

Understanding transplanted institutions: an exercise in contemporary history and cultural fragmentation

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Higher education institutions are supposed to deliver goods to society - skilled manpower, research, services, and opportunities for social mobility - and are often evaluated and managed in terms of their ability to achieve these goals. However, they are also institutions with their peculiar histories and traditions. It is impossible to fully understand them, and their different ways of responding to these demands, without a good understanding of their historical and cultural context. Guy Neave stresses this point in his article on "Higher Education Policy as an exercise in contemporary history" (Neave 1996, p. 408). In his words,

For those working in an historical setting, context - the subtle variations that go to make up the social, cultural and political fabric within which an issue is situated - is essential. Having an intimate grasp over say, the historical or contemporary development of a given system of higher education, of the laws that regulate it, the procedures that govern its administration, the conditions which govern access, are certainly necessary, but not sufficient. For the higher education system of any nation is seated not simply within the academic culture of that nation. It is also firmly anchored within the whole range of social values and beliefs which, by their nature, tend very often to be opaque to the outsider for the very reason that they form part of that civilisation's central norms and thus are largely taken for granted by its denizens.

One difference between higher education as a discipline and other fields of education research and scholarship is that, in the former, the historical dimensions tend to be much more present and salient than in the latter. A possible explanation is that, historically, higher education institutions have been much more autonomous and reflexive than basic and secondary education, whose subordination to outside influences and power - governments, economic planners, the Church, businessmen - is usually taken for granted. In the last decades, as higher education expanded, its costs increased, and its potential

economic relevance became more salient, it became also the subject of growing outside assessment and interference. The conceptual tensions between the historical, “comprehensive”, contextual approach to higher education policy and the more functional, analytical and quantitative approaches are a reflection of the all-too-real tensions between autonomy and external oversight, typical of higher education institutions in most countries today. As Guy Neave has remarked, it can probably also be argued - and certainly researched - that “never in recent times has higher education been more externally driven than over the course of the past decade” (Neave 1995; Neave 1996, p. 404). One could argue that the historical, “comprehensive” approach is inherently more conservative than the external views, with its stress on the “private life” of higher education institutions, to use the phrase coined by Martin Trow and adopted by Neave. But one could also argue that policies based on the proper understanding of the historical, cultural and institutional context of higher education institutions are more likely to succeed than those which ignore and do not really care about this “private life”.

Besides, the historical approach need not be conservative, particularly if it not bounded by the idea of unified, coherent historical traditions, but taking into account the fact that higher education institutions are the product of different, and often conflictive historical trends, and that public policies are, more often than not, the process of taking the side of some trends against others.

Latin America is an interesting case of this clash of historical traditions, as well as the clash between the historical and the functional approaches. A frequent, naïve view of higher education in this region is to consider the universities as “modern institutions”, created by governments and planners to make their societies more competent and efficient, against anti-intellectual, pre-scientific traditions. According to this view, as new institutions, these universities did not have traditions of their own, except, perhaps, the institutional models which are copied from other countries, very often without a proper understanding of their “private life”. In this perspective, the problems facing the

establishment of universities in Latin American countries would be just one part of a broader modernisation agenda.

However, Latin American countries, for the most part, have never been “traditional societies” in the usual sense¹, and their culture is better described as the “shattered mirror” of modernity, in the phrase coined by José Joaquín Brunner (Brunner 1988). All fragments of the broken mirror reflect the modern world, but from different angles, each with its own history, and it is necessary to understand at least some of these fragments to understand also the peculiar features of the higher education institutions in the region, their trends and potentials for change.

