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C E P A L

Review

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Youth as a social movement in Latin America

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In this article the author depicts in general terms the main directions taken by youth social movements in the history of Latin America in this century. He begins by sketching in the student, military and political movements in and around the 1920s, when youth played a leading role, in university reform for example, together with some of the main doctrines, such as anti-oligarchism, Latin Americanism and the concepts of people and nation.

From 1930 important changes occur in the organization and attitudes of young people: the youth sections of the political parties gain in importance, the university students become professionalized, and the values of modernization and development are enhanced. In the beginning the focus is on the conflict between the traditional and the modern; then it moves on to the form which modernization should take and the manner of attaining it. In some countries this latter aspect of the conflict acquires great virulence and polarization, the tragic culmination of which is the starting point for the 1980s. In his concluding paragraphs the author asks some of the questions implicit in the present situation concerning the attitudes of young people, in terms of their links with work, education, family and politics, the possibilities of participation or exclusion, and the reactions which all this may provoke.

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Touraine's text quoted in the epigraph emphasizes a number of details rarely noted in connection with the significance of the youth movement —specifically student and university— in Latin America. It is usual to refer to its function as a political protagonist, whose relevance is recognized by society, and its capacity to speak on behalf of others, setting itself up as a kind of group or sector above the classes. It can also be shown that the historical period in which it gains importance begins approximately in 1920, coinciding in a number of countries with the so-called crisis of the oligarchy, and that it reaches its end in the first half of the 1960s, coinciding with the end of the populist era. During this specific period it is argued that the function of youth was perhaps similar to that of the Russian "intelligentsia" of the 19th century; the same term is even used to refer to it.

This comparison with the Russian populist "intelligentsia" is extraordinarily seductive, partly because the Latin American young people themselves in the early days of their activities recognized its influence —largely through literature— and also because of certain similarities in some of the structural features of the societies in which the two movements operated, especially with respect to the nature

and role of the various social classes. Although it would be of interest to dwell on the analysis of the social preconditions for the existence of these Latin American "intelligentsias", and to explore the reasons for their decline, the purpose of this paper is rather to highlight the content of their ideologies, or what might be called the formulation of their social projects, because this is primarily what made them into social movements. To this end, we have selected certain historical factors of particular relevance in the constitution of the social projects for which "youth" saw itself as the vehicle.

The "Córdoba Reform" (1918) is usually taken as the key date in the emergence of a youth ideology. It is of interest to note that, although the keynote was given by the student movement, other specifically military movements between 1910 and 1930 claimed the character and status of youth. There were, for example, the "lieutenants' revolution" in Brazil (1924) and at approximately the same time the so-called "military youth movement" in Chile.

The *leitmotiv* of both movements was conflict with the oligarchy; this is an important fact, for the course of Latin American populism is set by confrontation with the oligarchy and the intention to establish a politico-social order to take the place of oligarchic rule. This anti-oligarchic movement was not confined to youth; there were a number of political movements in and around the 1920s which took this line. These movements are often identified with the so-called irruption of the middle sectors: the first *alessandrismo* in Chile, *irigoyenismo* in Argentina, *batleismo* in Uruguay, the various elements of the Mexican revolution until they were consolidated by Obregón in 1920, and many other similar cases in different Latin American countries.

The youth movement took part in these events, but it did not wish to see itself merely as an expression of the demands of the middle sectors. Young people preferred to conceive of themselves —like their Russian fellows— as an "intelligentsia", i.e., "people who think for themselves" and do not represent any specific social interest. It may be noted in passing that the concept of being a group located above the interests of particular sectors is a feature which

the student movement shared with the military youth movement.

In the ambiguous and in some cases remote attitude of young people towards the demands put to the oligarchies by the middle sectors may be found perhaps part of the explanation for the sometimes clear division between youth, populism and a more liberal concept of politics. The young people were to some extent attracted to liberalism, taking this word in its broadest sense; however, they frequently saw it as a creed concerned only with political institutions and lacking any other content, and they therefore distanced themselves from pure liberalism. Nor should the tragic significance of the First World War be forgotten, for it was seen as the ruination of the values of European liberalism.

On the other hand, the student youth movement had to cope not only with the crisis of oligarchic rule but also with a working-class movement which in many cases had a strong influence on anarchic thinking, to which the student movement was not averse either. This fact is mentioned because it helped to ensure that the oligarchy was confronted not through conflict with the middle class but in terms of a conflict between oligarchy and people, a characteristic theme of populism's political outlook.

The youth movement of the time had three central interrelated axes which had a strong influence on the shaping of its ideology as well as far-reaching immediate and subsequent effects. These focuses are the concept of Latin America and Latin Americanism and the ideas of people and nation.

