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A Regional Student Movement in Latin and South America: The Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes—OCLAE (Latin American and Caribbean Continental Student Organization)

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Introduction

The history of universities and the social transformations in Latin America are deeply intertwined. Mobilization of students at universities and their collective action has had a significant impact on social transformations (Krotsch, 2002). The prominent La Reforma de Córdoba (the Reform of Córdoba) in Argentina, 1918, is a case in point and must be highlighted when studying student movements in Latin America. This reform is a fundamental part of the history of this continent and especially higher education in Latin America.

The reform started in 1918 in Argentina; it engraved in universities (especially public ones) a specific character in terms of community and decision-making processes. The reform aimed at pushing for more autonomy for the university, participation of students and teachers in the decision-making process, academic freedom, and the separation of the university and other institutions such as the army, political parties, and the church (Slon, 2020). As stated by Solano (1998), the students from Córdoba (Argentina) lighted the flame of the university reform, this process started in the, by the time, underdeveloped and clerical Córdoba University but soon moved to many other universities in the country and from there to the rest of Latin America. Furthermore, for some sociologists, this year is especially relevant since they consider it as the year that Latin America entered the twentieth century (Bernheim, 1998).

According to Bernheim (1998), the Córdoba protests presented the first time that the traditional Latin-American university was challenged and an important step toward modernization of higher education in Latin America. The students, also known as the “Reformists” [Los Reformistas] that fought for the reforms, did not hesitate to support other political movements or political parties that represented their interest or advocated for their demands. Moreover, these students acknowledged the necessity of an alliance between the different social sectors as a means to

constitute a popular movement (Solano, 2018). Krotsch (2002) considers that the universities and the movement around the reforms initiated in Córdoba played a key role in the construction of a modern and active civic citizenship in Latin America.

Another notable period in the history of student movements in Latin America, as in many other countries of the world, was in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Hobsbawm (in Muñoz, 2013) during the 1960s, the role of the students both at the social and political arena was more important than ever before, student activism and influence were in the spotlight all over the world. During these years, the Latin-American student movement supported various causes from working-class and feminist movements to anti-imperialist ones (Muñoz, 2013). For Muñoz (2013), this proved that the fights and demands of the student movement were deeply rooted to the political context in which it originated. Furthermore, other authors observe that during the 1960s and the 1970s the student movement in Latin America focused both on university reforms and societal transformations. In this period, most of the countries in the region were under dictatorships, so the main agenda was the fight for democracy, freedom of political organization, participation of students in spheres of decision, academic freedom, and university autonomy. The movement also remained deeply inspired by the Cordoba Reform. After the mobilizations of 1918, the conquest of the autonomy of higher education and the growing debate about the social mission of universities became central agendas. University democratization extended to the position of rector, which became elective, and from this movement the university extension was also born, focused on bringing to society the knowledge produced in the academic environment. Ordorika (2022) suggests that student activism at the time was firmly influenced by the Cuban Revolution and the later death of Che Guevara (Ordorika, 2022).

It was during the period of 1960s and 1970s revolts that the Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes—OCLAE (Latin American and Caribbean Continental Student Organization) as a regional student organization was founded, influenced in particular by the Cuban Revolution and broader social movements in Latin America at the time. This chapter discusses the establishment, the organizational characteristics, and political activities of the OCLAE, and in particular how the historical background and other social events have influenced the OCLAE since its foundation.

This chapter draws on the literature on the history of the Latin-American student movement. However, no scholarly publication exists on the OCLAE. Analytical studies on the structure of OCLAE and the systems of student representations in Latin America more generally are lacking. Therefore, this chapter relies on the primary sources, especially the publications by the OCLAE such as the most recent policy papers, internal reports and press releases, as well as the official statutes of the OCLAE. Content analysis of these primary sources allowed us to understand the formal rules and outcomes of the internal decision-making processes and also the political standing of the organization. We triangulate data from documentary sources with the semi-structured interviews with the student leaders: the current President of OCLAE Leonel Friman (from Cuba), the former representative of Brazil in the Secretariat, Bia Lopes and Dave Oliveros, President of the Venezuelan Federation of University Students, and current member of the General Secretariat. The interviews have been conducted through voice messages, so not simultaneously.

