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Publisher: Routledge

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International Studies in Sociology of Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riss20>

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Published online: 19 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Armando Alcántara, Silvia Llomovatte & José Eustaquio Romão (2013): Resisting neoliberal common sense in higher education: experiences from Latin America, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 23:2, 127-151

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2013.790661>

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Resisting neoliberal common sense in higher education: experiences from Latin America

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To illustrate the way in which neoliberalism and the creation of a common sense are associated, we present in this study a number of institutional and social experiences that have occurred in Latin America during the last 30 years. First, we explore the situation in Argentina, where the relationship between the university and society is being redefined. A new form of knowledge transfer to society, focused especially on social movements, is currently being carried out by different programmes at public universities. Second, the Brazilian experience is characterised by the creation of a number of new universities that are attempting to transform the social role of the traditional model of extension programmes to serve local, regional and international development. We contend that as the traditional university approaches to its 1000th anniversary, it urgently requires a radical transformation. The origins and expansion of neoliberal policies of higher education in Mexico constitute the third case in point, in which we argue that the role of international agencies is a key element in the creation and consolidation of the common sense associated with neoliberalism in higher education policies. The experiences and processes discussed in this article constitute important aspects that show the way in which universities and various actors within them can take part in the struggle to resist the consolidation of neoliberal policies in Latin American higher education.

Keywords: higher education; Latin America; common sense; neoliberalism

Introduction

Latin America was the first region where neoliberal policies were implemented. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Chile, ruled by the military junta that overthrew President Salvador Allende, was the first laboratory for these policies. In the early 1980s, neoliberalism spread to most countries in the

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region. The economic climate of those years was characterised by asymmetrically disadvantageous economic policies in Latin American countries, which caused a serious crisis of external debt. Acting jointly, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued what were then known as ‘letters of intent’ to attempt to restructure those countries’ debt service and thus prevent their economies from falling in default. The measures to be implemented, according to these letters of intent, were to reduce the fiscal deficit, devalue currency, sell state enterprises, remove import tariffs and increase exports, among others. While the above measures stabilised the economy, they also affected spending on education, health and housing in a very significant fashion.

For education in general and higher education in particular, neoliberal policies meant decentralisation, evaluation, accountability and privatisation, among others. These policies, derived from the broader context of governmental policies, gradually developed into a sort of ‘new common sense.’ However, despite the imposition of this new common sense on various spheres of economic and social life of Latin American countries, it found strong resistance from various social movements. Examples of these movements were the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the *sem terra* in Brazil, and the *piqueteros* in Argentina. In the fields of education and higher education, student movements and teacher mobilisations have been at the forefront of social resistance to neoliberalism.

The political, social and economic landscape of Latin America has changed in the last three decades. In Argentina, for example, after the end of military dictatorship (1976–1983), neoliberal policies were imposed primarily during the 1990s. After a terrible crisis in the government and the economy occurred in the early twenty-first century, there was a restructuring of the economy and a progressive regime rose to power. In Brazil, after two neoliberal administrations, the arrival of President Lula da Silva meant a new strategy for economic development and an effective struggle against poverty. In Mexico, however, despite the end of seven decades of one-party domination, the newly elected administration continued the neoliberal policies that led to slow economic growth and increasing poverty.

In this article, the implementation processes of, as well as some of the struggles against, neoliberal policies in higher education in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico are critically analysed. First, we review the recent experience of Argentina’s University of Buenos Aires in which relationships between university and society are being redefined. Second, we take into account the current situation of higher education in Brazil to argue that the university as institution should be reconceptualised. We then contend that student movements should be considered as important elements in struggle against neoliberal policies that continue to expand as ‘common sense’ in Latin American higher education.

Resistance to neoliberalism in the university in Argentina: linking university and society (1989–2012)¹

The current debate in Argentina about the relationship between universities and society links shows a complex scenario with three prominent issues. The first relates to the meaning and identity (or identities) of the university. The second has to do with the term ‘society’ or ‘social.’ And the third refers to the role we expect to play as academics in the relationship between university and society. In other words, what is at stake is the kind of model we should construct to navigate that complex and controversial relationship in this new historical period called post-neoliberalism.

Thus, our starting point is the identification and appropriation of contradictions arising from the multiple meanings assigned to the role of the university in society, as well as the recognition of the historic nature of this link between universities and society in line with the breaks and continuities of capital-accumulation models prevailing in the period under study. This article focuses on important moments in the relationship between the university and society in Argentina from 1989 to 2012 regarding the challenges in rethinking the meaning and identity of the university.

Neoliberalism and education: overemphasis of the market in the relationship between university and society

During the 1990s, a neoliberal economic model of capital accumulation was consolidated in Argentina. The model had begun in the early 1970s in the era of the civil-military dictatorship, which became the de facto government after the 1976 coup d'état. The model was based on the guidelines of openness, deregulation, economic asymmetry, implementation of flexible labour policies, privatisation of major utilities (water, electricity, energy and air transportation), nationalisation of the private external debt, financial liberalisation and adjustment and deterioration of the labour market (Aspiazú & Basualdo, 2004). A financial model was similarly implemented based on three elements: financial reform, foreign debt and import openness (Basualdo, 2010).

