

# THE VENEZUELAN STUDENT MOVEMENT AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION: THE UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA DURING THE GOVERNMENT OF RÓMULO BETANCOURT.

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## Summary

This study examines the influence of the Cuban Revolution on the ideology of the Universidad Central de Venezuela's student movement during Rómulo Betancourt's government. Findings reveal that admiration for the revolution led students from passive criticism to insurgent action. University autonomy facilitated radicalization, making UCV a stronghold for revolutionary struggle.

**Keywords:** student movement, Cuban Revolution, UCV, radicalization, insurgency, Betancourt, university autonomy.

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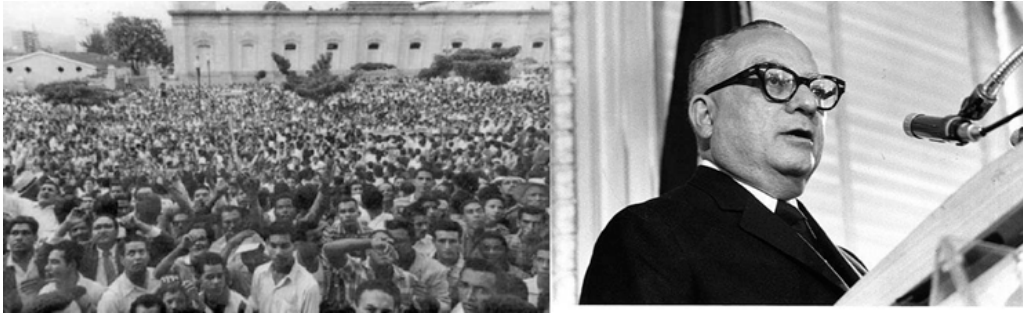




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## Introduction

The general objective of this research was to analyze the influence of the Cuban Revolution in the gestation of the ideological and inspirational bases of the student movement of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), from 1959 to 1963. In order to achieve this goal, the objectives were: to systematize the Cuban Revolution, to describe the socio-political situation of the government of President Rómulo Betancourt and to explain the characteristics of the student movement of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) during this presidential period.

The work is divided into three chapters, conclusions and annexes. In Chapter I: The Cuban Revolution, a historical review was made from the military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista to the victory of the Cuban insurgents. It explained the ideological bases of the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's eagerness to expand his ideal to Venezuela. Chapter II: Government of President Rómulo Betancourt covers the socio-political reality experienced during this period. The management of the Government Junta was reviewed, the Puntofijo Pact was explained and the rise and fall of the left during President Betancourt's term of office was addressed. Finally, Chapter III: The student movement of the Central University of Venezuela and the influence of the Cuban Revolution in the gestation of its ideological and inspirational bases during the government of President Rómulo Betancourt contains the evolution of the role played by the



university youth, from the fall of the Perezjimen dictatorship until the end of 1963. The chapter also includes an analysis of the influence of the Cuban Revolution on the Ucevist student movement during the Betancourt administration.

The phenomenon of the Cuban Revolution, as Mondolfi (2017) specifies, coincided with an environment of ideological fermentation provoked by the recent process of decolonization in Asia and Africa, as well as the emergence of the Third World. Consequently, it is not surprising that its victory had a particular

impact in Venezuela.

López (1998) divides the actions of the UCV student community into two phases: 1958-1960 and 1960-1966. For the purposes of this research, only the second phase was examined up to 1963, which is when Rómulo Betancourt's presidential term ended.

The dividing line that separates the phases described above by López will be marked by the type of influence exerted by the Cuban Revolution at that time in the country, which, as indicated by Rodríguez Bauza (2015), will be given by the step taken by the student movement from a legal to an illegal stance. From 1959 to 1960 it will be only intellectual; it is from 1961 onwards that it acquires a much more interventionist role.

Throughout the first two years of the Betancurista administration, the university community showed an attitude in defense of democracy, which was supported by the need for Venezuelans to have access to quality higher education.

Fidel Castro's visit to the country marked a turning point in the administration of Rómulo Betancourt. He was received as a hero, both in the Silencio and in the Aula Magna of the UCV. Rodríguez Bauza (2015) also indicates that his "aura of heroic fighter, sows a seed that in a fertile soil like the Venezuelan would soon germinate in many different ways, one of which makes him the antithesis of Rómulo Betancourt" (p.225).

By the late 1960s through 1963, the image of university had shifted to a critical approach to the national government.

It should be noted that this trend was closely related to what was happening within the Venezuelan left, in which the Cuban Revolution "exerted a considerable influence on the thinking and political attitudes of university students. From this moment on, we can already speak of an ideological discrepancy between the Government and the University Community" (López, 1998, p.109).

The well-known Popularazo, genesis of the university insurgency and milestone that, to Fuenmayor (1987), marks the separation between one phase and the other, will be for President Betancourt an insurrectional plan whose ultimate goal was to emulate what Castro had done in Cuba.

Dr. Luis Betancourt (personal communication, September 25, 2018) expresses that for him it is from the 1960s when students begin to be considered a threat due to their behavior. This period also coincides with the time when Venezuela broke relations with Cuba.