In a way, the "Latin Americanism" of the young people was connected with the confrontation with the oligarchy. The oligarchy was described as displaying a certain cosmopolitanism, in the sense of identification with things European. The European model of civilization began to fall into disfavour from the time of the First World War. There then arose an ideology which, seeing that civilization in crisis, indicated a new role for America. Thus, the students of Córdoba were saying to the students of Argentina and America: "...the new incipient cycle of civilization will have its roots in America because irresistible historical factors

so decree, and it requires a total reversal of human values and a clear lead for spiritual forces, in concert with a broad democracy, without dogmas or prejudices".

It is of interest to mention two significant facts. The first is that the "American conscience" was formed in exile, and the second is that this conscience was born through literature. The Argentine Manuel Ugarte wrote the following: "We discovered two truths: first that our production was joined within a single literature; second that as individuals we belonged to a single nationality, taking a panoramic view of Iberoamerica from Europe. Amado Nervo was Mexican, Rubén Darío Nicaraguan, Chocano was born in Peru, Vargas Vila in Colombia, Gómez Carvallo in Guatemala and we in Argentina; but a connection, a likeness, a purpose identified us all. More important than the language was the situation, and more than the situation was the will to give shape in the kingdom of the mind to what we deliberately designated our great fatherland".

From that moment this Latin Americanist ideology was to develop in several ways. On the one hand, there was a search for the "authenticity and identity" of things Latin American; on the other, there was anti-imperialism, embryonic at that time but later decisive in youth ideology.

The concepts of nation and people conflicted with the values implicit in the idea of nation-oligarchy. The people was presented as a model for the formation of the new values of the nation; it was set up almost as the historic form of an ideal nationhood, and it was often in literature that this purpose appeared with greatest clarity. Form this standpoint, the people possesses a number of ethical qualities —solidarity, honesty— which enable it to raise the nation up again from the corruption of the oligarchy. The people is seen as the vehicle of two fundamental goals in the shaping of the new nation: the concepts of justice and socialism. It was also thought that its traditional forms of organization were prototypes of socialism; hence the whole concept of Latin American indigenism.

It was necessary to achieve the political unity of the nation, whose weakness had been brought out by the crisis of the oligarchy, through a vigorous popular consensus. This led, paradoxically, to an overstatement of the purely ideological value of the notion of people. According to this view, the concept of people had an almost purely political significance: it was identified with and subsumed in the concept of nation and it had value only in terms of the nation. Here too we find part of the explanation for the subsequent overvaluation of the notion of State, for while the people is the foundation of the nation and is made up of various groups with different interests, the State is what constitutes in practice the national unity.

The 1929 crisis was the decisive influence in the next decade. As many writers have pointed out, in addition to its economic effects, it meant that in the sphere of ideology liberalism was viewed with even greater disfavour than before. There were some paradoxical elements in this dissatisfaction with liberalism: it was found among conservatives as well as innovators. The decade of the 1930s was one of strong politicization, which meant to some extent that the independence of youth was less important than the global political option. The youth problem was subsumed in political polices; this period saw the emergence of the "party youth sections". In some cases, indeed, the youth movements became parties.

It must also be noted that, since 1930 and with much greater intensity since the Second World War, the majority of the Latin American countries have undergone structural transformations which, in conjunction with urbanization and industrialization, have altered the composition of the social classes and groups, as well as their weight and significance. To some extent the students, while still seeing themselves as the "revolutionary intelligentsia" mobilizing the people, tended also to see themselves in the role of promoters of the process of transformation and development. In a way, they were the vehicles of the new science and the new technology. There certainly was an ideology of development, supported by some social and political sectors, but it was often formulated, elaborated and promulgated by the university intellectuals.

The widely-welcomed policy of modernization meant that the whole of society

conceived a new role for the university, which was no longer seen merely as a revolutionary focus. The awareness grew that a modern State requires higher education and that new intellectuals, scientists and professionals had to be created. They were to come from the social sector of the middle groups, who thus acquired a privileged position. The State, the economy and society needed these new intellectuals and professionals and they would need them even more in the future; the old generations were inadequate, for they had adjusted poorly to the requirements of modernization. In this situation young people felt that they had room and that their future was open and promising.

In a way this was the beginning of the period of the "professionalization" of the universities (although, of course, in our type of society the professionals still retain certain broader intellectual characteristics). It was the universities which disseminated the new values of modernization and development, formulated them in terms of a reasonably effective ideology, and succeeded in creating a collective image of themselves, one of the main features of which was the existence of a promising future founded on the potential wealth of each of the region's countries.