This set of policies hastened the destruction of the productive industry prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as intensifying the phenomenon of social atomisation and contributing to the gradual dissolution of traditional social movements.² In this context, public education did not remain unaffected by the negative diagnoses that underpinned neoliberal structural reforms. It was targeted as part of the general critique of the welfare state as inefficient and ineffective, resulting in the growing belief that funding for public education was a financial burden carried largely by groups who were not direct beneficiaries. According to Puiggrós,

the necessary condition for a sustainable educational policy, curriculum project or educational experience, is that the individuals involved have a strong belief

in the need to create it or at least agree to take it as the only existing solution ... Pedagogical neoliberalism stood exactly in the discursive place where the fractures of the traditional education system – for which there are no other answers yet – are felt and suffered. (1998, 50)

The policies of structural reform in education were characterised as follows: (a) a focused effort to palliate social needs and shortcomings. The intention was to improve equality but the effect was unfortunately the opposite; (b) the transfer from national to provincial control over educational institutions without budget compensation for local governments to absorb this task; (c) flexible teacher recruitment mechanisms, tending to impose a free-market approach to education, breaking down the traditional systems of teacher training, and putting the colleges and universities on equal footing with private groups and institutions; (d) intensive monitoring by the national government of basic curriculum contents of public and private institutions; and (e) the implementation of national programmes for assessing the quality of teaching and learning, organisational performance and management efficiency, in order to address the loss of financial resources in the educational systems (Puiggrós, 2010).

With the return of democracy in 1983, university autonomy was restored along with its main components: free tuition at the undergraduate level, unrestricted access and fully supported by public funds. The number of universities also grew: the private sector went from 22 institutions in 1982 to 44 by the 1996. Likewise, the public sector grew significantly as well, going from 28 institutions in 1982 to 40 in 1996. Currently, the country's higher education system is made up of 117 institutions, of which 56 are public (two are provincial), 59 private and two international.

The higher education law

Under this set of structural reform policies, the Higher Education Act (LES, its Spanish acronym) was enacted. It allowed universities to decide independently on the allocation of their domestic resources, management of personnel and selection of students. The law authorised the collection of fees in open contradiction with the constitutional principle of free education at all levels. It also created the National Assessment and Accreditation Commission (CONEAU, its Spanish acronym), whose main purpose was to conduct external evaluations of higher education institutions (HEI), oversee accreditation of all postgraduate and graduate programmes as defined in Article 43 of the LES and manage the Regional Councils for Higher Education Planning (CPRES, their Spanish acronym), which were created with the aim of bringing the same level of coordination at national and private universities to provincial governance.

Other public policy mechanisms oriented to the commodification of education, to the privatisation of knowledge, and to university heteronomy – strengthening the link between higher education and industry and increasing

government control – include the Law of Technological Innovation (with the possibility of setting up technology linkage units), the creation of an Office of Technology Transfer at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET, its Spanish acronym), the Technological Linkage Program of the Secretariat for University Policies, and the Fund for the Improvement of University Quality (FOMECE, its Spanish acronym), among others.

During the 1980s and with greater strength and focus in the 1990s in the context of the LES and the harsh budgetary constraints, the Argentinian government actively promoted a policy aimed at stimulating the link between science and technology. It was supported by technical assistance and the sale of services in accordance with the definition of the ‘social’ role of science and technology at a time of intense debate regarding the public-private dichotomy. Consequently, a number of areas of exchange and cooperation with the purpose of creating links between other institutions and organisations – public and private, domestic or international – began to emerge at many universities.

The model of the relationship between the university and society in Argentina has had an impact on both the university’s ‘identity’ and its academic culture, in light of the privatisation of knowledge and the commercialisation of education (Llomovatte, Juarros, Naidorf, & Guelman, 2006; Naidorf, 2009). These processes of transformation become even more serious given the fact that they occurred at a time when the application of neoliberal policies at the social level undermined the rate of upward mobility that prevailed before the dictatorship and led to increasing marginalisation, poverty, vulnerability and exclusion.

In sum, the link between university and society is characterised by an overemphasis of the market at the social sphere. It has been stimulated not only by the bottleneck budget situation, the active promotion of the link between the university and industry cited above, and the classical theories of human capital in vogue, but also for the breakdown of the traditional social movements. This does not mean, of course, the absence of other voices or of the effects of emerging social actors after the 2001 economic crisis, nor the absence of resistance movements from the universities, as will be discussed in the next section.

The crisis of neoliberal hegemony. A new movement: the university’s transference of knowledge towards social and community interest projects

Given the suffocating situation described in the previous section, it is noteworthy that there were still university actors engaged in resistance against these neoliberal measures, with varying degrees of efficiency and organisation. An example of this resistance is the anti-neoliberal movement which occurred against the negotiations and signing of the Free Trade Area of the

Americas agreement (FTAA or ALCA, its Spanish acronym). This agreement included in its provisions privileges aimed at deregulating the education market. It is important to observe how the demands of the student movements and of university professors against these provisions were transformed into the widespread claims of various groups and social movements under the common umbrella of public education (Feldfeber & Saforcada, 2005).

With the start of the new century came the breakdown of neoliberal policies and discourses in many South American countries. This provided the framework for the installation of redistributionist governments supported by major sectors of the population as a result of large electoral coalitions. In Argentina, the neoliberal model of capital accumulation fell into a profound and nearly unprecedented economic, political and institutional crisis between 2001 and 2002. This circumstance left large sectors of the population in a situation of exclusion, marginalisation and vulnerability. As a consequence, university students had to confront a new reality: the need to rethink the purpose of society and, therefore, rethink their own role, their ability to provide solutions to society, and their ability to transform themselves to overcome their own crisis of meaning and performance, appealing to the historical perspective and demands of the moment.³

During the 1960s university extension programmes were taken up by universities to promote popular participation. Building upon the university's traditional functions of research and of undergraduate and graduate instruction, the university and the new social movements began, within the emerging context of the reconstruction of both the social fabric and the production system at the turn of the twenty-first century, to rebuild their identities and their possibilities for action. With the emergence of new social movements (a growing phenomenon of the 1990s which burst into full swing with the new millennium as governments began to redistribute public funds to sectors hit hardest by the previous model), the university tried with varying degrees of success to redefine its identity and promote new types of relationships with those movements.

In this scenario, the university underwent an identity crisis (Santos 1995) derived from a crisis of legitimacy in the production of socially relevant knowledge. Several groups and university teams began to rethink the university's relationship with society, particularly with social movements. These initiatives were in most cases organic responses to the economic crisis, especially after 2001. They were aimed at raising and promoting similar discussions in universities across the country. The new relationships were named 'University Transference of Knowledge towards Social and Community Interest Projects' (Llomovatte, Pereyra, & Naidorf, 2009).