In this period, there was a short distance between being a good student and being a good guerrilla fighter, a line that became increasingly blurred as young people gained prominence within the political spectrum thanks to their anti-establishment behavior.

The intention of repeating what had happened in Cuba caused the desire to increase the armed insurgency to boil in the University City of Caracas, which allowed many of the guerrilla activities to take place in its spaces: recruiting centers, indoctrination centers or the place where many of the insurgents spent the night. García Ponce (2010) explains that "one of the



buildings that served as a student residence was converted into a bastion, called nothing less than Stalingrad. There many students rested, spent the night, and oiled their weapons” (p.20).

Likewise, the banner of the inviolability of the university campus facilitated the radicalization of the student movement, as well as the need to imitate their Cuban counterparts. Many students carried out illegal, anti-democratic and anti-system activities, using the victory achieved with the new University Law as a façade. García Ponce (2010) himself will say that the Central University of Venezuela was known as the “free territory” of Venezuela, implicitly indicating university autonomy.

The desire and the need to replicate the Cuban path to socialism, the criticism of the perceived mission of Venezuelan liberal democracy to interests described as colonial and imperialist, added to the great anti-leftism that existed in the university ranks, forged the character and the opinion of the student movement that turned towards the radical left.

To conclude, it is feasible to assume that, if there was an influence of the Cuban Revolution in the gestation of the ideological and inspirational bases in a majority of student movement, composed mostly by cadres of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) and the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). This influence is evident in the speeches and actions carried out by young university students; they went from a critical but passive stance towards the government to insurrectional and anti-system violence.

The speeches and actions carried out by the university youths went from a critical but passive posture towards the government to an insurrectional and anti-system violence.

The period of the underground and what was known as the year of the Junta de Gobierno was a time of student organization, political work and university unity. Young people possessed an indisputable moral authority in the eyes of society, so that being a student, in many cases, was synonymous with prestige and importance; they played a role that was necessary for the moment.

The historical context was not given for something different from what happened. The rejection of President Betancourt's policies, the need to return to the spirit of January 23rd and the feeling of emotion that overwhelmed young people after what happened in Cuba made many see the Revolution as a model to follow.

On the other hand, the Central University provided the conditions to allow the spirit of the Cuban Revolution to seep in the way it did. It is important to note that students were generally immersed in the revolutionary guerrilla world in the university, so that being a good student was synonymous with being a good guerrilla fighter, in some cases.

The government project offered by Rómulo Betancourt was based on the demobilization of the masses in order to guarantee democratic stability. Without underestimating the importance of the masses in achieving January 23, the country could not survive in a state of continuous agitation and crisis, therefore it was necessary to resort to order. However, this policy was rejected by the majority of the university student body.

, the signing of the Puntofijo Pact generated uneasiness and discontent within the student movement, triggered the feeling that unity was being lost and that their party, Acción Democrática (AD), had forgotten its founding postulates.

The political line taken by the Betancurista administration cost the Adeco party the loss of its entire replacement generation from the moment the MIR emerged, and when these young politicians assumed an ideological tendency oriented towards Marxism- Leninism-Leninism. They were considered as the promise of the future, and before this event, on their shoulders rested the great responsibility of consolidating the democratic project that began in this presidential term.

In the early years of the administration of Rómulo Betancourt, the spirit of January 23rd remained alive in the hearts of many of these students. Their intention was to return to the feeling of unity and nationalism they had experienced, and in which they had participated before the fall of the dictatorship. This youthful romanticism allowed the Cuban Revolution to be a model to follow, since they only saw in it what they longed for: union and nation; added to this combination, there was a plus, the anti-Americanism that it exuded.





After the split of AD, the party said goodbye almost completely to university political action. In addition, it is of utmost importance to remember that most of the members of the Ucevist student movement, after this event, were oscillating between two tendencies: Christian Democracy and the radical left. In spite of the resistance exerted by the Christian democracy, many students decided for the other alternative, and it is in this extreme that the Cuban revolutionary action is sought to be emulated.

On the other hand, autonomy was a blessing for many and a disgrace for a few; it served to make a large part of the student body untouchable and not to assume the consequences of their acts, many of them committed with the intention of defending the Revolution. In the same way, it gave the student movement a cloak of protection from the forces of law and order.

For the youth, the advance of the radical left in Latin America was greater than the need to reestablish democracy in the country; likewise, their lack of experience in the political arena facilitated this revolutionary influence whose origins could be traced back to Cuba. The conviction with which young people believed in the Cuban project was due, almost entirely, to their leader and the values he represented.

Despite President Betancourt's subsequent efforts to recover and maintain unity, to confront the threat from Cuba and the threat that was beginning to emerge within his own national territory, the country's conditions were ripe for this phenomenon. The world order forced nations and their citizens take sides in the Cold War, regardless of the fact that this was a period of relative peaceful coexistence between the two blocs.

In recapitulation, the young people went from doing politics in a period with restricted freedoms to acquiring a little stability with the transitional government to finally reach a period of full democratic exercise. They managed to maintain a social and political prestige within the community until it gradually deteriorated with their subversive actions. They went from being considered the big brother of the people to becoming one more enemy of society and the system.

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