

Rethinking 1968: Bolivia's overlooked student movement

Charlie H. Parker

University of Barcelona

Abstract

Nineteen sixty-eight was a legendary year for protest and has been studied extensively worldwide. Bolivia was left out of this global history, despite experiencing its own months-long protest movement. University students fought for university autonomy and against authoritarianism and repression. Spreading out from La Paz, students across the country erected barricades, led lightning protests, and fought against police. Security forces took on familiar militaristic tactics such as bombarding protestors with tear gas and employing sieges and raids on university buildings. The university movement dominated the press for months but was ultimately worn down by repressive brute force. This research presents the first and only academic study of the Bolivian 1968 university movement and argues that it constitutes a novel facet of the 1968 protest movements, sharing many characteristics with other student movements of that year while also manifesting according to local idiosyncrasies. *Keywords:* Bolivia, 1968 protests, university rebellion, resistance, repression.

Resumen: Repensando 1968: El olvidado movimiento estudiantil boliviano

1968 fue un año legendario de protestas y ha sido ampliamente estudiado en todo el mundo. Bolivia quedó al margen de esta historia global, a pesar de haber vivido su propio movimiento de protesta que duró meses. Los estudiantes universitarios lucharon por la autonomía universitaria y contra el autoritarismo y la represión. Extendiéndose desde La Paz hasta el resto del país, los estudiantes levantaron barricadas, lideraron protestas relámpago y se enfrentaron a la policía. Las fuerzas de seguridad adoptaron tácticas de corte militarista, tales como bombardear a los manifestantes con gases lacrimógenos y asediar y realizar redadas en edificios universitarios. El movimiento universitario dominó la prensa durante meses, pero finalmente fue sofocado por la fuerza represiva. Esta investigación presenta el primer y único estudio académico sobre el movimiento universitario boliviano de 1968 y argumenta que este movimiento constituye una faceta novedosa de los movimientos de protesta de 1968, compartiendo muchas características con los demás movimientos estudiantiles de ese año, al tiempo que se manifestaba según las idiosincrasias locales. *Palabras clave:* Bolivia, protestas de 1968, rebelión universitaria, resistencia, represión.

Introduction

The events of 1968 represent, in Nora Farik's (2008, p. 4) words, the first case of a "global concurrence". The protest movements were globally connected: people discussed issues that crossed borders, found inspiration and outrage in distant events, and perceived what was happening far away as linked to their own cause (Fücks, 2008, p. 8). At a time when national and cultural differences in the world were more pronounced than today, the global rebellious spirit of 1968 was a profoundly novel global phenomenon. Though people protested a range of disparate issues, they shared a common fervour for resistance, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and determined opposition to authoritarianism. Although young people have historically had little influence in the world, the 1968 protests showed that, when driven to action, the young can be powerful (Kurlansky, 2004, pp. xv-xvii, 378-380). Research into the 1968 protest movements has been conducted in countries across the globe: Czechoslovakia (known as the Prague Spring), the Soviet Union, Germany (both East and West), South Africa, Yugoslavia, Belgium, Poland, Spain, the UK, Japan, and China (Farik, 2008; Caute, 1988). In Latin America, the protests in Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, and Colombia are included (Millán, 2018a, pp. 17-18). Bolivia, a landlocked and often overlooked country in the heart of South America, also experienced months of unrest in 1968. Bolivia's university protests have, to the best of my knowledge, not been the subject of any research.¹

The events of 1968 were not one grand unified movement; however, they do share many of the same mechanisms, processes and interrelations that are worth analysing (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2004, p. 29). Given the lack of analysis of Bolivia's 1968 movement, this article primarily aims to document this case and fill this historical gap in the global context. It will contextualise the local Bolivian events within the global framework of university unrest and compare them with similar occurrences elsewhere. With this goal in mind, the following pages first lay out the current historiography on the nature, motivations, processes, and outcomes of the 1968 global student protests. This will be followed by a brief overview of key events of the year, particularly those in France, after which I will focus on Latin America, notably the Mexican '68. The core of the article will then examine the 1968 student movement in Bolivia, drawing constant comparisons to other '68 movements. The article relies mainly on the Bolivian press as a primary source because it is one of the few sources available on the topic and the only one capable of providing rich detail on local protest events alongside insights into broader public opinion. To improve reliability, three major Bolivian newspapers were used and then triangulated to reconstruct the 1968 university protests: the Catholic moderate *Presencia*, the centre-right *Última Hora*, and the more conservative *El Diario*. To a lesser extent, the article uses the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) archives to complement the newspaper accounts, though few resources document the events. No personal accounts of the events were found.

The 1968 historiography

Nineteen sixty-eight “stands for a new democratic political culture” (Fücks, 2008, p. 8). The global protests pushed for democracy, whether through the democratisation (or democratic autonomy) of certain institutions such as universities or through broader societal change, such as democracy for an entire country. State repression then engendered broad anti-authoritarianism. For many movements, this anti-authoritarianism also possessed anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist traits, particularly in Latin America, given its deep colonial history and the influence of the now-legendary figures of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Salvador Allende (Fücks, 2008, pp. 8-9). A key motivation factor for many of the global protests was a rejection of the detested United States war in Vietnam (Kurlansky, 2004, p. xvi).

Globally, those in power shrewdly employed their sway over certain elements of the media to craft their messages and discredit the student movements. Consequently, university press and radio became a means for young people to challenge the often-hostile mainstream media (Carey, 2016a, pp. xxv-xxvi). Furthermore, new technologies like television, inexpensive videotape, and satellite communication broadcast news of distant events almost immediately (Kurlansky, 2004, pp. xvi-xvii). Visual media in the form of pamphlets, newspapers, and television became increasingly influential in spreading student protests (Fücks, 2008, p. 8).

