

Resisting “Progress”: The New Left and Higher Education in Latin America

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Throughout Latin America, the recent return to power of parties and leaders from the political Left precipitated a widespread reexamination of neoliberal¹ policies, including those related to higher education. From Guatemala to Uruguay and most countries in between, leftist leaders condemned neoliberal economic policies as unresponsive to the people and therefore in need of transformation. In the area of higher education, this new agenda has meant the introduction of policies that aim to increase access for all, reduce tuition costs, and reverse—or at least regulate—the trend toward privatization and diversification. Not all Latin American countries have been able or willing to implement these policies, however.

This article explores higher-education policies in Latin America, focusing on two central questions: What are current trends in higher education in Latin America? How are left-of-center governments in Latin America responding to pressures and incentives to transform higher education in the region? We argue that although the rise of the Left in Latin America precipitated a reexamination of higher-education policies in the region, leftist governments have been largely unable to implement reforms that realize their discursive pronouncements. With the notable exception of Venezuela, most left-of-center governments have been unable to implement policies that increase access, reduce tuition costs, and diminish the role of private providers of higher education in the region. The article first discusses recent trends in higher education in the region and identifies key areas of policy-making activity. The second section examines the recent return to power of left-of-center governments and the implications of those electoral outcomes on higher-education policies, particularly the importance of conceptualizing higher education as either public or private goods. The third section presents three brief case studies: Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil. In the final section, we hypothesize about factors that explain higher-education policy in Latin America and that point toward potential avenues for future research.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA?

Four current trends stand out in Latin American higher education: massification, privatization, diversification, and accreditation. Throughout most of their history, Latin American universities remained accessible only to elites, which meant that enrollments were historically low (Tünnermann-Bernheim 1991). Access increased in response to the Córdoba reforms of 1918—reforms that emphasized increased access, faculty

governance, academic freedom, free tuition, scientific research, and engaging the university in the solution of important social problems (Arocena and Sutz 2005; Bernusconi 2007; Levy 2006; Tünnermann-Bernheim 1998)—to demographic growth and to improvements in primary education. As a result, enrollment has grown significantly in the past five decades. For example, table 1 shows enrollment figures from 1975 to 2005 in Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil. In Chile, enrollment grew from 150 thousand to almost 600 thousand; in Venezuela, it grew from 200 thousand to 1 million; and in Brazil, it grew from 1 million to 4.5 million. Such rapid growth in demand has created significant incentives and pressures on governments throughout the region.

After the fall of democracy throughout the region (1964–1990), and at the urging of The World Bank and other institutions, Latin American policy makers began to pursue a series of neoliberal higher-education reforms intended to transform universities into more efficient and financially autonomous institutions (Jones 2007; World Bank 1994; 1998). These reforms contributed to three other important trends: privatization,² diversification, and accreditation. In terms of privatization, both the ownership of universities and the financing of higher education have shifted significantly from state to private hands. For example, 71% of all Brazilian higher-education institutions were private and 29% were public in 1980. That is, of 900 total institutions, 689 were private and only 211 were public (INEP).³ In contrast, the latest higher-education census shows that 88% of all Brazilian institutions are private and only 12% are public. Of a total of 2,365 institutions, 2,081 are private and only 284 are public (INEP/MEC 2013). Similarly in Chile, in 1980, there were only eight universities (i.e., six public and two private); by 2010, of a total of 173 existing institutions, only 16 were public and 157 private. That is, 91% of all higher-education institutions were private and only 9% were public (Ministerio de Educación 2010).

In terms of diversification, a general typology of higher-education providers in Latin America includes universities, professional institutes, centers of technical training, and a host of other entities that provide postsecondary education (Jones 2007). Such rapid growth in demand for higher education, increased privatization, and growing diversification of higher-education institutions has had a significant impact on the quality of education. For this reason, in the past two decades, most countries in Latin America have developed policies to improve the quality of higher education and have established accreditation organizations to regulate higher-education institutions

(Días Sobrinho 2006). These trends provide a glimpse of the impact of neoliberal policies in transforming higher education from a public good to a private good.

THE NEW LEFT AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

After decades of dictatorship, often marked with gross violations of human rights and increasing inequality, 1998 marked a watershed year in Latin American politics: Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela. Founded on a socialist platform, his coalition party promised an anti-neoliberal agenda—one that would place higher value on solidarity, participatory democracy, and redistributive policies than on individualism, neoliberalism, and representative democracy. However, Chavez’s victory was only the beginning of a trend.

