

# THEORISING STUDENT ACTIVISM IN AND BEYOND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PHILIP G ALTBACH<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

For most of the second half of the twentieth century, Philip Altbach has followed, analysed and theorised student activism in Europe, North America, India, Africa and beyond, and become the foremost scholar on the topic. This chapter critically reviews Altbach's work on student activism (1964 – 2006) and his efforts at developing a comparative theoretical understanding of student activism in terms of its causes, organisation, ideological orientation and outcomes, along with the backgrounds and identity of student activists, the importance of national and institutional contexts and historical conjunctures in the emergence of student activism and in the response of national and university governments to student protest. The chapter takes Altbach's thinking on student politics and activism and most recent theoretical contributions on changes in European higher education governance and student representation at system and institutional level to consider four questions: Under what conditions does student activism emerge? What are the typical characteristics of student organisations/movements? What are the typical characteristics of student activists? What are the effects of student activism? In so doing, testable propositions for theorising student activism in, and beyond, twentieth century Europe are developed. The paper thereby challenges Altbach's own assertion that "student activism lacks any overarching theoretical explanation" (1991: 247).

## Keywords

Student activism, student politics, student engagement, university governance

## Introduction

Studies of student political activism in Europe and the international student movement will always mention the work of Philip G Altbach, whose pioneering work and publication record on this topic spans almost half a century. This chapter examines a central pillar of Altbach's lasting contribution: the conceptualisation of key characteristics of student activism and related propositions regarding the causes of student activism, its organisation, the backgrounds and identity of student activists and their typical ideological orientation, the effectiveness and impact of student activism, as well as context-specific and conjuncture-related propositions. Thus, while Altbach repeatedly argues that there is no "overarching theoretical explanation" for student activism, and hence that it is "difficult to explain and even more problematic to predict" (Altbach 1991: 247); the purpose of this chapter is precisely to contradict this view by showing that *he* actually provided such a framework, even if he did not utilise it systematically to this end. The paper does not directly deal with Altbach's *empirical* and *historical* research on student activism in Europe, North America, India and other parts of the 'Third World', but rather with his synthesis and abstraction of this "highly complex, many-faceted phenomenon" to provide a conceptual framework for

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“understanding the configurations of student politics” (Altbach 1991: 247). It therefore shows at a theoretical level that Altbach’s work continues to be a relevant point of departure for investigating student politics in Europe and beyond.

Like many young scholars of today who conduct research into student politics, Altbach started out as a student activist. First in high school, then as undergraduate majoring in sociology and history in the late 1950s and eventually as master’s student in educational administration at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s, he became a member of liberal-religious and humanist-pacifist American student and youth organisations, culminating in his role as national chairperson of the nation-wide Student Peace Union from 1959 to 1961 (Altbach, n.d.; 1997: vii; 2009: 1; 2013). Altbach’s master’s dissertation on *James B. Conant* (1963) and his first published academic articles on *Japanese Students and Japanese Politics* (1963) and *The International Student Movement* (1964) coincide with the transformation of political commitments into academic interests (and with the dissolution of the Student Peace Union in 1964), and are followed by his PhD *Students, Politics, and Higher Education in a Developing Society, The Case of Bombay, India* (1966), as well as the anthology *Turmoil And Transition: Higher Education And Student Politics In India* (Altbach, 1968b).

A fruitful collaboration with prominent political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset starts during his post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard University in 1966-67 (cf. Lipset and Altbach, 1966; 1969; Altbach, 1997: ix). In the *Comparative Education Review*’s special issue on student politics of 1966, Altbach establishes himself as one of the main analysts of student politics in the United States and, due to his interest and doctoral work, of student politics in the ‘new nations’, the developing countries of the Third World. Unlike Lipset, Altbach retains his interest in the topic for most of his academic career; his publication record expands rapidly, focusing mainly on American and Indian student activism and student politics in developing countries in general.

