

## ONE

# Mobilizations

### STUDENTS TAKE TO THE STREETS

In the Montevideo autumn of 1968, faced with announcements shortly before the beginning of the school year that government-subsidized bus fares would increase, high school students burst onto the public scene as they took to the streets to protest.<sup>1</sup> These protests kicked off the year's great mobilizations, which were some of Latin America's longest and most intense, rivaled only by events in major cities in Mexico and Brazil.<sup>2</sup> In the first days of May, students made headlines as they staged various rallies, occupied school facilities, set up roadblocks with toll collection to raise money, and held spontaneous sit-ins to disrupt traffic around their schools. This activity was, in the words of journalists Roberto Copelmayer and Diego Díaz, "boisterous but peaceful." While demonstrations were led by various actors, activism on a large scale was catalyzed by the Coordinating Unit of High School Students of Uruguay (Coordinadora de Estudiantes de Secundaria del Uruguay, or CESU), which responded to the

Union of Communist Youths (Unión de Juventudes Comunistas, or UJC).<sup>3</sup> Witnesses and commentators alike agree that the levels of violence seen during those days were not very different from what had been experienced in similar situations in previous years. Local newspapers reported sporadic incidents of rocks being thrown at buses and some clashes with police forces that tried to break up the protests, arresting and even slightly injuring some demonstrators. Nobody expected this unrest to maintain its momentum for long. The demonstrators who were arrested were usually set free within hours, and if they were underage they were released to their parents. This was in sharp contrast to reports of a violent police force dispersing demonstrators at the International Workers' Day rally on May 1, where serious incidents had occurred, spurred on by the combative stance of the *cañeros* (sugarcane cutters) of the Union of Sugarcane Cutters of Artigas (Unión de Trabajadores Azucareros de Artigas, or UTAA), who had marched down to Montevideo from the country's northernmost region.<sup>4</sup>

On May 8, just days after President Jorge Pacheco Areco introduced several changes in his cabinet, Interior Minister Augusto Legnani resigned without explanation and was replaced by Eduardo Jiménez de Aréchaga. A week later, Colonel Alberto Aguirre Gestido was appointed chief of police of Montevideo. By then, classes had been suspended in many of the capital's high schools because they were occupied by students, paralyzed by a strike, or temporarily shut down by the authorities. The presence of students in the streets was taking on new dimensions. The number of demonstrations grew, and the various groups of protesters came together in joint marches, often putting up barricades, burning tires, and, according to some observers, hurling makeshift incendiary bombs, or Molotov cocktails, mostly at city buses.<sup>5</sup> At the

same time, the number of arrests grew, and the Montevideo police called in the Metropolitan Guard (*Guardia Metropolitana*) as backup for the regular officers assigned to neighborhood police stations.

Meanwhile, CESU leaders were still hoping to reach a negotiated solution with the mayor of Montevideo to prevent the rise in bus fares. Conflicting rumors surrounding these negotiations escalated the protests, triggering “flash” demonstrations that sought to take repressive forces by surprise. Protesters also organized roadblocks and picket lines intended to inform the public of the situation. This surge of actions also included what were known as “counter-courses,” noncurricular classes on various subjects, often held off school premises with the participation of students and teachers who sympathized with their demands. At the end of May, while the municipal authorities announced their commitment to keep student bus fares down, high school students demanded that the benefit be extended to the entire population. The CESU’s call to put an end to this stage of the conflict was met with outright rebellion from students, who continued to occupy several high schools.

In early June, the bus fare issue was still unresolved, and student unions found new reasons to protest. Traditionally this time of year brought demands for greater funding for public education as legislators prepared to discuss the budget that was to be adopted by the executive branch. These issues fueled existing conflicts among students and teachers in other public education institutions, such as the polytechnic school, the *Universidad del Trabajo del Uruguay* (UTU), and the teachers’ training college, the *Instituto Normal*. Student demands were largely connected to an explosive growth in enrollment and the resulting shortage of materials and human resources and the

executive branch's attempts to impose solutions. Newspapers across the political spectrum were filled with articles about the crisis in secondary education—the shortage of classrooms, the difficulties of the teaching staff—and the need to take urgent action. This evidenced widespread concern over the deterioration of the country's valued public education system, an indicator that had often been used to support the claim of Uruguay's singularity in the region.

As the country's social and economic crisis reached unprecedented levels, teachers' and students' unions used this public sentiment to their advantage, stepping up their demands and confronting a government set on implementing reforms that were unfavorable to them and limited their participation in governing bodies and decision-making processes. The refusal by governing party legislators to ratify the appointment of Arturo Rodríguez Zorrilla as director of the National Board of Secondary Education further inflamed those who claimed that the government was violating the board's autonomy.<sup>6</sup> Parents also organized to put pressure on both sides, with some supporting the demands of teachers' unions and students and others rejecting this excessive "politicization" of education. The rest of the country was not indifferent to this unrest.<sup>7</sup>

Widespread protests erupted in June when university students joined the demonstrations. On June 6, the Federation of University Students of Uruguay (Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Uruguay, or FEUU) called on students to demand that the executive branch release the funds it owed the university and other educational institutions. High school students who were still mobilizing for subsidized bus fares joined FEUU protesters at the steps of the main university building. At the end of the rally, as was often the case in these demonstrations, a group of

protesters started marching down the main avenue, 18 de Julio, toward the Old City district. They had advanced only a few steps when they were met with gunfire from a police vehicle. Five students were seriously wounded. Most analysts agree that this incident, which involved shots fired from .38-caliber service revolvers, was the first clear sign that the repressive forces were adopting new methods. There were also mass detentions, with charges filed in court against several of the students arrested.<sup>8</sup>