(Cameron and Hershberg 2010; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Roberts 2008; Silva 2009; Weyland 2004). Although privatization has increased significantly in the past three decades, a more recent trend since the Left’s return to power has been an emphasis on the importance of providing education for all, free tuition, and using the university as an instrument for state-policy implementation, including the extension of anti-neoliberal ideas across borders. However, not all leftist governments have been able to reform higher-education policies to the extent that their party platforms would have predicted. For example, whereas Venezuelan policy makers developed programs that significantly increased access to higher education, Chilean and Brazilian policy makers focused their attention on quality assurance and accreditation to improve the quality of higher education.

The rise of the Left in Latin America was largely the result of a return to democracy and the failure of previous governments to respond effectively to the material demands of increasingly critical and participatory citizens.

Shortly after 1998, left-of-center parties throughout Latin America were able to win the presidencies of their respective countries: Ricardo Lagos in Chile (2000), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil (2002), Néstor Kirchner in Argentina (2003), Tabaré Vazquez in Uruguay (2004), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005), Michele Bachelet in Chile (2006), Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2006), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2006), and Alvaro Colom in Guatemala (2007), among others.

The rise of the Left in Latin America was largely the result of a return to democracy and the failure of previous governments to respond effectively to the material demands of increasingly critical and participatory citizens. Neoliberal economic policies were strongly recommended and widely adopted throughout the region during the 1980s and the 1990s. By 1998, however, policies that sought to tame inflation, promote economic growth, and reduce the size of the state through fiscal discipline, privatization, and trade liberalization had failed to achieve the results that its proponents anticipated. Worse still, neoliberal policies became widely unpopular among large sectors of society whose standard of living had worsened as a result of their implementation

COMPETING LEFTIST VISIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Today, left-of-center governments in Latin America are responding to public pressures to transform higher education as well as resisting—or adapting to—transnational models of higher education. However, in almost all countries, we can see a clear difference between the electoral promises to provide higher education for all and the actual policies being implemented. In Brazil, for example, the leftist Workers Party’s (i.e., Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) education policy has been historically in alignment with the Party’s economic policy, which was marked by aversion to private and foreign influence. For example, among the proposals advanced in Lula’s 1989 government program is a “directive” calling for the state to replace the private sector in the delivery of educational services through the expansion of public-school networks (Partido dos Trabalhadores 1989). Similarly, in the 1994 elections—although specifically undertaking to observe “constitutional principles of freedom of education”—the PT’s government program promised to increase public university financing and decrease transfers and incentives for private universities (Partido dos Trabalhadores 1994). Remarkably, once it was in power, the PT undeniably moderated its programmatic position on transfers to the private sector, adopting a pragmatic approach in response to the sector’s demand. For example, during the first term of his administration, Lula launched the University for All Program (i.e., *Programa Universidade Para Todos*, or Prouni), a public

Table 1

Total Enrollment in Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil: 1975–2005

COUNTRY	YEAR		
	1975	1995	2005
Chile	149,647	342,788	567,114
Venezuela	213,542	597,487	1,418,303
Brazil	1,089,808	1,759,703	4,453,156

Sources: Instituto de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira. Ministerio da Educação 2013, Ministerio del Poder Popular de la Educación Universitaria 2011, Ministerio de Educación 2010, and The World Bank 2000.

policy that grants full and partial scholarships in private higher-education institutions. In short, the rise of the Left in Brazil has not brought substantial changes to higher-education policies. As a result, privatization, diversification, and accreditation continue to be the status quo.

Since 1981, the Chilean model has conformed more closely to an elitist and entrepreneurial model of higher education, emphasizing limited access, privatization, and diversification. Lagos (2000–2006) led the first left-of-center government after the return to democracy in Chile. In his program of government, he clearly emphasized the importance of education for fostering equality and competitiveness in the emerging knowledge-based society.⁴ The program promised increased access for economically disadvantaged students, improvements in the quality and efficiency of both public and private institutions, and increases in higher-education funding. These promises, however, did not materialize in reforms to higher education. Higher education in Chile remains decentralized, privatized, diversified, and—as a result—highly unequal (Brunner 2011). Bachelet (2006–2010) was clear in her intent to reform higher education by increasing access and reducing tuition costs. However, during her administration, quality control and accreditation of private institutions became the focus of higher-education reforms. Partly in response to massive student protests demanding more access and more government support, Bachelet’s most recent government program places higher education at the top of her

merely about reforming higher education or about national development. Rather, its aim was more ambitious: to transform the university into a political actor with both national and international reach (Ministerio del Poder Popular de la Educación Universitaria 2009). Venezuela, however, is the only country in Latin America where rhetoric and practice are clearly aligned. In part, this congruence is the result of the Venezuelan government’s oil reserves and its control over the main branches of government, which affords it the ability to implement policy.