As the wave of student revolt sweeps through Europe and other parts of the globe in 1968, Altbach is ideally placed to provide insightful commentary and analysis. In the *Student Revolt in Europe* (1968) Altbach points out the commonalities and differences between the student protests in Italy, West Germany and Poland, and compares them to student activism in American universities and in developing countries. With reference to the United States, Altbach and Lipset (1966: 320) argue that the ‘student revolutions’ were being “greatly exaggerated by the mass media” and “involve only a tiny minority of the student population”; in Western and Central Europe, however, the situation of 1968 was different, involving up to half of the student populations of major universities (Altbach 1968: 755), notwithstanding its “overexposure in the mass media” (Moodie 1997: 295). In *The Student Barometer* (1969) Altbach focuses on student politics in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet intervention in August 1968 that had so dramatically halted the national movement towards sovereignty and liberation. European student activism also features prominently in the large edited volumes on student activism: in *Students in Revolt* edited by Lipset and Altbach in 1969, in *Student Politics: Perspectives for the Eighties* (1981) and, much later, in *Student Activism: An International Reference Handbook* (1989) both edited by Altbach.

For most of the 1970s, 1980s and the early 1990s, Altbach returns his focus on student political activity in the United States, India, and the Third World. In books like *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis* (1974) and important articles such as *From Revolution to Apathy: American Student Activism in the 1970s* (1979) and *American Student Activism: The Post-Sixties Transformation* (1990) he reflects, amongst other things, on shifts

in student activism before and after the 1968 moment, as well as the revitalisation of student activism as part of the impact of the anti-apartheid movement on student politics in the United States in the 1980s. A sustained interest is devoted to the observation and analysis of student activism in developing countries with publications focusing on India (1968, 1974, 1987) and Asia (1970), and more generally the comparison of student activism in the 'First World' and the 'Third World'. The landmark article "Student Politics in the Third World" (1984) is dedicated to the latter topic, as well as sections in other publications.

Among the long-lasting effects of 1968 – and of Altbach's work on and beyond that key moment in European student history - is that the study of student activism has become more than a pastime topic for students and young scholars. The study of student politics in general and student activism in particular, along with other aspects of student engagement in politics on and off campus, has become a respectable academic pursuit. It is well entrenched in the burgeoning fields of comparative education and higher education studies as well as in a varied range of disciplines, including anthropology, history, political science and sociology, along with its place in social movement and youth studies. From the 1960s through to the mid-2000s, Altbach has become the most persistent and consistent analyst of student political activism and the student movement, and as the number of studies on student politics is increasing, his pioneering work on these topics is being widely acknowledged, but rarely treated at any great depth. The culmination of Altbach's work is contained in several *encyclopaedic chapters* on student activism where his strength as synthesiser rather than comparative analyst is fully brought to bear. These chapters therefore form the heart of this attempt to re-visit Altbach's framework and re-consider it in terms of specific theoretical propositions.

### **Conceptualising student activism**

According to Altbach (1992: 1444), student activism "is inherent in the nature of the academic community" and "will continue to be a powerful force", both on campus and in society. Yet, in many contemporary studies of student activism, key notions of 'student politics', 'student activism', 'student representation', 'student unrest' and 'student protest' are conflated, as well as terms like 'student governance' and 'student government', 'student movement' and 'student organisation' (Luescher 2005). In Altbach's work on student activism, 'student' typically refers to higher education students and thus excludes those in vocational training colleges and high schools. This is not to say that his framework may not be applicable in those contexts; it is, however, developed specifically in relation to activism of students in college and university, or at a similar institution. The collective of students is referred to as 'the student community' (Altbach 1966: 187) or, with reference to all students at a particular institution, as the 'student body'. The fact that student communities are to some extent age-graded, transient, divided by faculty and discipline, live in fairly closely knit residential communities, come from similar familial and class backgrounds and so forth, all make the student community and student organisations and movements somewhat unusual (Altbach 1991: 252).

The term 'student politics' is perhaps best used as an umbrella concept to refer to all kinds of political activities of students, whether formal or informal (Luescher 2005), ordinary or extraordinary (Pabian and Minksová 2011), oriented towards society or academia (Altbach 1966: 184). Altbach (1991: 248) attests to the typically oppositional nature of student activism, characterised by forms of student campaigns, protest marches and even violent demonstrations. Today, student activism may be defined as part of the informal or extraordinary political activities of students, as against the now ordinary and formal political

activity of student representation in official bodies of higher education governance (at various levels) and beyond. The distinction is substantiated by the convention that student protest and student activism are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. Moreover, the term ‘activism’ forcefully invokes the idea of political engagement through *public action* (as against the ‘boardroom politics’ involved in formal student representation). In Altbach’s terms, student activism typically is about the public expression of new ideas, about shaping public debate on a topic (like the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam war in the 1960s, disinvestment from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, or women’s rights, gay rights, and global warming in the 1990s and 2000s) and therefore it is often done through publications, public speaking, campaigning, the use of mass media (and, one must add today, social media), and finally through demonstrations and other forms of agitation (Altbach 1992: 1438).