This qualitative study of the OCLAE presented in this chapter takes inspiration from the previous academic literature on student representation (Klemenčič, 2012, 2014), particularly

Klemenčič's work on global comparison of student representation and transnational representative student associations (Klemenčič and Palomares, 2018). This chapter brings the Latin American student movement under a new lens of analysis that has proven to be fruitful investigating student unions in general and in particular the regional representative student associations. The chapter first presents the history of the OCLAE. Next section discusses the particularities of the organizational characteristics of the OCLAE. The following question is guided by the question: how does OCLAE's legitimacy survive going beyond sectorial claims? The conclusion presents the contributions of OCLAE for the Latin American student's movement and the development of its integration through the fifty-five years of existence of the organization.

History of the Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes—OCLAE (Latin American and Caribbean Continental Student Organization)

In 1966, during the IV Latin American and Caribbean Student Congress, the OCLAE was founded by Fidel Castro, leader of the Cuban Revolution (Statues of OCLAE). The idea was to constitute the movement by the time of the “Bogotazo,” the series of riots and protests happened in Colombia after the murder of the presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, in 1948. Bogotazo enabled the founding of the OCLAE. With the votes of twenty-three students' organizations in the IV Latin American and Caribbean Student Congress, when OCLAE was founded, the University Federation of Students of Cuba (FEU Cuba) was elected to OCLAE's presidency (Reyes, 2021). This decision was also made based on the historical contribution of the Cuban student movement, its trajectory, and the fact that this movement had already achieved what was (and is) perceived by student leaders as a free and quality education for all in the country. This decision has been ratified by all student delegates who have participated in each of the student congresses organized since then; the last one took place in 2019 in Caracas, Venezuela (Interview, Leonel Friman).

Since its foundation the main objective of the OCLAE has been the fight for a quality and free education for all. Furthermore, the OCLAE has led and promoted or supported other fights such as the fight for peace, for sovereignty, and independence of people and countries, for gender equality, the protection of the environment and against any kind of discrimination. The OCLAE hasn't focused only on a sectorial agenda, but rather on all the social problems in the region and that is what makes the student movement unique in the region (Interview, Leonel Friman).

The main principles that the organization stands for are anti-imperialism, peace, equality, anti-neocolonialism, and antiracism. The anti-imperialist principle refers to the understanding that the students cannot allow their countries and people to be the back door of other countries or allow the implementation of genocidal policies in order to get advantage of its natural resources (Interview, Leonel Friman).

The OCLAE members understand imperialism as moving in the complexity of human relationships, which include education. According to Bia Lopes, former Executive Secretariat of OCLAE, imperialism promotes “ideals of life that are convenient to the interests of foreign nations, like the myth that the Latin Americans are submissive and must keep their eyes on the

United States and its way of life instead of seeing the wealth and potential of their own region” (Interview, Bia Lopes). When debating anti-imperialist education, the students are seeking an educational system that serves their own people and national interests, with plurality, diversity, and respect for native peoples and resources, and also inspired by the expression of Simón Bolívar “that the nations march towards their greatness at the rate that their education marches” (Interview, Dave Oliveros).

One of the main objectives of OCLAE is to support the Latin American integration through cooperation among Latin American student movements. The fight for peace in Colombia, against the economic blocking of the United States against Cuba that lasts over sixty years, and the economic blocking against Venezuela are some of OCLAE’s main priorities, as well as the solidarity with the Palestinian and Saharai causes (interview, Dave Oliveros).

