

## Meanings, Imaginaries and Meanings of the Protest of the Students Belonging to the Student Movement UNEES

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### Abstract

*The article “Meanings, imaginaries and meanings of the protest of students belonging to different expressions of the UNEES student movement at the University of Cartagena” examines the complexities of student mobilizations at this institution. Based on a master’s thesis entitled “Experiences of collective action, organizational processes and social protest: a reading from the UNEES student movement at the University of Cartagena”, this study investigates how students articulate their demands through various forms of protest, including marches and blockades, in response to issues such as the defunding of public education. It analyzes the collective imaginaries that underpin these actions, highlighting the construction of identities and narratives around the defense of education as a right. The article also considers the political and social context surrounding the movement, pointing out how government policies have influenced student organization and their methods of protest. Through interviews and qualitative analysis, it reveals the lived experiences of students, who see protest not only as a means of expressing their discontent, but also as a way of reclaiming their place in society. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of the student movement in Colombia, highlighting its importance in the defense of educational and social rights.*

**Keywords:** Student Movement, Social Protest, Organizational Processes and Social Movements.

### INTRODUCTION

Social movements are the collective actions of groups of men and women who face inequalities, injustices and imbalances in society, hence sectors of civil society acquire great significance in the field of political and sociological reflections as subjects immersed in scenarios of incompatibilities, asymmetries and struggle for the recognition and guarantee of rights (Archilla, 2006).

Thus, the student movement in Latin America has a long history of struggles that provide the historical framework for understanding the various student mobilizations carried out in Colombia and in the special case of this research, it is essential to analyze the way in which collective actions are expressed in the scenarios of university student participation in Cartagena.

The reference that guides the student movement is located in the early twentieth century in the south of the American continent with the Manifiesto Liminar of the university reform of 1918, a proclamation built by the university youth of Cordoba, Argentina, which embodied the demand for democratization of the University, a struggle that would be the foundation of the processes of student mobilization in Latin America throughout the twentieth century and early twenty-first century (Bergel, 2008). In this sense, the manifesto of the Cordoba students raised the discussion on university democracy, secular education and the need to build a university based on the scientific spirit of the time, ideas that have been the bearers of transformation processes in American society.

From the above, a whole historical movement emerges, where Colombia has not been the exception to the development of these new perspectives of the social movement, including discourses of changes and transformations in terms of educational policy. In addition to this, new contemporary trends have emerged on

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the theoretical understanding and political practices of the social movement, allowing to broaden the reflections towards the possibility of intersectionality. The slogan of “the right to have rights” (Harvey, 2005) is related to the previous idea, becoming a principle of construction of a variety of popular expressions in search of recognition, among them the student organizations, which have articulated and co-existed organizationally with the objective of strengthening their political incidence in national life and in the country's higher education.

Archila (2012), who is one of the main references on this subject, states that the history of the Colombian student movement is divided into four periods, which correspond to the different historical contexts in which the ruling class has configured a state power closed to the transformations of the time. Events such as the massacre of the banana plantations, the bipartisan violence, the armed conflict and the neoliberal transformation of education have crossed the historical developments in which university students are interrelated with their social environment.

University students in Colombia have bet on building different initiatives to unify processes of social organization and student struggle with the intention of expressing mechanisms of resistance to the privatization and commercialization of education and the defense of human rights that are violated by the repression of different governments, which process the social conflict with state violence and deepen the gap in access to higher education.

The closest historical references are located from 2011 with the MANE (Mesa Amplia Nacional Estudiantil), which generated collective actions around social protest in the exercise of resistance to the Reform to Law 30 that added the notion of profit motive in the regulatory framework of higher education. Similarly, and in line with the struggle against neoliberalism in education, the UNEES (National Union of Higher Education Students) emerged in 2018. This plural and diverse expression of the student movement arises in a critical financial situation of operation of Higher Education, generating collective actions that led it to opt for mechanisms of social protest pressure through a Student Strike.

Consequently with the interest of this research, the context surrounding the research question on how collective actions and organizational practices are configured in the social protest of the National Union of Higher Education Students (UNEES) at the University of Cartagena (UDEC), is raised with the aim of performing an exercise of interpretation of reality and a reconstruction of the social practice of the student movement at this university, taking as a reference, the development of the problems of the commercialization of Higher Education applied to the University, such as the financing of Higher Education Institutions (HEI), university democracy and student political participation in relation to other social demands that become struggles that articulate university students with other sectors of society.

In the university context in Cartagena, the needs and diverse expressions that make up the student reality made up of young people from different backgrounds are interwoven. Understanding this interweaving of events presented in the scenario of the student movement will be functional because a reflection on the very practice of the subjects involved in the context and enriches the historical experience of the accumulation of knowledge.

