

THE UNIVERSITY SITUATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Report drawn up by Jaime Cordova, Assistant for Latin America, after his tour of the Pax Romana-IMCS Federations in Latin America, November '56-January '57.

Types of universities in Latin America

Most of the universities in Latin America are state universities which date from the time of Spanish or Portuguese domination, and are maintained or supported by the government. Generally speaking, they have undergone a threefold influence: first, that of the Catholic Church under whose aegis they were founded in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the lines of the medieval university; later on, the influence of the French liberal school based on the anti-Catholic rationalism which is still found in most Latin American universities today (some of them, like the University of Uruguay, were modelled on the Napoleonic system); and lastly, since the beginning of the century, Anglo-Saxon tendencies and a preference for North American university education have made themselves felt in the Latin American universities. Yet, on the whole, the Latin American university has not assimilated these influences to create a new type of university; rather in most cases, one or other influence predominates, for instance, French influence in Uruguay, and North American in Cuba and Panama.

Besides the state universities, there is a small number of Catholic universities, mostly founded at the turn of the century. They sprang up in protest against the evils of the state universities and wished to supersede them. However, financial difficulties and lack of coordinated support from all sectors of the Catholic community have marred their success.

Finally there are a few private universities, like the Universidad Técnica in Valparaiso and the University of Los Andes in Colombia. The aims of these universities are determined by their patrons - in Valparaiso, technical formation, or integral formation as in the University of Los Andes.

Characteristics of the Latin American University

a) The University is blind to the sociological needs of Latin America. Ancient philosophy ^{or} existensialism is discussed in the lecture halls, while the University avoids the urgent problems which face the continent, e.g. problems of native populations, lack of technicians, the failure of democracy etc. The universities bear the brunt of the responsibility for the prolonged political immaturity of Latin America. We have proof in the fact that the upper stratum of the ruling classes are products of Latin American University education and their conduct in public affairs shows up the negative aspects of their academic formation.

Despite the problems common to all the Latin American countries, its universities do not furnish a common effort to meet the needs of the hour. With a few exceptions, they are cut off from society, and society in turn is not aware that they should guide the country. Since the University faithfully reflects the political life of the country in which it is situated, this problem does not exist in democratic states like Uruguay and Chile.

b) The Latin American University is a typical example of an exclusively professional institution. On the whole, the University does not

fulfil its three fold duty of search for Truth, transmission of culture and training; research is practically non-existent, either for financial reasons or for lack of academic stimulus. Professional formation is antiquated and usually inadequate, for want of modern equipment.

c) With the exception of Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica, the University is rated a political instrument both by dictatorial governments and by political parties. Also given the role which the University and especially the student population played in winning independence for the Latin American republics, it follows that dictatorial regimes oppress the universities, by violating their autonomy, by exercising economic pressure etc. At the same time, political parties try to win over the universities either through the teaching staff or the students.

University autonomy

The relations between the University and the State depends on the government in power. A law-abiding state respects the University; a dictatorial or totalitarian regime siezes and enslaves the University making it another instrument of its policy. Unfortunately the number of dictatorial governments is very high in Latin America. They fear that the universities will mould public opinion and adopt policies incompatible with the selfish interests of the governing classes; the government therefore perverts the University and deprives it of its most prized characteristics. Consequently the Latin American universities experience the whole range of institutional autonomy and state interference. From Uruguay and Chile, where theoretical restrictions on absolute autonomy are offset by democratic principles and a liberal university regime, to Honduras and Venezuela where the universities are mere tools of the government, there exists in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia etc. a series of restrictions on University autonomy. These restrictions may be defined by legislation or with the connivance of the teaching and administrative staff of the universities. Lack of autonomy is seen in direct or indirect nomination to teaching and administrative posts, in total or quasitotal economic dependence in external control over the activities of the University which in extreme cases may go so far as to censor text books (during the Peron regime) or maintain a secret police like the SN (Political Police) in Venezuela under the present Pérez Jimenes regime.

Economic Situation of the Universities.