It is noteworthy that by *transferencia social universitaria* (university/social transference), we mean the construction of collective spaces where the recovery, creation and democratisation of knowledge and expertise of

academics and of others who had been affected by the recent crisis and confronted the risk of exclusion are possible. The starting point is located in the realm of practice, which is the place to develop initiatives for innovation and excellence, either on academic subjects or institutions. Key actors in this experience include members of social movements and organisations, micro-entrepreneurs, the unemployed, rural communities, indigenous populations, among others. The work is developed in fields such as health care, social organisations, education and training, ecology and education.

Two central dimensions or axes make up this university/social transfer model. First is the social dimension, as discussed in the hegemonic model, which was equated with technology transfer and, fundamentally, with the sale of services and knowledge that the university produces or adapts. The new model is based on the construction of knowledge *with* the community, and not just on solving the community's problems. The footprint of the university/social transfer model is closely related to territorial development: a proposal in relation to the spatial area loosely defined, not always surrounding in geographical terms, but in the sense of the various social spaces that the university dwells in and shares with social institutions and organisations. Thus, what matters is its dynamic engagement with sustainability of the processes of change and development.

Second is the academic dimension of experience. While one of the core functions of public universities is its accessibility to all social sectors, compliance with that function should be effected across all aspects of the university in order to open up the institutional means for improving workers' social conditions, as well as for academic and scientific renewal. Thus, another central parameter is the search for links between extension activities (in their classical meaning), social transfer and political and academic planning through cooperation with professorships, research projects and experts from various faculties.

While we were reviewing the experiences carried out in this initiative, some difficulties and obstacles appeared. The first was linked to the challenges of managing these programmes as part of the normal institutional responsibility of universities. There was an attempt to institutionalise them and avoid affiliation with any political party or social organisation that could weaken them and make it difficult to sustain over time. Indeed, there were no appropriate policy instruments in universities to set up agreements with the type of organisations that we were interested in. The models and agreements commonly used only provided traditional exchange relationships with similar institutions but not with social movements or organisations. Over the past decade, the development of these experiences allowed us to adapt the instruments available to the specific needs of the new paradigm.

The second obstacle relates to the academic field and, in particular, to the academic culture that universities have modelled over the last 20 years. This model emphasises the role of universities as producers of

decontextualised (and, more recently, privatised) knowledge. Despite this institutional context, it was possible to start producing some socially relevant transfer activities concerned with the level of quality of the knowledge produced and academic integration involving teachers and researchers, professorships and research teams, and departments and institutions.

Disputes over the meaning and challenges of reshaping the university/society relationship

Over the course of the first decade of the new century, which some authors characterise as ‘post-neoliberal,’ both universities and social movements benefited from an environment conducive to social participation and the redistribution of resources. In the case of public universities, there was a sustained parliamentary discussion for the enactment or amendment of a new law for higher education, although it was ultimately not passed, and nonetheless there have been some actions directed by the national government that have improved university infrastructure, raised teachers' salaries, promoted research, and encouragement of university extension programmes. Various regional and international organisations that affected the university sector simultaneously deployed, with greater or lesser degrees of strengths, a series of concepts such as fairness, relevance and pertinence in order to strengthen the relationship between university and society. In our understanding, they constituted various and contradictory types of links (Llomovatte, Pereyra, & Kantarovich, 2008; Naidorf, Horn, & Giordana, 2007). Consequently, the current challenges are to unravel the conflicting meanings in dispute and address the role of the university as co-producer of socially relevant knowledge in the twenty-first century.

Regarding the former issue, concepts such as relevance, demand and social responsibility have been used to describe and prescribe the link between university and society. The problem of relevance appears in various statements of UNESCO nested in the evaluation area (UNESCO, 2009). The category ‘demand’ has primarily pertained to technological innovation, which deserves a special place in the debate about whether the best available technology is the most suitable for the social actors with whom the university deals. Social responsibility, a term prevalent in the 1990s, connects with an entrepreneurial vision of the university. It was effective in the form of volunteer university work. In the current Argentinian context, it is noteworthy to observe how the spirit of the National Volunteer University Programme does not involve compensatory practices but, rather, aims to generate synergies and shared knowledge between academia, popular sectors and social actors.

With respect to the second challenge, the question is how we would redefine and rethink the role of the university in society at a time of relatively minor budgetary pressures and increasing social participation. One of the

responses arising from the experiences mentioned here and with close ties with actors in the social economy (cooperatives of workers) is to assume what Santos (2009) sees as the 'new epistemology from the South' and 'pluriuniversity knowledge.' In this novel conceptualisation, the university is a place of horizontality with new knowledge in which it learns, listens to, reveals and brings new forms of knowledge production, novel linkages with the production sector and new ways to access such knowledge.

It is noteworthy that these initiatives, though significant in themselves and supported today by a strong policy that promotes and finances social transfer activities and extension programmes in most national universities, are still far from mainstream. There are still few research teams who choose this strategy to deliver to society and its main actors the knowledge they produced, let alone those that collaborate with these stakeholders on projects to build knowledge together. Moreover, the emerging role of the university with respect to new conflicts and transformations and to the new consensus has to be part of the professional training offered at the university. These themes are still excluded from the university curriculum in Argentina. Incorporating them would mean a university permeable and sensitive to social and educational reality. The absence of these issues, beyond the lack of connection with social problems, runs the risk of ignoring new areas of study regarding social and educational phenomena.

The challenge for both public and private universities in Argentina at this stage lies primarily on its ability to put into play active cooperation and creativity to shape and integrate extensive social networks that would bring together work at the community, regional, national, and universal levels without losing their specific institutional features in this historic moment. What is required from universities goes in accordance with their long and complex history and traditions. They would also exceed their limits and leave behind obstacles to reconfigure their social identity.

