



**A Matrix for the Comparative Study of Student Movements: Twentieth
Century Latin American, U.S. and Indian Student Movements**

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Abstract:

University student movements are diverse socio-cultural entities. Depending on the cultural and economic moment, university student movements have been intensely political entities that participate in steering the aims of government and nation. However at other moments, student movements have been less concerned with wider socio-political issues, and have worked mainly within the realm of student issues and university administration. This paper applies a matrix to analyze the commonalities and differences between various student movements and to understand more about their relationships to their immediate and broader environments. This article examines three student movements, and some of the factors leading to their evolution in India, Argentina and the United States by building on concepts first introduced by Philip Altbach in 1968.

Introduction:

Despite the fact that post-secondary education systems vary incredibly within and between different political and economic systems, student activism is a common element within higher education. There is no obvious explanation behind why student activism occurs, especially since it takes so many forms; however, societal factors, student demographics and political context all appear to contribute to its formation and the evolution. The identification of common antecedents to various types of student activism raises the possibility of finding predictors of student movements along with ideal conditions under which types of student activism take place.

Altbach's Theory of Student Orientation and Focus

In his work "Student Politics and Higher Education in India", Philip Altbach examines the different approaches taken by student movements as well as the variety of functions these movements fulfill. He describes the political action of student movements as being either *normative* or *value* oriented, and having either an *etudialist* or *societal* issue focus (Altbach 1968). *Normative* orientation refers to the idea of taking action around a very specific issue, such as a proposed increase in tuition levels. *Value* orientation refers to action around broader systemic ideological issues, such as breaking down class barriers. An *etudialist* focus, according to Altbach's definition, refers to activism that focuses on student or campus issues. While *etudialist* issues may originate outside the walls of the university, it is the impact of these issues upon students that is at the centre of discussion. Finally, the *societal* focus takes the discussion beyond the campus and looks at an issue from the perspective of an entire nation, and may be political, cultural and/or economic in nature.

An Orientation-Focus Matrix

Altbach's framework to understand student movements is a useful tool for comparing and finding commonalities in the evolution of different student movements. It is useful to look at *normative*, *value*, *etudialist* and *societal* points as described by Altbach as the extremes of two distinct spectrums; the "orientation spectrum" (ranging from *normative* to *value* driven) and the "focus spectrum" (ranging from *etudialist* to *societal*). In taking this concept a step beyond Altbach's definition, it is possible to cast these two spectrums as intersecting axes of a matrix, so that a given student movement could be defined as being degrees of *normative-etudialist* or *value-societal*. The value of this interconnected matrix, as opposed to two independent spectrums, is that it allows for comparing student movements across cultures outside of specific points in those cultures' histories. A common element of student movements is mutability; their nature and purpose can change dramatically over time. As such, attempts to construct a comparative analysis of a phenomenon that changes so dramatically can be very challenging, if not impossible. However, an *orientation-focus* matrix allows researchers to track the development of student movements over time as they develop and change, so that the comparison is of two or more lines of evolution, rather than two or more fixed points on a single spectrum.

A matrix also allows for systematic and sophisticated reflection on the positions taken by student organizations in their respective cultural and educational environments.

While it appears that the *normative* and *etudialist* perspectives are complimentary, the former being focused on a specific item and latter on student-centered issue, it is also possible for a movement to hold a *normative-societal* position (as may be the case with the student movement in India in the 1920s), or a *value-etudialist* position (as one might argue was the case in the United States in the 1980s). Examples of three historical student movements that may draw upon the matrix identified above include the Latin American movements of the early 1900s, Indian movements from the 1930s-50s and the student movements that developed in the United States in the 1960s-80s. Literatures describing and analyzing these movements are numerous, particularly when compared to other periods and countries, and each had a demonstrable impact in their respective societies, albeit with differing measures of success. While both the Indian and U.S. movements remained national, these student movements managed to stretch out through space across multiple regions and included many universities. This paper looks at these three examples via the proposed *orientation-value* matrix.

