

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Political Analysis

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8pp3m1m0>

Journal

Comparative Education Review, 45(3)

ISSN

0010-4086

Authors

Rhoads, Robert A

Mina, Liliana

Publication Date

2001-08-01

DOI

10.1086/447675

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



CHICAGO JOURNALS



The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Political Analysis

Author(s): Robert A. Rhoads and Liliana Mina

Source: *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (August 2001), pp. 334-353

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Comparative and International Education Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/447675>

Accessed: 04/01/2014 15:15

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and Comparative and International Education Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparative Education Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Political Analysis

ROBERT A. RHOADS AND LILIANA MINA

In this article we explore the political tensions surfaced through the student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM]). The lengthy strike was a response to proposed tuition fees by the administration and lack of student participation in the decision-making process. Although some of the tensions described in this article have long existed at UNAM,¹ recent efforts by the Mexican government to link higher education more closely to the nation's economic development interests has heightened conflict between what may be described as social justice versus market-driven political and economic sentiments. By social justice sentiments, we refer to long-standing efforts to remedy economic inequities by promoting highly accessible and egalitarian forms of higher education. In terms of market-driven views, we refer to Mexico's efforts to advance a global economy by promoting more selective and competitive forms of higher education. In seeking to make sense of these tensions, we call upon the work of Antonio Gramsci and of Karl Mannheim, whose writing we find useful in framing and analyzing oppositional discourses.² We are also heavily indebted to Imanol Ordorika's previous analyses of UNAM, as we seek to further arguments deriving from his work.³

The issues at UNAM are complicated, and rarely are the groups or dividing lines clearly drawn. The biggest challenge we face in writing this article is simplifying matters sufficiently in order to present a coherent explanation of the dynamics and tensions; yet at the same time we must capture the incredible complexity of UNAM's political environment. This indeed is quite the challenge. And to top it off, we are outsiders looking in, seeking desperately to avoid the colonial gaze. In our defense, in a political wilderness as complex and multifaceted as UNAM, perhaps observing "the forest" from a distance has its advantages.

¹ Imanol Ordorika, "Reform at Mexico's National Autonomous University: Hegemony or Bureaucracy," *Higher Education* 31 (1996): 403–27, and "Power, Politics, and Change in Higher Education: The Case of the National Autonomous University of Mexico" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1999).

² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936).

³ Ordorika, "Reform at Mexico's National Autonomous University," and "Power, Politics, and Change in Higher Education."

Comparative Education Review, vol. 45, no. 3.

© 2001 by the Comparative and International Education Society. All rights reserved.
0010-4086/2001/4503-0002\$02.00

The growing impetus for Mexico to open its markets and become a significant player in the global economy has added to the political tension that has long undergirded its national politics. The rebellion by the Zapatistas in Chiapas is but one example of the conflict between local economic and sovereignty concerns versus more market-driven, corporate efforts to globalize Mexico's economy. To groups such as the Zapatistas, Mexico's step into the global marketplace, most evident by its participation in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has produced little or no return for the vast majority of citizens who continue to be decimated by poverty. Additionally, powerful international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), along with corporations based primarily in the United States, have increasingly come to influence national policy in Mexico as "Americanization" takes a deeper hold on the country's economy. While many of these Western-based organizations influence national economic policies in developing countries such as Mexico, accountability is minimal if existent at all.⁴ For example, the IMF has long demanded that the Mexican government reduce subsidies to public universities such as UNAM. These economic and political forces have major implications for public higher education in Mexico, as the case of UNAM reveals.

A central aspect of the complex political and economic dynamics at UNAM is rooted in debates about Mexico's strategic initiatives relative to globalization. This is true for the political economies of other Latin American universities as well.⁵ The trend throughout the region is toward the privatization of higher education, evidenced by decreased state funding and increased rhetoric and policy changes linked to market-driven views. Correspondingly, the following strategies are being implemented to varying degrees: more restrictive and competitive admission standards organized around formalized evaluation; new or increased tuition payments; the reduction or elimination of marginal programs, especially those less likely to serve the needs of business and industry; and procedures to ensure expedient student progress. All or a combination of these strategies are seen as necessary to boost the university's role in promoting economic transnationalism.

Mexico's commitment to globalization and market-driven economics reflects the dominant political discourse and was a central policy of the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), led by Mexico's former president, Ernesto Zedillo, and the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), which through the leadership of Vicente Fox ousted the PRI in the summer of 2000. But the discourse of globalization has generated much resistance.

⁴ Robert Arnove, Stephen Franz, Marcela Mollis, and Carlos Alberto Torres, "Education in Latin America at the End of the 1990s," in *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, ed. Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 305–28.

⁵ Carlos A. Torres and Daniel Schugurensky, "The Political Economy of Higher Education in the Era of Neoliberal Globalization: Latin America in Comparative Perspective," *Higher Education* (in press).

Antiglobalization and proautonomy rhetoric characterized the student strikers at UNAM during the 1999–2000 academic year as they cited Mexico's Constitution and held to a belief in its historic commitment to education as a social institution.

Our knowledge of UNAM derives from four primary sources. First, during the 1999–2000 academic year we participated in a listserv centered in Mexico City and created specifically to discuss issues surrounding the strike. Second, through our participation in the strike listserv we were able to administer a short, open-ended survey that was completed by 77 respondents. A third source of data derives from a site visit conducted in January 2000. Finally, a fourth data source is represented by a variety of documents and publications, including letters and opinion pieces written by UNAM faculty and students, newspaper and periodical coverage, and official proclamations released by the UNAM administration.