In this section, we have reviewed a proposed new model of the relationship between university and society in which the former takes into account not only the needs of social movements but also incorporates in its teaching and research the knowledge it produces. This ultimately leads to a new concept of extension, since the old model was unidirectional, while the new one attempts to become bidirectional. We now move to explore the current situation of higher education in Brazil, the largest Latin American country. In this section, we analyse, first, the challenges that universities are facing at a time when they are approaching the first millennium since their creation in Europe. Secondly, we identify two types of institutions emerging from post-neoliberal times: the world-class universities and the publicly oriented universities. We argue that only few of the existing universities would have the capacity and resources to become members of this sort of 'premier league,' and that most of the new universities recently created throughout the country correspond to the second institutional type.

Post-neoliberalism and the university in Brazil

It is at the turn of centuries and even more at the turn of millennia that crises become a kind of syndrome that pervades on all sectors and discourses of society. But what is a crisis? Is it the driver of transformation and, ultimately, revolution? Or is it a paralysing anaesthesia against the possibilities of overcoming its own problems? It seems that when problems and difficulties are given a significant dimension in the minds of people, they can provoke either the necessary reaction to overcome a crisis or they can generate a kind of bewilderment – a matrix of powerlessness and fatalism that hinders any reaction. When a clear decay reaches institutions in great proportions, the disease can even reach the status of ‘normality.’ In such circumstances of economic, social, political and ethical crisis, the epistemological, political and axiological apparatus tends to be absorbed in an atmosphere of crisis, thus causing people to migrate into their inner selves toward a sort of ethical individualism.

A person in that situation sees concepts, principles, foundations and values as a result of processes of psychological structuring and not as products of social processes, searching around those parameters for the formulation of life projects and actions. This ethical individualism is very close to an eschatological vision, and it is only one step away to slip into apocalyptic pessimism and the acceptance of the end of history. Individualism coincides also with the paralysing hopelessness to which Paulo Freire made reference in these terms: ‘as a programme, hopelessness paralyses and makes us succumb to fatalism in which it is not possible to put together the forces needed to stop the world’s re-creating force (1992, 10)’.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the globalisation of capital accumulation and the pulverisation of bipolar politics due to the demise of ‘real socialism’ generated an unprecedented imbalance in almost all institutions of social formations worldwide, thus causing an atmosphere of crisis. Moreover, at the beginning of the third millennium, we are being perpetually bombarded by the media’s nihilism against the possibilities of public opinion rising to political action. We are also witnessing the reiteration of an absolute disbelief in the possibilities of knowledge, which is contradictory on its face. Finally, we encounter ourselves in everyday life, with the hedonistic individualism stamped on the body and the idolatry of unrestrained enjoyment of pleasure and immediate gratification.

Since its creation in the western world as a social institution, the university was not immune to crises of various kinds. It was, in general, the space where the first echoes of ‘problem situations’ were heard and where the *inéditos viables* (untested feasibility), aimed at overcoming those situations, were always expressed, as Freire (1997) used to say when he analysed the crises and the possibilities of its overcoming. It was also at the university

where almost always the first attempts to overcome the crisis, whatever their nature, were carried out.

One may ask at this point why the university is an institution so permeable to critical situations and, simultaneously, why it is so sensitive to gnostic and political novelties, proclaiming itself frequently as a pioneering institution, responsible for overcoming the problems to which humanity is exposed. The easy answer to this question would be made with the traditional claim that the university is a social institution, maintained by the resources of the social formation to which it belongs and that, therefore, in times of crisis it immediately suffers the effects of economic and political depressions. Thus the production and transmission of knowledge to new generations may be subject to delays due to the emergency of the struggle for survival. It is worth remembering that this type of decrease is also a contradiction on its face, because it is precisely during crises that the production and dissemination of science should be stimulated so that solutions to crises might be found.

Today, the university has become more permeable and more sensitive to shocks that occur in society and the state because, at the present stage of capitalist accumulation, knowledge has become a basic commodity. In the penultimate year of the twentieth century, Federico Mayor, the former Director-General of UNESCO, confirmed the presence of a crisis that also thrived in higher education:

Now, when we are reaching the end of this century and preparing ourselves to enter a new millennium, we are witnessing a development of higher education and a growing awareness of its vital role in economic and social development. However, higher education is in a state of crisis in practically all countries of the world. (Mayor, 1999, p. 7)

A brief reconstruction of its origins and history can explain the fact that it was, over the years, the critical sounding box for social problems and attempts to formulate innovative solutions.

The historical trajectory of the Brazil's higher education

The university, now nearly a thousand years old since its inception in 1088 in Bologna, Italy, was born from double inspiration of universality and the corporation. Although it has made great contributions to humanity, with rare exceptions the corporate spirit has ultimately prevailed in its structure and its operation. Over the centuries, it has produced more for its own purposes and for the achievement of its members than for society at large. Consequently, it has developed a number of vices, among which are elitism, credentialism, the fragmentation of knowledge, scientificism and myopia in relation to the knowledge produced outside its walls. Therefore, access to university was for many years the prerogative of the elite and a minority

avant-garde. The myth of absolute incompatibility between widespread access and high quality in higher education was perpetuated in most countries of the capitalist world. This is the argument that supports the elitism of the university.

While confronting this myth, we should question these elitist principles: (i) that only a minority can have access to the products and to the best of the ‘banquet of civilisation’; (ii) that most of humanity will be condemned to heavy-duty labour, manual crafts, and mechanical and monotonous jobs; in short, to dehumanising tasks. Only a society dominated by a worldview that has individualism as its starting point would defend the epistemological (vanguard) and political (elitist) superiority of a minority group. Despite its ambiguities and instabilities, the university was in its birth one of the historic institutions, centred on modernity, which considered the Middle Ages as the ‘Long Night of a Thousand Years.’ Since its creation, the university has also proved to have a critical vitality and a resistance to all forms of ignorance, obscurantism, intolerance and physical and symbolic violence.