This emphasis on the future and on the creative nature of science and technology meant that the intellectuals of development, and with them several young university people, had begun to discover that neither traditional cultural values nor popular values could provide a firm foundation for future policies. This marked a divergence from the "populists" of the 1920s and 1930s who thought that they had found in the people the model of the nation. There was assuredly a degree of looking "outwards" which, while it did not mean the loss of "Latin Americanism", did imply a change of tone, and it was not unusual for the region to be described in terms of underdevelopment.

Although the universities never became totally professionalized, encyclopaedism, dilettantism and rhetoric began to be seen as undesirable and in conflict with the policy of specialization. The great theme was progress, and science and technology were the means for achieving it. It must be stressed that democracy was also believed to be the necessary political framework for the attainment of that goal, and that the values of progress and democracy were interrelated and mutually supportive.

The ideology of development was preached among university youth and spread from it. Development was seen as an urgent political necessity that no government could disregard. This ideology was also established as a base for the launching of social criticism, more particularly against the traditional society and its representatives, who were accused of acting as a brake on the longed-for development.

Although the idea of the revolutionary alliance of "intellectuals, artists, students and workers" had not yet emerged with such great force, the ideology of development sought to become a national creed capable of inspiring both the elite and the masses. The use of these terms is already significant in itself.

In the 1960s modernization was already in many places no longer merely an aspiration but a real and functioning process. The conflicts which arose from that moment were connected to a large extent with the contradictions of modernization itself. The traditional form of conflicts in the past started from the contradiction between the traditional and the modern; what was now being discussed was the direction to be taken by modernization and the changes needed for its attainment. In short, there was agreement about the need to modernize and eliminate the obstacles of the traditional structures, but there was also a big debate about the forms of modernization. The topic most expressive of the agreements, disputes and confusion was agrarian reform.

The option for the development route, of course, did not amount merely to an ideological discussion. The Cuban revolution was a concrete experience; there were other options, such as those advocated by the Alianza para el Progreso. All this had a strong impact on youth; this is not surprising, since, after all, the debate was about the possibilities of the future.

While it is true that the old traditional structure was rejected and there was disagreement about the future, it must not be forgotten that the biggest problems lay in the present. The difficulties were evident in the student world. For some, secondary and higher education was still a route for ascent and

mobility; this was not always the case for others. Some placed their hopes in a modernization which could give them a place as technicians and professionals; others were realizing that job opportunities were beginning to decline.

In the universities the problem took the form of a debate between "modernization" and "reform". The goals of modernization were primarily to adapt the universities to the purposes of development, especially with respect to assimilation and the creation of science and technology. Changes were also encouraged in the university structures —departmentalization, hours of work, and ratio of teaching to research— with a view to producing a more dynamic structure. The key words in this operation were efficiency and rationalization.

The advocates of reform did not avoid the topics of modernization, but they placed greater emphasis on democratization in the search for a university community and, primarily, on the themes of the social function of the university. It is interesting that the words solidarity and justice kept cropping up, used not only in relation to the disadvantaged and against traditional society, but also as a rejection of the competitive, individualist and professionalizing outlook of the modern university. The demand for justice was also a rejection of the form taken by development.

In this context, the student movement was strongly influenced by the general political changes taking place in Latin America in those years. The tendency to take matters to extremes had its effects in the debate about modernization and reform. For some, the "bourgeois and reactionary" university could have no better fate than to be destroyed; for others, the university, "a launching pad for chaos and communism", should be taken under control and heavily purged.

The repercussions of this conflict on society are well documented and the often tragic results have been repeatedly discussed. However, it is useful to return to the paragraph from Alain Touraine which served as the starting point for this paper: according to him, the 1970s saw the last battles fought by young radicalized intellectuals. If this were so, what might be foreseen for the present decade?

One of the points of greatest current concern is to identify the role that young people can play in the consolidation or defence of a stable democratic order in the region and in the present situation of crisis. This concern is accentuated by the clear influence of the crisis on the conduct of young people: the possible effects of such phenomena as exclusion from the world of work or intellectual idleness are of undeniable importance in this conduct. We must also wonder about the extent to which the future behaviour of young people will be expressed in the form of a youth movement.

As we have seen, the group which appeared as representative of youth was, generally speaking, the student movement. Today it is difficult to believe that the differences of social class or stratum will be erased or disappear in the formation of a single youth movement, but it is possible to conceive of the formulation of a youth identity on the basis of specific problems: an identity in terms of the stratum to which the student belongs and in relation to the existing social institutions. Of course there are young peasants, young workers and young students; the important thing is to determine, how a young person establishes his relationship with the status of peasant, worker or student.