La Máxima Casa de Estudios

The National Autonomous University of Mexico has over 250,000 students and is the largest university in North America. It is a multiuniversity in the truest sense, with satellite campuses throughout Mexico. Estimates suggest that as much as 30 percent of all university research in Mexico is conducted at UNAM. The university receives roughly 90 percent of its budget from the government and is generally regarded as Mexico's preeminent university, as well as *la máxima casa de estudios* (the nation's university). An important development that contributed to the strike is that for the fiscal year 1999 the university was forced to cut its budget by 30 percent. The budget cuts reflected a decrease in support from the federal government said to be caused by falling oil prices.⁶ The administration saw budgetary constraints as a legitimate rationale for charging tuition, although student strikers tended to see such issues as excuses for implementing a market-driven concept of tuition in which low-income students would effectively be blocked from participation in higher education.

As it exists today, UNAM was established in 1910 through the initiative of Justo Sierra, minister of public education. At the heart of the institution's structure was the principle of university autonomy. As Ordorika notes in his extended political analysis of UNAM, "With historical variations, the government granted UNAM an autonomous statute; the legal rights to administer its resources, make academic decisions, and appoint university authorities."⁷ Sierra believed that while the university should be funded by the government, at the same time it must be self-governing and independent of the government. Sierra's vision was not implemented until 1929, when the uni-

⁶ Rhona Statland de López, "National U. of Mexico Sharply Cuts Spending," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 20, 1998), p. A46.

⁷ Ordorika, "Power, Politics, and Change in Higher Education," p. 9.

versity charter was passed by the government, granting UNAM partial autonomy. This autonomy was strengthened in 1945 with the passage of the Charter of the National University, which recognized the public and national responsibilities of the university and established the government's formal role in funding it. Finally, in 1980 an amendment was added to Article 3 of Mexico's Constitution guaranteeing university autonomy, which was seen to include self-governance, academic freedom, and free examination and discussion of ideas.⁸

Another facet of UNAM's institutional identity relates to the fact that free education is seen as a fundamental gain of the Mexican revolution. In fact, the revised Constitution restricts the institution of fees and tuition charges for public education. While much debate exists as to whether the free education doctrine is to include higher education, UNAM has embraced for years a policy that charges virtually no fee for enrollment (the equivalent of a 2-cent charge has been in place for years). To many students, free education at UNAM is fundamental to its identity as *la máxima casa de estudios*. Attempts at UNAM in 1986 and 1992 to adopt tuition fees met steep student resistance, and in each case the administration failed.⁹

Historically, UNAM has played a central role in the larger landscape that is Mexican society and culture. This fact cannot be understated in analyzing issues surrounding the strike and the importance student strikers placed on preserving access to UNAM. Related to its role as a source of cultural and historical significance is the broad curriculum available to students at UNAM. As one student explained, "The University is the major center of professional preparation, of research, of education, and of culture for the country." And a second student added, "The University is the cradle of culture for the country, and the largest university in Latin America, and because it is *la máxima casa de estudios* everything is related to national issues."

Students expressed the belief that UNAM offers critical economic and cultural opportunities for the masses, the vast majority of whom cannot afford tuition payments. Thus, at the heart of the conflict at UNAM were issues related to access and contested views regarding the role of *la máxima casa de estudios*. The student strikers supported the position that UNAM should be tuition free and accessible to students from the lowest income groups throughout Mexican society. Their position is based on Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution. One student elaborated on this position: "All the conditions of the strikers, the defense of autonomy, the defense of democratic education, conform to Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution." A second student stated, "We fight so that the government will not charge for schooling. We have participated in all the movements that call for payment

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ordorika, "Reform at Mexico's National Autonomous University."

in any public schools. It is unconstitutional to charge.” A third student supported similar views and in the process pointed a finger at the media for its negative portrayal of the student strikers: “The media obviously omits a lot of things. They make the students look like villains for ‘kidnapping’ the University, but let’s not forget how our ‘intelligent’ government from the very beginning began to cut back funding for the public universities so that they could pay the bankers. There is no doubt that this is a national issue, and that the students have to pay a price to sustain accessible schools. The fact is that this is a country where the majority of the people are poor and cannot pay.”

Over the years, debates over the principle of autonomy and definitions of access have been at the heart of major clashes between students and university and governmental officials. However, the most significant protest in UNAM’s history concerned governmental policies and took place prior to the 1968 Olympics hosted in Mexico City.¹⁰ The protests of 1968 revolved around student concerns about oppressive political practices at the national and city level. Demonstrations at la Plaza de Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City culminated with military and police units firing on a crowd of roughly 5,000 protesters. Although the government never released an accurate count of the killings of October 2, most estimates suggest that 300–400 protesters were shot and killed.¹¹

With complex historical antecedents, the demonstrations during the academic years 1998–99 and 1999–2000 reflect the latest in a series of major student protests over tuition charges, access, and student participation in university governance. For example, in 1987 students at UNAM fought administrative efforts to implement entrance exams. As part of a market-driven philosophy, the administration wanted to replace a highly accessible admissions process with a more selective, competitive process. But the administration underestimated student commitment to UNAM’s egalitarian mission and were surprised by massive demonstrations that effectively overturned their efforts (a decade later the administration moved again to implement more formalized admission procedures, including standardized tests).