However, despite its birth within western modernity, the university has increasingly been dominated by corporatism which was already hinted at in its origins, increasingly committing itself to the ‘shadow of power.’ More recently, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, education in general fell into the arms of the neoliberal pedagogical project and the university, id very little to propose alternatives against the liberals of the national education systems that had been seduced by the mermaid song of globalisation and its neoliberal heralds.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, neoliberalism reigned supreme in the national education systems of Latin America, despite the resistance of a few voices scattered across the national universities. Armed with statistics, indicators, rankings and other paraphernalia that gave them empirical scientific credibility, the so-called ‘educational entrepreneurs’ pontificated on the educational reforms that were carried out throughout Latin American and particularly in Brazil. They deployed throughout the universe of education the logic of the market, whose most striking imperative was (and still is) the linkage of financial rewards to faculty productivity. This relationship has been established at all levels of education in Brazil, creating what we might call ‘evaluative furor’: almost all countries of the subcontinent formulated, implanted and implemented ‘national testing systems,’ and, although the reasons given varied, the same has happened in other countries. Procedural, diagnostic and formative evaluation was relegated to the background or even eclipsed by structural, classificatory and meritocratic evaluations. This is one of the most diabolical strategies of any hegemonic process: the universal belief that the benefits of civilisation are only accessible to a few and that they only can be reached through individual competence, convincing even the ‘losers’ of the ‘justice’ of failure.

The Brazilian university today

In Brazil, with its very young university system – the first university in the country was founded only in the first half of the twentieth century – the effects of slave society, dominant for about 400 years, on basic education have continued long after abolition (1888) and into the twenty-first century. Universal literacy efforts such as those of Paulo Freire and Florestan Fernandes in the 1960s were isolated. Freire was arrested shortly after the 1964 military coup and was exiled for nearly two decades, and Fernandes suffered, too, the impact of malicious prosecution: after he called for the transformation of the Brazilian university in his seminal book, *University: Reform or Revolution?*, the military responded by breaking up the fragile National Education System that had been outlined by the national-developmental reform implemented in 1961, after the first enactment of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB, its Portuguese acronym).

With the military reform of higher education (Law 5.540/1968), the new Brazilian university system was restructured around the American model outlined in the ‘Atcon Report,’ translated to the Brazilian context by the ‘Meira Mattos Report’ and deployed by experts and organic intellectuals of the University of Houston, on the basis of agreements between the Ministério de Educação e Cultura and the United States Agency for International Development USAID (MEC-USAID). It was heir first to the European corporate university and later vassal of the American technical university, exacerbating the defects of the former and deepening the competitiveness of the latter. In the colonised new world, the European university had become simultaneously both one of the most important channels of social distinction for the settler minority and for its local allies, and one of the most odious instruments for discrimination against most of the colonised and enslaved population. With the country’s satellitisation by the United States in the context of the Cold War, Brazilian higher education had in its competitive ‘depoliticisation’ a liberal politicisation that began to shift toward privatisation, individualism, competition and meritocracy.

Albeit divided between two opposing projects of society, embodied in the socialist and the bourgeois, and therefore between two rationalities (Marxist, in its various trends, and liberal, also in its different approaches), the contemporary world was experiencing a period of relative stability when suddenly the balance fell apart, taking advocates of both sides by surprise. Those who had opted for the ‘Dollar Curtain,’ as was the case in Brazil, found themselves under the pressure of the ‘*Pax Americana*’ as the only (winning) alternative. Likewise, the period of ‘normal science,’ to use Thomas Kuhn’s terminology, was broken up, thus beginning an era in which the existing theoretical models seemed unable to fully explain the complexity of the real. To the majority’s despair, these paradigms lost ground during

the crisis, thus creating, on the one hand, a certain epistemological orphanage and, on the other, a kind of spontaneous empiricism.

However, in the first decade of this century in Brazil emerged a third option distinct from both the traditional European-style university model and US-influenced neoliberal approaches: the popular universities. They constitute an effort to overcome the corporatism and commercialism of the modern types of university. This new institutional model, the popular university, tries to echo the reminder of a social movement leader that was part of a network of struggles for the construction of the Federal University of Southern Frontier (UFFS): ‘We no longer want a university that graduates professionals for the productive system, but one that educates students for equality.’⁴ It also recognises the fragility of national solutions and tries to build an institutional matrix that responds to the need to set up supranational institutions. This university model and other new experiences carried on in Latin America constitute the current object of our research in the Ibero-American Network for Research in Education Policy (RIAPE3, its Spanish and Portuguese acronym). We are focusing on these developments for two purposes: to overcome the logic of the market and to oppose the array of supranational institutions in higher education supporting the neoliberal model.

The Brazilian university in the context of neoliberalism

As the ends of millennia have long had a powerful influence on people’s imaginations, particularly with regard to teleology, on the thousandth anniversary of the university humanity should decree the end of this ancient institution by transforming it radically, or at least by replacing it with something more inclusive to all segments of society, where the results of research and studies would be turned to the people’s interest: An institution aimed at producing public science and able to educate professionals and intellectuals, not towards profit, but towards social equality, one where diplomas, certificates and credentials would be replaced by mutual trust and collective solutions. A new model of the university is required in which the category of communality would be restored in the knowledge-production process, and in which the arts and other forms of the representation of reality may be better incorporated in the curricula; an institution in which all knowledge, regardless of its source of production or application, would contribute to the promotion of a omnilateral cognitive democracy, meaning not only to socialise knowledge for everyone, but also to incorporate knowledge that comes from every side (omnilateral in Latin).

Historical experience has shown that an institution like the university cannot be built or replaced overnight. However, we still have 76 years left before its millennium. We also know that is structurally not possible to transform such an institution from scratch, like Athena born full-grown from Zeus’ head, but must instead be reorganised around its existing conditions.