This research project aims to approach the reality under study from a historical perspective with the intention of understanding the causes of the collective action experience, the various expressions that arise from it and the future prospects of the student movement in Cartagena. In this way, the experiences of collective action, organizational processes and social protest in the framework of the UNEES student movement at the University of Cartagena, were approached from the dynamics related to the construction of the UNEES and the organizational practices that mobilized the Cartagena student body in 2018, in the months of March, April, May, September, October, November and December punctuating the experiential dynamics from the discourses related to social protest, exploring the strategies of collective action from its ideological and cultural scope. This exercise includes the analysis of specific cases of student mobilization, documenting both the tactics used in the protests and the results and transformations they generated, from the constructed and produced discourse.

Additionally, in the periods corresponding to the student mobilization once the University of Cartagena joined the National Higher Education Strike, the aspects related to the ideological and cultural spheres that gave

meaning to the collective experiences and the discourses of the participants of the mobilization juncture are formulated. From this aspect, the ideological influences that oriented the collective actions were investigated, examining the way in which discourses, symbols and cultural and ideological practices of the student movement were expressed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used in this study is qualitative, based on the Discourse Analysis (DA) allowing to understand the meanings, practices and realities of the student movement as a collective subject in the framework of social protest, the ways in which it operates and configures its actions. In this case, the expressions of this movement overflow the budgetary demands and begin to position the students' own struggles from their cultural manifestations belonging to the UNEES Cartagena.

For this, it is crucial to think the relationship between researcher and researched in a horizontal way, since the researcher brings his knowledge as a result of his practice as a member of the UNEES, but the subject to be investigated also has his own knowledge, experiences and knowledge that contribute to its construction and, from his experiences and subjectivities are transited between what he knows and what he is proposing to know; This type of research allows the existence of this dialogue between the experiences of the researched and the researcher, all this in the light of the participant observation, video-documentary review and semi-structured interview were identified as instruments for the collection of information.

With the implementation of this methodology, it was possible to approach the understanding of the meanings of collective action of the students of the UNEES UDEC in different expressions of struggle within the witnessed organizational process, allowing to build some meanings of struggle that revolve around 1. The defense of education as a fundamental right and 2. The autonomy and a diverse university in order to understand the meanings and senses, from the world of the symbolic, to understand how these imaginaries motivated the political expression in the form of collective actions.

## **RESULTS**

In the process of interpreting the meanings, imaginaries and meanings of the protest of students belonging to different expressions of the student movement that make up the UNEES, it is important to take into consideration the slogans to the extent that they play a fundamental role in social mobilization. The reason for their importance lies in their ability to synthesize ideas and demands, translating complex aspects of the objectives of the mobilization into short and direct phrases, with capacity for memory, communication and transmission of identity elements of the participating members of the collective action process.

Likewise, in terms of their practical functionality, slogans or mobilizing expressions generate unity of purpose, helping in the unification of common objectives so that participants can provide clear messages reflecting the demands, interests and aspirations of the movement so that the citizens who are spectators of the collective action process are able to understand their struggles, generating solidarity and support with society as a whole.

The slogans in mobilization have a meaningful, representational and symbolic character that allows processes of social cohesion, acquiring a relevant role in intersubjectivity, language and discourses of collective action, which allow the subject to use linguistic systems and imaginaries in order to give meaning to their own world and communication with other subjects in the world.(Vargas, 2019)

The construction of these meanings is based on the historicity of the student movement, taking up historical slogans of different student movements such as the French movement of 1968 "Prohibited to prohibit", the Chilean student movement "Another world is possible", adding characteristics of the particular contexts such as chants of the soccer teams, demonstrating in this way, the carnival, popular and neighborhood forms that persist with resistance within the student movement of Cartagena. For example, the following slogan was used as an expression of mobilization in different scenarios of collective action:

- Stop to move forward, long live the National Strike.

□ Duque, tell me how it feels, to have a National Strike, I know I know it hurts you, why, because UNEES is going to beat you?

In this sense, Mikhail Bakhtin (2003) offers a theoretical framework for understanding the carnival and its relationship with cultural and social processes, in this respect “carnivalism” contains a transgressive and challenging element towards social norms, putting on the table the existing articulation between everyday life and the social processes that occur in it, which goes beyond the speech act and where the enunciation involves subjective, political, evaluative and artistic characteristics, thus allowing the enunciation of utopian and festive character, can become acts of language capable of transgressing the hegemonic orders in culture.

In the case of the student movement at the University of Cartagena, the carnivalesque element is present in the student actions that contains the aesthetic and political element, disruptive of the public space, which through its form of expression uses stylistic elements such as satire, sarcasm, ridiculing the political adversary, irony and other forms of denunciation that seek parody towards power (Vargas, 2019). Examples of these manifestations are found in the following slogans:

□ There's money for the war, there's money for the war, there's money for the war and not for studying, Do re me, do re me, do re fa, Duque Care monda

□ What a fucking heat, what a fucking heat, but even more fucking is the President of the Nation.