In most of the world, the state crushed the student movements (Farik, 2008, pp. 4-5; Romero Castilla, 1968, pp. 139-41). While the revolution that many hoped for failed, cultural and political changes were set in motion (Fücks, 2008, p. 7). Worldwide, 1968 brought about the “growing participation of minorities in the public sphere, the changing gender roles, and the ‘coming out’ of sexual minorities” (Farik, 2008, p. 4). Moreover, police clashes with students around the world, from France and Japan to Mexico and Brazil, became an iconic symbol of rebellion, depicting bright, fresh-faced students standing up against battle-ready police forces (Ridenti, 2008, p. 11). More broadly, students became one of the main protagonists of social and political change (Romero Castilla, 1968, p. 133). Despite the expanding globalised world, the protests had localised demands that yielded very different local consequences. In other words: “the global met the local in 1968” (Carey, 2016a, p. xxxii).

Europe and the United States

The events of the Second World War changed the world irrevocably. Those countries ravaged by the War were particularly transformed. By 1968, much of Europe had been rebuilt and was experiencing an economic boom. Nonetheless, many young people felt repressed by this post-war society (Kurlansky, 2004, p. xvii). In the West, consumerist countercultures formed, led by rock music with its erotic lyrics, drug use, and general rebelliousness (Caute, 1988, pp. 35-52).

Kurlansky (2004, p. xvii) considers the generational difference between the pre- and post-War a significant aspect in the “struggle for common ground”. Carey (2016a, p. xiv) agrees that in some regions, particularly the United States, the 1968 protests featured a form of generational conflict. However, she affirms that it is misleading to say the global protests stemmed from a generational conflict. She emphasises that these protests derived from diverse issues of discontent with the current system.

In Western countries, many protests were a moral revolt against dominant values, as the sons and daughters of some of society’s most privileged sections rebelled. This alienation created a split between what became known as the Old Left and the New Left in many university movements. The two represented distinctly different outlooks and styles: the Old Left was beholden to party politics; it was methodical, planned, and firmly rooted in the working class, while the New Left distrusted state power and authority, was more utopian, decentralised, action-based, mostly middle-class, and generally perceived as more passionate (Caute, 1988, pp. vii, 20-24).

As the United States’ unjust war in Vietnam engendered outrage worldwide, students in the United States mobilised a variety of movements protesting a range of issues, from opposition to war in Vietnam to anti-capitalism and support for the Black Civil Rights movement. The United States has been considered to represent a different 1968 student protest movement due to its large size, where students rallied in multiple locations across the country, resulting in a dispersed, even decentralised leadership with varied protests that generally failed to collaborate with other sectors of society (Carey, 2016a, pp. xvii-xxiii).

May 1968 in France is probably the best-known and best-researched aspect of the 1968 student movement. Students at the University of Nanterre in the outskirts of Paris occupied their university buildings in March, demanding the release of detained student colleagues arrested in a solidarity protest with the Vietnamese. The authorities provoked the movement to spread to the Sorbonne University, deep in the capital, by closing Nanterre. At the start of May, the police invaded the Sorbonne, where students were holed up. This culminated in the “night of the barricades” on May 10, when students blocked roads and set up barricades throughout the streets of the Latin Quarter (Rieznik, Rabey, Poy, Duarte & Bruno, 2010, pp. 33-47).

Posters and slogans quickly became one of the main “weapons in the service of the struggle” (Caute, 1988, p. 199). Outraged by the brutal police repression, many of the country’s trade unions called for a 24-hour general strike. This strike evolved into an indefinite wild-cat strike call alongside occupations of important factories. Within days, the strike had spread across France, with more than five million workers on strike by May 20. The movement had changed course: now it demanded that President Charles de Gaulle resign. The movement maintained its strength until the end of May when the government went on the counteroffensive, using both carrots (police repression) and sticks (concessions to disparate groups) to disarm the movement (Rieznik et al., 2010, pp. 51-57, 67-78).

Night after night, the Latin Quarter of Paris, the scene of much of the street protests, was thick with tear gas (Caute, 1988, p. viii). By June 5, the general strike was waning, and by mid-June, the university faculties were recaptured. After calling a general election, de Gaulle silenced his critics by winning a huge majority (Caute, 1988, pp. 223-227). Despite an ostensible loss for the movement, it shook France to its core and almost toppled de Gaulle's government. (Rieznik et al., 2010, p. 8). While these events captured the attention of Europe and North America, much of Latin America remained embroiled in the Cold War, torn between the extremes of the political spectrum. Subversive plots, coups, and revolutions were constantly just around the corner. Student protests presented a new threat.

Latin America

The 1959 Cuban Revolution sent shockwaves throughout the Americas. It challenged United States hegemonic presumptions and consequently hardened the anti-communist Cold War stance of the United States, which adopted the National Security Doctrine to combat the alleged threat of an international communist conspiracy and "another Cuba".² Across Latin America, the success of young revolutionaries in Cuba galvanised the emergence of new social movements and set the stage for a 1960s full of hope, euphoria, and endless possibilities for a utopian future (Sorensen, 2007, p. 3). Throughout the region, the push for industrialisation, urbanisation, and economic development led to expansions in higher education to meet the need for planners, administrators, and technical experts. Universities were home to the intelligentsia and purveyors of critical thinking, but as student populations exploded, their capacity for unrest ballooned. Youth emerged as agents of change (Sorensen, 2007, pp. 3-6, 108). The number of university students grew massively in the years preceding 1968: across the region, the average percentage of students in higher education as a share of the total population doubled between 1960 and 1970, from 3.265 per cent to 6.9 per cent. Bolivia experienced one of the largest growth rates, more than doubling from 3.9 per cent to 10 per cent (Millán, 2018b, p. 33).