Thus, we should begin transforming the university as it actually exists in Brazil and Latin America.

In recent years, the movement for the reconfiguration of higher education has taken a worldwide perspective. It occurs in the context of two contemporary phenomena: 'economic globalisation' and 'cultural globalisation,' which are closely related to the emergence of a 'knowledge society.' In this process, two more general directions can be identified in higher education, each representing a distinct political face and, therefore, different philosophies, strategies and implementation formats:

- **World-Class Universities.** HEI guided by contemporary unified programmes in comparative evaluations oriented to international classifications (rankings) and cross-border credentialism. These universities have created common working platforms and pre-formatted virtual exchanges in the effort to construct a global culture that can be universally reproduced. In short, these universities are leading to a cultural homogenisation based on the rationality derived from diffuse centres of neoliberal capitalism. Examples of this type of university without borders, oriented to the reproduction of rationality and market interests, are transnational and corporate universities.
- **International Popular Universities.** Taking as main references the concepts of 'popular education' and the critical debates about the elitism of higher education and its role in the 'knowledge society,' the proposal that underlies this type of institution is anchored by demands for higher education in the countries considered to be in low or emerging stages of development. They would be situated tentatively in the field of institutional and curricular innovation, centred on the diversity and appreciation of people's thought and interests, and aiming at building a society based on social justice. Still under construction and searching for appropriate and politically and historically opportune institutional formats, these universities aim to represent a political alternative that is counter-hegemonic to the processes of globalisation. Popular universities seem to start the process of overcoming the corporatism that befell 'classical universities' and the commercialism of the neoliberal university.

Some of the new Brazilian universities are representative examples of these institutional types, such as the UFFS, which proposes in its constitutional documents the creation of a popular university; the University of the Latin American Integration (UNILA), which aims to be a multilingual and multicultural centre for the training of academic personnel at the highest level for Mercosur nations; the University of Afro-Brazilian Lusophone International Integration (UNILAB), whose purpose is the establishment of an institution focused on multicultural and multilateral issues of Brazil,

Portugal, and the Luso-speaking countries of Africa; the University of the San Francisco Valley (UNIVASF), with a multicampus structure focused on finding solutions to problems of the historical populations of Brazil's semi-arid northeastern region; and the Federal University of Pampa (UNIPAMPA) in Rio Grande do Sul, which is committed to solving historical issues of border and regional development.

The Florestan Fernandes School, located in Guararema near São Paulo, can be added to these universities. This school has been training leaders for the Movement of Landless Peasants (MST, its Portuguese acronym) and other social movements with a different curriculum strategy and in defiance to the official view of accreditation. Although it may not technically be a public university, the private Universidade Nove de Julho (UNINOVE) in São Paulo can be considered an example of popular higher education because of the social-class orientation of its academic programmes and because most of its more than 100,000 students and graduates come from the working classes. Moreover, it constitutes a unique phenomenon in the group of Brazil's private universities because of the frequent use of 'public criteria' in its selection process for courses and programmes.

Finally, the Open University of Brazil (UAB) can be included among the popular universities because of its prominent use of virtual communications media, making education accessible to students across low-income social strata and throughout other countries, and thus acting in the interests of universal higher education. Given the recent creation of these institutions and the theoretical and practical challenges that they are facing and especially given the historical inertia of both the internal dynamics of the universities and conservative hegemonic forces, the social relevance of the study of these institutions, with their development of models of higher education that resist and offer alternatives to the neoliberal consensus, is considerable.

In the next section, we will describe the origins and development of neoliberal economic policies, as well as the processes by which neoliberalism was extended to the economic, political, and educational spheres in Mexico. We will also explore how neoliberal policies, under the guidance of international organisations, such as the IMF the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), created and spread a kind of common sense. Within this framework, we contend that student movements constitute a prominent means of social and cultural resistance to neoliberalism, particularly when they are able to combine their own demands with those of society at large.

Neoliberalism, common sense and resistance in Mexican higher education

The influence of global neoliberalism is based on the market's dominance over the state and on government deregulation of private enterprise. As an

economic model, neoliberalism has now been strongly criticised for its failure to fulfil its promises of economic development and the reduction in social inequality. Repeated economic crises in recent years throughout developing countries and even the developed world are clear signs of its hegemonic decline. However, as Torres (2011) points out, despite having clearly failed as a viable model of economic development, the political culture associated with neoliberalism is still in force and remains strong. It has thus become a new common sense in the formation of modern concepts of governance and education. For universities and colleges, the neoliberal trend has manifested itself in four areas: efficiency and accountability, accreditation and universalisation, international competitiveness and privatisation. One of the key aspects of this new scenario has been the introduction of *new public management* as a novel form of corporate governance. It has been observed that international bodies like the OECD, which has specialised centres focusing on educational research, are playing an increasingly important role in the design of educational policies at the highest level for member countries and even for those who are not. However, we argue that the imposition of neoliberal policies on higher education is not free of contradictions and resistance from various stakeholders. Student movements have been especially important players in these processes. Today, the rejection of neoliberal policies that hinder widespread access and retention in universities can be observed across several hemispheres. In recent years, the most visible examples of these mobilisations include youth protests in the United Kingdom, Chile, and Colombia, and more recently in Quebec and Mexico. These student movements have sought to prevent the introduction of privatisation measures such as raising registration fees or government subsidies to private universities through vouchers or direct or indirect transfer of public funds. We contend that movements against the implementation of neoliberal policies can be considered as forms of resistance against the establishment and spread of a common sense that intends to take hold and solidify as consensus in the contemporary world.