The way students organized and demonstrated and their aims also changed significantly as of that moment. In the days after the shooting, young people across all levels of education rushed to the streets imbued with “a sort of frenzy,” in the words of Gonzalo Varela Petito, who was a direct participant and has a vivid memory of these events.<sup>9</sup> On June 7, students gathered in front of the university to protest the shooting; the rally ended with serious clashes and property damage, as well as the arrest and injury of hundreds of students. Over the next few days, demonstrators adopted tactics that involved gathering in groups, scattering, and regrouping and began to seek out confrontations with the police. The shock effect of these “flash” demonstrations was meant to gain an advantage over the police forces. In addition to actions in Avenida 18 de Julio and other downtown streets, the students staged marches, threw rocks, put up roadblocks, and engaged in violent clashes in the neighborhoods surrounding their schools, many of which were still being occupied.

On June 12, the University of the Republic, the CESU, the FEUU, and the national labor federation (Convención Nacional de Trabajadores, or CNT) called for a demonstration in “defense of freedoms, against repression, and for the release of jailed students.” When the rally was over, university authorities asked the demonstrators to disperse, in compliance with the Interior

Ministry's ban on marching to downtown Montevideo. Many participants, the majority of them students, disobeyed the order and confronted the Metropolitan Guard, which was waiting for them armed with tear-gas launchers. Instead of retreating, the young demonstrators put up barricades and began breaking store windows and throwing Molotov cocktails at the police forces, disbanding and regrouping along side streets. The Metropolitan Guard responded violently, leaving dozens injured and almost three hundred students arrested.<sup>10</sup>

The next day, the government issued a decree implementing Prompt Security Measures. These measures—a limited form of state of siege stipulated under the constitution, allowing the government to suspend the rights to strike, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech, among other repressive actions—had been applied sporadically in previous years (most recently in October 1967) in response to social conflicts and emergency situations such as floods but never for so long or as harshly as they were applied by Pacheco. In justifying the measures, the June 13 decree called attention to the “profound disruption of the social peace and the public order” that could ensue as a result of the several labor conflicts under way, in particular among civil servants and state bank employees, without mentioning the student unrest directly. Only the phrase “unusual climate of street violence,” near the end of the decree, alluded to the previous night and similar events.<sup>11</sup>

The ministers of culture, labor, and public health opposed the measures and resigned. These internal differences revealed the initial difficulties encountered by Pacheco as he sought to consolidate the authoritarian shift and to move more decisively toward economic liberalization, the two features that defined his administration from the moment he took office in December

1967 after the unexpected death of President Óscar Gestido. The government sought to contain the wave of mostly labor-related protests, which had swelled over the past decade as real wages dropped and structural inflation set in. The freeze on prices and wages decreed under Prompt Security Measures in June 1968 was another step in that direction as it entailed ignoring collective bargaining mechanisms mediated by the state (which would be formally dismantled by year's end). As of that moment, and except for a brief interruption in March 1969 when the measures were lifted for three months, an unprecedented repressive stance prevailed in the government's approach to the growing social unrest. It was during that period that what Álvaro Rico has termed "conservative liberalism" was consolidated as the ideology that supported the authoritarian restructuring of the Uruguayan state that would culminate with the 1973 coup d'état and that began in 1968 with changes in the political regime.<sup>12</sup>

In the short term, the government's authoritarianism failed in its aim to bring down the level of confrontation, succeeding instead in pushing large sectors of society into joining the protests. Organized labor continued to hold strikes and demonstrations against the government's economic policies (including a general strike on June 18) while resisting harsh repressive actions, such as the militarization and confinement in military facilities of workers who provided services in areas considered "essential." With respect to the student movement, the second fortnight of June was perhaps more turbulent than the first, with a series of demonstrations, roadblocks, rock throwing incidents, and clashes with the police, as well as hundreds of protesters arrested and dozens injured. It would appear that at this stage the younger high school students (those in the first four years of secondary education) took a backseat as their older peers (those

in the last two years of high school) began leading the protests along with university students.<sup>13</sup>

On June 27, serious incidents broke out around the School of Medicine. This led the government to accuse university authorities of allowing the institution to be turned into “a rioting center,” in the words of the newly appointed culture minister, Federico García Capurro.<sup>14</sup> Two weeks later, on July 11, the police surrounded dozens of students who had taken refuge at the School of Medicine after meeting with workers from nearby factories and demonstrating in the area. This continued until July 14, when, following difficult negotiations between Pacheco and university officials, the police agreed to allow the students to leave the building in the presence of a judge.<sup>15</sup> However, during those four days hundreds of protesters were arrested in the vicinity of the school, and at least one student received a gunshot wound. Reports of injuries suffered by police officers also began to emerge. The skirmishes, street demonstrations, and other forms of protest continued over the following days, with more young people arrested for violating the Prompt Security Measures. Around that time, the FEUU convention met again to decide the steps to be taken after two months of intense street struggle. These discussions, which are considered in greater depth later, were conducted amid growing unrest and escalating confrontations with police forces.