The most recent student strike was launched in the spring of 1999 and came as a consequence of efforts by the administration to implement tuition fees.¹² The strike grew long and complicated, with charges and counter-

¹⁰ Donald J. Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State: State Conflicts, 1910–1971* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), and “The Mexican Government and Student Conflict: An Essay,” in *Student Protest: The Sixties and After*, ed. Gerard J. DeGroot (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 131–38; Eric Zolov, “Protest and Counterculture in the 1968 Student Movement in Mexico,” in *Student Protest: The Sixties and After*, ed. Gerard J. DeGroot (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 70–84.

¹¹ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Carlos Monsiváis, “1968–1999: La comparación inevitable,” *Proceso*, special ed. no. 5 (Dec. 1, 1999), pp. 26–29.

¹² Francisco Ortiz Pardo, “La huelga del descencanto,” *Proceso*, special ed. no. 5 (Dec. 1, 1999), pp. 4–25.

charges coming from the many groups engaged in deliberations. It is impossible for us to describe all the key events, subplots, and diverse constituents involved in one form or another. Instead, we offer a brief summary of some key events in order to offer a general sense of the strike.

La Huelga Sin Fin¹³

On April 20, 1999, students and their supporters took over many of the faculties and schools constituting the large and complex university system that is UNAM. The takeover came after the administration, led by UNAM's rector, Francisco Barnés de Castro, announced the General Regulation of Payment in which tuition would be required of all students. The tuition payment amounted to roughly U.S. \$90 per semester and came on the heels of the government's announcement that UNAM's budget would be cut by U.S. \$30 million.¹⁴ Students also were angry that the final decision announced by the university council had been made at an off-campus meeting to which student representatives did not have access. As one student explained, "The strike started because the administration acted anti-democratically. In short, they did not consult with the university community. Barnés did not care if we were in agreement with the increase. Many times it was requested of him to meet so that a dialogue could take place and alternatives or propositions could be offered to UNAM."

The students organized a governing body to lead the strike—the General Council of the Strike (Consejo General de Huelga, or CGH). Two political groups dominated CGH: moderates and leftists (termed "*ultras*" by the media). The moderates or *moderados* (also considered "progressives") tended to be aligned with the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and other progressive political organizations such as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). Many of these students identified as part of *el cardenismo*, a movement supporting social and economic reform and the PRD presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (the PRD, along with the conservative Partido de Acción Nacional [PAN], were the leading opposition parties to the long-standing and ruling PRI at the time of the strike). The Leftists tended to be removed from mainstream electoral politics, and students were affiliated with a variety of groups, including Unión Revolucionario Emiliano Zapata, Frente Popular Francisco Villa, Movimiento Proletario Independiente, and the Trotskyist Juventud Socialista.¹⁵

¹³ We borrow the title for this section ("The Strike without End") from a special issue of the Mexican political magazine *Proceso*.

¹⁴ Rhona Statland de López, "Defying Protests, Mexican University Raises Tuition for First Time in 51 Years," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 26, 1999), p. A58, and "National U. of Mexico Sharply Cuts Spending" (n. 6 above).

¹⁵ Francisco Ortiz Pardo, "Las protagonistas," *Proceso*, special ed. no. 5 (Dec. 1, 1999), pp. 30–47, and "Una obra en cinco actos," *Proceso*, special ed. no. 5 (Dec. 1, 1999), pp. 48–61.

Along with various political organizations represented on the CGH, a variety of structural divisions within the complex UNAM system were also represented. For example, different colleges had their own student groups, including the Colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnology, Engineering, Medicine, and Sciences and Humanities, not to mention a large delegation of representatives from external colleges and institutions affiliated with UNAM known as *extrauniversitarios*, including the National Institute of Cardiology. Representation of the various schools alone accounted for 120 student delegates (*delegados de escuelas*) on the CGH.

In addition to groups having formal representation on CGH, there also were a number of loosely organized student and nonstudent groups based on informal designations, such as the “women in white,” a group of faculty women from the College of Sciences and Humanities, and the “eight emeriti” (*los ochos eméritos*), composed of eight retired faculty held in high regard by the university community. These groups to varying degrees found ways to influence the complex debates at UNAM. For example, *los ochos eméritos* specifically are noteworthy for the strong proposal put forth midway through the strike. Their proposal basically consisted of suspending the regulation of payment until university-wide forums could look into fundamental problems at UNAM. The university-wide forums also would include a review of UNAM’s 1997 reforms concerning formal entrance examinations and the university’s relationship with CENEVAL, the National Center for Evaluation. Despite the support of a large body of UNAM faculty, not to mention distinguished writers such as Carlos Fuentes, the proposal was rejected by the far left of the student movement for failing to meet their demands.

The original demands of the student movement were released by the CGH shortly after the takeover of the university and are contained in the following six points: (1) revocation of the General Regulation of Payment and annulment of all types of costs for registration, paperwork, services, equipment, and materials; (2) revocation of all the 1997 reforms on registration and exams (this included the elimination of standardized exams to be used for admission purposes), with corresponding reestablishment of automatic acceptance from preparatory schools to the university and annulment of time limits on academic continuation; (3) implementation of a democratic and resolute congress, in agreement with the lifting of the strike, and a vote by the delegates that will guarantee that the decisions of the congress will be a mandate for the university community and will be respected by the authorities; (4) dismantlement of the political apparatus of repression and political espionage and elimination of all types of acts and university sanctions by external agencies affiliated with the university, the return of the retained checks of professors who have supported the strike and refused to give classes off-campus, and annulment and discontinuance of all penal ac-

tion, especially in the case of 73 student detainees; (5) adjustment of the academic calendar based on the number of days of the strike, excluding the courses held off-campus; (6) abolition of the bonds between UNAM and the National Center for Evaluations.