OCLAE: A Different Regional Student Association

OCLAE is a special example of a regional association with unique characteristics that make it differ from other regional representative student associations. The first main difference can be found in the constituency. While All-Africa Students Union (AASU), European Students’ Union (ESU), and the Commonwealth Students Association (CSA) are composed entirely by students of third level education (in some cases including postgraduate students), OCLAE has also a consistent membership from secondary education (OCLAE Statutes; OCLAE, 2021a, c; Reyes, 2021).

The membership without distinctions among second-level, university, and postgraduate student representation is composed by (OCLAE Statutes, art. 16–22):

- Non-governmental national student organizations (Full members);
- Non-governmental local or campus-based student organizations (Associate members);
- Sub-regional umbrellas of student and youth organizations (Consultative status);

This perfectly couples with the agenda of the organization, which is transversal and political—even partisan sometimes. The same statutes, in the preamble, declare: “Students of the American continent and of the rest of the world, in their fight to conquer true social justice, are challenged to achieve an economic, political and social order that can be fair and equitable” (OCLAE Statutes, 1).

The other key difference, that makes OCLAE similar to a social movement organization (SMO—as according to Klemenčič, 2012, p. 8), is the absence of paid professional staff. The two Secretariats of OCLAE, the General Secretariat and the Executive Secretariat, are both political bodies composed of volunteer representatives of the national member unions and organizations. The absence of professionalized staff and the limited functional differentiation coexist with a hierarchical political coordination, merging elements from SMOs, and interest groups. Another key component of the available internal resources is the stable office of the organization placed in Havana (Cuba), that shows the support coming from the Cuban government, as also underlined by many interviewed student leaders in “La Calle es Nuestra” (“The Street Is Ours”), the most recent publication on OCLAE, edited on the fifty-fifth anniversary of its foundation, in 2021 (OCLAE Statutes, art. 5; OCLAE, 2013, p. 3; Reyes, 2021).

Not all of these structures include the national student population in the same way, but similarly to ESU in Europe, OCLAE is representative of the entire student body in Latin America (Klemenčič and Galan Palomares, 2018, p. 383). The structure of OCLAE is composed of current national student leaders, and usually the elected continental representatives do not leave their roles at the national level. Reinforcing that, all the elections to positions within OCLAE do not elect individuals but organizations, so for the entirety of the mandate it is a specific member union covering the position, but the person can change while changes in national executives happen (OCLAE Statutes, art. 38).

The key democratic moment of the organization is the CLAE—Latin American and Caribbean Congress of Students, held every two years (*ibid.* art. 34). All members contribute to the elaboration of the political priorities of the organization and elect the organizations that will compose the General Secretariat and the Executive Secretariat. The General Secretariat, with roles of continuous political supervision, approval of the budget, and organization of the CLAE, is composed by elected sub-regional representatives (Mexico and North America, Central America, Spanish-speaking Caribbean, French-speaking Caribbean, Andes, Southern Cone), the topic-based secretaries, working groups, and the Executive Secretariat (*ibid.* art. 31, 37). This latter body, also elected by the CLAE, is the executive structure of OCLAE. It is composed of four organizations, representing: a) Central and North America; b) Caribbean; c) Southern Cone; d) Andes (*ibid.* art. 29). Each of the four members also takes one among the following positions: a) President of OCLAE; b) Executive secretary as treasurer, organization officer, or communication officer (*ibid.*). It is a custom that a Cuban from FEU (University Student Union) leads the organization as president, both for the functional advantage of living in the host country, and for the symbolic value of what is considered the most influential union in an achieved national liberation process (Reyes, 2021, p. 47, 60, 103).

The President of OCLAE describes OCLAE as an organization of organizations. There is a shared understanding that the most important thing for OCLAE is not the construction of a student entity made individually, by people, but the construction of an organization that can bring together those who have reference in its bases, the student movement that really organizes the schools and universities of the continent. That's why student organizations are chosen and not people: because a project is chosen (Interview, Leonel Friman). The organizations that participate in OCLAE have a common objective: Latin American sovereignty, public, free, unrestricted, and quality education for students. A student as a person could not represent all this collective effort to build socially referenced public policies (interview, Bia Lopes).