On July 29, architecture students hung a sign in their school building declaring their solidarity with the civil servants who had been militarized. The sign was deemed offensive by the armed forces. After ordering university authorities to take down the sign, the military moved in on the students. They were met with rocks thrown from the roof of the building, to which they responded with volleys of tear gas. The students put up a new sign and took to the streets, where they clashed immediately



with the police. The next day a rally was held in front of the main building of the university to protest these incidents, culminating again with a spontaneous march down Avenida 18 de Julio and new clashes with the police, which left three officers injured.<sup>16</sup>

Similar episodes continued until the beginning of August, when the government's repressive actions peaked in response to repeated demonstrations. In the early hours of August 9, the police raided the main building of the university and the buildings of the Schools of Agronomy, Architecture, Fine Arts, Economics, and Medicine, alleging that it was in connection with its investigation into the whereabouts of Ulysses Pereira Reverbel, director of the state power company. Pereira Reverbel had been kidnapped by the MLN-T in one of the first high-profile actions by this group. The raids were conducted with neither a warrant nor any court officers present, and none of the schools' deans were notified. In the morning, when news of the raids spread, a battle involving a large number of students broke out in downtown Montevideo and continued throughout the day, leaving several people seriously injured, including one student with life-threatening wounds from the impact of a tear-gas canister. In other parts of the city there were also demonstrations and serious incidents between protesters and police. That day marked a breaking point in university-government relations, shattering the hopes still harbored by some of finding a negotiated solution to a crisis that had begun as early as March, at the start of the school year. Near the end of the day, the executive branch decided to request authorization from the Senate to remove from office all members of the university's Central Governing Board (Consejo Directivo Central, or CDC). At the same time, the police imposed a prior censorship requirement on all press releases issued by the university. The next day the Tupamaros freed Pereira Reverbel.<sup>17</sup>

These measures prompted immediate reactions from the university community. On August 10, university authorities declared that holding “certain [government] offices” was incompatible with university “teaching positions.”<sup>18</sup> Students continued protesting the measures implemented by the government and occupied the Schools of Medicine and Architecture. Run-ins with the authorities became more frequent, and the way these forces dealt with protesters became increasingly violent. On August 12, a dentistry student, Líber Arce, was shot by police; he died two days later. When news of his death broke, the protests that had been erupting spontaneously in different parts of the city stopped and a large number of people began congregating in the main building of the university, where Arce’s wake was being held. Nearly two hundred thousand mourners accompanied his remains to the cemetery in what was one of the largest demonstrations anyone could remember. It was the first in a series of funeral processions for activists slain by repressive forces over the coming months and years. After the demonstration, when night fell, a number of violent incidents occurred in downtown Montevideo, including vandalism and looting. The police stayed away, adopting a position that generated much speculation and gave way to conflicting interpretations. The FEUU and other social organizations condemned these incidents and denied any involvement in them, although the participation of leftist activists cannot be completely ruled out.<sup>19</sup>

Over the following weeks, especially after classes resumed in high schools and UTU centers, which had been suspended since Arce’s death, students again took to the streets to protest, throwing incendiary bombs, rocks, and other objects, putting up barricades, and setting cars on fire. These new protests left dozens injured and in police custody. In early September, violent skir-



Figure 1. Wake for Líber Arce held outside the main building of the University of the Republic, August 15, 1968. Photographer unknown, *El Popular* private collection, Centro de Fotografía de Montevideo.

mishes occurred after a brief occupation of a night school, Liceo Nocturno No. 1.<sup>20</sup> Students would gather in the vicinity of the main building of the university and the Instituto Alfredo Vázquez Acevedo (IAVA), a large high school located a block away, as well as around other large high schools and the university's Schools of Medicine and Chemistry. From there they would set off on marches and demonstrations that often ended in clashes. The occupations of educational facilities continued, along with class stoppages and teacher strikes, as well as joint actions involving students and workers in some neighborhoods, against a backdrop of ongoing union struggles that were more or less united. On September 19, following an intense day of labor and student protests near the Legislative Palace (the seat of Parliament), the CNT called a general strike that was marked by new violent incidents and clashes with police forces. On September 20, during a demonstration around university headquarters, Hugo de los Santos, an

economics student, was gunned down. Under fire from police forces, which made it impossible for medical assistance to reach him, a UTU student, Susana Pintos, tried to carry him to safety and was also shot. Both students died. What distinguished these incidents from those that came before was the use of pellet guns instead of the service weapons employed until then.<sup>21</sup>

To prevent future excesses, the executive branch closed all schools in Montevideo until October 15 and deployed the military to surround school facilities. This was followed by a series of negotiations and tensions between the executive branch and education authorities, especially those of the university (with a request to Parliament to immediately consider a new law regulating the election of its officers by secret and mandatory vote), which ultimately failed to bring the two sides any closer to an agreement, and classes remained suspended. During that time, student actions did in fact appear to dwindle and protests would only start up again with some force at the beginning of the following school year, in a very different context. However, several accounts suggest that during those seemingly calm months the drop in public unrest was inversely proportional to the radicalization of some groups of mobilized youths, many of whom were by then openly embracing confrontational political positions. These developments and a more in-depth examination of the spiral of violence into which the country was plunged between May and October 1968 are the subject of the following sections.

#### COORDINATES OF A CYCLE OF PROTEST

At first glance, one can identify certain similarities between the 1968 protest cycle and actions taken by student protesters in previous years. According to Gonzalo Varela Petito's description of

events at the IAVA high school, union activities usually began “shortly after classes had started for the year, ... reached their peak momentum by May, ... [and] by October they started to die down” as exams drew near. In fact, when high school students began mobilizing in May 1968, their sometimes-violent practices were compared to the combative approach traditionally taken by students in the streets, dating back at least a decade. Earlier protests had been met with police action too.<sup>22</sup> It was not until mid-June, around the time the Prompt Security Measures were implemented, that the nature of the demands changed and the levels of both student belligerence and police responses increased significantly.