Iconic figures such as Che Guevara embodied the optimism and impatience of the young generation and promoted action across Latin America. Shortly after his death in 1967, Che's image was immortalised as a symbol of his complex character: austere, heroic, romantic, emotional, and determined. His image was present throughout student protests in 1968, from Paris and London to Milan and Mexico City (Sorensen, 2007, pp. 6-7, 18-19, 24-27). This research shows that his image was also present in Bolivia's 1968 protests, albeit scarcely, and this surprising absence (especially considering Guevara died in Bolivia just a year prior) suggests he was not central to Bolivia's mobilisations, though further research, particularly from personal accounts, could clarify this.

The Latin American movement that has received the most scholarly attention is the Mexican 1968.³ The first protests were over different issues: students at

or affiliated with the National Polytechnic Institute were protesting police violence towards young high school students, while students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) were commemorating the 15th anniversary of Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada Barracks in 1953 and demonstrating against United States involvement in Vietnam. Both protests coalesced around the Mexico City main plaza on July 26 (Carey, 2016b, pp. 92-93). Students took to the streets in droves, and the army deployed, using warlike tactics. They even used a bazooka to blast open a historic colonial wooden door at the UNAM university, provoking outrage. The movement quickly turned to opposing this violent repression, meted out by groups of paramilitary and fascist thugs (Rivas Ontiveros, 2018, pp. 60-62). As in much of the Global South, Mexican students were more concerned by blatant exploitation and repression than generational alienation (Caute, 1988, p. 344). Women were prevalent throughout the protests in Mexico and broke with cultural norms to participate, such as standing guard overnight at the university buildings with members of the opposite sex (Carey, 2016b, p. 95). Students formed lightning brigades made up of small groups of men and women who provided technical skills, spread ideas, and organised solidarity. By late August, the students marched alongside teachers, workers, and street vendors in the hundreds of thousands. Quickly learning from their mistakes and attempting to prevent press distortions, the students led a huge, nonviolent, and highly disciplined silent march on September 13 (Carey, 2016b, pp. 97-103). A protest in the Plaza of Three Cultures in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, ended tragically on October 2 after a brutal massacre was perpetrated, killing hundreds (Rivas Ontiveros, 2018, pp. 64-71). Ten days after the massacre, on October 12, the 19th Summer Olympic Games were broadcast across the globe, being transmitted for the first time in colour. The games were inaugurated in the Olympic Stadium of the UNAM, the same university that was the epicentre of student protests (Santana, 2018, p. 184).

The Bolivian 1968

The Revolution of 1952, led by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), looms large in Bolivian history. After the uprising, the military was decimated, the electorate expanded fivefold, the largest mines that drove the country's economy were nationalised, and a sweeping land reform act was passed that empowered the numerically huge peasantry (Klein, 2016, pp. 252-65). By 1964, the MNR government had lost much popular support and had become increasingly repressive. Consequently, many in the country opposed to the MNR government welcomed the armed forces coup d'état of November 1964, including many university students whose street disturbances had helped create a political environment ripe for a coup (Field, 2014, pp. 176-189).

The new president, General René Barrientos Ortuño, initiated a period of military rule that dominated national politics for the next 18 years (Malloy & Gamarra, 1988, p. 1). Barrientos's rule soon turned autocratic, crushing the

labour movement, fracturing the miners, and exiling key political opponents. In 1966, Barrientos called elections to “constitutionalise” his presidency, winning a massive victory, bolstered by his huge support in the peasantry and aided by his government’s manipulation of the press, petty bribery, and lack of political opposition (Dunkerley, 1984, pp. 122-32). The following year, Barrientos’s government was thrust into the global spotlight when Che Guevara started his ill-fated guerrilla campaign in Bolivia, which soon became one of the first victories for the country’s hapless armed forces (Prado Salmón, 2021, p. 259).

A year of crisis

Political turmoil was always around the corner in Bolivia (Dunkerley, 1984, p. xi). Havana’s unexpected publication of Guevara’s guerrilla diary in late June 1968 caused alarm. By mid-July, the Minister of the Interior and good friend of Barrientos, Antonio Arguedas, suddenly fled the country and appeared in Chile. He confessed his betrayal by delivering the diary to Cuba and revealed that the CIA had been involved in the guerrilla counteroffensive, causing uproar in Bolivia as Barrientos’s government was portrayed as a puppet of United States interests (Dunkerley, 1984, p. 153). A huge scandal ensued, involving the initiation of a trial against Barrientos by the congressmen Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz and José Ortiz Mercado (Malloy & Gamarra, 1988, pp. 28-29). Members of some of the main opposition parties – the MNR, Falange Socialista Boliviana (FSB) and the Partido Revolucionario de la Izquierda Nacionalista (PRIN) – protested violently in the streets (*Presencia*, 21/07/1968). The government cracked down on political opposition more broadly, which devolved into mass resignations from Barrientos’s cabinet, and Barrientos threatened not to summon Congress on August 6 (*Presencia*, 26/07/1968). Congress was eventually convened as Barrientos prevailed, winning additional executive powers (Malloy & Gamarra, 1988, pp. 31-32). Just a couple of weeks later, Barrientos was challenged from within the armed forces in a hasty coup d’état led by General Vásquez Sempértegui, who accused the government of being responsible for the “drama that the country [wa]s experiencing” (*Presencia*, 21/08/1968). The rebellion was quickly crushed (*Presencia*, 22/08/1968, p. 1). During this period of chaos, the university movement was in full swing.

The University uprising

In March, early in the school year, university students began to publicly denounce government repression and interference in university affairs, coincidentally as students in Nanterre also protested against government repression (*Presencia*, 18/03/1968; *Presencia*, 26/03/1968). Just days later, student representatives from all seven of the national universities openly criticised the political repression of the government and declared a national state of emergency following the arrest of two university students (Federación Universitaria Local,

1968, pp. 23-25). Over the next weeks, students protested the implementation of an expanded State Security Law (*Presencia*, 08/04/1968). This was just a dress rehearsal for the wave of university protests that began in full in June.