Looking again at Klemenčič's typologies (2012, p. 8), we can say that both the mode of action and the outputs prove to be really original for the Latin-American regional student association. OCLAE supports the national struggles of its members and promotes campaigns, going from institutional lobbying to high-risk activism (as in McAdam, 1986, p. 68). Ángel Arzuaga Reyes, president of the organization from 1984 until 1986, mentioned the medical support provided to Nicaragua in occasion of the VII CLAE, and the support provided to the student opposition to the Pinochet regime in Chile (Reyes, 2021, p. 67). OCLAE tends to mix the national and the intercontinental campaigns, putting them together in official documents and statements (e.g., OCLAE, 2021b, c).

The organization is also part of higher education political processes which allow for Latin American student involvement. Mirthia Julia Brossard Oris (President 2018–19) described the

efforts of OCLAE to get heard at the Regional Conference of Higher Education (CRES) hosted by UNESCO in 2018, and the contrast to the Summit of the Americas of the same year (part of the system of the Organization of American States—OAS) condemned for its political standings and the reduced space allowed for student participation. OCLAE then joined the Summit of Peoples (Cumbre de los Pueblos) expressing a completely different agenda that denounced the presence of unrepresentative organizations at the OAS Summit, it declared the will to get mobilized for the 100th anniversary of the Cordoba Reform and renewed the goals of peace in Colombia and of the defense of self-determination for Latin American and Caribbean peoples (Reyes, 2021, p. 108, 110–12). The organization has a consultative status within the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and it is an official partner of UNESCO, while former presidents and the current General Secretariat have aimed to get a stronger position in these settings (OCLAE, 2021c, p. 4; Reyes, 2021, p. 114; UNESCO 2021, p. 13).

The Coexistence of a Stable and Formalized Student Organization and the Militant Student Movements at the National Level. How Does OCLAE's Legitimacy Survive Going beyond Sectorial Claims?

With members at the national level having the characteristics of social movement organizations, at first glance the structure of the OCLAE, with a stable and formalized hierarchy, may seem contradictory. It must be taken into consideration the fact that the scope of OCLAE's political action, which goes beyond the struggle for education and students' sectorial claims, is a key element of the entity's characterization. Going from room to room in schools and universities, the *modus operandi* of the student's movement goes from organizing demonstrations in the streets to presenting demands for the rights of students or taking a stand on major issues affecting the countries of the region in political processes. However, it does not mean that advocacy is rejected by its members, and it is also part of the mode of action of the organization, which usually adopts activist activities in the first place to gain space for its agenda in institutionalized structures.

The main struggles on the political agenda of the national student organizations and the OCLAE revolve around the ongoing structural problems of the continent: the fight for public education, for access to public higher education, against the commodification of education and the rise of private education institutions, against the presence of large foreign capital education conglomerates in our countries, struggle for free student passes in public transport. Furthermore, there are a series of social struggles embraced by students: the struggle for democracy, against imperialist interference on the continent, the struggle in defense of women's lives, for students' mental health and for decent employment (interview, Bia Lopes). Since these social struggles are part of students' daily lives, its members understand that they should be fought by OCLAE.

The militant character of most of the members also helps to understand the constituency of the Executive Secretariat. In 2022, the Secretariat is composed of the national student representatives of Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. According to Dave Oliveros, member of the General

Secretariat of OCLAE: “three of these countries represent revolutionary political processes in the region that are examples in promoting the access to a free and quality education, which is broadly ratified and recognized by the membership of the organization” (Interview, Dave Oliveros).

Some of OCLAE’s members declare that seeking unity in the midst of diversity is an important method for the performance of the organization’s work. This should happen not by means of imposition, but by means of dialogue. As stated by the former President of the University Student Federation of Cuba, José Angel: “We have always insisted on dialogue, defending our convictions and explaining the position of the FEU, always linked to the principles of solidarity and humanism. In different scenarios we have made it clear what Cuba’s position is in each aspect. We have been consistent in the constant support of sister student organizations such as the UNEN in Nicaragua, the FBU in Venezuela, the UNE in Brazil and the CUB in Bolivia. Those links that are already historic do not diminish our shows of solidarity and affection for the rest of the federations of the continent. We share with any of them, but leaving well marked what our political positions are and what our principles are” (Alma Mater Magazine, 2021).