Generally speaking, the cycle of action and reaction between mobilized youths and repressive forces truly “escalated,” spurred by the government’s growing authoritarianism, pushing vast sectors to the streets and making them more predisposed to confrontation. As discussed later in this book, the ideas that encouraged violence in the streets were already present in some minor groups that operated in student (and labor) circles, but their expansion occurred amid widespread outrage at each excessive use of force by the government in its actions to contain social unrest. It seems clear that both the implementation of Prompt Security Measures and the raiding of university facilities as well as the incensed statements hurled by members of the executive branch provoked students and triggered their violent responses. The killing of three young activists in August and September consolidated that context of aggression, conferring legitimacy on their actions and allowing them to attract new recruits. In this way, the demands made by early protesters, which had to do specifically with education, were abandoned in favor of more political issues and demands for radical social change. This set the tone

for the movement until its relative decline in late October 1968, and established the forms of struggle of the opposition to the Pacheco government in the coming years.

Throughout this cycle of protest young people assumed an increasingly confrontational posture. This was striking even when it came to relatively minor problems—such as the differences between IAVA students and their school principal described by Varela Petito—that had formerly been settled peacefully or would have been resolved by applying traditional principles of authority.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Antonio Romano notes that the “specific educational aspect” of the way in which conflict was approached in educational institutions was diluted “as political confrontation hardened.”<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note here that this challenge to the most basic rules of action in everyday spaces was a process that occurred together with major changes in the material expressions and symbolic significance of the use of political violence in the streets of Montevideo, and it was closely connected to the unprecedented escalation of repression by the government. A detailed examination of such changes in the pages that follow provides insight into the discussions within the movement and the Left over what these practices meant in the short and long term, both in the protests against the policies of the Pacheco government and in the struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society.

Let us begin this analysis by looking at the physical space in which these violent practices unfolded. First, students clearly sought to turn the whole city of Montevideo into the stage for their protests. From May through the first half of June, most demonstrations were held in and around high school buildings where student unions or some left-wing groups were traditionally stronger. The magnitude of these early demonstrations in low-income neighborhoods suggests that the children of the city’s

working and lower-middle classes felt a high level of discontent. Only on special occasions did they converge toward downtown Montevideo to protest. This happened, for example, on June 6 and 12, two days that marked the beginning of a phase of greater student confrontation and harsher actions by the police.

From that point on, as university students joined in and protests spread, demonstrators moved into downtown Montevideo, where numerous university facilities, high schools, and UTU buildings were located. Demonstrators would typically gather near the IAVA, the largest high school for junior and senior students, and the main building of the university, only a block away, where the largest rallies were held. The students would begin their rock throwing there, with Channel 4 as their target of choice because of the TV station's support of the government. Then they would start down Avenida 18 de Julio, with some students attempting to put up roadblocks or topple a car or two, and march at least a few blocks in the direction of the oldest part of the city. They would resume their rock throwing there, targeting the Pan Am and General Electric offices, which represented U.S. interests in Uruguay. This was usually where the police sprang more decisively into action. Under Prompt Security Measures, the rally itself would usually be expressly authorized, but this second part of the protest would be more or less spontaneous and therefore in violation of the measures. The year's most violent incidents—that is, those that followed the university raids in August and those that resulted in two deaths in September—also occurred in downtown streets, within the twenty blocks from the IAVA and the main building of the university to the centrally located Plaza Libertad.

The area where both the School of Medicine and the School of Chemistry were located, just steps away from the Legislative

Palace and near factories whose workers were involved in labor conflicts, was another district that saw frequent rallies and clashes. The incidents of June 27 and the more serious ones of July 11 through 14, when the police surrounded the School of Medicine, along with the events of late September, were the highest points of mobilization in these areas, which witnessed numerous demonstrations and clashes with repressive forces. Several violent incidents also took place in the working-class neighborhood of El Cerro and in the area around the School of Architecture. There were also many smaller or shorter demonstrations staged around other education centers in various districts of Montevideo, and while it is not possible to review them all here, Varela Petito estimates, based on information from the Interior Ministry, that there were as many as three hundred protests, or an average of two per day, from May to October, the five months with the highest number of actions.<sup>25</sup>

The choice of spaces described very briefly above seems logical, at least at first glance, because they were easily accessible and were natural gathering places for students (and workers in conflict) and because of the increasingly central role the university assumed in the defense of public freedoms, against the government, and in favor of social change. However, when and where to demonstrate was a frequent issue of debate. Analyzing these debates allows us to begin tracing the conflicts that existed within the student movement and its relations with the other groups that opposed Pacheco's authoritarianism. This provides a first understanding of the changes in the forms of protest introduced by the activists who burst onto the public scene in 1968, not only from a political and ideological point of view but also in terms of the impact of the cultural trends embraced by their peers in the rest of the world, which shaped a generational identity.