Student organisations and student movements are the platforms from which student politics is collectively organised. They can be international, national, inter-institutional or institutional, but campus-based organisations and movements are the most common (Altbach 1964). Badat (1999) offers a useful distinction between student organisations and movements on the basis of their membership. Thus, “student organisations are usually voluntary membership organisations within the student body” whereas “movements are broader entities, typically consisting of several organisations with no formal individual membership” (Badat 1999: 22). In Altbach’s writing, a student movement is defined as “an association of students inspired by aims set forth in a specific ideological doctrine, usually, although not exclusively, political in nature” (1966: 180). Here, the focus is therefore not on formal membership but on “a combination of emotional response and intellectual conviction” (Altbach 1966: 180). While this definition of student movement differs considerably from more recent ones that focus on the effort of “a large number of students to either bring about or prevent change” (Gill and de Fronzo 2009: 207-209), it will become clear below that this element is evidently implied.

A peculiar kind of student organisation are those with compulsory or statutory affiliation of an entire student body. They go by the names of ‘student union’, ‘student guild’ or ‘student association’, are officially recognised, and if they are established to represent the general student body, one speaks of national student associations or unions (Klemenčič 2012). The elected executive members of an institutional student union or guild, forming a students’ representative council or the like, typically constitute the ‘student government’. The notion of a ‘student government’ provides a useful conceptual means to designate officially recognised, formal structures of student governance from other student organisations. Although Altbach recognised the importance of these structures as part of everyday student life on campus, his unit of analysis in the study of student activism has been the “more radical groups [that] grow out of these ‘official’ organizations” (Altbach 1966: 178).

Against the foregoing overview of definitions and related key characteristics, Altbach’s early caution of the difficulties involved in analysing and understanding student activism and student movements can be appreciated; empirically it stemmed from his early work on student politics in India and the USA. The conceptual framework that Altbach developed in these contexts came to be applied to his work on student activism internationally. It ripened over almost three decades of intense study of student politics.

The early articles *The International Student Movement* (1964) and *Students and Politics* (1966) already use Altbach’s basic vocabulary and perspectives of later years for analysing student activism. The focus on student movements and organisations as the platforms of activism, the interest in their historical origins and the central place afforded to the scope of

activity, political impetus of activists and ideological orientation; Altbach's understanding that variations in student politics and the effectiveness of activism were closely related to the level of political development, responsiveness of the political system, and the appreciation of the peculiarities of the student community which both facilitate and hinder student movements; and finally, therefore, the argument that student politics must be understood within its particular historical, socio-political and cultural context even if there are many typical characteristics and discernible commonalities (and differences) across time and location. All these elements are present already in his earliest work. In later work they are matured, refined and laid out more systematically.

By 1989, Altbach's thinking on student activism crystallised to a point where the prism of analysis was set. His encyclopaedic chapters – i.e. Altbach's contributions on student activism to several higher education reference works like *Student Activism: An International Reference Handbook* (1989), *International Higher Education: An Encyclopaedia* (1991), *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (1992), and *International Handbook of Higher Education* (2006) - largely recap a story which, *conceptually* speaking, is complete as his contribution, and only requires the occasional *empirical* update. High level inferences make up most of that contribution; in large parts, they are not generalisations based on the rigorous application of the comparative method as it is understood today. Rather, Altbach's method is that of a synthesiser, one of *discerning commonalities and differences* across various contexts, and establishing *modal characteristics*.