Student support for the strike was relatively strong at first, but in late April counterstrikers appeared on the main UNAM campus, and a small scuffle ensued. The appearance of the counterstrikers though was soon overcome by a May 12 rally to support the strike in which 100,000 protesters representing students, faculty, staff, and labor unions marched to the historic Zócalo in downtown Mexico City. In early June, Rector Barnés backed off the initial demand for tuition payments from all students and stated that only those who could afford to do so would be required to pay (it was not made clear who would make such determinations, and so student leaders balked at the offer). A few weeks later, Barnés followed his earlier decree with another stating that tuition payments would be voluntary,¹⁶ that strikers would be immune from university sanctions, and that the spring semester would be extended so students could complete classes.

In July, the spring semester officially ended and the administration offered to discuss demands, but only if the occupation were to end. The students rejected the administration's offer in large part because of deep mistrust. Strike leaders, dominated more and more by the far left of the movement, stated that students had bargained before with the administration and had been betrayed. They would not make that mistake again. It was during June and July that tensions between the left and moderate wings of the student movement came to a head. The result was the eventual exclusion of *los moderados* from the movement. This was an important event in that any hope of a significant vanguard movement was likely lost. The growing dominance of the left in the student movement also led to the rejection of the late summer proposal from *los ochos eméritos*.

In September, marches in which participants demanded a settlement grew in size and number as the start of the fall semester was delayed.¹⁷ On November 12, Rector Barnés de Castro resigned as the strike moved into its seventh month. Soon thereafter, Xavier Cortes Rocha was named interim rector, and he vowed to continue the dialogue. A few weeks later, Juan Ramón de la Fuente was named the new rector of UNAM. Under de la Fuente's direction, a strong proposal was put on the table in the form of a university-wide referendum. Even though 90 percent of the workers, students, and faculty voted in support of the proposal in late January, the left wing of the

¹⁶ Rhona Statland de López, "Mexican University, Paralyzed by Protests, Rescinds Mandatory Tuition Increase," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 18, 1999), p. A49.

¹⁷ Rhona Statland de López, "Strike Delays New Term at Mexican University," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 3, 1999), p. A90.

student movement refused to end the strike. Finally, on February 6, more than 9 months after the strike began, 2,400 federal police raided the main campus and detained more than 400 striking students (mostly from the left), putting an end to the long ordeal.¹⁸

Political affiliations in many ways defined the conflicted terrain of the strike. In fact, a significant concern addressed by many students at UNAM reflected a belief that the strike and the administration's reaction to it was more about electoral politics than deeply felt ideological principles. In the midst of the strike, one student expressed fear that the student movement was "more about politics . . . and less utopian" than he had hoped it would be. A second student, also commenting during the strike, echoed the preceding perspective: "Don't be surprised if the conflict continues until the presidential elections, and that a whole generation is lost because of poor management at the hands of politicians. Just because a certain level of politics exists, it does not signify that it is acceptable. UNAM needs to get away from the direct influence of the government."

Paradoxically, conservative students tended to see the university as a neutral entity and blamed moderate and left-leaning student strikers for politicizing UNAM. As one student explained, "The leftist parties entangle national problems with the university." Some also blamed political leaders and authorities for not acting decisively: "The strike should have never started. But once it did start what was lacking was a heavy hand by authorities. Mexico's authority is in crisis. There are no leaders. Everything is political ambition. Those in power are afraid to exercise it for fear of losing power." And another student stated, "The important issue is the manipulation of the CGH by way of the leftist radicals who have been cysts to the university for over thirty years. And the failure of the government at all levels to make a decision to apply the law against the strikers."

While conservative students charged the left with politicizing the university, countercharges aimed at UNAM's administration and the PRI came from left-, liberal-, and progressive-minded students. One student suggested complicity of Mexico's president (at the time), Ernesto Zedillo: "The President uses the strike as a weapon to devalue the left, but he knows that a lengthy conflict can also revert back and harm the official political party." This student alluded to the possibility that Mexico's dominant party, the PRI, which essentially was in power from 1929 to 2000, contributed mightily to the farcical quality of Mexico's electoral process over the years and could suffer damage due to its inability to end the strike. On the other hand, supporters of the PRD, a primary political challenger to the PRI since the

¹⁸ Rhona Statland de López, "Police Raid Ends 9-Month Student Strike at Mexico's Largest University," *Chronicle of Higher Education—Today's News* (Feb. 7, 2000), on-line serial, available from chronicle.com/news.

1988 presidential election, feared that a long, drawn-out strike might push support away from progressive PRD candidates led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Indeed, Cárdenas and the PRD received modest support in the July 2000 elections, finishing a distant third in the presidential race behind the PAN and the PRI. An advisor to Cárdenas pointed out that while the PRD supported the strike at the beginning, their party's position was that the students should have accepted the university's proposal of late summer, when a governing congress with significant student representation was offered. In the later stages of the strike, the PRD sought to distance itself from the far-left students, who, in the end, seized control of the strike, pushed moderate and progressive students aside, and showed little interest in a negotiated conclusion. Their basic position was that they would not negotiate with a government that cannot be trusted, and therefore, they wanted a student-dominated university congress implemented immediately.

For the PRD, the problem may have been one of guilt by association, with many casual observers and political operatives likely associating the radical left wing of the student movement (the "*ultras*") with progressive-minded PRDs (the *cardenistas*). Thus, when the far-left students refused to negotiate over what many observers considered a reasonable proposal, sentiment shifted even more from the students and the PRD to conservatives associated with PRI. This led to more than a few observers questioning the motivation of the student leaders, possibly giving the PRD a black eye in the process.