The characteristics of these student actions were often discussed, for example, by the members of the university's CDC. The exchanges between those who wanted to limit the locations and times of protests, on the one hand, and the young protesters who sought to expand such limits, on the other, challenge the image of intergenerational harmony that is sometimes said to be a defining feature of Uruguay's 1968 student movement. It is often claimed that, in contrast to their peers in France and the United States, activists in this movement did not question either the schools' authorities or their regulations and that the movement was characterized by a strong sense of "university responsibility" based on the students' long-standing participation in the university's joint governing bodies and the cherished autonomy enjoyed by the institution, two typical features of Latin America's university tradition.<sup>26</sup> In general, this is an accurate picture; students, alumni, and faculty often agreed on issues regarding university politics. Because members of all groups participated in joint governing bodies, students did not blame faculty directly for institutional or educational shortcomings. Several sociologists—an emerging field at the time—noted this feature of young Uruguayan university students with surprise. Aldo E. Solari, a pioneer of the discipline in Uruguay, observed this in 1968 with respect to the progressive increase in the number of years required to obtain a degree, which meant students were entering the labor market at a later age, a factor that seemed to go against the repeated calls by students to forge a "popular university."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, with regard specifically to politics, a majority of students, alumni, and faculty (at least those that expressed themselves through the joint government bodies) opposed the national government. This opposition was in line with their traditional defense of the university's autonomy with

respect to political power, or drew on more radical ideas regarding the role of intellectuals in what they believed were imminent revolutionary processes.

This, however, should not overshadow the internal differences and the multiple tensions that marked, for example, the relations between organized students and the university rector, Óscar Maggiolo, at the start of his term in 1966. The drafting and discussion of the proposed university reform known as Plan Maggiolo offers a particularly interesting case for understanding the complexity of these relations, as student leaders were actively involved at every stage of the process, continuously questioning both the content of the reform and the motivations of university authorities who supported the proposal.<sup>28</sup> Two other examples of these differences were the adverse reaction of the FEUU to Maggiolo's contacts with president-elect Óscar Gestido in January and February 1967 and the rector's temporary resignation in October over the students' unauthorized placement of a sign on the front of the main building of the university.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the year, after the implementation of the Prompt Security Measures in October and the unexpected death of President Gestido in December, Maggiolo hardened his stance against the Pacheco government, joining the National Movement for the Defense of Public Liberties (Movimiento Nacional de Defensa de las Libertades Públicas, or MNDLP) along with other political, religious, and intellectual figures who sought to form an opposition front. In 1968, relations between the rector and the students improved as the former took a firm stand in defense of university autonomy and allowed the university to participate in demonstrations and assume a key role in furthering progressive social change.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, there were several discussions in the CDC over the use of public spaces, which revealed diverging viewpoints

regarding the decision to breach the limits set both by the city's street protest practices and by the unprecedented repression of the government and its new regulations. In early July, for example, student delegates urged the university to hold a public demonstration to show "its militant presence in this struggle that the Uruguayan people as a whole are waging for their freedom." The rector and several members of the CDC approved the spirit of the motion and proposed that, with the aim of joining forces, a call be issued to participate in the rally that was being organized by the MNDLP, "not marching down Avenida 18 de Julio, because we know how [against] it the police were even before the Prompt Security Measures, but from the university to the Legislative Palace, down Sierra Street." A student representative, Luis Carriquiry, agreed on the need to join the rallies but made one important "qualification": "We believe that, despite the difficulties that exist, we should try to first march down 18 de Julio. It has become a tradition for demonstrations as important as this to be staged on 18 de Julio. Not staging it on 18 de Julio would rob the demonstration of some of its strength or shine and it would look like we were doing things a bit on the sly."

Also, when the rector said that demonstrating after 9 p.m. had been "completely ruled out," the students declared that "the demonstration will almost certainly be held at night." As no agreement could be reached, the resolution was postponed. Regardless of what eventually happened (the police denied the authorization to demonstrate in the street and the MNDLP held its rally at the university), what this example highlights is the students' insistence that backing down would, in the words of Pedro Sprechman, a student delegate in the CDC, "seem like a compromise or like we were accepting a status quo and even accepting the violation of a constitutional norm.... What

we have here is a matter of principles and that is what we are defending.”<sup>31</sup>

These positions were clearly connected to different political stances that are examined in greater detail later. For now, I want to note the generational divide that separated the prudent stance adopted by Maggiolo and other CDC members and the zeal with which students reaffirmed their right to demonstrate when and where they wanted.<sup>32</sup> Some considered it unsafe or unnecessarily confrontational, but it is clear that marching at night down the still elegant Avenida 18 de Julio held strong symbolic value for young people, for whom roaming the city freely, going out at night, and having certain spaces where adults could not control them were synonymous with the passage into adulthood.<sup>33</sup> In denouncing the repression of a Saturday night march, UTU student Raúl Seoane boasted to the *Marcha* reporter interviewing him, “We’re the only ones who dare demonstrate on that day and at that hour.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the consolidation as of 1968 of street music festivals and other artistic expressions furthered by young left-wing groups, in particular the UJC, can also be interpreted as a generational conquering of public spaces.<sup>35</sup> Another example is the counter-courses that were held, as these were convened by students and were spaces where they interacted with teachers under conditions of greater equality and in what was a clear challenge to the institutional authority expressed in the more formal context of the classroom and the curriculum.<sup>36</sup>

The students’ determination to take over certain physical spaces had generational connotations, and this was evident not only in the streets but also within school facilities. Varela Petito observes this with respect to the numerous conflicts sparked between students and IAVA authorities over the use of the school’s

gym, the placement of signs, and the holding of student assemblies.<sup>37</sup> A high school student interviewed by Copelmayer and Díaz a few months after these events described it eloquently.