CONCLUSION

Although the rise of the Left in Latin America precipitated a reexamination of the proper role of higher education in society, the discourse and practices of leftist governments appear to be disjointed. On the one hand, an anti-neoliberal discourse has emerged throughout the region that conceptualizes the university as a public good with the potential to emancipate the masses. On the other hand, with the exception of Venezuela, most left-of-center governments throughout the region have been unable to implement reforms that realize their discursive pronouncements.

We argue that two factors explain the failure of leftist governments to achieve their policy goals, thereby explaining variations in higher-education policy across the region. First, most Latin American countries lack the necessary resources to increase access for all and reduce tuition costs. Second,

The combination of lack of resources and growing privatization therefore makes it both financially and practically impossible for leftist governments to reverse the trends occurring in the past four decades.

policy agenda. In her 2014–2018 government plan, Bachelet promised to introduce—within 100 days of her election—important reforms to higher education, such as expanding free tuition to 70% of applicants and expanding access through the creation of new universities. In short, the recent election of socialist candidates has not resulted in significant higher-education reforms, despite placing higher education at the top of their policy agendas.

Since 1998, the premise of the Venezuelan model has been access for all and development of an emancipatory model of higher education (Santos 2006). Beginning in 2002, the Chávez government began to develop a number of education policies (called “missions”), including in the area of higher education. For example, Mission Robinson aimed to eliminate illiteracy; Mission Sucre sought to expand access to higher education to marginalized members of society, including prisoners, factory workers, and members of the military; and Mission Alma Mater had the explicit purpose of “transforming and socializing pertinent knowledge of [Venezuelan] realities; and cultural, environmental, political, economic, and social challenges, within a framework of national transformation” (Ministerio del Poder Popular de la Educación Universitaria 2009, 1).⁵ This rhetoric was not

private universities fill an important void in the higher-education market in Latin America and therefore have become an integral part of the higher-education system in each country. The combination of lack of resources and growing privatization therefore makes it both financially and practically impossible for leftist governments to reverse the trends occurring in the past four decades. Although it is beyond the scope of this symposium, we also hypothesize that path dependencies and electoral politics play a significant role in limiting the capacity of leftist policy makers to change higher-education policy. Ultimately, the similarities and differences highlighted in this article provide evidence of the difficulty in characterizing higher education in Latin America as isomorphic and also illustrate the common national and international pressures that all of these systems face, as well as their responses. ■

NOTES

1. Williamson (1989) coined the term “Washington Consensus” to refer to 10 policies that he believed US policy makers would agree should be implemented in Latin America to improve economic conditions, and which have since become emblematic of neoliberalism in the region: fiscal discipline, reordering public-expenditure priorities, tax reforms,

liberalizing interest rates, a competitive exchange rate, trade liberalization, liberalization of inward foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and property rights.

2. Levy (1986) argued that Latin America has witnessed three waves: the first wave at the end of the colony, when Catholic universities became private to maintain administrative autonomy (although they still relied heavily on state funding); the second wave during the 1950s, when a number of private elite schools emerged in the region; and the third wave, starting in the 1970s with “demand-absorbing” private universities.
3. Evolução da Educação Superior – Graduação. Available at <http://www.censosuperior.inep.gov.br/web/censo-da-educacao-superior/evolucao-1980-a-2007>. Accessed March 2014.
4. “La educación es la base para humanizar la vida de las personas, para una efectiva igualdad de oportunidades, para superar la pobreza y para integrarnos competitivamente a un mundo que hace uso cada vez más intensivo del conocimiento y las tecnologías.” Primer Gobierno del Siglo XXI. Available at <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Security/citizenssecurity/chile/politicas/programalagos.pdf>. Accessed January 2014.
5. “Esta Misión se constituye como referencia de una nueva institucionalidad, caracterizada por la cooperación solidaria, cuyo eje es la generación, transformación y socialización de conocimiento pertinente a nuestras realidades y retos culturales, ambientales, políticos, económicos y sociales, en el marco de la transformación del país” (Ministerio del Poder Popular de la Educación Universitaria 2009, 1).

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