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# Introduction: Student Movements and Political Change in Contemporary Latin America

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The year 2011 with its series of massive episodes of popular mobilisation in Europe, North America and the Arab region, signals a symbolic comeback of students as a political actor and higher education as a locus of contention and dispute. Yet in many Latin American countries, students had mobilised well before the aforementioned events, including those studied in this special issue. Latin American campuses had been protesting against austerity before this very concept was part of the vocabulary of politicians and the media in industrialised economies. The so-called Washington consensus, that emerged in 1989 as a set of policy recommendations aimed at tackling the main problems of Latin American economies (hyperinflation and stagnation or recession), represented a framework endorsed by most countries in the region. (In a way, the Washington consensus represents a functional equivalent for Latin America of the Maastricht treaty (1992) for the EU.) But its success proved temporary and attempts by governments to impose reforms (e.g. the privatisation of public companies, the de-nationalisation of natural resources, the deregulation of labour laws and of many previously protected sectors such as pensions or education) rapidly encountered resistance. Students engaged in successive waves of protest during the 1990s and 2000s, joining urban and rural workers, indigenous groups, and left parties and unions. These struggles deposed presidents and forced new elections, halted projected reforms and/or brought about new political processes that eventually, in some countries, would be known as the 'pink tide' or new Latin American left. Therefore, student mobilisations over the last three decades can be interpreted within the context of larger and long-lasting conflicts over democracy and redistribution aggravated by the intransigence of neoliberal policy in the region.

The years of neoliberal hegemony resulted in many threats to the democratisation processes that followed the struggles against military dictatorships. Latin American student movements have been a democratising force for most of the twentieth century. Students set in motion this disposition and mobilised to fight the authoritarian modes of neoliberal reforms and the antidemocratic consequences of privatisation and de-regulation.

A significant feature that distinguishes Latin American student movements is the idea that universities should play leading roles in projects of national, autonomous

development. This concept is entrenched in the memory of this movement as one of the key lessons from the struggles of the 1920s and the 1960s, when students sided with popular movements inspired by reformist or revolutionary ideals. Thus, various nationalist projects and ideologies viewed universities as strategic institutions for the construction of the national project. This feature can explain why campuses have often been an arena of political confrontation and why they are regularly exposed to polarising trends much more than other spaces in society. These ideas are related to another singular feature of the development of higher education in the region, namely the salience and extent of the concept of university autonomy, which has sometimes included the notion of territorial autonomy. Probably much more than in other regions, autonomy has thus been seen in a defensive manner, as a legal instrument and a legitimating principle that allows academics to defend themselves from the contingencies taking place ‘out there’. For activists, the protection of these institutions provided by the institutionalisation of university autonomy helped to transform campuses into genuine ‘free spaces’ (Polletta, 1999: 1), i.e. those settings ‘that are removed from the control of dominant groups [ ... ] and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilisation’.

Yet student politics is relevant for understanding broader societal processes in the region for another reason: it provides a breeding ground for what has been sometimes called ‘subterranean politics’ (Kaldor and Selchow, 2013), i.e. issues and groups that pop up at critical junctures and that, given certain favourable conditions, can subvert previous hegemonic orders by introducing new values, by shifting priorities in the public agenda, or, in the most extreme cases, by changing the whole balance of the political system (see, for example, the article by Alonso and Mische in this issue). More precisely, as long as universities (or some of them) remain as loci for the reproduction of national elites, student politics represents a field of connection between subterranean and mainstream politics. Students are able to confront dominant narratives with efficacy because they know the elites very well, as they belong to them. This occurs despite trends towards the massification of higher education both in the global south and the north. But massification has come with a reorganisation of the system by which a few institutions remain – in practice – highly selective. ‘Elitisation’ is taking place at a very rapid speed, with specific patterns varying from country to country. The reorganisation of the higher education system derived from the joint advance of massification and ‘elitisation’ might have effects in the configuration of the field of student politics, as some of the articles in this special issue point out (see Ivancheva and Fleet, and Guzman).

Therefore, over the last few decades, student movements were never completely out of the scene in the region. Yet it is fair to remember that their strength, assertiveness and demands vary greatly across countries and over time. This special issue attempts to answer a few, simple questions. How do we make sense of the recent surge in student movements in the region? Is there something specific about student movements in the twenty-first century that makes them different from earlier movements? Is there something specific about Latin American student movements which they have in common, but which distinguishes them from other protest movements (e.g. the Occupy movement, anti-austerity protests in Europe)? Do the recent protests present continuity or rupture with student movements in Latin America in the last century, or at least since 1968, or are they a new cycle of protests? Do they contest or draw on the legacy or repertoires of past waves of student mobilisation in the region?

The articles included in this special issue focus on events since 2000, even if some of the authors look back further in history to explain relevant processes underlying the current movements. These articles adopt different approaches (from history to

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anthropology and political sociology) to the study of relevant cases in the region, which represent a diversity that has not been properly represented so far in other publications on the topic. Thus, this special issue addresses a gap in scholarly knowledge on student movements in Latin America and by doing so it contributes to debates on the current wave of protest that, since the contentious events of 2011, appears to have spread over the world including advanced economies and developing countries. These events have reinvigorated discussions on political mobilisation and social unrest among academics and the general public.

## **References**

- Kaldor, M. and Selchow, S. (2013) 'The "Bubbling Up" of Subterranean Politics in Europe'. *Journal of Civil Society* 9(1): 78–99.
- Polletta, F. (1999) "'Free Spaces" in Collective Action'. *Theory and Society* 28: 1–38.