Limited Case Study of Student movements in Latin America

As compared to both India and the United States, Latin America has the earliest evidence of mass university student activism. The university system in Latin America at the beginning of the 20th century was quite large since during the colonial period alone (between 16th- 18th century), Spain had created twenty-five universities of varying size in Latin America. These institutions included those operating by means of a Spanish royal charter, as well as universities established by the Roman Catholic Church. Importantly, all of these universities were run by the church and therefore the control of these institutions was dominated by a small group of church and political leaders (Liebman 1972).

During the period under discussion, the early twentieth century, Latin American university students began agitating for greater input into the decision-making processes and governance of their universities. Growing from the drive for political independence from Spain, students of Latin American universities criticized the curricular dependence their universities had on European institutions. This curricular reliance translated into teaching Latin American university students the customs and heritage of Spain and Europe, and came at the expense of indigenous and local needs and philosophies. Since there was a common language among the majority of Latin American countries (Brazil notwithstanding), university students were able to communicate with one another across national borders, sharing their concerns and finding common grievances with their respective universities. This interuniversity dialogue resulted in the first International Congress of Students in Latin America in 1909. The congress was followed by two subsequent meetings in 1910 and 1912. As a result of these meetings, students from across the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America came to agree on specific issues such as academic autonomy for university faculty and substantially increasing the student voice within university governance.

The defining moment for Latin American student activism came in 1918, at the University of Cordoba in Argentina. Instigated by the closing of a student boarding house, the students undertook massive strikes. The demands of the students included, among other things, student representation in university governance and freedom of university faculty from administrative control, drawing directly from the discussions of

the 1909-1912 Congresses. Argentina's reform-minded president agreed with the students and compelled the university to comply with student demands. Following this, students in other Latin American countries quickly followed suit, bringing the university reform movement to Chile, Venezuela, Peru and Columbia.

Early victories within Latin American student movements helped embolden student leaders to seek greater influence within the university and pursue broader, societal goals, including democracy and social justice. Concern over the elitism of the universities led to significant student pressures to relax admissions standards and increase the financial accessibility of the universities (Hennessy 1979). This growing middle class across Latin America added to this pressure by increasing the demand for postsecondary education and professional employment possibilities.

The volatile Latin American political climate of the time set the stage for the student movement to engage in opposition politics. During periods of ideological dogmatism, groups opposing the government would look to the university campus as the canvas on which to project their messages. Largely the children of the elite in Latin American society, university students had much greater freedom to criticize the government than the general populace. University communities could help expose oppositional political leadership to the world through international academic connections. The universities, with students' help, grew into the mouthpieces of various political elements otherwise external to the university (Albornoz 1967). This involvement of party politics had a divisive impact on the Latin American student movement, and altered the face of the university student body. The emergence of "professional" students (Hennessy 1979) turned student activism into a full-time job. Students ultimately became a major voice of opposition in many Latin American societies to the extent that they must be included in any narrative about socio-political change in Latin America at this time.

Limited Case Study of India

In India, the rise of the student movement followed the growth of a movement outside the walls of the university: that of Indian political independence from Britain. Student activism in India had its first, definitive expression in a series of campus protests responding to the 1928 British Simon Commission, which visited India to investigate the issue of Indian self-government (Altbach 1968). Under the guidance of the Indian National Congress, students demanded that the Simon Commission recommend political independence for India. As the student movement continued to grow and evolve, the Indian National Congress leadership took a direct hand in the resulting student organizations and played a role in directing the students' activities.

Student support for the Indian independence movement spread, contributing to the formation of the All-India Students' Federation (AISF) in 1936. The Federation had a nationalist and radical mission and focused on independence for India from British rule. This focus initially helped bridge the various elements of the Indian student body and drew on popular support for the independence cause among students. The political and cultural differences within Indian society fragmented the student organization, with the 1937 formation of the All-India Muslim Students' Federation (AIMSF). The AIMS F's goal was the creation of a separate Muslim state and they ultimately contributed to the formation of Pakistan.

The onset of the Second World War led to further fracturing of the Indian student movement. Within the AISF, tension rose between those students supporting participation in the war effort (generally Communist students supporting the decision of Soviet Russia to enter the war), and those students in opposition to joining the war (Socialists and Gandhian students). The resulting rift left the AISF in the hands of the Communist students and led to the formation of the All-India Students' Congress (AISC) which became the preeminent student organization in the late 1940s heading into Indian independence (Altbach 1968). Following Indian independence in 1947, the student movement and its organizations suffered further fractionalization, fueled in part by disenchantment with what some student leaders saw as political compromises being made by the National Congress (Altbach 1968). Students began looking to other political parties for glimmers of the idealism that they felt the National Congress was abandoning.