In addition to the importance of party politics, political concerns linked to the nature and importance of institutional and national autonomy defined major elements of the strike. This is especially relevant to how the strike was ended, when students were forcibly removed by *los federales*. This, as a former rector, Barrios Sierra, argued back in 1968, may violate the autonomy of UNAM. As one student explained, "What a terrible habit of the Mexican people, a nation without a historical memory. One that forgets the declaration of its politicians. . . . Dr. Zedillo's promises always declared that he would never use force. He has forgotten."

Issues of institutional and national autonomy surfaced in a variety of contexts. For example, there existed a compelling fear among left and progressive students that the country's commitment to globalization posed a challenge to UNAM's autonomy and accessibility. For example, a vital concern of the strikers was the increasing commitment of Mexico to market-driven forces that are pulling the country and institutions such as UNAM toward privatization. As one student explained: "Everyone thinks that this is a problem between the authorities and the students, but it is not like that. This is not only a national problem but an international problem. The imperialist politics that have been planted in Mexico and abroad have driven privatization not only in education but in all public sectors. For the most part, and in

the near future, all that is the common people or nation will no longer be. We will be in foreign hands, the hands of the United States.” The preceding student’s sentiments are captured in a political cartoon published in a special strike issue of the Mexican political magazine *Proceso*. The cartoon depicts Uncle Sam as a puppeteering devil standing over UNAM’s former rector, Francisco Barnés, controlling his behavior to suit the interests of the United States.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in framing this article is capturing the incredible political diversity within the student body at UNAM. Not only were the strikers torn over a wide range of complex and deeply rooted political and ideological positions (the most notable being the tension between the far left and the moderates), but students in general revealed deeply divided views on the strike. Additionally, the length of the strike brought about an ebb and flow of emotions and attitudes toward the strikers and their issues. A number of students expressed deep confusion and bitterness as the strike lingered on indefinitely. For example, the following student addressed some of these feelings during the latter days of the strike: “I don’t know what to think anymore. So much time has been lost. The strike was due to the student fees which don’t exist now. All that the strikers wanted has been given to them, and to the detriment of UNAM.” Another student also commented near the end of the strike: “The strike is affecting my life plans, because it does not permit me to continue my studies. And it affects me because I love UNAM, and to see the conditions that UNAM is currently under hurts very much.”

Clearly, conservative students and even some moderates tended to resent the strikers for sidetracking their educational careers. Many of these students did not see the movement’s concerns as legitimate issues for shaping UNAM’s future. As one student explained, “The University is a public institution, financed by the country and for that reason it must respond to the necessities of the country and not particularly to the students.” Student strikers, however, were quick to point out that they “represent” the country as much as if not more than other constituencies within the broader society. Their goal was not to tear down the university, but to build a stronger, more democratic institution in which students have a significant voice in determining policy. Although arguably unsuccessful, the student strikers sought to institutionalize their movement by gaining voice and influence at UNAM. One student in particular spoke to the issues raised here: “We are students, not delinquents. We also want to study. No one wanted the strike. But understand that this has been a recourse to pressure the authorities. We want a university for everyone, for the people, not just for a certain sector of the population.” In this respect, the student movement sought to hegemonize a more democratic vision of UNAM.

Considering the Work of Gramsci and Mannheim

The conflict at UNAM may be examined through a Gramscian lens in which the success of the students was contingent upon their effort to build an alternative hegemonic movement around a social justice vision of higher education.¹⁹ Here it is important to understand Gramsci's notion of hegemony as having both cultural and political components and involving both political and civil institutions in the promotion and enforcement of social and cultural norms. Hegemony is not simply the deployment of political organizations to gain dominance in a particular society. Hegemony also rests on social and cultural institutions—civil society—adding to the weight of political force by advancing cultural domination. Thus, building a counter-hegemonic movement—an alternative hegemony—involves advancing a cultural and ideological struggle that challenges the informal and institutionalized forms of oppression exercised by dominant groups.

From Gramsci's perspective, a key to an alternative hegemonic movement is intellectual and moral leadership concerned with cultural transformation. Cultural change, then, is seen as a necessary step in building a movement capable of overturning dominant ideologies and groups. And although domination of some form is inescapable, in an alternative hegemonic movement subordinate and subaltern sectors are included in such a way that individuals participating in these sectors know that they are integral to the general project. The key here is that there must be important features of a project that subaltern groups share. For example, the belief that everybody who gets an education and works hard can share in the wealth of a society is a commonly held notion by dominant and subaltern groups. As it is shared by the vast majority, subaltern groups are willing to accept a degree of domination, because, in a sense, they are part of the dominating project.

In Gramscian terms, the student strikers may be understood as a subaltern group. Their struggle was in opposition to the domination presented by UNAM's administration, which clearly was an extension of Mexico's national governance structure led by the PRI and reflective of the state's use of education to promote its political agenda.²⁰ A Gramscian analysis suggests that the student movement have as its goal the creation of a unified opposition capable of challenging the domination of UNAM. Only through the successful emergence of an alternative hegemonic movement would the students be able to break their domination at the hands of the administration and

¹⁹ We are deeply indebted to the theoretical analysis of UNAM put forth by Imanol Ordorika in his dissertation "Power, Politics, and Change in Higher Education" (n. 1 above). Additionally, we are grateful to have had the benefit of personal and professional conversations with Ordorika through which we gained insight into the application of Gramsci's work to the political struggle at UNAM.

