held back by its own less developed structures. There were also other hindrances, such as the educational plans drawn up for the country by the United States, a program attuned to the North American model of development. Furthermore, there were continuing battles for power within the universities between the Left and the Right.

New leadership groups regarded the Movement for Renewal of the University as favorable to their own growth and infiltrated it. People in Venezuela also took note of the protests and actions of the youth movements in other countries of the world. From the United States came rock music and the hippie movement, from France and Germany radical philosophies and the vehemence of the student revolts, and from London psychedelic drugs. Prague gave us a spring that held out the prospect of socialism with a human face and generated discussions about leftist dogmatism.

### **The struggle begins**

In June 1968, the university community began its struggle to achieve financing for the university infrastructure and improvement of the teaching staff. At first, naiveté gained the upper hand and a few anarchistic elements briefly carried the day. But as events unfolded, the university increasingly became the principal agent spurring social changes.

The students' activities produced unusual forms of protest as teachers, workers, and assigned officials of the Universidad Central de Venezuela joined in. Communal actions within and outside the university changed parts of everyday life. In June 1968, the Movement for Renewal of the University had become a reality. As the conflict intensified, President Rafael Caldera's administration ordered the military to occupy the Universidad Central de Venezuela.

This act of government interference dampened many of the hopes for the planned changes for renewal.



**Rioters attack the limousine of Vice President Richard Nixon and his party during their visit to Caracas, Venezuela, on May 13, 1958.**

The more recent Venezuelan protests against the media policies of the Chavez administration in May 2007, however, were more successful, and bear similarities to the legendary Paris May of 1968. Venezuelan students, too, used new political forms. Students took to the streets after decades of apathy and immobility to dem-

onstrate against a government measure designed to shut down a television channel.

In Venezuela, a country divided between the followers of the charismatic president Hugo Chávez and those who oppose him, a new generation of leaders under the age of 25 is emerging. These young students don't identify with any of the existing political parties but don't deny their validity either. They are interested in the democratic system. On the other hand, there is an incipient student front that calls itself "revolutionary." For want of power and significant numbers, its supporters keep reciting the very detailed rules set down by the great helmsman of the Bolivian government.

### **The Venezuelan May**

In May 2007, a national protest movement emerged that unified students on a variety of levels. Universities public and private united; students from different political camps—conservative, progressive, democratic, and even from the so-called ultra-left—different educational levels, middle and higher, and different social classes and regions of the country worked together.

Just as in the French May of 1968, the students took the initiative. They declared themselves autonomous and independent of any party

norms; they had no regard for the interests of the government or the opposition. Also parallel to the French May, these student leaders were very naive and lacking in political history and experience. They were accused of being mere puppets of the empire, servants to the ruling classes, and, in the best of cases, “daddies’ boys.”

### **A broad-based social movement**

But the same Marxist analysis that applied to the decade surrounding the French May pertains in Venezuela as well: Without comprising a social class, the students were an integral part of the people, and so they expressed the interests and struggles of the people. Therefore, the protesting students went beyond making lists of demands and strove to achieve something greater—political debates.

In this way, the student protests, which, after all, began in response to an inefficient and short-sighted government policy, transcended the academic realm and became a broad-based social movement. The strength and novelty of this 2007 movement lay, like that of 1968, in its capacity to communicate situations, needs, and aims without forcing them into previously fixed party schemata.

First, these new social actors took over the streets of the country’s main cities protesting the government’s sanctions against the media. Weeks later, they became the cement binding the social mortar, which, in turn, generated broader waves of protest. These protests were not only about defending the freedom of speech but also about defending human rights and universities’ threatened autonomy. They were also about fighting against repression, and especially against the authoritarian Bolivian leadership’s intention of setting the nation on a totalitarian socialist course.

“The other side of the coin”—the student front defending the government—now began mobilizing to stop the “counterrevolutionaries.” The arguments were so banal, clichéd, and backward-looking that the students merely managed to isolate themselves. Losing most student elections at schools and universities, the “Chavist” students clearly lacked initiative and impact.

### **“Boredom is counterrevolutionary”**

In 1968, the squares and avenues of Paris, Berlin, Prague, and San Francisco filled with young people who had turned slogans and methods of protest inside out—their creativity knew no bounds.

In 2007, the slogans “Forbid the forbidden” and “Imagination to power” regained their meaning in Caracas and other Venezuelan cities. Whether utilizing surprise tactics, mobilizing commando-style at lightning speed, occupying unusual spaces, or “dressing up” in the official pro-government red, the indie youth movement has always been ahead of President Chávez.

The government’s repressive tactics—arrested and wounded students, selective persecution, media attacks and denunciations—are spurring the student movement on, making it larger and stronger. The Internet, communication via SMS, virtual networks, a dose of anarchy, and the nearly 40-year-old democratic tradition have made it possible for the students to withstand the authoritarian ways of their government.

### **Protests spur change of course**

For ten years, the Bolivarian Revolution advanced, but now it has suffered its first defeat. The people of Venezuela rejected the government’s constitutional reform proposal on December 2, 2007. Venezuelan students played a major role in bringing about this change of course. In their new leading role and civic engagement, the students have had three direct and positive consequences: first, they prompted voters to reject the constitutional reform; second, they have started up protest activity again for defending civil rights; third, they have stimulated reflection and, above all, self-criticism among those in the government-supporting part of the movement.

These pro-government students realized for the first time that it is necessary to leave behind the “floodlike and emotional” mobilization “created by the leadership of President Chávez.” Moreover, they accepted “the mismanagement at all the levels . . . the inefficiency of the bureaucracy, and the disastrous administration of the regional and local governments,” as well as the narrow view of the Chavist student leadership. This is not the end of the story, as the protests of 2009 attest. New chapters await us in this Venezuela that has become a veritable sociological laboratory.

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