Starting on June 18, thousands of students at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), led by their local university union, the Federación Universitaria Local (FUL) and accompanied by teachers and the university rector, marched through La Paz, fuelled by their conviction in university autonomy and their opposition to government interference. It marked the beginning of a month dedicated to defending university autonomy, a demand shared by students across the globe in 1968 (*Presencia*, 18/05/1968). Resembling the anti-imperialist protests of their peers in other Latin American countries, students sang chants of death to “tyranny”, “imperialism”, and the “military boot”, a symbol of the authoritarian nature of the Barrientos government. Women can be seen marching side by side with men (*Presencia*, 19/06/1968, p. 1). The following day, students, professors, and administrative workers at the Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno of Santa Cruz took up the same cause, protesting throughout the city (*Presencia*, 20/06/1968). However, the stimulus for intense action did not come until a month later, when violent protests carried out by members of the FSB, MNR, and PRIN political parties in La Paz on July 20 provoked a political crisis in Barrientos’s cabinet (*Presencia*, 21/07/1968). The government responded by announcing a state of exception to enable swift repressive measures (*Última hora*, 22/07/1968). Quashing the party protest in La Paz, the state of exception led to arrests in the city of Oruro, where members of opposition parties were detained. This spilt over into detentions of non-involved university students and professors. Reinvoking the chant for university autonomy, the Oruro students declared their university grounds free territory (*Última hora*, 23/07/1968). They called for an indefinite strike until the arrested students and teachers were released, and for the next few days, analogous to students in Mexico City, students around the city played cat and mouse with police agents as the students took to lightning protests by blocking the city streets unannounced while trying to evade police brutality, dogs, and tear gas (*Presencia*, 23/07/1968; *Última hora*, 24/07/1968). Students in Potosí followed this example, staging a similar protest on July 26 (*Presencia*, 22/07/1968).

The persistence of university resistance and police violence escalated. At the start of August, at the Universidad Mayor de San Simón (UMSS) in Cochabamba, students battled police to reach the main square, which was symbolically important for protest marches in Bolivia as in Mexico. Police opened fire with tear gas and live rounds, killing two and arresting more than 60 (*Última hora*, 03/08/1968). Seemingly unfazed by their imminent peril, protesters continued the next day. Two more were killed, and the army laid siege to the university building, arresting hundreds (*Presencia*, 04/08/1968). Increasingly warlike repressive measures in Bolivia drew parallels to Mexico.

After some delay from the national university body, the Confederación Universitaria Boliviana (CUB) declared a two-day national strike on August 13,

repudiating government repression. Apparently recognising the potential for unruly elements in the protests, the CUB gave a clear directive to universities across the country to hold silent protests to express opposition in a less provocative way, making the same tactical decision to promote silent protests as students did in Mexico. The first silent protest was due to begin at the UMSA on August 16 (*Presencia*, 13/08/1968; *El Diario*, 13/08/1968). However, many students failed to restrain themselves and took to the streets of La Paz a day early, blocking the roads around the university building. They then spread their protests across the city to catch the security forces off guard, continuing throughout the day (*Presencia*, 16/08/1968; *El Diario*, 16/08/1968). The following day, the silent protest went ahead but met a more concerted effort from the police, who suffocated the crowds with tear gas. Skirmishes broke out between students and police, replicating the police clashes seen elsewhere from Mexico to Brazil and Japan. Some students even took a national police detective hostage, releasing him shortly after hearing of a plan to raid the main university building, the Monoblock, to rescue him. Surrounded in the Monoblock, students threw rocks down at the national guard and were subsequently forced out of the building after the electricity was cut. The police bombardment of tear gas suffocated whole streets where people lived and worked. A child had to be saved from choking on the gas by a civilian (*Presencia*, 17/08/1968; *El Diario*, 17/08/1968). The La Paz scenes of smoke-filled streets closely resembled the tear gas bombardments deployed in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Following the arrest of the FUL secretary of the UMSA, a small group of students took a national guard and two civil servants hostage in a bid to swap them for their secretary (*Presencia*, 18/08/1968). When the attempt failed, the students released the hostages the next day (*El Diario*, 19/08/1968). UMSA students then set up a protest exhibit in the university atrium displaying hundreds of empty tear gas capsules shot by the police in the previous days. Mocking the US in typical Latin American anti-imperialist style, beside the tear gas canisters, blackboards displayed: "Yankees, is this the aid for the Bolivian people?" (*Última Hora*, 20/08/1968). As in Mexico, women were integral to the resistance: after the display, about 300 female students led a peaceful march to the Palace of Government in Plaza Murillo, leaving their protest placards in front of the main door (*Última Hora*, 20/08/1968).

Spreading across the country over the next days, students in Tarija marched in the streets (*Presencia*, 21/08/1968), students in Sucre set off dynamite (*Presencia*, 21/08/1968), and students in Potosí showed their resolve by continuing to protest during heavy nighttime snowfall in the freezing conditions of the altiplano (*El Diario*, 25/08/1968). On August 23, the CUB, FUL, and the government signed an agreement to suspend all street protests in return for guarantees of constitutional rights and the release of all students and professors detained, confined, or kept in exile (*Presencia*, 23/08/1968). However, the university students envisioned an end to repression for all, and the FUL at the UMSA

disavowed the agreement the very next day after police forces arrested factory and transport workers (*Presencia*, 24/08/1968). Repression intensified. Two university students were murdered in Tarija during the coup d'état of Vázquez Sempértagui (*Presencia*, 22/08/1968). In Santa Cruz, university students faced a new antagonist when local peasants intervened in support of the government (*Presencia*, 29/08/1968). Responding to this repression in Santa Cruz, students in faraway Cochabamba blocked roads in and around the main plaza, threw stones at the US consulate, and briefly occupied the local Litoral Radio to broadcast their view of the government's "massacre of students" in Santa Cruz (*Presencia*, 30/08/1968). Where Mexico used paramilitary and fascist thugs for repression, Barrientos deployed his peasant supporters. Local peasants threatened to murder any university students who came to the Cochabamba countryside. Unperturbed, students burnt a boot to symbolise their opposition to the military (*El Diario*, 04/09/1968).

