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Latin America. The Argentine University Reform of 1918.

Facundo Bey.

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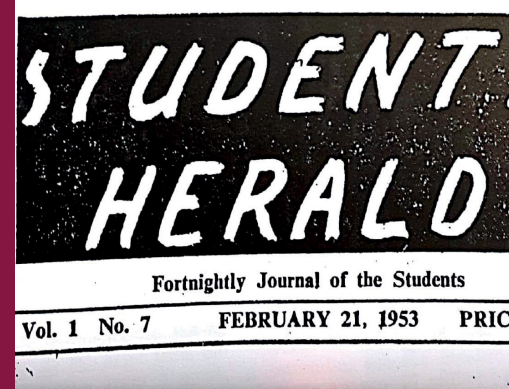
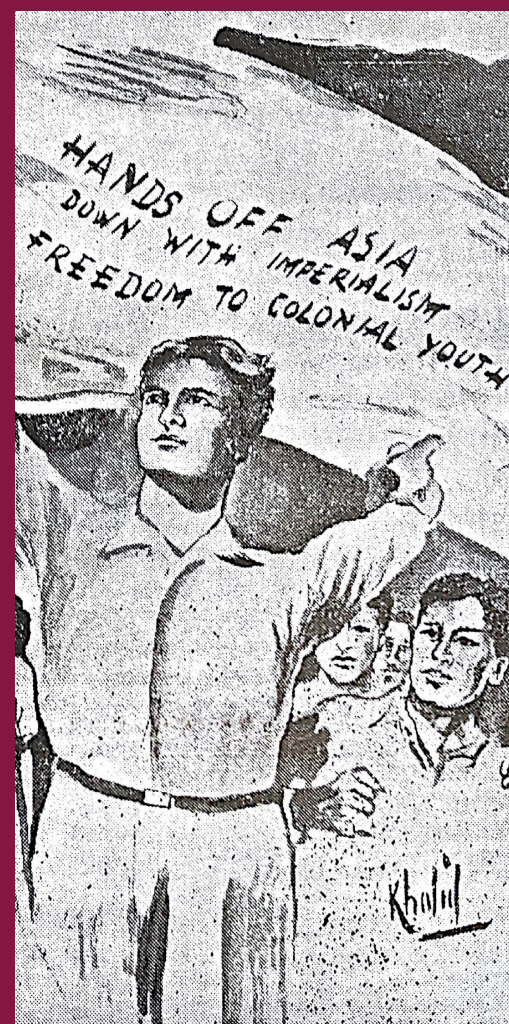
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STUDENT PROTESTS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Annotated sources (1918-2018)

Barbara Potthast, Katharina Schembs (eds.)





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2.2 LATIN AMERICA

The Argentine University Reform of 1918

Facundo Bey

On June 15th, 1918, the *University Reform* broke out in Córdoba, the adversaries of which were the conservative groups and the power of the Jesuits at the University. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Reform spread first across the whole country and then throughout Latin America. It had a number of immediate and well-known, novel goals: achieving university autonomy, that is to say, establishing the university's right to choose its own government, professors and curriculum without the intervention of the government or any other organization; the declaration and guarantee of secular higher education, free of Catholic dogmatism; establishing the participation of students, professors and graduates alike in the university government; allowing the possibility of optional classroom attendance; guaranteeing the periodic rotation of the chairs and ending life tenures, which should be replaced by public teaching demonstrations in the selection process of new faculty members; preventing the reelection of rectors and deans without an interim period;

the implementation of public lectures and parallel courses that would allow the students to choose among a variety of chairs; examining the contents of the curricula in order to include modern scientific material; developing linkages between student politics and national politics, especially in relation to national social issues; organizing and expanding the university's *extensión* politics, particularly the courses offered to workers in order to develop fraternal bonds with the proletariat; establishing tuition-free education and defending open admission; finally, incorporating innovative teaching and learning methods (Del Mazo 1967-8; Cúneo 1978; Portantiero 1978; Ciria y Sanguinetti 1987; Buchbinder 2005; Tünnermann Bernheim 2008). Through direct action, the *Reform* achieved a real change in university legislation and the organizational structure of higher education (Múnera Ruiz 2011).

The *Reform* as a movement, in general terms, sought to define, by means of its main proponents, a new model of man, university and science and, therefore, of politics. Although many times finding heterodox



Source: Archivo General de la Nación Argentina.

affinities, the metaphysical renovation of the reformists was beyond the strict institutional structure of the political parties, trade unions and traditional leaders, often maintaining the programmatic dogmas of ideologies that were popular among students. In fact, among the reformists there were supporters of socialism, anarchism, communism, radicalism, liberalism and, even, Catholics and non-partisans (Bermann 1946).

If the *University Reform* did not come to develop a new order, at least a youth culture of unprecedented power was articulated not only at the local but also at the international level. The enthusiasm it generated has been perceived as the second common enterprise of Latin American countries, after the cycle of their political independence from the Spanish Empire. The echoes across the rest of the continent started with its immediate reception by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre (1895-1979) and in José Carlos Mariátegui's (1894-1930) Peru, as well as in the Cuba of Julio Antonio Mella (1893-1929). The movement then expanded to Chile, Colombia, Guatemala and Uruguay. After 1930, a second wave arrived to Brasil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela y Mexico (Portantiero 1978: 58).

This perception of a common Latin American common endeavour was accentuated, especially once the lighthouse of European humanism had been turned off forever after the carnage of the First World War, while the United States had demonstrated its thirst to conquer the American continent economically, culturally and militarily. In contrast, at the same time, the Mexican and Bolshevik revolution raised the hope of a new and democratic era. In Argentina, this enthusiasm had a singular decline: these winds of renewal were met with an atmosphere full of democratic passion. Only two years before the *University Reform* there were free national elections for the first time and with them the middle classes, mostly descendants of immigrants, felt their roles of political protagonists, now represented by the brand-new radical government that closed a cycle of decades of fraud and successive oligarchic governments, made up of an enlightened but undemocratic landowning bourgeoisie.

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