### **Altbach's Framework for Studying Student Activism**

Altbach's framework, as laid out in his encyclopaedic chapters between 1989 and 2006 along with ideas from earlier writings, espouses a sensitivity to different national and institutional contexts, the characteristics of higher education, the backgrounds of student activists, and the features characteristic of student organisations and movements. At the macro-political level, the stage of political development, regime legitimacy, and responsiveness of the political system to political demands matters for understanding the emergence, nature, role and impact of student politics. At the system level of higher education, certain characteristics inherent in different national higher education systems and types of universities matter for understanding student activism. At the level of the student community, typical characteristics of studentship, such as its transient nature, are responsible for the most peculiar features of student organisations and movements. Furthermore, who the likely student activists are – and who not – can in parts be explained by generalisations concerning the academic, socio-economic, political and familial backgrounds of students. Altogether, these varied features suggest ways of studying the effectiveness, impact and future pattern of student activism. In the way it is presented here, Altbach's framework therefore involves a complex multi-level system of categorical classification as well as specific propositions regarding the emergence, outcomes and impact of student activism, response to student activism, and the characteristic features of student organisations and movements and of student activists.

The analysis and presentation of Altbach's framework here is guided by a number of questions, which may serve as research questions for future empirical studies:

- Under what conditions does student activism emerge?
- What are the typical characteristics of student organisations/movements?
- What are the typical characteristics of student activists?
- What are the effects of student activism?

In keeping with Altbach's framework these questions are elaborated and further specified by foregrounding various structural and conjunctural conditions.

***Under what national conditions does student activism emerge and succeed?***

Over a period of forty years of academic writing Altbach persistently argues that “the most important distinction [in variations between student movements] is between student activist efforts in the industrialized nations and those in the Third World” (Altbach 1992: 1442; see also Altbach 1966; 2006). The distinction is, however, less one that refers to a (today largely obsolete) definition of ‘Third World’ in terms of socio-economic development or Cold War political alignment (as against a First and Second World). Certainly, there are relevant socio-economic aspects, like the fact that student populations in so-called ‘Third World’ nations tend to represent a much smaller share of the total population and are concentrated in major capital cities; and that they tend to be from the most affluent and influential families and thus form an ‘incipient elite’ who will eventually take over the reins of their nation (Altbach 1991: 257). Yet, the crucial distinction is one of *political development* and *regime legitimacy*: The political systems of developing countries tend to be ‘young’, less democratic and less responsive, and thus lacking in legitimacy. As Altbach carefully puts it:

*“Political systems in the Third World have not always been installed through the ballot box and they lack wide legitimacy; thus they are more easily threatened by dissident movements of various kinds. A weak mass media and frequent limitations on free expression means that Third World regimes are generally out of touch with public opinion. Students often provide articulation for much more widely held views and concerns. Their movements are frequently the conscience of at least the educated segment of the population.”*  
(Altbach 1992: 142)

Concomitantly, Altbach finds that in industrialised (First or Second World) nations where regimes have faced a legitimacy deficit - “such as in much of Eastern Europe, and in several Western countries during the 1960s” – student activism can be significant and influential (1992: 142). In contrast, student efforts to overturn the government seem both difficult and unnecessary in countries with open and pluralistic systems of government, such as the United States (Moodie 1999: 298).

Moreover, students' own legitimacy matters. According to Altbach, another broad variation is that in the industrialised nations or, to put it more precisely, in established democracies, “student do not see themselves nor are they seen by society as being legitimate political actors”; at least not to the extent this is the case in non-democratic societies. In the ‘new’ nations, student often played an important part in bringing about national self-determination through their participation in nationalist and liberation movements. Thus, historically, the student movement has established a degree of political legitimacy that allows it to “speak truth to power” with considerable authority (Altbach 1992: 142). In this respect, Altbach has himself put forward a clear proposition:

*“Where student activism is traditionally accepted as a legitimate element of the political system it is more likely to have an impact on society.”* (Altbach 1991: 250)

A crucial variable in the effectiveness and impact of student activism on society may therefore be the respective level of legitimacy of the political system as against that of the student movement. The “dramatic” differences between industrialised countries and the Third World (Altbach 1991: 256) may therefore be understood in these terms. This proposition may not only hold true with respect to the role and impact of student activism in national politics and society; in higher education politics, the same may hold with respect to university reforms, as suggested by Altbach and various other studies (e.g. Nkomo 1984).