Calm returned to the UMSS for some weeks until the national police and army raided the university on September 17. During the raid, the executive secretary of the Cochabamba FUL was arrested on Barrientos's orders, along with dozens of other students, while university representatives denounced theft and destruction. The authorities claimed that the raid was to uncover hidden arms, which the FUL plainly denied ("Universidad de San Simón", 1968, p. 7; *El Diario*, 18/08/1968). Exploiting the media just as other governments were doing elsewhere to discredit student movements, the government released a photo two days later showing dynamite, a picture of Che's cadaver, Molotov cocktails, and communist propaganda in support of *guerrilleros*, or guerrilla fighters (*Presencia*, 20/09/1968). The Cochabamba FUL quickly rebutted this as press manipulation, directly challenging the complicit mainstream media as students did worldwide. They showed how the authorities had cut the university banner showing "Glory to the guerrilleros of independence", in reference to their fight for university independence, to just "guerrilleros", falsely insinuating that the students were preparing to fight in a guerrilla campaign. Furthermore, they claimed the authorities had not found any weapons, a fact they asserted local journalists could verify (*Presencia*, 27/09/1968).

Perceiving this unprovoked raid and manipulation in Cochabamba as an unjust offensive against Bolivia's universities, unrest stirred nationwide over the following days. Students at the university in Oruro blocked roads around the university building, decrying the government through speakerphones (*Presencia*, 20/09/1968). Students in Sucre likewise protested (*Presencia*, 20/09/1968), while UMSA students blocked roads across the city and threw rocks at a military jeep (*El Diario*, 19/08/1968). The UMSS students were not deterred, blocking roads throughout the city and quickly vanishing before police could react (*Presencia*, 20/09/1968). A larger march that same day involving university and secondary school students, teachers, and factory workers ended with fourteen students being detained (*El Diario*, 20/09/1968).

In Bolivia's own "night of the barricades", the movement climaxed on September 20 when barricades were erected across the country's cities. In La Paz, groups of students marched in the city centre, erecting barricades and chanting "death to the government" (*Presencia*, 21/09/1968). When the protesters reached the Plaza del Estudiante, they were met by the national guard, who launched a barrage of tear gas and surrounded them with ferocious police dogs. As the students dispersed, a few turned to more violent tactics, throwing dynamite and Molotov cocktails from different buildings, while others let off gunshots as they ran back to the UMSA building, from where they were surrounded in another militaristic siege (*Presencia*, 21/09/1968; *El Diario*, 21/08/1968). These events saw students increasingly portrayed as violent subversives: *El Diario* labelled the dynamite explosion "a terrorist act" (*El Diario*, 21/08/1968); and *Presencia*'s subheadline emphasised the presence of "40-armed university students" (*El Diario*, 21/08/1968). Simultaneously in Sucre, students filled the streets and threw rocks at an army barracks and the mayor's office but were surprisingly not confronted by any opposition (*Presencia*, 21/09/1968). In Oruro, students set up barricades throughout the city and clashed with police who surrounded the university building (*El Diario*, 16/08/1968). Three days later, Oruro students blocked streets around the Faculty of Engineering. The students were forced into the university building by the security forces, who deployed another siege to contain and then arrest protesters (*Presencia*, 24/09/1968).

Despite the fierce action of those days, the university students were losing steam and could no longer maintain their opposition. Repression, continued detentions, and martial counteroffensives against university organisations meant that the FUL at the UMSA had to postpone its march in defence of university autonomy, scheduled for September 24. This was attributed to "organisational failures" (*Presencia*, 24/09/1968). Over the following days, university unions announced the suspension of barricade tactics and protest marches; in Oruro, representatives explained that this decision resulted mainly from government repression (*Presencia*, 24/09/1968). Another march in defence of autonomy, declared for September 27 in La Paz, was also abandoned, though officially postponed, after the University Council considered that there were insufficient safety guarantees for the protesters and that they would have to wait for a better moment. At the end of September, during a conference of Rectors and student leaders of the country's public universities, the Rector of the UMSS complained that the frequent use of violence by students was ineffective and that they were losing public support through these actions. Various university delegates agreed but blamed the government provocations, arrests, and killings of students as one of the main reasons for their failure. Multiple rectors proposed that a lengthy truce with the government could secure the release of those detained (Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, 1968, pp. 6-14). It seems this advice was heeded, as the student movement ground to a halt. Extreme repression had achieved its goal and exhausted the students' wherewithal, as it also would do a week later in

Mexico City. A better moment for the march for autonomy never came, and for the rest of Barrientos's presidency, the universities remained muted.