The distinctive element of these slogans is the overflow of representations that breaks against any value system, allowing the senses and imaginaries of the students participating in the UNEES to find in the radical humor and ridicule of the adversary possibilities for collective action and the construction of their discourses. For this reason, these slogans express a subjectivity and shared meanings capable of building processes of identification, politicization of social relations in collective action and enunciation scenarios that construct counter-hegemonic meanings. In this regard, the following slogans with these characteristics are found in the student mobilization in Cartagena:

□ Who are you? I'm a student! I didn't hear you, I'm a student, one more time! I am a student, I am, I am a student, I am, I want to study to change society, let's go to the struggle.

□ Whenever we go out, people ask, who are those people who make so much noise, and we answer, we are students, we are marching, because of the bad government, that closes hospitals and opens battalions, that gives us a blow job with the budget, students yes sir, from Colombia the best.

In the subjectivity of the popular sectors, there are different strategies for the processes of resistance and re-existence, being clear that in the construction of the associative fabric of the movements, a series of mechanisms are deployed in the face of domination and exclusion capable of activating collective imaginaries and building knowledge that are expressed in “oral tradition and popular imagery through stories, humor, mischief, rumor, word games and symbolic investments” (Torres, 2002, p. 69).

✓ You have to see the things that happen, you have to see the turns they take, with a people that walks forward and a government that walks backwards.

✓ The public of the Republic is informed that the Public U is going to end, that is why I go out to the public streets of the Republic to protest.

In 2018 at the University of Cartagena it was possible to see a waste of symbolic expressions in which both students and teachers and workers, resorted to collective actions full of creativity and ingenuity for the deployment of their vindictory speeches counting on a popular and neighborhood element that intrudes into the senses and imaginaries of social protest, allowing in this way to build discourses for collective action that overflow the same claims, positioning laughter and carnival as a form of resistance which allows the forgotten, the excluded, the underfunded, the invisible and the nobody, to configure their own political identity from these transgressions, especially when taking into account that “the party and the carnival demonstrations that student demonstrations have become in times of mobilization are spaces for the agitation of slogans that have managed to leave stigmatization without a floor” (Vargas, 2019).

Thus, the struggles for state funding, the payment of the historical debt, democracy and university autonomy are elements of long memory that maintain the possibilities and limits of the struggle of the national and Cartagena student movement. However, at the University of Cartagena and the UNEES process, there was a differentiated political process that transcends the frameworks of studies proposed from the social theory, not only when the structure of political opportunities is favorable in time, but in the solidarity scenarios, the sense of common good comes into play, constituting social support networks, camaraderie and cronyism, present at any time of the struggle for higher education.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From the above, the interpretation of the meanings, imaginaries and meanings of the protest of students belonging to different expressions of the student movement that make up the UNEES at the University of Cartagena, allowed us to find findings on the way in which students support their processes of struggle and mobilization, based on their life experiences, the environment in which they are surrounded, academic training and the cultural space that gives meaning to their own existence.

It was found that UNEES students at the University of Cartagena, not only undertook collective actions around the national proposals for education funding, but their own meanings, imaginaries and meanings about the protest, positioned other debates that transcend the budgetary claims, thus allowing the struggle for education also takes into account aspects of the relationship University - Society, feeding the claims and demands towards a local demand that would solve specific problems of the environment around them..

In this way, findings are presented that contribute to the study of the mobilization processes at the University of Cartagena, adding new understandings about collective action and conceptions about social protest, building a new work in the academic literature on student movements in Colombia and trying to fill an academic gap on the theoretical understanding of the mobilization process of the Higher Education Strike at the University of Cartagena in 2018.

The fact of documenting the experiences of organization and struggle allow the present research to recognize the voices of those who in the past were persecuted, disappeared and killed, in order to never leave aside the impacts of violence on student life and the history of the University of Cartagena.

By thinking about this dimension of historical memory, this research aims to contribute to the reflection on the narratives that dignify the life of the student movement, its organizational practices and social struggles, allowing the university community and the Cartagena society to understand the open wounds left by the armed conflict in our house of study, in order to begin to understand the role of young university students in the construction of democracy.

For this reason, by rescuing the experiences and experiences of the students who participated in the mobilization process of UNEES, a bridge of connection is forged between the past and the present, making it easier for current and future generations of the student movement and the university community to understand the historical roots of their struggles. Such an approach contributes to the preservation of the memory of the victims, strengthening the sense of identity and common objectives of those who can be touched by the stories of resistance and the commitment to public education for the access of the Colombian people.

From the investigative mood, the fact of having participated in the participatory observation process as a social actor immersed in this mobilization, allowed to understand the findings from the theoretical knowledge acquired in the master's degree in Social Conflict and Peacebuilding, offering a feeling-thinking look oriented to inspire calls for collective action, since the historical accumulation that built the student movement of 2018 grouped in the UNEES, serves as a reference for future student mobilization processes.

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