***In what higher education systems and institutions is student activism likely to emerge?***

In general terms, academic life permits and hinders student activism. On the one hand, it provides considerable free time for students to live life at their own pace, build close-knit communities with like-minded peers, explore, debate and mobilise for new ideas. On the other hand, the studies also regulate life and follow a timetable, whereby periods of exams can be all consuming and make activism the more difficult.

At the system level of higher education, certain characteristics inherent in different national higher education systems, types of universities, and disciplines of study all matter for understanding student activism. For one, there is no conclusive argument whether student activism is more typically a phenomenon characteristic of elite, mass or universal higher education. Student activism has been observed in all of them even if its meaning may vary (Trow 2006). Different traditional patterns of higher education systems do seem to have an impact on student activism even though, through the Bologna Process and similar processes of convergence and isomorphism, the different modes and related system characteristics observed by Clark (1978) are on the wane. In the traditional European continental system of higher education with its infrequent examinations, and more student-determined pace of study, student leaders have had more time to devote themselves to political work than in the Anglo-American system. In the latter, frequent examinations, the course-credit system and a more regulated timetable of academic progression distinguish it from the continental European “laissez-faire” system (Altbach 1991: 249). The Anglo-American and continental European systems have been historically reproduced in the university systems of former colonies.

The transient nature of the student population and rapid turnovers in student leadership make student movements difficult to sustain, and create a tendency for students to be impatient to see change (Altbach 1991: 249). Against this, the broad-based “structural realities of academic life” provided for by the different national systems are important in that they can impact on the length of student generations, the amount of time student leaders can devote to political work, and thus the potential of a student activist to become a “permanent student” (Altbach 1991: 249). The proposition here is therefore that the less regulated (or more laissez-faire) the academic life of students is, the more likely student movements emerge and are sustained across several student generations and traditions of activism are developed and maintained.

The extent to which a student movement can have nation-wide reach depends on the size and heterogeneity of the higher education system. In the large and heterogeneous American (national) or European (supranational) system, organising a coherent student movement is extraordinarily difficult (Moodie 1999: 296). While this has improved with large student federations such as ESU, in very small national systems made up of a handful of institutions only, such as found in many developing countries, organising a student movement of national impact is much easier.

On the one hand, academic institutions are inherently part of the activist equation in that they are by nature highly politicized: politics is an integral part of the creation and dissemination of knowledge. They are the ‘factories of new ideas’ and ‘engines of development’ and have acquired and maintained special freedoms (and responsibilities) in order to be able to act as such (Altbach 1992: 1438; Castells, 1991). On the other hand, the type, size, prestige and location of universities matters greatly. Given that in terms of their backgrounds, student activists tend to come from well-educated, urban families and are wealthier and more privileged than the average student (and tend to be among the best students academically), they are also typically clustered in the best and most prestigious universities (Altbach 1992: 1443). In the same institutions, they are likely to come into contact with cosmopolitan, activist professors (Altbach 1992: 1443). Moreover, studying in a university that is located close to the country’s capital or major cities “gives students a sense that they are at the centre of power” (Altbach 1991: 257); it makes access to information and decision-makers easier and demonstrations are more likely to receive national media coverage (which is very important in terms of getting a response).

Thus, with reference to the United States in particular, Altbach argues that historically student activism can be found only in a small number of institutions:

*“The more cosmopolitan and prestigious universities on both coasts, a sprinkling of major public universities in between, and some traditionally progressive liberal arts colleges” (Altbach 1997: xxxvi, in Moodie 1999: 397).*

In addition, students from some faculties and disciplines are more inclined towards activism than others. Student activists tend to come from most social sciences and humanities as well as from mathematics; least inclined towards activism are students from applied and professional fields like commerce, engineering and agriculture (Altbach 1991: 252; Altbach 1992: 1443; Lipset and Altbach 1969). The reason for this pattern can be that (1) student activists self-select into the social sciences because these disciplines focus on the study of society and social problems; (2) the subject matters actually affect students and produce more radical views and a more activist inclination; and (3) that the course of studies for regulated professions tends to be more structured and thus makes it more difficult for students to ‘take a year off’ and come back to their studies (Altbach 1991: 253).

The finding regarding the ‘disciplinary specialisation’ of student activists may be extrapolated to the institutional level to propose that the more vocationally or professionally-oriented the institution (e.g. a university of technology, a polytechnic), the less likely are student movements to emerge from within it. It may further extend to system level, whereby the related proposition would be that from the professionally-oriented side of a binary system or in dual systems of higher education, student activism is less likely to emerge.

