Part IV – Universities

Colin Henfrey
Bernardo Sorj


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ones, like Vicuña Mackenna. Their struggle wasn’t a central one, but their experience belongs to the future. The further they scatter those who shared it, the more its effect will multiply.

PART IV – UNIVERSITIES

Background

Like all South American universities, Chile’s in 1970 reflected the ruling-class’s dependence on European and North American ideologies and culture. They bore little relation to local requirements, either technical or social. Their medical schools, for example, were as much concerned with heart transplants as with infant mortality. Technical training contributed little to the need for popular consumer goods or technological independence in areas like copper production. Also inadequate public schooling restricted university entrance to those who could pay for supplementary private teaching.

Student movements have nevertheless been a radical force in Latin America. Questioning first the dominance of the traditional oligarchies, they became strongly nationalist in the 1940s and 1950s. After the Cuban revolution this nationalism grew increasingly left-wing. Chile was no exception. Under Frei students won reforms which allowed them a significant part in university administration. By 1970 their support for Allende was strong, in the expectation that universities would be deeply involved in the changes promised by the PU.

Its formula was that the universities should be ‘at the service of Chilean society’. Teaching would cater for Chilean needs, and students would contribute to the development of the country, through technical studies and voluntary labour. Entrance would be open to students who hadn’t been able to afford preparation for university entrance. An agreement was made with the CUT for extension courses in the unions.

All these proposals were implemented. New courses developed and traditional ones changed. Thousands of students did voluntary work in development projects. Technical students did applied research in the factories, mines and agrarian reform centres. The universities helped to make cheap editions of the classics available to a mass public. Their own
research and publications on Chilean society became integral to the social policies which the PU implemented.

Meanwhile student politics reflected those of the wider society. Student support for the PU grew, but then as polarization deepened university departments became increasingly divided. The left was weakened by the absence of staff on government secondment and the return of Christian Democrats seconded before 1970. Also, each year’s new student intake injected into the university the increasingly right-wing views of the average student’s middle-class parents. Early in 1972 the PU candidate lost the election for rector of the University of Chile. The opposition now took the offensive. Eventually confrontations brought university life to a standstill, with the fascist Fatherland and Freedom Party influencing the centrist opposition of Christian Democrat students and teachers.

Raul’s opinion, as a student leader and Communist Party activist, was that left-wing students should concentrate on supporting the PU’s programme within the university. For him the left’s demise was due largely to other left parties’ excessive demands and to their student activists working on fronts outside the university, which they considered more important.

In many universities, resistance to the coup was strong. Students and university teachers have since been heavily repressed, but continue to play a central part in popular resistance to the junta.

**The Students’ Polarization in the University of Chile**

*Speaker: RAUL, 22, activist of the Communist Party and student leader in the state University of Chile, in Santiago*

**Student politics: the campaign of 1970**

Throughout the PU period I was a student activist in the University of Chile. It was always a political weathervane, an indicator of the direction in which the balance of power was moving. In the late 1960s its radicalization produced massive support for the PU in the 1970 election. Then under thePU, its ultra-leftism, to my way of thinking and that of other party comrades, was symptomatic of the polarization which ended in the PU’s downfall.

In 1968, under Frei, a university reform was passed after years of militant pressure from students. This gave them far greater participation in the running of the universities. The next year the left gained control from the Christian Democrats of the national students’ union (*Federación de Estudiantes de Chile*). The Christian Democrats’ youth section sympathized heavily with the PU and many of them came over to it. It was in this same year that I was elected as a student leader in Santiago.

Previously I’d been active in a group of the ultra-left, but after the election it divided, and went mainly to the Communist Party. The PU’s victory, for which we’d campaigned, convinced us that we should be working within the mass parties of the left, now that Allende was in power. I don’t think this was the abandoning of an immature position. For me it was primarily a response to a changed political situation. Previously we’d been working clandestinely with a view to armed insurrection and concentrating our propaganda on workers untouched by the main left-wing parties, especially in small, non-unionized copper mines. This no longer made sense. In 1970 there was a new and, at that moment, a more real way forward, which we recognized as such and supported.