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Access, equity and quality trends in Latin America's public universities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to describe key dimensions of contemporary Latin American Public Universities (LAPUs), especially pertaining to access, equity, and quality. Analyses of LAPUs must be contextualized within the great diversity of organizational models, as well as the accelerated process of economic and institutional expansions and contractions, particularly after the 1950s. Framing LAPUs in their broader economic and socio-historical landscapes, we consider how the notion of “public” evolved in the region’s approach to higher education. We describe the case of the Latin American macro-university, a globally unique model of public higher education, which combines ideals of democratization, very large enrollments and meritocratic models of selection and access. We conclude by discussing the dynamics influencing the distinctive notions of “public” and “publicness” in the Latin American context and its potential applications for other regions of the world.

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1. Introduction

What is Latin America? Which are its limits? There does not seem to be a consistent answer in the literature being analyzed. Generally Latin America is defined by exclusion: all of the American continent except for Canada and the USA, although in some specific analyses other countries are excluded, such as Cuba for being communist or the English-speaking countries in the Caribbean . . . a continuing problem in comparative education is to work out the relation between normal concepts of international, national and regional space often defined by legal or geographical boundaries, and discursive space. (Beech, 2002, p. 425)

As Jason Beech’s reflections suggest, trying to capture fairly and accurately the heterogeneous dimensions of contemporary phenomena under the category of “Latin American” invites controversy. Analyzing trends and commonalities, without minimizing or ignoring the diversity among Latin American Public Universities (LAPUs) is as complicated as defining the bittersweet qualities of a good Argentinean tango or a Brazilian samba, and it may be a quixotic exercise for two key reasons. First, as already noted, is the conceptual challenge of establishing the geographic boundaries of

what to consider as “Latin American,¹ an endeavor compounded by the lack of consistent and reliable long-term data on the performance of the universities in the region. Second, the lack of consensus about the conceptual boundaries and consistent data fuels the polarization of highly politically partisan debates about the role of public higher education in the region.²

Yet the public university in Latin America—and especially the subset of LAPUs known as “macro-universities”—occupies a symbolic space in the public imagination, transcending geographical or empirical concerns. In this essay, we begin by positioning contemporary LAPUs within their broader socio-historical landscape, paying special attention to how “public” evolved in the region’s approach to higher education over time. We introduce the case of the macro-university, a globally unique model of public

¹ The complete list by region is: South America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, Venezuela; Central America: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama; Caribbean: Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Cayman Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Puerto Rico, Saint Barthélemy, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and Virgin Islands.

² While polarized debates about universities are not exclusive to Latin Americans, the more explicit and direct articulation of higher education actors and groups with local national partisan political processes is a distinctive characteristic. See Adrogue et al., 2015; Albornoz, 2004; Bernasconi, 2007; Bernasconi and Clasing, 2015; Didriksson, 2007; Fischman, 2008; Gentili and Levy, 2005; Lopez, 2007; Plata and Alberto, 2005; just to name a few.

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higher education, and in conclusion, we discuss the multidimensional nature of the notions of “public” and publicness in the Latin American context and their relevance for other settings.

2. The landscape of the Latin American public university

While some scholars and commentators are concerned with the expansion of the private sector, market incentives, and the unresponsiveness of academic institutions to social needs, others point to the minimal presence of LAPUs in the international rankings, the invisibility of the R&D regional production, and technological changes (Moreno-Brid and Ruiz-Nápoles, 2011; Schwartzman et al., 2015). Although this discussion varies dramatically across the different countries and higher education systems, trends and patterns emerge from a comparative approach (Altbach, 2007; Vessuri et al., 2013; Didriksson, 2007). Where most commentators do seem to agree is that Latin American universities are rapidly diverging from an ideal-type model that emerged after the radical proposals of transformation of the *Córdoba Movement* of 1918³ and purportedly flourished in the post-World War II period.

Although many were created in the 19th century, it is during the first half of the 20th century that LAPUs consolidated as prestigious and influential institutions, considered by many to be akin to secular civic temples of knowledge.⁴ This period is often nostalgically referred to as the “golden age” of the LAPUs (Fischman et al., 2011). Historically, LAPUs prioritized professional preparation and “state-building” functions (Ordorika, 2013; Ordorika and Pusser, 2007). For example, Ordorika and Pusser (2007) Ordorika and Pusser (2007, p. 192) note that institutions like the Universidad de São Paulo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Universidad de Buenos Aires are responsible in large part for “building the material conditions for the expansion and consolidation of their respective States, as well as the intellectual and social legitimacy of those states” (see also Jaksic and Serrano, 1990, for the case of Chile). LAPUs also occupied a highly influential role as agents of social change through their “extension” function: in addition to teaching and research, LAPUs were expected to address and solve social problems by engaging in community outreach, contributing expertise to improve opportunities for disenfranchised members of society, and preserving local culture and traditions.