Finally, will student activism eventually emerge forcefully in private higher education? On the one hand, it has been argued (with reference to Latin America) that private institutions tend to “specialize in job-oriented fields such as business administration, [which are] not normally linked to activism” (Levy 1991: 151; also see Levy in Altbach, 1989c). On the other hand, given that this argument about student political quiescence in private higher education relates to high quality institutions, the question remains whether the unprecedented proliferation of low quality higher education will only increase the number of unemployed graduates who, as the Arab Spring has shown, readily participate in new social movements or



whether academically-oriented, etudialist student movements will eventually emerge from within private institutions focusing on improving the quality and relevance of private higher education qualifications.

Therefore, the multilevel perspective and various distinctions between different systems and institutions have enormous heuristic value; they also involve a number of highly suggestive testable propositions with enormous potential for further study.

### ***What are the typical characteristics of student activists?***

Many of the typical characteristics of student activists have already been mentioned; they are part of Altbach's 'sociological generalisations' concerning "who are the activists". What matters are: (1) the familial, socio-economic and political background, whereby student activists tend to come from well-off, well-educated, urban families that are supportive of activism; (2) minority groups tend to be over-represented among student activists (e.g. Christians in India; Protestants in France; Jews in the United States); and (3) they tend to come from a small number of academic disciplines and are among the academically best-performing students (Altbach 1991: 252-253). Thus, the typical student rebel is not representative of the student body; she or he is more likely part of a small minority of the total student community.

Some studies have shown that student activists tend to have a "complex set of attitudes and values [that] contributes to activism", including a "higher moral sense than their uninvolved peers" (Altbach 1991: 254) or, perhaps, idealism (Altbach 1966: 177). Among the ideological commitments shown by student activists in the past have been nationalism; opposition to authoritarianism of various forms; a commitment to open and democratic forms of government; equality with respect to race and gender, gay rights; and more recently, environmentalist concerns (Altbach 1991: 247; 1992: 1438). Hence, Altbach argues that "student activists have frequently been the 'conscience of their generation'" (1992: 1444). Lastly, student activists tend to be leftist, even if this has historically not always been the case (Altbach 1991: 1441-1442).

The main question that arises from the sociological generalisations is whether they continue to hold up in a global higher education context that is characterised by unprecedented growth of student numbers, internationalisation, and a related diversification and fragmentation of national and institutional student bodies. Moreover, some recent studies have found that students specialise politically towards either informal activist involvement or participation in formal student leadership and representation in official governance bodies (Luescher-Mamashela et al 2011). What the reasons and criteria for this choice are and the typical characteristics of the latter student politicians has, however, not been established beyond a small subset of institutions.

### ***What are the typical characteristics of student movements?***

The emergence of 'virtual' youth and student movements observed during the Arab Spring, and thus the impact of ICTs and social networks like Facebook and Twitter on student activism post-date Altbach's work and offer useful new material for theorising student movements. In 1966, Altbach put the challenge of analysing and understanding student movements as follows:

*“One of the difficulties in analyzing student movements is their transitory nature – the student community as well as the interests of the students change rapidly. Organizations are often temporary, and leadership fluctuates. The emphasis of the movements shifts from campus to society and back again at rather regular intervals, and the movement itself can disappear for extended periods of time. Interaction between the educational system, the broader political and economic situation, and the socio-psychological nature of the student community is complex, making any thorough understanding of the role of the students in politics and on the educational establishment difficult.” (Altbach 1966: 187)*

Thus, already at this early stage in the development of his theoretical framework, Altbach pinpointed key characteristics of student movements. Later he argues that “the dynamics of student movements are not unlike those of other social movements although the specific aspects of campus life – an age-graded population, a fairly close community, common social class backgrounds and other elements – make student movements somewhat unusual” (Altbach 1991: 252). Foremost among the unique characteristics is the transient nature of studentship which has a powerful impact. Given the short life cycle of student generations, lasting typically between three and five years only, student movements tend to be short-lived and sporadic. Moreover, Altbach notes their ‘fluidity’ and stresses that their rise and demise are difficult to predict. Furthermore, given the typical oppositional nature of student activism, student movements tend to be reformist if not revolutionary in outlook, and in their ideological orientation reflect the commitments of the activists involved (see above).