The OCLAE creates and decides to support the campaigns of its members in the General and Executive Secretariat. From that instance the lines of action are organized by the OCLAE members to support and participate in the campaigns. Some of the most common methods to express regional solidarity and promote consciousness about the processes that countries in the region are experiencing are through: regional days of mobilization through national committees organized by the student’s federations and OCLAE, protests in front of embassies and consulates, and social media campaigns (Interview, Dave Oliveros). Furthermore, OCLAE gives support to the national federations of students in their campaigns all over the continent, promoting it and encouraging that other national unions produce content or organize activities regarding the campaign with its own membership.

Recent examples of these student-led mobilizations are several. In 2019, Brazil and Chile experienced mass student demonstrations. In Brazil, the “Education Tsunami” convened by the National Student Union started the first revolt against the government of the present Jair Bolsonaro. The reaction of the academic community to the statements of the then Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub that 30 percent of the university budget would be cut because the university’s communities were “promoting agitation” created a great indignation in the country (Rede Brasil Atual, 2019).

With huge popular support of the student’s body ratified in assemblies which took place in the universities to organize the protests (Gomes and Mascari, 2019), the Tsunami of Education brought out millions to the streets with the support of political leaders of the more diverse ideological tendencies. As a result, the cuts were reversed throughout the year and thus the student movement imposed the first political defeat to the Bolsonaro government (Cancian and Bran, 2019). The campaign was composed of three big national street demonstrations: 15 and 30 of May and 13 of August organized by the National Students Union of Brazil, member organization of OCLAE’s Executive Secretariat, and therefore re-launched and supported with various solidarity actions by sister organizations across Latin and South America.

Also in 2019, in Chile, the kick-off for social mobilization was the 3.75 percent increase in public transport fares in Santiago. This led to demonstrations by high school students on October 17 and 18, the so-called “catracaços,” in which large groups of students gathered to jump the subway turnstile as a form of protest. With the repression applied to the movement of

high-school students and the lack of retreat, the demonstrations took on a much larger and more generalized volume, including new agendas. OCLAE organized, through its national unions in other countries, protests in solidarity in Chile's embassies and consulates. Even after the increase was revoked, mass protests continued: on October 25, the "biggest demonstration in the history" of Chile was called, in which more than 1.2 million people gathered around Plaza Italia (BBC, 2019), the main stage of demonstrations in the city. This marked a turning point in the correlation of forces and was the kick-off for the convening of the constituent process in the country, as it was the start of the mass protests claiming for social rights and structural changes that would only be possible with the adoption of a new Constitution.

In sum, the OCLAE as a formal organization finds legitimacy among its members because it is a direct reflection of the militant character of those who build the organization. The structure, that represents a continuous coordination directly led by national student leaders, is legitimized by the strong prestige of the organizations in the Executive Secretariat and by the coherent political nature of common actions, that are based on Solidarity and mutual support more than on top-down mobilizations at continental level. As demonstrated by the interviews with the present and former student leaders of OCLAE, the composition of the Executive Secretariat and the long-standing permanence of the FEU of Cuba in the presidency are not seen as contradictions by its members, but rather as a confirmation of the shared political agenda and principles that are common to all.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the organizational structure of OCLAE and its main political priorities in the Latin American educational and political context. The organization represents an important platform for the integration of students from the region by institutionalizing the cooperation of national and local student organizations in Latin America. The practice of solidarity between member organizations, engagement in joint campaigns, and the construction of activities and meetings show that this integration has been consolidated since the foundation of the entity fifty-five years ago. The democratic mechanisms of participation of members and adoption of shared principles reinforce this cooperation. OCLAE, with its strong non-sectoral agenda, has made use of practices going from institutional lobbying to risk activism for decades. This is a reflection of the involvement of sectors of Latin American youth with regional policy that allowed OCLAE to reach its nineteenth congress, to be held in 2022.