A massive expansion of the Indian higher education system following independence also had a significant impact on the evolution of the Indian student movement. Expansion of institutions and enrolment resulted in a larger number of university graduates. Consequently, significant numbers of university graduates in 1950-60s India found underemployment or unemployment as they left the university. This situation was a stark contrast from the guarantees of civil service or professional positions experienced by previous generations of students. Whereas student activists before independence felt assured that, regardless of their political involvement at university, their vocational futures were certain, graduates after 1947 found this was no longer the case.

The onset of the Cold War found the remaining student organizations in India being used as pawns in a larger struggle for India's support in the new bipolar world. Upholding its traditional support for the Communist cause, the AISF enjoyed the financial support of the USSR for member recruitment and agitation. With the demise of the AISC in 1948 attempts were made to found a non-political student organization. Following a short lived National Union of Students (1950-58), a number of smaller, pre-existing student governments federated to form the National Council of University Students of India (NCUSI) in response to the Communist dominated AISF. However, even this new student body was brought into the struggle for influence in India as Western powers provided funds to support the NCUSI to balance the Soviet support of the AISF.

Further political fragmentation within both the AISF and the NCUSI led student leadership to find new ways of keeping students united and working together (Altbach 1968). Student organizations began to limit their focus, drawing attention to specific student-related issues such as tuition fees, admissions policies and academic freedom within the universities. Furthermore, activism was scaled back from the national arena to the campus, so student strikes and agitation focused on a specific university. Ultimately, Indian student movements in their early periods were connected to the broader political situation, particularly the fight for sovereignty until the point of expansion of Indian higher education. University expansion, while not totally removed from broad politics, can be seen as more of an internal university issue that also ultimately affected the membership, direction of Indian student movements following independence.

Limited Case Study of The United States

The United States' notable student activism erupted in the 1960s-70s. Focused on opposition to the American military effort in Viet Nam, the 1960s-70s US student movement included other social-activist issues such as the promotion of civil rights. However, as Philip Altbach and Robert Cohen argue in their work "American Student Activism: The Post-Sixties Transformation", the sustainability of the American student movement of the 1960s was compromised by a series of external factors which directly impacted the lives of students (Altbach 1990).

Of the external issues affecting the American student movement, the economic downturn faced by North America in the 1970s had a significant impact, forcing students to give more consideration to their post-graduation employability. Activist involvement dwindled as students worried about employment repercussions of such extracurricular involvement. Employability also had an impact on academic pursuits. Students moved into programs such as business, computer science, professional program preparation (such as pre-medicine or pre-law) and sciences at the expense of the social sciences and humanities (Altbach 1990), which had served as the blast furnace for student activism.

As student focus shifted from the social sciences and humanities to programs perceived as having greater employability, fewer were prepared to undertake the time commitment associated with organizing and mobilizing their fellow students. In general, students in the humanities and social sciences have less structured academic time than science or professional program students. Science and professional programs tend to have heavier course loads with more in-class time and labs. It is not surprising, then, to find most student activists drawn from social science and humanities programs (Crouch 1970; Lipset 1993; Ali Syed 1997). A consequence of this shift in the student demographic was a reduction in the human resource pool from which the American student movement of the 1970s could draw.

Despite this factor, student activism did not disappear entirely. Student energies were re-focused to pre-existing campus organizations; namely, student governments. However, rather than limiting themselves to the traditional social event planning and campus services American student governments had preoccupied themselves with in the 1950s, student governments in the 1970s began building a competency in government lobbying (Altbach 1990).

Assuming a focus on issues directly affecting students, government lobbying was not restricted to campus administration. Student governments considered state and national policies affecting students and institutions of higher education. One of the most successful student lobby organizations to come from this period, as identified by Altbach and Cohen, was the Student Association of the State University (SASU) of the University of New York system. Although these students would periodically employ demonstrative political action, such as protests, a greater portion of their energy was spent in direct lobbying efforts, such as meeting with bureaucrats and legislators. This more focused approach allowed SASU to insert itself as a component of the policy making process, recasting the student movement as an informed policy adviser to decision makers rather than a blunt opposition to government or university administration.