In his early writings, Altbach distinguishes between different types of student movements based on their ideological alignment, focus, and orientation. While the Cold War distinction between student movements aligned to and supported by the pro-Western Bloc and the Communist Bloc has become obsolete (Altbach 1964), the other distinctions continue to be useful. In terms of topical focus, orientation and scope of activity, Altbach distinguishes between ‘etudialist’ and ‘society-oriented’ student movements. Etudialist movements are inward oriented, primarily towards higher education and student-related concerns. Conversely, society-oriented movements are concerned with societal issues – political, social or cultural (Altbach 1966: 184). A second Altbachian distinction is between norm and value-based student movements whereby the former are particularistic and “generally aim at the correction of specific grievances or at a particular goal” while the latter are “concerned with broader ideological issues”. Moreover, Altbach adds that the ideology or value-based movements are more likely revolutionary; while norm-based movements tend to be more reformist (but may nonetheless be quite militant over specific issues) (Altbach 1966: 183-184). Lastly, a final characteristic added to the equation is political party affiliation. According to Altbach (1966: 184), “student groups affiliated to political parties usually have a value orientation and are often concerned with broader political issues”. Correspondingly, recent studies show that party politics tend to introduce a complex dynamic into student movements which may compromise the representation of student-specific interests (Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume 2014).

Altbach makes an important point in his discussion of the classifications which involves a proposition that may be fruitful in further testing. He argues that there is a great deal of correspondence between the two classifications (above), in that “there are similarities between the norm-value distinction and the ‘etudialist’-society orientation of the student movement” (Altbach 1966: 184). The recent study by Jungblut and Weber (2012) on the

transformations of the German national student union over almost two decades suggests that there is continued relevance to these distinctions and Altbach's related proposition (even if the authors have not made reference to Altbach's pioneering work). In addition, Altbach's foundation can also be seen in the structural axis of Gill and de Fronzo's (2009) classification of student movements. Moreover, given that there are quite specific properties to each of Altbach's classifications (as sketched above), they offer good material for comparative analysis and systematic empirical testing.

### ***What are the effects of student activism?***

Altbach is somewhat ambiguous about the effectiveness of student activism, even if he affirms that its overall cultural and political impact on higher education and society has been highly significant (albeit more so in developing countries than in Europe and North America). At national level, student activism has in some cases simultaneously been highly effective *and* counterproductive: for instance, in the 1960s students caused the downfall of governments in Korea and Thailand, but then the military took over rather than the group favoured by the students (Altbach 1991: 256-257). At campus level the "institutional response to protest, while difficult to predict, has sometimes obtained some of the changes demanded by students, although full success has seldom been achieved from the student viewpoint" (Altbach 1991: 251).

The ambiguity may be understood in terms of Altbach's frequent proposition that the effectiveness of student activism is not so much determined by factors directly related to the issues raised by students or the type of activism employed. Rather, as a kind of extra-parliamentary opposition, student activists at best wield influence on decision-makers. Altbach's argument is that the effectiveness of student activism is determined to a large extent by the response of other social groups in and outside the university, and ultimately, the response it receives from government (Altbach 1991: 249-250). To provoke a response, the message of the activists must be disseminated but "it is frequently difficult to predict either the nature or the scope of media attention" (Altbach 1991: 250). Lipset and Altbach (1966: 175) and Moodie (1999) all found that student activists received overexposure in the mass media in the late 1960s. The exposure that student activism gets in the media is therefore a crucial factor in determining its potential effectiveness.

There is a range of typical responses that student activism receives from government or institutional managements: ignoring it, engaging and negotiating with student activists, or repressing activism at various degrees (Altbach 1991: 250). According to Altbach (1991: 250), the violent repression of student activism is often a factor in "increasing both the size and the militancy" of activist movements. As a short term strategy, repression may work well; for the long-term, however, it may prove counter-productive, sowing "the seeds of later unrest" (Altbach 1991: 251). In this regard, it is proposed that the ways activists articulate their concerns are conditioned by the response they expect (Altbach 1991: 249-250). A related and more general proposition is therefore that the pattern of response to student activism determines the nature of future activism and ultimately student political culture.