Origins and growth of neoliberal policies in Mexico

Mexico is a clear example of neoliberal policies' implementation since the 1980s. At the beginning of his administration, President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) sent an SOS to the international financial community, noting that unless the country's foreign debt was restructured, the country would be unable to meet its financial commitments. His call was answered by the IMF and the World Bank through the signing the 'letter of intent' by which the Mexican government launched a series of policies designed to 'adjust' the Mexican economy around the principles of neoliberalism. Thus, the federal administration reduced the fiscal deficit, devalued the peso, sold or privatised most of its state-owned enterprises aside from except the oil

and power companies (Petroleos Mexicanos and Comision Federal de Electricidad), drastically lowered import tariffs, and increased exports, mainly to the United States. These measures succeeded in stabilising the economy, but also had a recessive effect as the unemployment rate began to rise – although not as much as it might have due to the resulting growth of the informal or ‘black-market’ sector. Social sector expenditures, especially on health, education, and affordable housing were reduced as well (Alcantara, 2005). Subsequent administrations continued to implement and expand these neoliberal economic measures. While they have managed to maintain macroeconomic stability, however, they have not been able to achieve significant and sustained economic growth sufficient to reduce social inequalities. As a result, half the population is now poor, while the nation’s financial wealth is increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, as shown by the inclusion of several Mexican businessmen in *Forbes*’ list of the world’s richest people. While the unemployment rate is below 10% of the economically active population, the number of those jobless or working in the informal economy is significantly high. The educational gap reaches numbers close to 30 million people, similar to those in the national education system.

Neoliberal policies and the formation of common sense

Gramsci (1971) noted that common sense is a worldview ‘mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of entry into the conscious world’ (p. 323).

Common sense, then, is a product of history and must be analysed ‘as part of the historical process.’ As a consequence, there are many common senses and not just one. Every social stratum has its own common sense and every school of thought leaves behind sediments of common sense that are crystallised in a contradictory way into the popular consciousness. The power of influence of the dominant ideology is visible in the content of the common system. Therefore, all the philosophical and sociological approaches that define the common sense of the lower classes as the basis of objective thought need to understand the ideological function that shapes common sense in stratified societies (Alfaro, 2002). In analysing how neoliberalism has globally developed a common sense, Harvey (2005) points out that since the 1970s, a new discourse has multiplied, especially among intergovernmental bodies like the IMF, the World Bank, and the OECD and in various think tanks. This discourse focuses on several terms such as ‘deregulation,’ ‘privatisation,’ and ‘withdrawal’ of the state from social sectors like health and education, and begins to consider the latter as services rather than rights. Neoliberalism has gradually become hegemonic, first as a form of discourse that seeks to build up a common sense centred on the idea that, given the vast and rapid changes occurring in sectors like the new technologies of

communication and in the organisation of large multinational companies, the only possible way was to step back from the regulatory and distributive functions of the state. This was also the period of crisis of the socialist state model, leading eventually to its general collapse in the late 1980s. Almost at the same time, theories of postmodernism emerged to back up the collective project for social emancipation (Harvey, 2005; Teodoro, 2010).

Development of neoliberal policies in Mexican higher education

During the 1980s and 1990s, relationships between the state and public universities underwent major changes that altered their traditional patterns and gave them a new order and meaning. The logic of exchanges between these two actors was restructured quite rapidly during this period. In the context of the Mexican economic crisis, relationships between the state and the higher education system began a new phase through the linking of planning and evaluation to public funding. The public university sector was the most strongly affected by alterations in the forms of action and government intervention in regulating their growth and overall direction.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, the public policy landscape in higher education was the result of decades of unregulated expansion. Phenomena such as overcrowding, bureaucratisation, skewed enrolment expansion, financial crises combined with poor effectiveness of the planning processes, excessive politicisation, and loss of academic oversight in the substantive functions of many institutions, along with increased and intensified complexity of the system, and a strong tendency towards institutional differentiation and towards the promotion of university achievements as a vehicle of upward mobility, made up the dense and complex web of problems that the government had to face (Acosta, 2000).

The higher educational policies implemented from 1982 to 1994 combined additional financial resources and information. This combination changed the modus vivendi between government and universities, introducing a new axis: evaluation associated with public funding. In the early 1990s evaluation thus emerged as a key element of modernisation, paving the way to an accelerated process of change that in turn led to a new cycle of higher educational policy. As a consequence, public universities needed to adapt rapidly to the new scheme and learn to play by new rules, or, to the contrary, confront and question the new policies and propose alternative policies.

Overall, policy guidelines initiated during this period have remained in place, with only a few adjustments made to fit Mexico's recent economic performance. One of the programmes that have received most attention is the implementation of economic incentives for the performance and productivity of academic personnel. At the institutional level, the most recent strategy (2000–2006) has been the articulation of programmes for faculty development and infrastructure modernisation, in what is known as

the Comprehensive Programme for Institutional Improvement (its Spanish acronym), which aims to improve the quality of educational programmes. During the last three decades, governments have developed new mechanisms and instruments for planning and evaluation aimed at better regulating HEI, particularly the autonomous public universities. This objective was achieved by combining these mechanisms and instruments to the granting of complementary financial resources, and the partnership has resulted in the reduction or narrowing of institutional autonomy.

The growing influence that international bodies like the OECD have had in the design and implementation of policies of higher education in the past two decade should also be considered. Dale (2008) and Teodoro (2010) have described the OECD as the leading global think tank of hegemonic globalisation, an organisation with the power to defining the global educational agenda, to shape and control the game, and to determine national and international preferences in education policy. In other words, the role of international organisations has been changing to perform more and more the role of ‘problem definers’ and less that of ‘problem solvers.’ In the case of Mexico, the influence of OECD recommendations on policy design can be seen in the higher education policies that are part of the last two national education programmes (Rubio, 2006).