The assemblies were held primarily during school hours. We asked for permission, and if we didn't get it, we tried to hold them anyway. There were classes that went out to a square to hold their assemblies. We even used the auditorium, which until then had been used as a meeting place for the old *pelucones* [conservatives]. We opened the door—when they didn't give us the key—and we had our class assemblies in the room.<sup>38</sup>

Some of the protest strategies can be linked to the age of the participants. Several demonstrations combined the desire to challenge authority with a markedly playful tone that was most likely connected to an old festive tradition of European universities, which was still present in Latin American student life and was frequently associated with political protests.<sup>39</sup> In 1968, this spirit was often expressed through comedy, such as in a humorous sign put up in the School of Architecture in late July that mocked the armed forces and prompted their intervention, or the more absurd one that read, "High school occupied by Nico's gang," mentioned in the weekly *Marcha* in June.<sup>40</sup> The flash demonstrations—one of the preferred actions staged between June and October 1968—were also typically youthful in style, as groups amassed and dispersed quickly to take repressive forces by surprise. The impression that these young activists gave the people of Montevideo was that they were taking over the streets with their disruptive actions. Another common protest practice was the snatching of police caps and holding them up as trophies or as tangible evidence of a victory, however minor. The urge to strip the enemy of such a symbolic element was seen as a form of humiliating the enemy. In at least two accounts from days in

which large clashes occurred—including the first shooting on Avenida 18 de Julio on June 6 and the incident that resulted in the death of Líber Arce in August—activists mention cap snatching and a desire to flaunt it as a symbolic victory over the police.<sup>41</sup>

Many photographs from that time show demonstrators, for the most part young men, carrying out these actions with bravado, dressed in clothes that were bolder than those their elders and some of their peers commonly wore. The adults who supported such acts saw them as an exhibition of “virility” that was considered a typical feature of youth activists. Most, however, did not go as far as Hermógenes Álvarez, dean of the School of Medicine, who suggested that the “presence of a young female activist” was the reason a male student was willing to “go unarmed against two policemen who drew their guns at him.”<sup>42</sup> With this and other gendered references, such arguments tended to explain leftist activism as a product of the natural outrage that injustice prompted in (male) youths. In this way, they exalted the physical dimension of activism, the image of the body in action, the strength and drive that were commonly associated with an early stage in life, as well as its psychological features of courage, commitment to a cause, and lack of concern for the material consequences of one’s actions. This rhetoric usually looked to the past, especially to the Latin American wars for independence, to explain the insurgent roots of 1960s youths. In the words of Carlos Quijano, veteran editor of *Marcha*, these young activists joined the “legion of silent warriors who, in the right or in the wrong, were willing to give their lives for their country.”<sup>43</sup> There were points of contact between these interpretations and those of some of the detractors of the student movement, including the interior minister himself, who portrayed young people as idealists or innocents in order to call



Figure 2. Rally at Plaza Libertad, on Avenida 18 de Julio, in downtown Montevideo, 1968. Photographer unknown. *El Popular* private collection, Centro de Fotografía de Montevideo.

attention to the responsibility of the adults who unleashed, encouraged, or took advantage of their rebelliousness (as university authorities were criticized for doing).<sup>44</sup>

The documents of the FEUU categorically rejected these interpretations, with particular force after the death of Líber Arce.

We are not playing a game when we expose ourselves to tear gas canisters, to jail, and to bullets. Those who have always, out of convenience or hypocrisy, carelessly dismissed our activism, painting it out to be an impulsive reaction, know today that we are willing to risk our own lives to defend the interests of the people.<sup>45</sup>

Some statements by the student movement celebrated the relationship between political commitment and physical action, for example, calling on fellow students to confront the police and advocating a strategy based on “rocks and bodies willing to

shout the truth.”<sup>46</sup> As I discuss later, this was a controversial view that reflected the political positions at the root of some of the bitterest conflicts within the Left.

## ON VIOLENCE

Before analyzing the disagreements prompted by this widespread view of student mobilization, let us look at the evidence available on the actual use of violent methods in 1968 and how it relates to the government’s escalating repression. Organized students argued in favor of certain confrontational tactics, such as rock throwing, but they rejected others, especially the use of firearms and anything that could injure others (although a high school activist unabashedly admitted, “It’s pretty naive to think that if you throw rocks at a bus you’re not going to hurt any passengers”).<sup>47</sup> Other tactics, such as the burning of cars, were even more controversial. Although the use of such tactics was generally denied at the time (in the CDC, for example, student delegates tacitly allowed other members to brand those who carried out such actions “outside provocateurs”) some later accounts confirm that students did engage in them.<sup>48</sup>