The Latin America universities have three sources of revenue:- a) private income (capital and liquid assets) and money collected by special taxes
b) subsidies from the State allocated in the national budget
c) students' fees.

Private income sufficed in the past but is totally inadequate today. State subsidies are pitifully small compared with expenditure on defence and armaments. Students' fees are infinitesimal because University education in Latin America tends to be free, with the exception of Venezuela where fees are intentionally exorbitant and a discriminating factor in university entrance.

Judging from these facts, the Latin American universities are certainly among the poorest in the world. Without adequate buildings, laboratories, good libraries or student hostels, most of the universities are deprived of

the material well-being which favours sound instruction and the growth of the University community. Two factors heighten this economic crisis. First, in every country, despite the high costs involved, universities are springing up everywhere and nearly always for no valid reason. The authorities prefer four universities which are crippled economically to two which function properly. Secondly, the number of students rises every year; yet, because fees are nominal, University income remains much the same as in the last century.

University administrators and teaching staff

Most of the professoriate have no teaching vocation and are ill-qualified for their task. In Latin America, university teaching is practically unheard of as a career. Hence low standards among professors who prefer accepted ideas to the pursuit of independent enquiry. Besides, the number of professors and lecturers who engage in research is infinitesimal. Low salaries aggravate the position to such an extent that full-time teachers are almost unknown, since they must earn their living outside the University; again, most of the staff teach for reasons of social prestige; good professors who dedicate themselves to their universities and their students, lead a life of self-sacrifice.

It is interesting to note that while students in Latin America oppose dictatorships, the professoriate rarely does. They dare not speak openly for fear of losing their posts and falling out of favour with the government. On the other hand, the universities do not encourage the professors to improve their work, for example, by offering research scholarships abroad - consequently the staff drifts into a routine of lamentable mediocrity.

Finally, moral crises are destroying the professoriate in most of the dictatorial regimes. For the real leaders of Latin American youth, the best teachers and the fiercest opponents of dictatorial governments which encroach on University autonomy, are often imprisoned or live in exile. There are thousands of exiled professors from Bolivia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and Cuba living in other countries in Latin America. As for the administrative staff (Rectors, Deans, Registrars etc.), with the exception of democratic countries like Uruguay where appointments are made on merit, these posts are filled on grounds of political or social connections, by government nominees. It has been rightly said that the youth of Latin America is leaderless.

The Students

60% of the students come from the middle classes; 30% from the working classes and a mere 10% from the upper classes (most of the young people from the upper classes either study abroad or carry on the family business). While, in the past, the universities were open only to the sons of well-to-do families, today they are being crowded out by the middle classes. Sons of business-men, of professional people, farmers, soldiers and technicians, fill the universities of Latin America; therefore we can say that the problems of the student in Latin America are those of the middle classes. Indeed the middle classes, which are going through an economic and moral crisis, provide the greatest number of candidates for the liberal professions

and the civil service, considered the two most rewarding careers.

Technical education and other openings are lacking. So, once they have graduated from secondary school, young people feel obliged to go on to the university. Granted there are always responsible students with a real vocation for university studies, the fact remains that most of the young people have no ideals, no vocation for university studies and no financial backing. It may even be that through family circumstances, they are fellow-travellers and know they will sooner or later abandon their studies. With no understanding of the meaning of the University and no attachment to its ideals, they form an irresponsible group ripe for agitation and rebellion.

What are the main problems of the University student?

In the first place, the secondary education provided in most countries does not give an integral formation and there is no provision for vocational guidance. The choice of career is a sort of "lucky dip". All the first year University student knows is that, after studying for a given number of years, he will receive a diploma with which he can earn his living. Although this lack of vocational guidance stems from the system of secondary education, the University is also to blame in that it makes no attempt to explain its aims and mission. Consequently, the University in many Latin American countries has lost its "raison d'être"; most of the students cannot identify themselves with ideals which the University itself has not defined and does not propagate. Professional status in Latin America is the key to class betterment, a sort of social passport, like the cassock and the soldier's uniform in times gone by.