1968 and beyond in Bolivia

Despite the extent of the 1968 Bolivian protests, events in 1970 have received more attention. Bolivian historian Fernando Cajías de la Vega (2018, p. 129) refers to them as: “our '68 was '70”. These events are called the University Revolution. According to Cajías de la Vega, the events of May 1968 in Paris greatly influenced the Bolivian University Revolution, alongside the Cold War and local guerrilla movements in Latin America. Social and cultural changes occurred in 1969 and 1970, and schisms erupted on the left. New dance styles emerged alongside sexual liberty and the radicalisation of student politics (Cajías de la Vega, 2018, pp. 132-36). Nevertheless, the events of 1970 in Bolivia were greatly influenced by the protest movements of 1968 – according to Cajías de la Vega, they had their origins in 1968 (Cajías de la Vega, 2018, p. 136). Furthermore, Malloy and Gamarra (1988, p. 49) also agree that under Barrientos (who died in early 1969 in a helicopter accident) the University became a crucial base of left-wing opposition. Both the University Revolution of 1970 and the protest movement of 1968 were fighting for many of the same things: university autonomy and democratic institutions. However, the University Revolution was mostly an internal struggle, focused on the structural reorganisation of the university institution. It involved internal votes, meetings, and assemblies, as well as control over the appointment of teachers and administrative officials after the formation of revolutionary committees. This period of reorganisation was central to the University Revolution of 1970, with only a few street marches coming afterwards in response to attempts to restrict the revolution and its socialist tendencies (Terrazas Tejerina, 2020, pp. 102-103, 114-22, 140-66). This was confirmed by the first revolutionary committee composed by the Faculty of Law in the UMSA: “[it is] a general and radical movement to change structures, modify plans and programmes, and present new principles on which to base it” (Última Hora, 30/03/1970). Although motivations such as university autonomy were shared by the 1970 and 1968 movements, they differed in many other respects. The University Revolution of 1970 lacked the broad state repression, explicit anti-authoritarianism, large street protest movement with police clashes, barricades, and broad strike action that were typical of 1968. For these and many other reasons, I maintain that Bolivia's 1968 movement fits better into the 1968 historiography.

Conclusions

Bolivia's 1968 university movement demonstrates many of the same features, motivations, and tactics of other 1968 movements. In Bolivia, the students began their fight for democracy and autonomy within the university system, as did

students globally. Fuelled by repression, they soon rallied against authoritarianism, symbolised through acts such as the burning of military boots. Bolivian students, like their Latin American peers, also attacked imperialism and created protest art to denounce US interference in the supply of tear gas and other repressive technologies. The clear frustration with the autocratic system and the lack of any discernible generational conflict support Carey's (2016a, p. xiv) assertion that discontent motivated student action. This also fits local Latin American protest tendencies that focused more on combating repression than alienation. Tear gas bombardments by the Bolivian police forces were extreme, and city streets were blitzed with tear gas capsules, suffocating whole neighbourhoods – just as happened in Paris. Bolivian security forces employed militaristic tactics reminiscent of Mexico's 1968, which included raids on university buildings and the laying of sieges around the premises. Typical of Cold War logics seen across the region, the Bolivian government and security agencies made concerted efforts to manipulate the media narrative and portray the university movement as violent and subversive. Street barricades, common throughout Bolivia's history,⁴ were deployed with a frequency that rivalled Paris in 1968. As in Mexico, protesters adapted tactics to changing circumstances: lightning protests to evade repression and silent marches to demonstrate non-aggression. Student-police clashes dominated the Bolivian press as they did in countries as diverse as France, Mexico, and Japan. Finally, like most 1968 university movements, the Bolivian university movement was stamped out by the authoritarian government through brute force. A contribution to the movement's failure, as recognised by those within the movement, was students' increasingly violent tendencies, which reduced public support, received negative press, and legitimised both government depictions of university students as violent subversives and government counterinsurgent repression.

Although the United States is often considered a distinctly different university protest movement, the Bolivian case shows many similarities. The Bolivian movement was widespread and dispersed throughout the country, despite its huge size and difficult-to-traverse mountains. Students reacted to events in other parts of the country, expressed solidarity with their peers, and coordinated efforts through their student unions. Moreover, the Bolivian movement received mixed support from other sectors of society and generally failed to galvanise extensive, committed society-wide backing, with collaborative action remaining spontaneous and inconsistent. Despite these similarities, the Bolivian 1968 also diverges from many of the other protest movements. Unlike in the United States, Europe, Mexico, and elsewhere, the issue of the Vietnam War was seemingly non-existent in Bolivia, but despite this, anti-United States sentiments were rife and materialised in attacks on US property. Despite the influence of global processes, this case demonstrates that local circumstances shape resistance, or as Carey (2016a, p. xxxii) states, "the global met the local" in Bolivia. Bolivia's local social dynamics of peasant involvement in politics created a uniquely Bolivian

repressive force to oppose the students. Moreover, the extensive use of hostage-taking appears mostly unique to the Bolivian 1968.⁵ According to Cajías de la Vega, social and cultural changes were more prevalent during the University Revolution of 1970. However, young women participated broadly and overtly in 1968, breaking social norms that envisioned women as passive and inconspicuous. Lastly, the extent to which other 1968 movements influenced the Bolivian movement is uncertain. Nevertheless, Bolivian university students certainly would have known about movements in other parts of the world, as many of the most popular national newspapers regularly featured details of these movements on their front pages (*Presencia*, 12/05/1968; *Última Hora*, 30/07/1968; *El Diario*, 24/08/1968; *Última Hora*, 21/09/1968). Furthermore, the lack of material found regarding university radio or press may suggest these were not widely utilised by students in Bolivia, unlike elsewhere. Future research could confirm these uncertainties, while this paper's circulation hopes to instigate the unearthing of personal testimonies. Considering these features of the movement, Bolivia's 1968 university movement appears to be an important part of the global history of 1968 protest movements, especially as the Bolivian perspective offers new vantage points for rethinking the characteristics that defined 1968.

* * *

Charlie H. Parker is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Geography and History at the Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. He holds an MA (2022) in World History from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain, and a BA (2021) in Modern Languages from the University of Nottingham, UK. His research focuses on Bolivian political history between 1964 and 1982, with particular attention to military rule and nonviolent resistance. He has published the article "Barrientos y el poder campesino" in the 2025 Anuario of the Archivo y Biblioteca Nacionales de Bolivia.