This integration, of course, has not been easily consolidated and continues to be the target of threats. The current President of OCLAE, Leonel Friman, stated in an interview for the book "La Calle es Nuestra" ("The Street Is Ours") (OCLAE, 2021a, p. 3; Reyes, 2021) that "the attempts to destabilize are the result of convergent interests of the world elites of transnational capitalism, the United States government, as well as the oligarchic fractions and dependent bourgeoisies, and the objective of re-establishing neoliberal policies in some cases, and radicalizing them in others, dismantling Latin American integration and liquidating the democratic and social welfare gains in some countries." This reality has had as a response the combative and haughty attitude of the students, the workers, and the people in the streets, which raises the need to change the system.

In the face of imperialism's attempt to restore, the people have begun to react by showing the value of progressive struggles. This is demonstrated by the recent popular rebellions in Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala; the failure of the coup in Bolivia; the resistance of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua to the blockades imposed by the US government and the election of progressive governments in Mexico and Argentina. In many of these processes, the student movement was the catalyst for the claims for social change.

Even with the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which conditioned the organization to operate virtually, despite the great barriers to internet access on the continent, OCLAE member federations continued to mobilize and work for their integration (Interview, Leonel Friman). There were ample events organized during 2020 and 2021.

In June 2020 the organization held the online forum "OCLAE vs COVID: Acción y Denuncia" (OCLAE vs COVID: Action and Denunciation), with the participation of thirty student federations. Furthermore, in October 2020, the online meeting "El movimiento secundario in América Latina y el Caribe" (The Secondary Movement in Latin America and the Caribbean) was organized and in November 2020, the "Encuentro Juvenil Internacional Ideas que son banderas" (International Youth Meeting Ideas that are Flags). From March 19 to 20, 2021, a virtual meeting was held, in which thirty-one student federations paid tribute to Fefel Varona, martyr of the OCLAE, on the fifty-third anniversary of his death. Five days later in the first workshop of the VI National Meeting "Friends of the Revolution" the theme of the unity of the student movement for a free public education was addressed. Throughout July and August, virtual panels and a face-to-face brigade were held in Havana to commemorate the organization's fifty-fifth anniversary.

In July 2021, OCLAE held, together with the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Guadalajara (FEU UdG), the "Encuentro Estudiantes en Resistencia: Soñar, Luchar y Resistir" (Encounter Students in Resistance: Dreaming, Fighting, and Resisting). First in-person meetings occurred later that year. In November 2021, the first face-to-face meeting in two years of OCLAE's General Secretariat occurred. In February 2022, another meeting of its General Secretariat and the Launch of its nineteenth Congress happened. In April 2021, OCLAE organized its 1st School of Political Training for Student Leaders.

The specific way of organizing of the Latin American student movement and the features of OCLAE, which represents its aggregate at regional level, are deeply interconnected to the history of movements and to geopolitics in the region. This chapter provides a first analysis of how OCLAE works. However, our chapter also leaves many questions open that could bring further research in the future. How the changes in the political context(s) have impacted the student movement and its political standings could be analyzed, both with an historical perspective and with a social-political one, looking at the most recent changes in Latin-American governments. A study of the tools used in internal and external communication could be interesting, considering OCLAE as an international organization whose leadership is directly affected by an embargo limiting access to the internet. Finally, the OCLAE leadership, and its legacy in Latin American politics could bring to interesting results, considering the strong connection existing among the student and political activism spheres in those countries.

These and other questions on student movements in Latin America are relevant because of the variety of national contexts in which OCLAE members operate in, and for the political nature of Latin American student activism that brings students and their organizations to the frontline of social and political changes in Latin America.

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Part B
Student Politics and
Representation in Africa