

Democracy and access to university in Brazil: a balance of recent history (1995-2017)¹

Democracia e acesso à universidade no Brasil: um balanço da história recente (1995-2017)

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ABSTRACT

The text discusses the context of Brazilian Universities in the last twenty years and proposes to understand that historic period as characterized by important shifts, both in terms of its democratic expansion and elitist retraction. The analysis is organized in three moments, according to the Brazilian universities different recent cycles: the first cycle starts at the beginning of the 90's, coinciding with the Presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso; the second one starts between the beginning up to the midst of the years 2000, coinciding with the Presidencies of both Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Roussef, from the Labor Party (PT); the third cycle, already under its course, begins in 2017 after President Dilma's impeachment and the ascension of President Temer's political group.

Keywords: Higher education. Brazilian universities. Democracy and accessibility.

RESUMO

O texto apresenta o contexto das universidades brasileiras nos últimos vinte anos, e caracteriza este período histórico do ensino superior brasileiro como um momento de importantes inflexões, em sua retração e em sua expansão,

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na sua elitização e democratização. A análise é organizada em três momentos, de acordo com os distintos ciclos recentes das universidades brasileiras: o primeiro se inicia a partir de meados dos anos 1990 (coincidindo com a chegada ao poder de Fernando Henrique Cardoso); o segundo, a partir de início/meados dos anos 2000 (coincidindo com a chegada ao poder do PT, inicialmente com Lula e depois com Dilma Rousseff); e o terceiro, atualmente em curso e vivido desde o ano de 2017, após o *impeachment* da presidente e a ascensão do grupo político que comanda o país sob o governo de Michel Temer.

Palavras-chave: Educação superior. Universidades brasileiras. Democracia e acesso.

1.

Higher public education in Brazil is going through a critical moment, to say the least. Brazilian newspapers report every day the danger of universities not being able to finish out the school year. University rectors make radical cuts in their in-house expenditures and denounce the worst time in terms of budget in recent memory. On the other hand, the federal government, through the ministry of education, insists on putting the blame on the inefficiency of the universities themselves, in their spending and in their internal mismanagement.

In this context, and this discussion, I believe it is worth taking a few steps back to get a better perspective. To recall a scenario historically more vast in our public education can bring us, perhaps, a broader and more accurate framing of the problem we are experiencing today.

In the case of Brazil, the history of higher education does not extend too far back. Unlike the initiatives in North America and even in Spanish America, the higher education courses in Brazil only started in the nineteenth century. Universities, on the other hand, were only founded at the beginning of the twentieth century and had very uneven patterns of expansion: the University of São Paulo, from the 1930s onwards, sought to import French standards, while around the years 1940 and 1950 there began a large influx of federalization of so many other universities around the country. This set of public universities (which coexisted with a minority of private universities, especially Catholic) ended up centralizing the training of personnel and the production of knowledge in Brazil until the end of the twentieth century, which began new cycles for our universities.

In fact, I believe that especially in the last twenty years, Brazilian universities have undergone moments of important adjustment, both strategic and very distinct – in their retraction, and in their expansion, in their elitism and democratization – that deserve to be evaluated. This is what this paper will address.

In this talk, I will divide these recent cycles of Brazilian universities in three distinct phases: the first, from the mid-1990s (coinciding with the coming to power of Fernando Henrique Cardoso); the second, from the early/mid 2000s (coinciding with the arrival to power of the PT (Workers Party), initially with Lula and then Dilma Rousseff); and the third cycle, currently in progress, lived since last year after the impeachment of the president and with the rise of the political group that currently leads the country under the government of Michel Temer.

2.

Whether one agrees or not with the educational policies implemented by Fernando Henrique Cardoso (and his minister of education, Paulo Renato de Souza) starting in 1995, one thing is undeniable: there was a clear project of change in Brazilian higher education. And this project was based on two basic premises, from which a series of complementary actions were derived: on one hand, the mistrust with regard to federal public universities, seen as the *locus* of inefficiency, of corporatism and waste; on the other hand, the investment in the expansion of the system of private universities, seen as the virtuous place of the efficiency that comes from competition, the pursuit of resources in the market and as the possibility for faster (and more austere point of view of public spending) towards the expansion of higher education to vast numbers of young people who had no possibility of access to a university. In fact, upon reflection, one perceives that this educational policy was in full agreement with a general plan policy from that same government, which also implemented large privatizations of state-owned enterprises, reform of the State and welfare (which occurred in 1998) and in various other fields which showed, in short, a distrust in the public sphere in favor of the private sector.