The files of the police agency DNII that are accessible contain numerous references to detentions of young people, many of them underage, who were armed with rocks, flammable chemicals, incendiary bombs, and objects such as sticks, branches, scraps of iron, and pieces of broken sidewalks. Except in those cases in which they had been caught in flagrante, the detainees denied that they meant to use such materials, claiming that they were holding them for someone, that they had forgotten they had them in their pockets, or simply that they did not know why they had them. Students made similar claims when caught with liq-



uids and scarves intended to combat the effects of tear gas, especially after the Metropolitan Guard began to be called in to control demonstrations and protesters perfected their strategies to face these forces. Their obvious aim was to deny any participation in the nonauthorized marches, but the repeated references to certain detainees found in police records and the fact that many of them can be identified as well-known leftist activists suggest that they did in fact participate in such actions and that they frequently resorted to violence.<sup>49</sup> At this stage there were no deaths among the military or police, and none suffered permanent injuries, although in many cases students did target them.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of serious injuries among officers reveals that, despite repeated accusations by police forces and government authorities, the use of firearms was rare among participants in the student movement at this time. In July, when the university rector and the dean of the School of Medicine requested authorization to visit a policeman who had allegedly been shot at one such demonstration, the culture minister and President Pacheco replied that they still had to confirm whether or not he had been wounded by a gun.<sup>51</sup> The interior minister was also unable to give the names of the officers who had allegedly been shot by students in September.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, no handguns or shotguns were included among the weapons seized during the 1968 raids on university buildings. The confiscated items—rocks and other projectiles, chemicals, “explosive cartridges”—were later exhibited to the public in an attempt to show the students’ “violent nature.”<sup>53</sup> Among the DNII files only one document refers to abundant ammunition supposedly left behind by students after the occupation of Liceo Nocturno No. 1 in September. The investigation led to charges being brought against an individual who had no connection to that school but whom the students

had approached for firearms and in whose house the police found a handgun, bullets, gunpowder, and instructions for making Molotov cocktails.<sup>54</sup>

In any case, it is clear that the physical evidence obtained by the police was not enough to justify the use of repressive force on the grounds that the officers were acting in “legitimate self-defense,” especially after the three student deaths. As the Blanco Party senator Carlos Furest said in a Senate discussion, “Three to zero is too negative a score to have to keep hearing such nonsense.”<sup>55</sup> The governing party thus resorted to portraying the student movement as part of a plan coordinated with trade unions and other political forces to destabilize the country. In the words of Minister Jiménez de Aréchaga, “Agitation spurs repression, which in turn sparks increasing agitation. . . . I must admit that it is a veritable campaign to bring about the revolution and to do it without much bloodshed.”<sup>56</sup> The minister’s aim was to evade his responsibility in the incidents that had greatly exceeded the traditional forms of dealing with social conflict, but his statements drew attention to the relationship between student unrest and police repression, an aspect that cannot be avoided when considering the 1968 cycle of protest and violence.

We must consider to what extent each side—demonstrators and repressive forces—modified their attitudes and pushed the limits as the cycle of violence grew, each in response to the actions of the other side. The flash demonstrations, for example, clearly emerged as a form of protest that “because of the ease and discretion with which they were organized” succeeded in “preventing the police from being alerted” and thus from arresting demonstrators.<sup>57</sup> The students were fully aware of the meaning and effect of their actions, and this often sparked internal arguments over the advisability of using this or that method. But

let us leave these discussions aside for a moment and highlight instead the level of reflection evidenced by the radicalized young activists interviewed by Copelmayer and Díaz:

- F: We wanted a productive violence, one that we could get something out of. If we had a run-in with the police and we damaged a van or one of them was hurt by a rock, it was reported in the newspapers, on the radio.
- D: We saw no other method than that to make our opposition more shocking: standing in front of a bus and breaking all its windows . . . Our goal was to throw rocks at the bus . . . so that the bus driver would go back to the company and say, "Our windows were shattered by students." Management or whoever ran the company was then going to realize that there was a student power, a force that was there, fighting.
- J: There is a fundamental difference between the first demonstrations in the month of May and the second demonstrations, which were more violent. I remember that in the first demonstrations students . . . were supposed to keep advancing when they tried to stop them, but they weren't supposed to attack those who repressed them.
- D: We couldn't go on peacefully demonstrating when we were being repressed with gas and, later, with bullets and shrapnel. That clearly showed that students represented a powerful force, which was playing its triggering role, as we called it, to perfection.<sup>58</sup>

The police, in turn, warned in July that students were looking to confuse repressive forces with their "operative methods" and asked people to "immediately" move away from the hubs of agitation "to avoid being arrested."<sup>59</sup> These examples show that, when faced with unprecedented levels of street violence, both sides sought to gain ground by anticipating the actions of their opponent. The police certainly had a great advantage as

intelligence services often enabled them to learn the students' plans in detail and receive military advice to prepare their operations. It should be noted at this time that the military, authorized under Prompt Security Measures to assist in defending the "public order," intervened directly only twice and that its public image was still positive, in contrast to the increasingly discredited police.<sup>60</sup>

In terms of organization, it appears that until mid-September demonstrations were controlled by the local police precincts, which responded when they were alerted that a conflict had broken out in their jurisdiction. One such event ended with the death of Líber Arce as a result of injuries inflicted by a police officer from the Ninth Precinct who was attempting to repress a flash demonstration near the School of Veterinary Medicine.<sup>61</sup> Police officers generally showed up on foot or in police cars or wagons, with their .38-caliber guns and regular nightsticks, and were sometimes backed by firefighters if there were barricades or burning cars; they were careful to document property damage to stores and neighboring houses.<sup>62</sup> At this stage, the Metropolitan Guard, which would later become a symbol of the authoritarianism of the Pacheco government, with their helmets (which earned them the names *casquitos*, or small helmets, and *marcianitos*, or little Martians) and their clubs and vehicles for transporting detainees (known as *roperos*, or wardrobes, and *chanchitas*, or pig-gies), only stepped in to back the police during large demonstrations or complicated incidents. There were also attempts to use horses and dogs, but these were not as effective as water cannons (known as *guanacos*) and tear gas, although these could backfire depending on the wind. While some student accounts indicate that there were differences in the attitudes of these two forces, it would appear that both the officers from the police precincts and

those from “la Metro” (the Metropolitan Guard) were often aggressive and aimed for the body, which would explain the high number of injuries reported once repression was stepped up. It appears also that the weapons used in the first stage were not as lethal as the pellet guns that were used in late September, which, paradoxically, resulted in their use being justified because of their greater accuracy.<sup>63</sup> Two additional deaths that followed would prove just how mistaken, or cynical, that argument was.