Broadly based student activism experienced resurgence in the 1980s with the anti-apartheid movement. Building from the broader public concern over apartheid in South

Africa, students brought the issue home to their campuses by making specific demands of their university administrators. In 1985, students at Columbia University in New York demanded that the university divest its holdings in companies doing business with the South African government. Other students soon picked up this issue, and similar protests took place at the University of California at Berkeley and Cornell University (Altbach 1990). The threat of reprisal for activist students echoed those felt by students in the 1960s-70s. In many ways, student leaders of the divestment movement risked greater chance of personal repercussions, as university administrators could use tools of non-academic discipline or expulsion.

An Application of the Orientation-Focus Matrix

The limited case studies, described above, about students movements in the U.S., Latin America, and India appear to defy comparison. This is so because of their varying histories, disparate cultural factors and time periods. However, comparison is possible if employing the suggested *orientation-focus* matrix. Moreover, comparison is useful for understanding more about student movements and possibility of predictable cycles of student movement behavior.

The period of most extreme *normative-societal* orientation in the above outlined limited case studies was exhibited during the greatest level of activity and historical impact. In the case of Latin America, this is the 'University Reform' movement of the 1920s, during which the specific goal of student representation in university governance was tied to the students' desire to increase the local relevance of universities. In India, the national independence movement of the 1940s was the catalyst for student activism, giving students an articulated and achievable goal. In the US, the anti-Viet Nam movement of the 1960s provided the clear goal of US withdrawal from Viet Nam, tied to a larger perspective on the United States' role in international relations.

There is an important difference between the *normative* focus of the Indian student movement, and those of Latin America and the United States, which may have had a significant impact in how the Indian student movement appears to have evolved. In the case of India, the goal of national independence was not one of the students' own making. The origin of the independence movement was off campus. Although students were important in the drive for independence, it cannot be said that they were at the helm of the movement. This stands in stark contrast to Latin America in the 1920s and the United States in the 1960s, since these movements themselves originated within university student bodies.

Analysis:

This difference may help explain the amount of difficulty the Indian student movement appears to have experienced with party politics within the movement. By drawing from a movement outside itself for inspiration and guidance, the Indian student movement subjected itself to the same political divisiveness that was playing out on a national stage. Students involved with the independence movement would not see themselves as students joined for a common purpose, but simply a subset of a broader, external world. Furthermore, this relationship meant that the student movement could not control its own direction since direction was steered by a broader social movement. Following Indian independence, the relationship between the student

body of activists and the governing Indian National Congress became strained when the Congress encouraged students to leave politics to the adult members of the movement (Altbach 1968). Tying itself closely to a world external to the university campus might have contributed to the difficulty the Indian student movement found in engendering a sense of student culture and internal solidarity distinct from that of the 'adult' world.

When student movements take on one singular unifying goal, there is the tendency for a loss of long-term momentum and a sort of built-in obsolescence. This is perhaps best illustrated in the case of India, where, once independence was achieved, the tenuous connections holding the student movement together gave way to divisive internal politics. This challenge of *normative* orientation is not, however, limited to India. The American Viet Nam movement suffered a similar albeit slightly different fate in since it was the relationship to the broad political and economic situation that undercut the movement's strength. The American student leadership saw the movement as unsuccessful in achieving its goal, namely the immediate withdrawal of American forces from Viet Nam (Altbach 1990). As external forces, such as the economy in recession, began eating away at the ability for students to support the movement, the viability of achieving the movement's central goal was questioned. So, whereas achievement of the goal sounded the death-knell for the 1940s Indian student movement since independence and sovereignty were gained, collective fatigue and the failure to permeate broad politics undercut the 1960s US student movement.

In the case of Latin America, the theory of *normative* foci's limited shelf-life is problematic. As the University Reform movement spread from the University of Cordoba, it picked up momentum instead of losing it. One possible explanation is that Latin American student leaders built upon the success of the immediate goal, student representation in university governance, with new goals, such as faculty academic freedom. The student Congresses of 1909, 1910 and 1912 had already established these goals for many of the Latin American students groups.