Email: charlieparker11@hotmail.co.uk

Notes

- 1 In an article by Adalberto Santana chronicling the events of 1968 in Latin America, a short section on Bolivia only mentions the failed guerrilla of Ernesto "Che" Guevara of 1967 and the escape of three of his comrades across the Chilean border in February of 1968 (Santana, 2018, p. 191). The book *Los '68 Latinoamericanos* mentions that Bolivia had a university movement, but without any further detail (Millán, 2018a, pp. 9-10).
- 2 The National Security Doctrine was the politicised targeting of the internal enemy (communist infiltrators) through counterinsurgency tactics implemented by local military-security forces that were supported by the US. Latin American militaries began to regard large sectors of their societies as potential or actual subversives (McSherry, 2005, p. 3).

- 3 In Mexico alone, more than 50 titles have been published on the student movement and the subsequent state repression since 1968, far exceeding other cases (Millán, 2018a, p. 15).
- 4 Bolivia has employed the roadblock and street barricade as a form of resistance throughout its history and is characteristic of the country (Eckstein, 2001, p. 11). Academic Benjamin Dangl states that the barricade tactic stems from the indigenous uprising of Túpac Katari against colonial authorities in La Paz in 1781, after his rebellion laid siege to the roads around the city for six months (Dangl, 2019, p. 7.)
- 5 I say "mostly" as I was able to find just two stand-alone occurrences of hostage taking. Once in July during the Argentinian 1968, when students took university authorities hostage (Bonavena & Califa, 2018, p. 227). Then at Colombia University in April 1968, when students took the Dean hostage (Carey, 2016a, p. xxv; Cauté, 1988, p. 143).

References

- Bonavena, P. & Califa, J. S. (2018). El '68 Argentino. Luchas estudiantiles en los albores de un ascenso de masas. P. Bonavena & M. Millán (eds.), *Los '68 latinoamericanos: Movimientos estudiantiles, política y cultura en México, Brasil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina y Colombia* (9–22). Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- Borrero, M. (2016). Spring Thaw, Summer Frost: Eastern Europe in 1968. E. Carey (ed.), *Protests in the Streets: 1968 Across the Globe* (61–90). Hackett Publishing Company.
- Cajías de la Vega, F. (2018). Nuestro 68 fue el 70. *Ciencia y Cultura*, 22 (40), 129–140. http://www.scielo.org.bo/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=s2077-33232018000100008.
- Carey, E. (2016a). Introduction: Student Protests in the United States and Beyond in 1968. E. Carey (ed.), *Protests in the Streets: 1968 Across the Globe* (xiv–xxxii). Hackett Publishing Company.
- _____. (2016b). Mexico's 1968 Olympic Dream. E. Carey (ed.), *Protests in the Streets: 1968 Across the Globe* (91–119). Hackett Publishing Company.
- Cauté, D. (1988). *Sixty-eight: The year of the barricades*. Hamish Hamilton Ltd.
- Dangl, B. (2019). *The five hundred year rebellion: Indigenous movements and the decolonization of history in Bolivia*. AK Press.
- Dunkerley, J. (1984). *Rebellion in the veins: Political struggles in Bolivia, 1952–82*. Verso.
- Eckstein, S. (2001). Power and popular protest in Latin America. S. Eckstein (ed.), *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (1–60). University of California Press.
- El Diario*. (16-08-1968). Protagonizaron choques estudiantes y policías.
- _____. (13-08-1968). Universitarios aprobaron un plan de acciones callejeras.
- _____. (17-08-1968). Siete horas duraron disturbios de ayer.
- _____. (19-08-1968). Universitarios pusieron ayer en libertad a tres rehenes.
- _____. (24-08-1968). Marcha del silencio en Oruro y Cochabamba.
- _____. (25-08-1968). Manifestación universitaria bajo la nieve.
- _____. (04-09-1968). Fue herido un estudiante en violenta manifestación.
- _____. (18-09-1968). Condenaron el allanamiento a universidad de Cochabamba.
- _____. (19-08-1968). Universitarios hicieron nuevo bloqueo de calles.
- _____. (20-09-1968). Hubo ayer en Cochabamba 14 estudiantes detenidos.
- _____. (21-08-1968). Volvieron a producirse disturbios callejeros.