²⁰ For a broader discussion of the state and educational policy in Mexico, see Daniel A. Morales-Gómez and Carlos Alberto Torres, *The State, Corporatist Politics, and Educational Policy Making in Mexico* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

the PRI. As Gramsci wrote, "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise: only permanent victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately."²¹ Clearly, from a Gramscian perspective, understanding the relationship between the student strikers and domination associated with the administration and government is key.

It is important to note that in defining the student strikers as a subaltern group we not only argue from a strict economic, class-based, Gramscian analysis of oppositional movements, but also incorporate understandings of their marginality as students. Although certainly many of the student strikers derive from lower and working classes within Mexican society and are likely to embrace such identities as part of their participation in the movement, just as certainly many others are the children of the privileged. Consequently, our definition of the student strikers as a subaltern group combines their class status with their marginalized status as students. We base such a judgment on long-standing social science evidence supporting an analysis of college and university students as marginalized members of larger academic communities. For example, an extensive body of research on student movements in the United States during the 1960s as well as more recent research on student activism in the 1990s offers much support for such an argument.²²

To understand the nature of domination faced by the student strikers at UNAM, we find it necessary to explore the relationship between university reform and the Mexican state. Let us begin with a discussion of Carlos Ornelas and David Post's differentiation of "populism" and "modernism."²³ According to Ornelas and Post, modernist reforms seek "to rationalize universities, making their allocation of graduates in the labor force more efficient. A university that is sensitive to the economy's need for particular skills signals those needs by passing on the relative costs of different academic programs to students."²⁴ They go on to argue that modernist reforms "aim to decrease student subsidies in public universities, or at least to concentrate subsidies in socially more productive fields such as engineering and medi-

²¹ Gramsci (n. 2 above), p. 55.

²² Julian Foster and Durward Long, eds., *Protest! Student Activism in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1970); Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Richard P. McCormick, *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Seymour Martin Lipset and Philip Altbach, "Student Politics and Higher Education in the United States," in *Student Politics*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (New York: Basic, 1967); James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Robert A. Rhoads, *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

²³ Carlos Ornelas and David Post, "Recent University Reform in Mexico," *Comparative Education Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 278-97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

cine.”²⁵ The modernist assumption is that “social benefits from the university are maximized when its resources are competitively allocated to individuals based on their particular merit and capability.”²⁶

A populist ideology, which Ornelas and Post argue is rooted in liberal individualist ideals, seeks broader social change through university reform and sees social stratification as a key concern. They claim that “the primary goal of students and professors who embrace populist reform is to gain political power. As intermediate objectives, populist reformers attempt to win the lowest possible tuition for students, as well as the most open possible admissions to the institution for part-time as well as full-time students.”²⁷ Populist reformers tend to see the university as the center of Mexican culture, situating Mexican elites as the gatekeepers of culture and power because of their role in controlling the university. Opening up the universities to the masses is seen as a way of sharing power and providing service to the broader society.

Although Ornelas and Post shed light on the complexities of higher education reform in Mexico, the philosophical stance of populism fails to capture the dramatic challenge and ideological position of UNAM’s student strikers, especially those centering the strike—the moderates. To be more clear, many of the leaders in the student movement were aligned ideologically with progressive and left views of society and social structure. They represented a rejection of liberal and neoliberal views of university reform, although they agreed with the populist sentiment of expanding educational opportunity and increasing social mobility for the poor. Their calls to action and demands for democratic restructuring of the university bear little resemblance to liberal appeals to hone the system by working through existing institutional structures. Indeed, the student movement reflected radical sentiment that may be understood as a social justice position, challenging the liberal individualism of populism and seeking to build a counter-hegemonic project capable of reversing market-driven initiatives of the ruling powers.

Ornelas and Post, in their discussion of the “modernist” position, provide insight into the market-driven accountability of the current government. This movement has been described by Levy as the “new accountability.”²⁸ It reflects Mexico’s growing interest in global markets and addresses the market-driven project pursued most vigorously following the 1988 election of PRI presidential candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari: “Salinas has pressed for a new political-development model, including less national government involvement in the economy and higher education. He has repeat-

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Daniel Levy, “Mexico’s Changing Higher Education and U.S. Universities,” *Planning for Higher Education* 22, no. 4 (1994): 24–30.

edly made the point that Mexico has to improve its education at all levels and in particular reform its traditional policies for public higher education.”²⁹ The higher education reforms that Levy notes include fixing the following problems: easy entry to the universities, soft studies with few examinations, free tuition, and excessive public employment for faculty (most faculty teach as adjuncts and work at other jobs). Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon (Salinas’s successor, elected in 1994) continued to follow the path laid by Salinas, using his position as part of a campaign to solidify the PRI, which only in recent elections faced the possibility of losing power, finally being ousted in the summer of 2000 by the PAN and Vicente Fox. A comment from Gramsci seems particularly insightful here: “The more the immediate economic life of a nation is subordinated to international relations, the more a particular party will come to represent this situation and to exploit it, with the aim of preventing rival parties gaining the upper hand.”³⁰ This certainly appears to be the case in Mexico, where the struggle between the administration and the student strikers also signified a struggle between rival political parties, the powerful PRI versus the emergent PRD (ironically, in the end the student strike may have cost both parties’ votes to the PAN).

University reform efforts led by student progressives affiliated with the PRD as well as far-left groups represent something more complex than the “liberal individualist ideals” designed to “gain political power,” as described by Ornelas and Post in their discussion of populism. Certainly, power is important in the case of the student strike. But, power in their case seems to be a means to an end. It is the end—social justice through democratic decision-making bodies and educational opportunity for the poor—that defines the alternative hegemonic project at the center of the student movement. The failure of the students to achieve political and cultural transformation reflects not so much an assault on Gramscian thought as it does the shortcomings of the student coalition, most specifically, the major fracture between the left and moderate wings.