Significant changes in the region’s higher education systems after World War II generated a move towards a “development” orientation in which two dynamics became increasingly relevant: the rising pressure to expand research-intensive models and the consolidation of a growing sector of private universities (Levy, 1997). In most countries, however, the traditional professional preparation and “state-building” public university was the dominant model, with a relatively small number of public flagships

matriculating larger shares of the students in the region. Mexico, for instance, has eight federal public universities, comprising only 0.2% of all institutions in the country, yet representing about 12% of enrollments. Similarly, the 46 state public universities are 2.4% of institutions but enroll 30% all Mexican students (Cruz Lopez and Cruz Lopez, 2009).⁵

Public universities did not expand merely by state fiat. Much of the growth came from demands made by their respective national populations. During the 1960s, the pressures for university expansion came not only from the Latin American states and the business sector, but also from grassroots protests by students and political activists. But the result was the same: “A large number of women, elder and poorer persons . . . started to flood the universities which were until recently all male, elite institutions of the privileged young” (Schwartzman, 1997, p. 45).

In Latin America, the ideals and structures of the “development-oriented” university of the 1960s–1970s gave way to the “market-oriented” university of the 1980s–1990s. LAPUs in the late 1990s must be understood in their broader socio-political contexts, marked by the rise of neoliberal-oriented governments and accompanying deindustrialization and structural adjustment policies advanced by new alliances between national political and economic actors, as well as international financial sectors coupled with intergovernmental organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (Alcántara et al., 2013).⁶

At the turn of the 21st century the social prestige of LAPUs was not as consensual as in past periods, and most were regarded as just another organization subject to many of the same forces of change—globalization, massification, competition, digitalization—bearing down on all contemporary organizations.⁷ The most striking accomplishment of Latin American universities in the last half century was the rapid growth in enrollment from half a million students to 7 million in the last three decades (Fischman and Stromquist, 2004). Correspondingly, the numbers and kinds of institutions arising to meet this volume of students diversified rapidly (Levy, 1997, p. 3). In just the seven-year span between 1995 and 2002, the overall number of postsecondary institutions in the region increased from 5438 to 7514, and the representation of universities within that total increased from 812 (60.7% of which were private) to 1213 (69.2% of which were private) (Arocena and Sutz, 2005).

As the system expanded, so did the presence of tertiary graduates in the region, growing 12 times over the second half of the 21st century, from 0.6% in 1950 to 7.1% in 2000. By 2013, our analyses of UNESCO data suggest at least 10% of the adult

³ Catalyzed through student activism at the University of Córdoba in Argentina, which subsequently triggered a series of similar protests across the region, the *Córdoba Movement* called for universities to primarily be agents of social transformation rather than bastions of state elitism. The movement led to more institutional autonomy on curricular and budgetary matters, away from direct government control over these decisions, and also included students in university governance. More broadly, the Córdoba Movement had an enormous influence on how Latin Americans conceptualize the independent role of universities in society and their accompanying public obligations.

⁴ Given its current relevance and size, it is important to recall the Brazilian tradition of LAPUs is quite recent and rather different from the other countries in the region. In Brazil before the 20th century there were several faculties of Law, Medicine and polytechnic schools but none of this higher education organizations was classified as a “university.” In 1920 the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro was created and it is the first institution allowed to use the name. A hundred years later the Ministry of Education in Brazil classified more than 2000 institutions as “universities”.

⁵ The complete list of Federal Universities in Mexico is: 1) Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; 2) Instituto Politécnico Nacional; 3) Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana; 4) Universidad Autónoma Agraria, Antonio Narro; 5) Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo; 6) Universidad Pedagógica Nacional; 7) Universidad Abierta y a Distancia de México; 8) El Colegio de México; and 9) Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas A.C. (http://www.ses.sep.gob.mx/publicas._federales.html)

⁶ Structural adjustment, stabilization, and de-industrialization policies largely were implemented in Latin America and other regions between the 1970s and early 2000s. Emerging from a combination of economic, political and cultural transformations (global transformations in the financial and capital sector, the oil crisis, violence, dictatorships, human rights violations, the increase of the drug trafficking, technological transformations and demographic changes), they resulted in a dramatic regional debt crisis, followed by fiscal retrenchment and what is known as the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s (Torres and Schugurensky, 2002)

⁷ Per Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ much-debated analysis (2005), the idea of university is facing three fundamental crises: a crisis of hegemony, because it is no longer the only institution to offer the highest levels of knowledge; a crisis of legitimacy, because it is no longer consensually accepted as the only provider of the highest levels of education; and an institutional crisis, because it cannot assure its own reproduction. See also Mollis, 2014; González, 2013.

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