- Farik, N. (2008). Preface. N. Farik (ed.), *1968 revisited: 40 years of protest movements* (Issue 7, 4–6). Heinrich Böll Foundation EU Regional Office Brussels.
- Federación Universitaria Local. (30-03-1968). Nuestro profundo y sincero agradecimiento al pueblo boliviano. Repositorio del Archivo Central de la Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, La Paz-Bolivia.
- Field, T. C. Jr. (2014). *From development to dictatorship: Bolivia and the alliance for progress in the Kennedy era*. Cornell University Press.
- Fücks, R. (2008). What is left? 1968 revisited. N. Farik (ed.), *1968 revisited: 40 years of protest movements* (Issue 7, 7–10). Heinrich Böll Foundation EU Regional Office Brussels.
- Klein, H. S. (2016). *Historia mínima de Bolivia*. El Colegio de México.
- Kurlansky, M. (2004). *The year that rocked the world: 1968*. Jonathan Cape.
- Malloy, J. M., & Gamarra, E. (1988). *Revolution and reaction: Bolivia, 1964-1985*. Transaction Books.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2004). *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press.
- McSherry, J. Patrice. (2005). *Predatory states: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Millán, M. (2018a). Prólogo: Protagonismo político de, e interés científico por, los movimientos estudiantiles latinoamericanos. P. Bonavena & M. Millán (eds.), *Los '68 latinoamericanos: Movimientos estudiantiles, política y cultura en México, Brasil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina y Colombia* (9–22). Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- _____. (2018b). Un análisis crítico de las interpretaciones conceptuales sobre los movimientos estudiantiles de los '60. P. Bonavena & M. Millán (eds.), *Los '68 latinoamericanos: Movimientos estudiantiles, política y cultura en México, Brasil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina y Colombia* (23–52). Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- Prado Salmón, G. A. (2021). Fuerzas Armadas y Nacionalismo Revolucionario 1936-2020. L. Cajías & I. Velásquez-Castellanos (eds.), *Un Amor Desenfrenado por la Libertad: Antología de la Historia Política de Bolivia (1825-2020)* (II: 1952-2020, 233-273). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.
- Presencia*. (18-03-1968). Protesta de FUL orureña por postergación de elecciones en distrito minero San José.
- _____. (26-03-1968). La FUL de Oruro denunció detención de 2 ciudadanos.
- _____. (08-04-1968). FUL de Oruro decretó paro por 24 horas.
- _____. (12-05-1968). Violentos disturbios en París en vísperas de negociaciones de paz.
- _____. (18-05-1968). Universitarios realizarán hoy una marcha de reafirmación autonomista.
- _____. (19-06-1968). La marcha universitaria se realizó ayer pacíficamente y sin incidentes.
- _____. (20-06-1968). En defensa de la Autonomía hubo marcha en Santa Cruz.
- _____. (21-07-1968). Un muerto y cinco heridos de bala en los disturbios de ayer.
- _____. (23-07-1968). Los universitarios de Oruro decretan huelga indefinida.
- _____. (26-07-1968). Presidente no convocará al Congreso hasta que Corte Suprema se pronuncie.
- _____. (27-07-1968). Manifestación universitaria en Potosí.
- _____. (04-08-1968). Relación de los disturbios y hechos violentos en Cochabamba.
- _____. (13-08-1968). Paro de 48 horas en universidades de todo el país.
- _____. (16-08-1968). La Guardia Nacional dispersó con gases a universitarios que bloquearon calles.
- _____. (17-08-1968). Por segundo día consecutivo volvieron a enfrentarse grupos de universitarios y los efectivos de la Guardia Nacional.
- _____. (18-08-1968). Universitarios ofrecen canjear 3 rehenes a cambio de Rubín de Celis.

- _____ (21-08-1968). Universitarios en Tarija salieron en manifestación.
- _____ (21-08-1968). Vásquez Sempértégui proclama rebelión y pide relevo de Barrientos y Ovando.
- _____ (22-08-1968). Dos estudiantes murieron durante manifestación en ciudad de Tarija.
- _____ (22-08-1968). En Sucre hubo disturbios estudiantiles.
- _____ (22-08-1968). Fracaso golpe de Vásquez, dice el Gobierno.
- _____ (23-08-1968). Universitarios se comprometieron a suspender toda acción callejera.
- _____ (24-08-1968). FUL rompió convenio con gobierno.
- _____ (30-08-1968). Universitarios apedrearon Consulado norteamericano.
- _____ (20-09-1968). Acto de desagravio a la Autonomía Universitaria.
- _____ (20-09-1968). En Sucre hubo manifestación pacífica de universitarios.
- _____ (20-09-1968). Los universitarios cochabambinos cambiaron sus tácticas de lucha.
- _____ (20-09-1968). Material capturado en Cochabamba.
- _____ (21-09-1968). Choques entre policías y universitarios en Oruro.
- _____ (21-09-1968). Fuerzas del orden tendieron cerco a Universidad paceña.
- _____ (21-09-1968). Manifestación universitaria hubo en Sucre.
- _____ (24-09-1968). Manifestación en Oruro fue reprimida ayer por el Ejército y Policía.
- _____ (24-09-1968). Universitarios postergaron la 'marcha de la autonomía'.
- _____ (27-09-1968). Universitarios cochabambinos aclaran sobre último allanamiento a su sede.
- _____ (27-09-1968). Universitarios de Oruro resolvieron suspender bloqueos y manifestaciones.
- Ridenti, M. (2008). 1968 — again! Reference year for an age. The events in Brazil. N. Farik (ed.), *1968 revisited: 40 years of protest movements* (Issue 7, 11–16). Heinrich Böll Foundation EU Regional Office Brussels.
- Rieznik, P., Rabey, P., Poy, L., Duarte, D. & Bruno, D. (2010). *1968, un año revolucionario*. Editorial de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- Rivas Ontiveros, J. R. (2018). Antecedentes, desarrollo y repercusiones del '68 mexicano. P. Bonavena & M. Millán (eds.), *Los '68 latinoamericanos: Movimientos estudiantiles, política y cultura en México, Brasil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina y Colombia* (53–78). Universidad de Buenos Aires.
- Romero Castilla, A. (1998). Japón en el año del estudiantado. *Sociológica* 13 (38), 139–141.
- Santana, A. (2018). 1968 en la memoria de América Latina y el mundo. *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* (234), 177–200.
- Sorensen, D. (2007). *A Turbulent decade remembered: Scenes from the Latin American sixties*. Stanford University Press.
- Terrazas Tejerina, N. (2020). “Todo el poder a los estudiantes”: Revolución Universitaria – UMSA 1970-71 (tesis doctoral). Disponible en Repositorio UMSA (TSOC408).
- Última Hora. (23-07-1968). Oruro repudia la violencia y actitudes anarquizantes.
- _____ (22-07-1968). Estado de Sitio.
- _____ (24-07-1968). Dispersaron manifestación estudiantil con gases.
- _____ (30-07-1968). México bajo control militar.
- _____ (03-08-1968). Disturbios en Cochabamba causaron dos muertos, 15 heridos y muchos detenidos.
- _____ (20-08-1968). Fue pacífica la marcha de alumnas de la UMSA.
- _____ (21-09-1968). Jornada sangrienta en la capital uruguaya.
- _____ (30-03-1970). Revolución con proyección a universidades de todo el país.
- Universidad Mayor de San Andrés. (septiembre de 1968). *Conferencia de Rectores y Dirigentes Estudiantiles*. Repositorio del Archivo Central de la Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, La Paz-Bolivia.