The historian Clara Aldrichi argues that the influence of the United States was a key factor in increasing the Uruguayan state’s capacity for social control during this period. As of the mid-1960s, the police received training and significant logistical assistance to combat the initial inefficiency diagnosis that had been issued by the U.S. advisers of the Public Security Program (PSP). By mid-1968, according to Aldrichi, the results were palpable, and a growing number of police officers were using the weapons introduced by this program. This included the wooden batons, based on a U.S. design and manufactured domestically, that so many activists were beaten with over subsequent months. Also from the United States came the shotguns used to kill Susana Pintos and Hugo de los Santos in September, which had arrived the previous month in a shipment of fifty riot control weapons ordered by the PSP. Moreover, Alfredo Rivero, the colonel who commanded the Metropolitan Guard and gave the order that day to fire at demonstrators, had been trained in “riot control” under that same program. Although at that time there was no accurate information on the size and forms of PSP operations, much of the opposition to Pacheco linked the presence of U.S. advisers to the rapid increase in the repressive power of the police.<sup>64</sup>

Concerns about escalating violence (and the lack of reliable data) were evident in Senate discussions during this period. After

several false starts, legislators finally succeeded in bringing Minister Jiménez de Aréchaga to the Senate to explain the police actions under the Prompt Security Measures. These discussions give us an idea of politicians' positions on these matters. First, the focus on students and the university must be highlighted as it reflects their growing public importance after the issuing of the decree implementing the measures, which made no mention of them. Second, there was a cross-party group of senators (several from the governing Colorado Party, some from the Blanco Party, and the Communist Enrique Rodríguez) who justified or at least explained the students' actions and the positions of the university. From vastly different ideological and philosophical principles, these legislators argued in support of the "idealism" of young people—an idea in vogue at the time—and accused the government of curtailing their ability to fully realize themselves and form part of society. Some drew on their personal experience as parents of students who were participating in the movement; others appealed to their fellow legislators to remember their own rebelliousness in their youth. They all pointed to police brutality and the government's authoritarianism as central to the problem at hand. Accordingly, Zelmar Michelini, the Colorado senator who led the questioning of Minister Jiménez de Aréchaga, asked for his resignation, accusing him of targeting the university and of having turned, together with the chief of police, into a "spur" for students and workers.<sup>65</sup>

On the other side were those who agreed with the minister that the origin of the violence was to be found in certain minority sectors (some three hundred activists backed by university authorities) that were hoping for a conflict in order to destabilize the government. As in the DNII reports, these governing party



Figure 3. Demonstrators resist a tear-gas attack in the area around the School of Medicine and the Legislative Palace, September 5, 1968. Photographer unknown. *El Popular* private collection, Centro de Fotografía de Montevideo.

politicians portrayed the demonstrations of medical and chemistry students and of workers at the Bao soap factory and the Frigorífico Nacional meatpacking plant on September 18 as an attempt to create chaos in parliament, in preparation for the call to “go at it with full force” in downtown Montevideo over the next two days. As proof, they pointed to the items seized by the police and the “first aid room” set up in the main building of the university in anticipation of the September 20 clashes. Although the minister made several attempts to analyze the student movement from a psychological and sociological perspective, his aim was to steer the blame away from the repressive forces and ultimately conclude that the police had acted in “legitimate self-defense” and with the weapons necessary to confront their dangerous attackers. It is worth noting that the origin of the

weapons was never clarified. He repeatedly compared the situation in Uruguay to that in France in order to stress the appropriateness of the actions by the police and to highlight the virulence of local youths. Whereas the “universal” issues faced by young people were used to justify the actions of the student movement, the minister drew on foreign examples to claim that the movement was removed from national problems. Thus, one of the movement’s leaders was presented as “the Uruguayan Cohn-Bendit,” a homegrown “golden youth” with no reason to rebel other than being inspired by Cuba and influenced by Leninism. Adults, and in particular high school teachers and university professors, were similarly presented as instigators of youth violence. It should be noted that the guerrilla group MLN-T was never mentioned as a factor in the protests.<sup>66</sup>

In more general terms, these Senate sessions proved the difficulty of finding common ground and a solution that would halt the cycle of violence. By then—well into October—students had already been back in school for two weeks, following the suspension of classes and the use of military troops to surround school buildings. The government saw the waning of public protests as proof of the immediate effectiveness of the measures. In fact, during the previous months student activists had for that same reason been unwilling to stage strikes or any other form of protest that would have interrupted classes. However, during the weeks when students were forced to stay away from schools and universities, the more militant groups continued to meet and find ways to protest. It was then that many of them realized that they had reached a watershed moment and that they needed to engage in more committed actions and embrace violent methods. Upon returning to class, they began spreading this message



among fellow students. This sparked new controversies within the political parties of the Left that had an active presence among students. The ground was laid for a climate of great confrontation that would prevail in the coming years. Chapter 2 assesses the impact of the 1968 student demonstrations within the Left and the resistance movement against Pacheco.