During his first year at the University, the student is completely bewildered, and unprepared for University life and studies. Since the University does nothing to help him, the young student must work out his own approach to University life, and generally bases it on the routine of more senior students.

Those who live away from home cannot do justice to their studies because living conditions are scandalous; they are under-nourished and exposed to infectious diseases, like tuberculosis, which are rife in Latin America. The poorer students have no money to buy books and spend their time in University or public libraries waiting to snap up unborrowed text books. Consequently, most of them prefer to buy for a few cents the mimeographed lectures handed round by their teachers and which, so they say, guarantee success in examinations. As a result, poor students feel socially inferior and are bitterly disappointed in the University which has failed them. An aggressively energetic attitude spreads among the students and in what are called "Student Revendications" they clamour, in the first place, for good food and lodging, a demand to which they have unquestioned right, yet which very few universities try to meet.

Soon after he has been admitted to the University, the student realises that his teachers are unworthy of respect either academically or morally speaking. That is why the professoriate has no ascendancy over the youth of Latin America; indeed the latter consider the former a privileged class and their enemy. Hence the divorce between student and professor in the Latin American University.

Moreover, since the students are only too aware of the national pattern in which it would seem that men are not taken on face value, but for social or political connections, they throw in their lot with the passions and interests which oppose society, in their search for a solution to the problem of personal survival. And so youth, divided and sub-divided within itself, brings into the University the spirit of truculence and strife which exists in national politics, squandering the energy which could contribute to the welfare of their country.

The students are not bound to their universities by social ties. Unlike students in other parts of the world, Latin American students only go to the University to attend classes; the institution in itself does not attract them. There are no student hostels, no sports grounds, no refectories, no common rooms to encourage better relations among the students themselves. Meanwhile, the University authorities remain utterly indifferent to this state of affairs.

Student Representation in Latin America

Since the beginning of the century, student unions have been trying to solve the problems which face the University in Latin America. The student unions which met in Uruguay and Mexico in 1908 and 1910 respectively, resolved that students be allowed to elect representatives to sit on University Boards. In 1918 students in Cordoba (Argentina) rose in protest against the unjust and chaotic state of their University. This revolution established a just balance within the University community, through the active participation of all its members - professorial staff, graduates and students. Argentinian students laid down the principles of "University Reform" which is now the ideal of all student unions in Latin America today. The aims of "University Reform" are briefly:

- a) University Autonomy
- b) Co-government of the University (Government of the University by fair representation of administrators, teaching staff, past and present students)
- c) Voluntary attendance at lectures (this would allow poor students to work on the side)
- d) Academic Freedom
- e) Nomination of teaching staff (by competitive appointment and with student participation)
- f) Better technical instruction
- h) Social welfare
- i) University education open to all.

Since the nineteenth century, the student unions have opposed political dictatorships and have striven for "University Reform". The reaction of the Government and the University authorities has often forced the students to fall back on drastic methods which are sometimes violent and unjustifiable.

Precisely because the National Unions of Students and the Trade Unions are in general the enemies of dictatorial regimes, student leaders are often exposed to persecution and exile.

The First Congress of Latin American students which met in Montevideo in October 1955, resolved, in collaboration with the trade unions) to create an organ specifically designed to fight totalitarian methods. To give one example of what the Congress proposed to fight - about 15,000 exiled Venezuelan students are studying in Latin American Universities, owing to Pérez Jimenes' policy of student suppression in Venezuela.

But if on the one hand, the National Unions have taken a strong stand against dictatorships, on the other, we have to regret the tendency of Latin American National Unions to take political action which is not specifically related to University affairs but rather to the shifting political scene. Indeed, since the beginning of the century, political forces in Latin American have been fully aware of the value of these Unions and make use of their influence for political ends, e.g. to influence the Government, to make propaganda for different political parties.

Also, owing to the lack of civic conscience among students, small groups of students of given political tendencies gerrymander student elections to make sure that their followers are elected. Consequently, the Latin American student, who is characteristically apathetic, elects officers not on the basis of their qualifications and personal qualities, but on the propaganda made previous to the elections. The students then leave everything in the hands of the Union which becomes an omnipotent body with no external control, and which works for the political ends of its members more than for the needs of the student community. However, this situation is changing; the international contacts which the student unions have had in the past 5 years have made the students more aware of the importance of proper student representation.