The social justice position is most evident in the strikers’ defense of Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution addressing free public education. The beginning text of Article 3 reads as follows: “Every individual has the right to receive education. The State—Federation, States, and Municipalities—will provide preschool, primary, and secondary education. Primary and secondary are compulsory.” And later, under Article 3, Section IV, the Constitution reads: “All education that the State provides will be free of charge.” And then in Section V, still under Article 3, it reads: “Besides providing preschool, primary, and secondary education, the State will promote and assist in all types and means of education, including higher education necessary

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁰ Gramsci (n. 2 above), p. 176.

for the development of the Nation.” Interestingly, Article 3 of the Constitution also calls for education to be democratic: “Furthermore: It [education] shall be democratic, considering democracy not only a judicial structure and a political regimen, but also a system of life based on the constant economic, social, and cultural betterment of the people.” A commitment to the Constitution’s defense of free public education, largely the result of the Mexican Revolution, is poignantly captured in one of the protester’s slogans, claiming that “Zapata fought so we could study,” a reference to the insurgent efforts of Emiliano Zapata to forge a new Mexico during the revolutionary struggles of 1910–20.

In many ways, social justice versus market-driven mentalities reflect underlying sentiments linked to democratic versus instrumental decision-making processes. In their discussion of schooling and the democratic state, Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin note that issues linked to equality (democratic issues) are often pitted against concerns for increased efficiency (instrumental issues).³¹ Although democratic views openly acknowledge a particular political position—a democratic one—strategies rooted in instrumentalism tend to deny political realities and situate organizational and social problems as informational problems. From such a perspective, if the proper amount of information or the correct ordering of facts can be achieved, then a clear decision will derive from the analysis. Thus, problems of ideology and politics get ignored as antidemocratic processes involving powerful organizational decision makers guide an instrumentally evaluated and bureaucratically delivered decision, masked as apolitical and ideologically neutral. But, of course, the decision is rooted in bureaucratic conservatism, where ideology often exists beneath the surface. As Mannheim argued, “The fundamental tendency of all bureaucratic thought is to turn all problems of politics into problems of administration.”³² This is the primary form that domination takes in the case of the relationship between the administration and the student strikers at UNAM.

For Mannheim, the very nature of ideology is rooted in politics and must be understood in terms of the sociohistoric forces at work in a given society at a particular time. “We must realize once and for all that the meanings which make up our world are simply an historically determined and continuously developing structure in which man develops, and are in no sense absolute.”³³ Along these lines, Gramsci argues that “everyone is a philosopher” and asks whether it is “better to ‘think’, without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? . . . Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one’s own conception of the

³¹ Martin Carnoy and Henry M. Levin, *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985).

³² Mannheim (n. 2 above), p. 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

world . . . choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world."³⁴ In either case, Gramsci adds, we are all products of "some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs?"³⁵ In the case of UNAM, the strikers, in part, were trying to bring Mexico into historical focus by challenging the underlying ideology of the Zedillo administration, namely, its views of economic expansion and the role of accessible higher education.

A central theoretical concern of this project was to make sense of the strategies student strikers employed as a means to advance a cultural and political project centered on issues of social justice, and how, as part of their project, they incorporated subordinate sectors of the student movement. And, of course, a central point of our analysis must contend with whether the student movement came up short, or whether indeed Gramsci's notion of oppositional movements is theoretically lacking.

Although the university administration and the PRI were unable to forge a successful hegemonic movement around a market-driven view of higher education, as evidenced by the strike and its support among students, by the same token, the student movement failed as well. The UNAM student strikers saw the educational policies of Mexico as a product still in the making. Their strike was an effort to fundamentally shape such processes through whatever political and cultural opposition they could create as part of a resistance strategy. They clearly had an ideological position—this they did not deny. But they also recognized that the forces against which they struggled were also ideologically rooted. For them, globalization is given meaning in Mexico through an ideology firmly grounded in a market-driven mentality largely driven by the wealthiest Western countries and Japan.

Despite their strong ideological commitments, the student strikers failed to account for subaltern groups on the margins of their own movement. In the power struggle played out between the left and more moderate student forces, the possibility of forging an alternative hegemonic movement was severely hurt. The inability of the strikers to build a powerful and cohesive movement was reflected in the division and discontent within both the student movement and the general student body. In the end, the left's lack of trust of the university administration, the PRI, and their fellow moderate strikers was too much to overcome as their ideologically based resistance became more uncompromising. Potential seemed to exist in the beginning, but as the strike dragged on and as sentiment shifted, any chance of forging a movement capable of successfully challenging the administration was lost.

Leadership was lacking at key levels within the student movement. Exclusionary decisions by far-left students that in the end chased moderate and

³⁴ Gramsci (n. 2 above), p. 323.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

progressive allies out of the movement revealed either a case of political naïveté, nihilism, or both. One explanation offered for the leadership vacuum was the fact that many experienced student leaders did not play key roles in the strike simply because they were involved in the political campaign for presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. The loss of veteran student leaders to the Cárdenas campaign is as good of an explanation as any for the weak decision making that led to the defeat at the hands of the administration.