Student movements as forms of resistance to neoliberal policies

Struggles of university students have been an important part of social movements in Latin American history. The seminal movement of students from the University of Cordoba in Argentina in 1918 marks the beginning of a long tradition of student struggles in the region. As pointed out by several authors including Portantiero (1987) and Tunnermann (2008), the movement for university reform meant the political rise of the middle classes. Students demanded that the university be opened more widely to society and that the old and outdated curriculum be replaced, and called for academic freedom, competitive examinations for teachers with students’ participation, support for scientific research, autonomy for university management, joint government (co-gobierno) of the university, and democratically elected authorities. In a few years, the student movement for university autonomy was disseminated to almost all countries of the region (Marsiske, 1989). The National University of Mexico, for example, achieved autonomy in 1929. A comprehensive account of student movements in Mexico’s modern history would be too long, so we just mention some of those with more social and political influence. It should be emphasised that these movements are examples of resistance against neoliberalism in higher education. Some of them, like the 1968 movement and the current ‘# Yo soy 132’ (# I am 132), went beyond academic affairs and demanded greater democratic freedoms across Mexican society.

The period between the late 1960s and early 1970s was characterised by the emergence of large student mobilisations worldwide. Under the influence of the Cordoba movement in most of its public universities, Latin America has been regarded as the archetypal example of student activism (Levy, 1986). After the May 1968 protests in France, a major social movement led by students from the two major public institutions of higher education, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the National Polytechnic Institute, burst on the streets of Mexico City. Students demanded the release of political prisoners, the removal of restrictions on free expression of ideas, and the punishment of police officers responsible for the repression to the student movement. On 2 October, the movement was harshly repressed by the Mexican government, leading to the deaths of hundreds of young people in a square near downtown Mexico City. Nonetheless, this movement had a strong influence on reducing the repressive nature of the political regime and on the expansion of civil and democratic liberties. In the mid-1980s, thousands of UNAM students mobilised against a set of measures intended to restrict university access, establish departmental examinations and increase the cost of registration and other school services. After several mass demonstrations on the streets of Mexico City, a round of negotiations with university officials, and a two-week strike, the student movement was able to defeat the measures and earned a promise to organise a university conference for university reform (eventually held in 1990, although after several days of intense deliberations, only minor changes to UNAM's academic structure and governance were achieved.) One of the main effects of this movement on Mexican society was that several of the student movement leaders actively participated in the creation of the leftist Democratic Revolution Party, which is currently one of Mexico's three major political parties. Another student movement took place at UNAM in the late 1990s when the rector of the university proposed to the University Council the approval of a General Payments Regulation which substantially increased registration fees and other payments. In response to the authorities' stubbornness to remove the regulations, a radicalised student movement went on a 10-month strike. The student mobilisation led to the rector's resignation at the end of the year. As the more radical students refused to end the strike, the newly appointed rector called for the completion of a referendum among students and professors. The referendum's results showed a wide majority for the end of the conflict. After the repeated refusal of the strikers to accept the referendum outcome and to leave the premises, the university authorities called for police intervention. The strike ended in February 2000, and shortly after the controversial regulation was repealed.

An unprecedented student movement called '# Yo soy 132' (# I am 132) is currently underway in Mexico City and in some of the country's major cities. This time, however, it was initiated not by students at public universities but by those attending some of Mexico's most elite institutions. One of

their primary demands is for greater access to electronic media, which is highly concentrated in a few companies. Because they are youths with wide access to the Internet and social networks, their main tools for communication and mobilisation are Twitter and Facebook. This movement, still in the process of consolidation, has managed to integrate students from private and public universities. After the 1 July, presidential election they severely questioned the election outcome. Students contended that the winner candidate had won due to the strong support of the private media entrepreneurs and not to popular vote (<http://www.yosoy132media.org>).

Final remarks

In this chapter, we have analysed the efforts of movements and institutions in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico to resist neoliberal common sense in higher education. In the first case, we described the Argentinian case in which a new model of the relationship between the university and society is in progress. Some initiatives carried out by professors and student movement leaders aim to overcome the traditional gap that until now has isolated the university's extension activities from social and popular demands. In addition to the financial support that the university can provide, federal and local governments are also providing resources for the completion of the programmes. The Brazilian experience, meanwhile, shows a double objective: on the one hand, local and federal support for just a few universities in their goal to build world-class institutions, while on the other hand, popular support for a set of federal universities throughout the country with new institutional missions and innovative curricula. Some of these new universities pursue regional and international integration, while others attempt to be instrumental in local and community development. Finally, the Mexican case illustrates the process by which neoliberal policies were first established at the economic level and subsequently extended to other spheres, including higher education.

It was also showed the significant role that multilateral organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and, more recently, the OECD have played in strengthening neoliberal policies as a sort of common sense. In fact, as Teodoro (2010) has argued, OECD policy recommendations have become new forms of regulation in educational policy worldwide. However, the Mexican experience also demonstrated that student movements have constituted important and influential means to resist the advance of neoliberalism in society in general and in higher education in particular. The past and current struggles of student movements against privatisation and in favour of more access to public higher education are clear examples of those efforts. In the same vein, it is possible to argue that the recent student mobilisations that have taken place in Canada, France, the UK, Colombia, the USA, Chile and Mexico constitute a world-wide movement against post-neoliberal

policies promoted not only for neoconservative governments but also for those describing themselves as social democrats.

We have also argued in this article that the traditional model of the university should be transformed radically in view of the enormous challenges posed to these institutions by the growing demands of society and the rapidly changing panorama of knowledge and technology. Notwithstanding that the future for universities and other institutions of higher education is not promising due to the economic and social crises that both advanced and developing economies are experiencing, universities should also change to meet the needs of new forms of teaching and learning and of new types of students within the framework of lifelong learning.

Notes

1. Daniela Perrota was a collaborator in this chapter on Argentine universities.
2. It should be noted that the military coup in 1966 principally decimated the traditional social actors in the world of work and culture, the student movement and a number of faculty.
3. Among the well-known pillars of the 1918 reform movement, students demanded changes that today are regular features of Argentina's public universities: university government made up of professors, graduates and students; university autonomy from the state; and the implementation of university extension programmes as a means for community relations.
4. This quote was expressed in a meeting by a Sem-Terra Movement member.

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