Another possibility is that Latin America's student movement's *normative* focus was a question of degree – at what point would there be enough student representation? Should or could there be more than what had been previously achieved? If the battle line could be moved so that it was always just slightly out of reach, it would have been possible to sustain a *normative* movement indefinitely, provided student interest in pursuing the goal remained. Following this logic, one could suggest that the Latin American student movement did not have a *normative-societal* orientation like the United States or India, but was of a *value-societal* orientation, since it focused on the principal of increased voice and representation versus a specific goal of student representation. If this is the case, Latin America avoids the trap of built-in obsolescence found in the examples of the United States and India.

There does not appear to be a common evolutionary pattern for student movements across cultures. In the case of the United States and India, student organizations made attempts to regroup and refocus, moving from a point in the *normative-societal* quadrant to a position of *value-etudialist*. Where in the first instance there was a specific goal that would the benefit of all in society, student leaders began to focus on principals of specific relevance and importance to students. In the case of India, this change in focus manifested itself in campus protests on university admissions

policies in the 1950s-60s, and in the case of the United States it manifested itself in student lobbying efforts in the 1970s-80s.

Latin America appears to have followed a different pattern completely. Arguably having more of a student-issue focus than either the United States or India during their *societal* stages, Latin American student politics appears to have moved further out along the *etudialist-societal* axis, taking on a social justice focus as party politics infiltrated a highly splintered body of student activists. While there may be individual flashes of *normative-etudialist* activity which unites students from conflicting political standpoints (Rhoades 2001), the fractured Latin American student movement of the 1950s-70s evolved into a largely *value-societal* oriented, concept-driven movement, versus a student movement with a real definition or sense of purpose.

When the *normative-societal* orientation of a student movement exhausts itself, which is theoretically behind 1940s India, and 1960s and 1980s America, it appears to be followed by *etudialist* activity with a *value* focus. In the case of India, this followed infighting fueled by Soviet-Western political and cultural polarities. Student movements refocused on student-specific issues, such as admissions standards (Altbach 1968). The period between the 1960s anti-war activism and 1980s divestment movements in the United States is characterized by the rebirth of student government and the growth of lobby organizations. As such, American student lobby groups pushed government on such issues as tuition levels and financial access to higher education (Altbach 1990).

These periods of *etudialist-societal* orientation could be seen as lulls in student activism. Perhaps *etudialist-societal* activity is simply a baseline for student activism, and is, in a sense, of lesser social importance than the more ideologically driven *normative-societal* action. However, it may also be worth exploring *value-etudialist* orientation as the most sustainable position a student movement can take over the long run. The *etudialist* direction may allow student organizations to avoid the political issues that can divide student movements. An issue that students immediately relate to can have a uniting effect thereby increasing the opportunity for building networks of like-minded students. Having student movements organize around student centred issues might be the best way to avoid the factiousness that often times betrays the unity of student movements. At the same time, however, other members of society may not replicate the perspectives and idealisms that university student movements bring to political situations. Assuming a *value* orientation versus a *normative* orientation may create a moving target for student organizations. For example, rather than setting a specific tuition level as an aim, a call for increased access to universities provides the possibility of multiple goals. Although missing the resonance a *normative-societal* orientation may engender, a *value-etudialist* orientation appears to provide a breadth of issues (by focusing on values, versus a specific goal) and definition (by limiting focus to student-specific concerns) which may better lend themselves to long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Student movements are a unique part of the culture of higher education. One of the fundamental elements of the university community, students have a vested interest in the operations of the university and the impact higher education can have on the world outside the walls of the academy. The students who attended the first International Congress of Students in Latin America in 1909 had a direct impact on the University of

Cordoba in 1918 and, ultimately, the very structure of Latin American higher education. Although potentially compromised by the true leaders of the Independence movement, Indian students were a key component to their country's independence from British rule in 1947, and went on to represent a microcosm of a world embroiled in Cold War. In the United States, students brought the attention of their nation and that of the world to the futility of American involvement in a foreign conflict and forced their own universities to account for their business practices. As difficult as it is to overestimate the impact students can have, it is equally difficult to find a common definition for what a student movement is. A tool to permit analysis and comparison, such as an *orientation-focus* matrix, provides a key to understanding student movements.

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