From the perspective of the student strikers, it was somewhat disheartening that so little was accomplished when so much seemed possible. In the end, a movement with the potential to be a vanguard for democratic reform in higher education fizzled beneath the weight of in-fighting, immaturity, and inexperience. For the administration, the opportunity to claim victory, however temporary, fell at their feet as public sentiment, with the aid of massive media support, shifted to their favor. And so as left and progressive students lost a chance to forge a possible hegemonic movement, they may have done significant damage to the PRD in the process, a notion borne out by the subsequent election of PAN leader Vicente Fox and only moderate to weak support for Cárdenas. With the ability of the administration and the PRI to reclaim UNAM in the spirit of bureaucratic control and a market-driven mentality, democracy and social justice in Mexico may have taken a hit in the process.

Conclusion

Underlying social justice and market-driven perspectives are fundamental convictions about the nature and role of UNAM. On the one hand, student strikers believed that UNAM ought to serve the poorest of the society by offering accessible education and opportunities for social mobility. In arguing from a social justice position, they tended to point to massive economic inequities throughout the larger society. This group saw the government's reduction of UNAM's 1999 budget and the administration's subsequent decision to raise tuition as abandoning the responsibility of the state to provide free and accessible higher education. On the other hand, government and administrative officials, as well as a significant block of students, saw the university faced with economic exigencies that demanded greater accountability and a shift toward increased privatization. Funding cuts from the government were seen as unavoidable and necessary, the result of Mexico seeking to expand its competitive role in the world economy. For this group, a move toward privatization of higher education encourages the kind of entrepreneurial spirit needed to compete in a global economy.

The actions of students at UNAM may be understood as an attempt to forge a specific vision of Mexico and its policies toward higher education.

The students saw the issues at a critical juncture in the political and cultural trajectory of Mexico as a state. They viewed the forces of globalization and the growing influence of market-driven decision making as bureaucratic threats to democratization, which, in their minds, is expressed through open access to higher education and opportunities for social mobility. In this regard, the goal of the strikers was to create a movement in which social justice issues took precedence over bureaucratic instrumentality.

The administration reflected the global commitments of former President Zedillo and the PRI (and the PAN as well). They saw reliance on market forces as part of the expansion of Mexico's commitment to global capitalism. While neoconservatives tend to view capitalism itself as a democratic form, the realities of UNAM may situate the university as a fading open-access organization in a global Darwinian play whereby the most financially solvent institutions survive (usually those with governmental support, i.e., banks and corporations). The rest drop by the wayside, much like the dinosaurs of the prehistoric period. Such thinking reflects the "Soberonian saga" Ordorika describes in his analysis of UNAM, when he detailed the role former rector Guillermo Soberon (1973–80) played in strengthening a conservative administrative stronghold by investing more money in particular structures and departments at UNAM.³⁶ As Ordorika explains, "This discourse served the conservative groups perfectly. The new formation argued that politics had no place in an academic institution. Politics were condemned as a negative and anti-university practice."³⁷ Such an ideology took root despite the fact that the vast majority of key administrative appointments went to members of the PRI and were clearly political.

Adding to the ideological tension is the historic mission of UNAM, rooted in a social justice view of higher education. To impose a market-driven schema on such a long-standing and widely embraced philosophy is to refashion its historic identity. If such a decision is to be considered, then it ought to be confirmed or rejected democratically through open political debate and not simply accomplished through executive fiat, which, as the strike suggested, is unlikely to work. In the process of acting unilaterally, it is hardly surprising that subaltern groups rejected the domination of the PRI and what they saw as its autocratic administrative arm embodied by the official leaders of UNAM. Clearly, the present administration has failed to build a hegemonic movement around a market-driven philosophy.

In many ways, the problems at UNAM offer a microview of the larger landscape of Mexican higher education and its changing economy. The work of Rollin Kent is most helpful here in that he has identified two key stances influencing Mexico's efforts to modernize: "uncritical adoption of a

³⁶ Ordorika, "Reform at Mexico's National Autonomous University" (n. 1 above).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

modernistic educational discourse sometimes linked to technological messianism [and] currents of resistance that express fear of the destruction of historically ingrained popular forms of sociability by intense modernization.”³⁸ Kent suggests that reconciling these tensions is one of Mexico’s biggest challenges: “Higher education institutions are enveloped by tensions among various cultural forms which need to find a means to express and resolve themselves. The dispute over educational values will surely continue, as educators are faced with the double goal of providing a good basic education for everyone and simultaneously developing a sophisticated system of higher education that is needed to support international economic competitiveness and cultural integration.”³⁹ Given Kent’s advice, and our own finding that the tension between market-driven philosophies versus social justice perspectives is so much a part of Mexico’s cultural landscape, organizations such as the IMF and World Bank would be wise to include such points in analyses of economic options for Mexico. It seems fairly self-evident that in a country where over one-fourth of the population lives under conditions of severe poverty, denying access to higher education is more likely to lead to destabilization at the cost of dollars saved toward education. As Atilio Boron and Carlos Torres argue in their analysis of education in Latin America, high poverty rates confound neoliberal restructuring, because citizens are denied “access to the minimal levels of social welfare that are in some cases . . . constitutionally guaranteed both in the spirit and in the letter of the law.”⁴⁰ This is certainly the case at UNAM where the spirit of open access prevails among so many low-income students.

³⁸ Rollin Kent, “Higher Education in Mexico: The Tensions and Ambiguities of Modernization” (paper presented at the OECD IMHE Central European University Conference—The World on the Move and Higher Education in Transition—Prague, Czech Republic, August 1995), p. 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Atilio Alberto Boron and Carlos Alberto Torres, “The Impact of Neoliberal Restructuring on Education and Poverty in Latin America,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 42, no. 2 (1996): 102–14.