Outright confrontational tactics are, however, typically a measure of last resort; they witness to a polarisation of interests on a campus and/or in society at large. A lack of channels to pursue co-operative tactics and/or a lack of responsiveness from using co-operative tactics may give rise to the pursuit of increasingly more confrontational ones; hence, the choice of tactics may be generally dependent on the responsiveness of the regime. Studies on student activism from various contexts therefore recommend the establishment of formal structures

for communicating and negotiating with student leaders, as an appropriate response by university authorities to reduce disruptive student political activism on campus (Luescher-Mamashela 2013: 1446).

### **The Student Rebel: A Post-Script?**

Among the long-term results of student activism at campus level has been the formal inclusion of students in the decision-making structures of higher education governance – most notably at institutional and sub-institutional levels but also at system level. However, this inclusion also presents a dilemma for student activists:

*“On the one hand, the legal provision for student representation may be regarded as an achievement of students’ erstwhile political struggle; on the other hand, it also changes the very nature of the engagement by removing it as a cause for political struggle. The paradox involved [...] is that student representatives participating in formal settings may need the subversive, activist support of their constituency in order to be able to defend and possibly extend the gains made by previous student generations, whether or not these have been legally enshrined. (Luescher-Mamashela 2013: 1447)*

Correspondingly, the burgeoning number of recent studies on formal student representation (e.g. Zuo and Ratsoy 1999; Bergan 2004; Lizzio and Wilson 2009; Cardoso and Machado dos Santos 2011; Michelsen and Stensaker 2011; Minksová and Pabian 2011; Klemenčič 2011; 2012) are indebted to the history of student activism and the pioneering work on this topic by Altbach and others. They represent a significant distinct shift from informal to formal political activity of students on campus and an accompanying re-conceptualisation of the former as ‘extraordinary’ and the latter as ‘ordinary’ student politics (Pabian and Minksová 2011). The student subject has thus become incorporated in the governance machinery of higher education while gradually the dominant conceptualisation of ‘student’ in relation to the university changed to privilege notions of students as ‘consumers’ (at worst) or ‘co-producers of knowledge’ (at best) (Luescher-Mamashela 2010; 2013; McCulloch 2009). Altbach’s subject, in contrast, is never the student as consumer: it is the student as activist, idealist, rebel. His core interest was that small inner-circle of militant campaigners, organisers and protesters – and their relation to the student body, student organisations and the student movement, and ultimately to core institutions of modern society. In spite of this shift at the level of higher education governance, the study of student activism will continue to be relevant as long as universities fulfil their emancipatory role, and the spectre of student rebellion haunts illegitimate regimes and governments and unresponsive university managers wherever they are.

### **Conclusion**

While student activism is indeed a “highly complex, many-faceted phenomenon” (Altbach 1999: 247), there have been many advances towards understanding it, and undoubtedly future work will continue to refine this to an extent of being able to anticipate its emergence, perpetuation, demise and effects. Despite changes in higher education on a global scale, the ‘student rebel’ remains part of ‘the activist equation’ and will provide ample opportunity for studying student activism.

There are good reasons for future studies into student activism. As Altbach notes in the introduction to his seminal work *Student Political Activism: An International Reference Handbook* (1989), student activism has historically had a significant impact on national politics and broader society, and on all levels of governance relevant to higher education:

*“Political leaders would do well not only to listen to student protest movements but also to understand their dynamics, since regimes have been threatened or even toppled by activist students. The academic community also needs to understand student activism, as students have from time to time been key actors in movements for university reform and have also disrupted academic institutions.” (Altbach 1989: 1)*

Moreover, student activists themselves gain from understanding their own practice more deeply. As Altbach puts it, “the activists themselves should be fully aware of the history, politics, and potential of student protest movements since, as has often been said, those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it” (1989: 1).

This paper has outlined a selection of key features of Altbach’s theoretical framework to provide for propositions that can be elaborated and tested in future comparative studies of student activism in Europe and elsewhere, along with a number of classificatory frameworks that hold promise for further development and updating as heuristic devices. It has thereby shown that Altbach’s work is pioneering and substantial and remains highly relevant even as higher education expands and moves increasingly into the centre of the knowledge society.

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