The first fragments are the historical tensions between Church and State. The standard image of early Latin America is the Priest and the Conquistador working hand in hand to bring the Incas, the Aztecs and Atlantic natives under submission. The first Latin American universities in the 16th Century were organised by the Church (the universities of San Marcos in Peru, Mexico, Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, Santo Tomás in the Dominican Republic, the Colegio Mayor de Santo Tomás in Guatemala and others), and the Church was also responsible for all formal education that existed during the colonial period. These early institutions were part of the cultural enlightenment that prevailed in Spain in the 16th and 17th century and extended also to the colonies, in which the partnership between clerical and civilian elites was often tense, and culminated, in the 18th Century, with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain and Portugal, ending also the

¹ The exception are the large native populations in countries like Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Paraguay, which still stand separate from the European white colonizers and their descendants, the criollos, with many of them speaking their traditional languages. However, these populations have been in contact with the Europeans for centuries, and their culture and traditions were shaped by these experiences. The same applies to the descendants of African slaves, brought to Brazil and many Caribbean countries, as well as the United States, in large numbers until the mid-19th century.

Catholic grip on the Spanish and Portuguese universities (Carneiro, Simoes and Diogo 2000; Linz 1972; Maxwell 1995).

With political independence in the early 19th century, the new nations inherited the complex and heavy bureaucracies created by Spain and Portugal to administer their colonies. These bureaucracies have been described as patrimonial, meaning that they did not embody the Weberian principles of separation of public and private interest and property, nor the recognition of an autonomous and free citizenship (Eisenstadt 1973; Schwartzman 1977; Uricoechea 1980). At the same time, the new elites imported from France the ideas of how a modern nation should be organised, which included the creation of modern military, health and legal institutions and their corresponding learning centers. In practice, the new nations established in the early 19th century did not remain in the hands of the leaders that created them and worked for their consolidation - San Martin, Simon Bolivar, Hidalgo, José Bonifácio, and later Sarmiento and Andres Bello - but succumbed often to the power of small oligarchies and caudillos. The Catholic Church did not disappear from the region with the expulsion of the Jesuits and political independence. Some of the old Catholic universities became lay, state controlled institutions; others closed down; and others were able to survive as independent institutions. In some countries more than others, a new urban, professional social group started to emerge, also looking to Europe for their professional identities and political ideologies, and trying either to capture the levers of political power on the name of their claimed scientific and technical expertise, or to free themselves from the controls and oversight of the new political establishments (Schwartzman 1991b).

The University Reform Movement, which started in Cordoba, Argentina, in 1918 and spread to many other countries after that, can be seen as part of this conflict between the emerging, educated middle classes and the political elites. Basically, the Reform Movement established the power of the students to participate in the management of the universities, and the notion that the universities should be autonomous from interference

from governments and politicians, who should, however, keep on paying for their maintenance.

Throughout the 20th century, as mass higher education became prevalent in the region, new fragments would grow and reflect other dimensions of modernity and post-modernity. The reformed universities adopted universal admission, free tuition, and the election of rectors by the students, lecturers and alumni. They became very large - some of them, like the universities of Mexico and Buenos Aires, among the largest in the world - very politicised and did not allow much space for scientific research and academic scholarship (Levy 1980; Schwartzman 1996). European immigrants, first, and international cooperation, later, would create a new segment of research oriented academics, who would look at Europe first, and later American research universities, as the new model for the reorganisation of the universities in the region (Albornoz, Kreimer and Glavich 1996; Cueto 1994; Schwartzman 1991a; Vessuri 1998). A new academic profession would emerge, organised in part as an academic community of scholars, but mostly as strong unions of civil servants, often in association with different political parties. (Balbachevsky and Quinteiro 2002; Gil Antón 1994; Schwartzman and Balbachevsky 1996). The issues of cost, rationalisation and effectiveness, stressed by institutions such as the World Bank and OECD, would justify the strengthening of national ministries and agencies for science, technology and higher education; and new demands for access, equity and affirmative action, reflecting the concerns of new social movements and international agencies, also grew in importance.

The shattered mirror metaphor should not be understood as meaning that Latin American societies do not have their own personalities, histories and traditions. It just means that Latin America is, and has always been, part of a much broader picture, which it reflects and modifies in its own ways.

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