The upshot of this policy was actually a huge retraction of resources from the public universities: teachers and other employees saw their salaries lag and freeze; the funds for student scholarships were drastically diminished; there was a decrease in the transfer of funds for university budgets, compromising the basic upkeep of federal universities; there was a great amount of faculty and staff re-

tirements (which has increased exponentially in view of the project of reform in the pension system) that have not been recovered, effectively shrinking Brazilian universities. There was a cut in public investment in science and technology. In light of this situation, there was what was called at the time a “brain drain” from the federal universities to private universities or to institutions abroad.

There occurred, accordingly, a dramatic increase in colleges (“*faculdades*”), university centers and private universities in this period, which effectively made it possible for certain portions of the population to have access to higher education, ones that would not have had this opportunity in previous years. With the unlocking of old legal mechanisms that historically closed off access to higher education for the broader population, university enrollments grew, always in the private sphere. But this increased access to higher education, which was truly important, brought with it certain consequences and side issues. For example, there was a certain lack of control with respect to admissions in some disciplines – and Law is perhaps the most emblematic example. Due to that cycle of the expansion in private education, there are now in Brazil, approximately 1,400 Schools of Law (comprising approximately half of all such courses worldwide), which in turn brought negative consequences, both for the job market and to the reputation of the practice of law, as well as the dynamic itself of legal education. In addition, as a general rule (always subject to important exceptions), private institutions of education that were created in this period did not come accompanied by a culture of effective production of science and technology, or any emphasis on the basic sciences nor a value for the teaching profession, so that the large increase in institutions of private higher education did not exactly produce the expected consequence of giving a boost in terms of creation of knowledge. In spite of 87.4% of the Brazilian institutions of higher education now being private (according to data from the Census of Higher Education, 2014), it is the Public University that continues to be the origin of approximately 90% of the production of science and technology in Brazil.

Another important effect of this growth worth noting was the following: although there was a clear intention to increase the democratization of higher education, the multiplication of private universities did not put an end to a certain elitism that characterized public universities. The problem is that, due to its highly competitive selection process, those who continued to enroll in federal universities (more consolidated, traditional and free) were the children of the families who could attend the best high schools, which, in general, are often private. Which is to say: the strange Brazilian equation, according to which the quality of secondary education is in expensive private schools and the quality of higher education is in the free public universities meant that, generally, the rich continued to predominate in the best universities and the poor (or those

who eventually began to access the system) would keep to private universities. In other words: the system, in addition to being elite, only deepened inequities. And for that reason, in this period, and in general, federal universities (at least in the most popular majors, such as medicine, law, engineering) were the place of white middle-to-upper-class students.

3.

A few years after the arrival of the PT (Workers Party) to power in Brazil, already in the early years of the millennium, a different sort of project for public education began to emerge. There was a clear idea that a change was needed in the public higher education system, and all its inherent problems.

That is not to say that in this period private higher education was attacked or forgotten: in reality there was a relative halt in the creation of new private institutions (which, in part, was motivated by the exhaustion of the market itself which, if previously repressed, had now reached its limit), and yet policies were put in place that in fact largely benefited this new powerful market of higher education that had been created in the country. The creation of governmental programs such as PROUNI (the University for All program), and the Ministry of Education FIES Fund (student loan program), aiming at increasing the attendance of vulnerable student populations in private institutions, became in fact a government lifeline for the survival of private higher education.

Nonetheless, the bigger change in the design of the new cycle of government was actually in public higher education. There was a gradual restoration of salaries and job openings for teachers and staff in public universities. There was the creation, by Decree number 6.096/2007, of a program called REUNI, dedicated to the restructuring and expansion of Federal Universities, which further involved the increase in the number of teachers, funds for infrastructure, the multiplication of *campuses*, and even the creation of new federal universities. After the closing of the cycle started by the REUNI, in the year of 2013, there followed an expansion in programs specific to some majors in federal universities, especially in the disciplines of engineering, medicine and in professional degrees. In the year 2014, a new National Education Plan (PNE) was approved, drawing up overall goals up to the year 2024, in which there was a forecast of dramatic growth, to the point of approximating access to public higher education for the whole country. There was, likewise in this period, a substantial increase in funding for science and technology, which was felt strongly in the nation's

funding bodies. There was a great impetus for internationalization, in which the creation of the program “Science without Borders”, aimed at undergraduate students, was the most prominent.