In Latin America there have not only been changes within each social group but also in the relationships between the different groups and strata. The crisis of the industrialization model can also be seen as the crisis of the relationship between the different social groups of which it is comprised. Accordingly, what is taking place is a process of de-structuring which implies a break with the old identities, something which is also happening in the political and cultural fields.

In addition to the transformations described above, account must also be taken of the changes in the relationship which young people establish with the basic social institutions, such as school, family, and work. In this connection, two facts can be stressed which affect young people from the various social strata; firstly, the existence of a certain kind of exclusion and, secondly, the fact that young people are making demands which these institutions, as they exist today, are generally unable to satisfy. Attendance at school, for example —or even at university— does not necessarily mean inclusion in the sphere of the

culture or the professions. And in some areas of education there are signs of material and spiritual privation affecting the condition of youth. Because of the crisis, it is often impossible to break away from the family; this leads to conflicts because if affects young people's need for independence. As far as work is concerned, the crisis clearly accentuates exclusion; inclusion is often only partial or intermittent.

Since these three institutions —work, school and family— all foster socialization, it is reasonable to think that the difficulty of integration will have the foreseeable result, in a specific way for each stratum, of a crisis of identity and to some extent an anti-institutional attitude. The question is whether we are not witnessing the birth of what might be called a "consciousness of exclusion" in which a state of conflict is established with all the political and institutional elements which define this exclusion. This separation from institutions may lead to the development of a kind of behaviour characterized by passivity or withdrawal or, on the contrary, to a demand for "everything and now". Clearly, this kind of attitude will have a definite influence on the stability and continuity of democracy.

It is clear that a crisis such as the present one indicates a certain crisis of identity for young people, but it also implies a profound uncertainty about the future. It is possible therefore that young people may be trying to establish a kind of adolescent subculture almost as a definitive identity, when by definition youth is something transitory and a starting-point more than a destination.

It is true that some of the problems described here affect youth in particular, but they are assuredly problems of the whole of society as well. The crisis now affecting the majority of the Latin American countries implies options and conflicts. These take the form, in the various social groups and sectors, of conflicts of specific interests; among young people, in contrast, they tend to emerge primarily as disputes and conflicts about direction. As we have seen, in generic terms the traditional conflict in Latin America has been between the progressive and the traditional, in all their different forms. However, can it be asserted today that this is still the focus of the conflict? Many people doubt it

and tend to see this focus in terms of exclusion-inclusion.[1] The attitudes which emerge would tend, according to this view, to depend on which of these two sectors the persons concerned belong to.

The "included" often show tendencies towards individual mobility or passive conformism; the "excluded" show forms of anomy and deviant behaviour or, at times, a strong tendency to emphasize elements of community solidarity, although often with attitudes of opposition to institutions, or at least of remoteness from them. In a difficult economic context it is understandable that young people should reject a politico-institutional system which they see as purely formal, but there is also the possibility of the regenerative participation of young people in the institutions. It is impossible to predict which tendency will prevail, for there are many factors which will determine whether apathy and rejection or, on the contrary, participation will win the day; all we can do is to suggest some of the elements which influence the choice.

In Latin America young manual workers and young people from the working-class strata in general have tended to behave as representatives of their class rather than as young people as such. Nevertheless, the participation of young people in the trade-union movement, for example, may indicate renovation. There are differences between young and old manual workers; the education gaps are often large, and their social experience is also different.

It cannot be denied that students —especially university students— have traditionally played an important role and they show a stronger tendency to define themselves as young people. However, the role of the students had much to do with the symbolic value attached to the university in our countries, for it was one of the obligatory reference points of national life, and this situation has now begun to change. The increased access to the university has meant a loss by the students of the status of a privileged elite. In the Latin American experience the

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[1] See the article by J. Martínez and E. Valenzuela on *Juventud popular y anomia* in this same issue.

university has played the role of "society's thinker"; today there are other bodies which also perform this function. To some extent the university has ceased to be the preferred forum of the debate, and this has affected the role of the student movement. There is probably a dual movement; a stronger youth identity in areas where it has traditionally been weak, and less influence, although still an important one, attached to what used to be the youth movement *par excellence.*

Many other changes could be mentioned, but it is better to return to the focus of the present concerns. Since young people are to a certain extent social protagonists, the question is how can the problem of democracy be restated, even

in unfavourable circumstances. A democratic system, in addition to what it implies as an institutional form, is a recognition of the interplay between possible and diverse options. Here youth has a key role: it might say to itself that it is for youth to determine what are to be the differences from what exists at present. The purpose of democratization —from the youth standpoint— is not only to increase the opportunities of involvement in what already exists, but also to open the way to new options and modes of establishing the social relationship. Leaving aside a kind of youth Messianism, youth's proposal would have to be susceptible of formulation as a proposal for society.