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Illustrated by Tania Díaz\*\*

## The New Normal in Universities Daily Life and Pandemics

Daily life, including education, has been profoundly transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic, social, and political crises it has prompted. The new normal is expressed in novel scenarios that deserve analysis with methodologies that take into account the importance of examining cultural change using contemporary social theories.

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Daily life can be interpreted from the point of view of semiotics (Eco, Greimas), hermeneutics (Ricoeur), and critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk), as well as new theories of interpretation and description. All this can help us look at cultural change in the North American region.

Lockdown, education, working on line, local-global inequality, sexual reproduction, and gender violence must be interpreted making an effort to understand change and the crises in the context of the health emergency.

For example, the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (Clacso) has begun a social observatory project on the coronavirus called “Pensar la pandemia” (Thinking about the Pandemic),<sup>1</sup> which offers a multiplicity of critical axes for analyzing and dealing with it in the day-to-day.

The UNAM has done its part by holding critical seminars since the pandemic began, such as the International Studies Seminar on North-South Global Change, organized by the CISAN and the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters to analyze cultural change in educational spaces throughout the Americas.

Since the 1990s, North American public universities have joined an accelerated process of globalization based on the advance and modernization of technologies that make it possible. Globalization has made us ask ourselves about the importance of these advances for incorporating new knowledge into our daily life in universities in times of crisis.

In trying times like these, we put into practice the theoretical-methodological approaches of contemporary social theories. We are then faced with the question of the repercussions that this global change will have on our institutions of higher learning for institutional development, the capacity for innovation and teaching, and the evaluation of public policies implemented during this crisis. These policies will be evaluated in the future based on their success or failure to continue the projects of public universities.

Academic traditions and practices that began transforming in the 1990s due to globalization have generated significant changes in education in a new digital era, such as the appearance of virtual education. In this context, digital education can be understood as a phenomenon associated to the third globalization that has had an impact on our ways of seeing, observing, and understanding higher education for forging the most advanced thinking on the planet.

The third globalization helped us previously interpret new distance-learning and online arrangements that have become indispensable for thinking about the pandemic based on already existing concepts like cultural diversity, the digital gap, and socio-economic contexts, in which academics and students' lives are immersed as the main actors in higher education.

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tual platforms, which in the North American region are always uneven. As F. Javier Murillo and Cynthia Duk aptly mention, these designs focus on a minority of the population with enough technology to be able to develop those learning processes; however, they leave out the broader population that will have to cover their basic needs during the pandemic without including higher education as one of their priorities for subsisting.<sup>2</sup>

The problems higher education faces in the pandemic allow us to interpret the meaning of human actions in a scenario like this one.

In her theory of action, Agnes Heller underlined the importance of understanding micro- and macro-reality in the social communication processes that drive daily life. This is why her thinking has contributed to the development of a critical sociology of education. In a 2013 interview, she said,

A professor is, by definition, an intellectual, and his/her task is to allow the student to develop his/her capabilities and nature. We have many problems in modern universities. In general, the world has a growing bureaucracy in which the authorities control professors and professors control the students. On the other hand, upward mobility through the university has been seriously affected in recent years; the children of the poorest cannot pay the tuition.<sup>3</sup>

The comprehension of these social educational spaces on a micro and macro level has helped us to better understand what goes on in our institutions based on the experiences of our professors, academics, students, technicians, and educational administrators. Socio-educational processes are complex and even more so if we take into account the challenge we are facing as a society in the pandemic.

Lockdown has transformed our ways of working and relating to each other. Sometimes the measures taken due

to lockdown have forced us to transform our homes and the interaction with our remote workmates. We have also had to implement certain domestic measures, changing our university environments, turning them into digital spaces that are sometimes difficult to understand and to design to adapt to university academic curricula.

An analysis of daily life allows us to understand that our societies are not static, and both men and women forge our subjectivity and social identity. In her conceptualization of daily life, Mari Luz Uribe mentions “the dynamism of unfolding daily life and the influence exercised by aspects of external conditions on the individual, such as social, economic, and political factors in a specific cultural setting.”<sup>4</sup>

This space is shown as a place that will give human life meaning in establishing a continuity of our social practices associated with experience, as a unique capability for developing our culture.

In the case of university culture, the change from in-person schooling to virtual education has transformed the conception of living spaces for the creation of a new normal, which must express the configuration of new subjectivities in the framework of social relations.

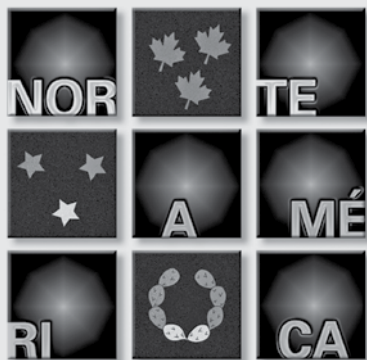
The space configured from the dynamic perspective of human culture would imply reducing the in-person surroundings, turning them into an effective space on telecommunication networks and platforms like Zoom, which display a new social order that broadens our capacity to socially signify a virtual world.

Culture, understood from the viewpoint of heterogeneity, would give us the meaning of new, broad cultures turning around these new virtual spaces of communication of university communities. The critique of a homogenization of culture in the pandemic shows us the change that we have had to undergo in terms of technological development and our openness to it with regard to the diverse, the unique, and the unitary.

The explanation of new social phenomena will allow us to signify new constructions in social relations that broaden out the meaning of human experience around dramatic episodes like the one we are currently experiencing. For that, it is necessary to give these actions meaning every day, in order to continue building our individual, social, or university identities and subjectivities through cognition and human learning in the midst of a crisis. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 “Pensar la pandemia. Observatorio social del coronavirus,” Clacso, <https://www.clacso.org/pandemia-y-vida-cotidiana-nucleos-criticos-para-analizar-y-abordar/>.
- 2 Javier F. Murillo and Cynthia Duk, “El Covid-19 y las brechas educativas,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Inclusiva* vol. 14, no. 1, 2020.
- 3 Juan Carlos Miranda Arroyo, “Agnes Heller y la filosofía de ‘lo social,’” *Educación futura. Periodismo de interés público*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.educacionfutura.org/agnes-heller-y-la-filosofia-de-lo-social/>.
- 4 Mari Luz Uribe Fernández, “La vida cotidiana como espacio de construcción social,” *Procesos históricos* no. 25, January-June 2014, pp. 100-113.



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