The University and Religion

The Latin American University is anticlerical and antireligious as a result of French liberalism in the nineteenth century. Whether determined by legislation or not, the Latin American universities do not recognise Theology as a branch of knowledge.

Students and teachers (of whom 90% are baptised Catholics) either do not know or do not practise their religion. University education in most Latin American countries is atheistic and professors use their office to expound false doctrines contrary to Catholic principles. The University is shot through with the grave moral and religious crisis of the student community. Atheism is prevalent both in the faculties and in the University as a whole. Also there is tremendous intolerance which respects neither principles nor religious belief, and which is a faithful reflection of the civic immaturity of the people. The Catholic student who goes up to the University with the inadequate religious formation which is given in secondary schools in Latin America, soon loses his faith, or ceases to practise his religion due to the adverse influence of students and professors alike.

The Catholic student movement

The youth of Latin America, is capable of making a decisive contribution to the progress of the continent. Because of its lack of cultural traditions and of experience of community life in associations, it might seem that this youth had no ideals. That is not true. Rather, the youth has never had good leaders and experienced teachers; its few leaders are provisional and autocratic. But among all sections of youth - among the working class, students and young graduates - there is the same passionate eagerness and common aspirations. What is needed is to break down the self-erected barriers with which the different youth groups surround themselves, to coordinate their efforts, form leaders and give moral and economic aid to youth movements. It is a difficult but not an impossible task, for even on the international level, there exist common problems and aspirations, a common language and the same customs.

Now among youth, the university student undoubtedly plays a decisive role. That is why university organisations deserve great attention. Pax Romana-ILCS quickly realised its responsibilities towards the Latin American University and has been working in this field for the past 12 years.

I should like to refer specifically to the Pax Romana Latin American Plan which has been applied for the past four years, and which was approved during the World Congress in Montreal, Canada 1952.

1. Four years ago, the ILCS had 24 federations in Latin America. Most of them were not organised on the national level; they had no leaders with international experience, and no programmes for the improvement of the university situation. There was no continental coordination, and consequently, the federations were cut off from one another.

2. Pax Romana-ILCS aimed at providing

- international formation for its university leaders by a system of study travel grants
- solutions to common university problems, interchange of leaders and experiences by regional meetings
- international and continental information through news services
- continental coordination within the world programme of the ILCS.

3. During my trip to Latin America I have noted the following progress among our federations

- the ILCS is working with ten new groups, affiliated or about to be affiliated to the Movement
- the organisation of the federations on the national level has improved to such an extent that they are now

making an effective contribution to university life (e.g. the Corporacion de Estudiantes Mejicanos built and now run the Casa del Estudiante in Mexico City. This residence provides good, inexpensive accommodation, social services in the form of medical assistance etc.)

- the federations work systematically to improve university structures and the material and spiritual situation of the student body

- the federations are working within the National Unions of Students

- a. to orientate them away from party political ends towards their true objectives which are the provision of student welfare, the defence of University Autonomy and Academic Freedom

- b. to win support for the COSEC in Latin America

- the work of our federations within neutral organisations like the World Assembly of Youth and the Youth Committees of UNESCO, has increased enormously

- the federations have abandoned the isolationist attitude of four years ago, by mutual interchange, not only of correspondence and experiences, but also of leaders. Hence the national and international formation of university leaders who are the bastions of continental coordination.

4. With these results behind us, we shall try to enter a new stage of expanded and more effective development in July of this year on the occasion of our Continental Meeting in El Salvador. Our plans for the future include

- formation and civic action of our federations

- social action

- the organisation and formation of young graduates for their professional-civic-social duties by establishing and encouraging groups of professionals and Catholic intellectuals

- introduction of the World University Service into Latin America.

- closer collaboration with the Young Christian Workers and neutral youth organisations.