In summary, at least up to the year 2014 and the beginning of 2015 (when the Brazilian economic crisis also began impacting public policies) we saw a transformation in the landscape of the federal universities in comparison with the previous cycle: the majority of universities restructured, expanded and established lines of funding for research, and with the help of renewed salaries, this prompted an unquestionable leap in the production of science and technology in Brazil.

In parallel to this, there was also a change in the forms of access to the federal universities, which resulted in a significant reduction of its traditional elitism. Backed by the recognition, on the part of the Supreme Court, of the constitutionality of the system of racial quotas for admission to university (in the decision of the ADPF 186, issued by the Rapporteur, Minister Ricardo Lewandowski, in the beginning of 2012), on August 29th of 2012, the federal government enacted Law 12.711, requiring all federal universities to implement a system in which 50% of all vacancies should be reserved for students coming from public schools -- a policy devised to increase the proportion of low-income students as well as those of ethnic minority backgrounds.

As a backdrop for these policies, there was a purpose of social inclusion, democratization of access and a desire to decrease social elitism within federal universities, so that the increasing presence of poor, black and indigenous students in undergraduate courses -- virtually non-existent in previous years -- began to be felt.

4.

On August 31st, 2016, with the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff, thus ended the cycle of power of the PT and began a new one when vice-president Michel Temer took office, who sought and continues to seek a political and ideological change, one more radical than his predecessor. Amid all of these adjustments (among which the freezing of public expenses for twenty years, the newly approved labor reforms and the still pending reform of the private pension system can be considered most prominent), there is clearly a radical change in the policy the public federal universities.

The process of the expansion of federal universities stopped being promoted. More than that, the covenants of the expansions that had already occurred

in recent years between universities and the federal government, and currently in progress, have been the object of permanent tension. The budget for the year 2017 saw -- for the first time in decades -- a nominal decrease in funding for public universities. This fact is particularly concerning for at least two reasons: the vast majority of universities are still in the process of expansion of their *campuses* and, moreover, the largest expenditure of all the universities actually lies in maintenance contracts and services that do not “freeze” or reduce, but whose cost rises every year.

In addition, the (already reduced) budget funding, has suffered a more radical curtailment than in previous years: the amounts required for the maintenance of universities (overhead costs) have yet to be fully released, effectively jeopardizing the very livelihood of the universities through the end of the year, which will be unable -- if the situation does not change -- to provide for their most basic expenses, such as electricity, sanitation and safety. Furthermore, the amounts allocated to investment (capital) suffered the biggest cuts, virtually ruling out any new development or laboratories in most universities. The assembly of the rectors of federal universities is unanimous in saying that this is the most critical time Brazil has faced, in regard to the subsistence of our universities, in over two decades. And the approval of the constitutional amendment 95/2016, at the end of last year, which limits public spending for twenty years, including in the field of education, does not bring good prospects for the future.

The program “Science without Borders” has been deactivated. There was the extinction of the Ministry of Science and Technology, now merged with the Ministry of Communications. The lines of funding for research, science and technology suffered an important reduction, which is being felt in all development agencies. Only 20% of the targets of the national plan for education envisioned for 2017 have been met, and recently the federal government vetoed a proposed law that gave priority to the achievement of these educational goals in the future. And the scientific community awaits, with distress, what further changes in the general policies and inclusion may be implemented in this new cycle, now going on in public higher education for just over a year.

5.

To the extent that it perceives a clear retraction of the role of public universities currently, at the same time in which it sees a strong support for certain business sectors by government, some are left to think that the policies

of the current federal administration with respect to federal universities, to higher education and to the promotion of science and technology, have simply returned to the 1990s. It would be a cycle in the direction of the return of the belief in the virtues of the market versus the belief in the virtues of rationality in public universities. However, I think otherwise. Although there is clearly a *bias* in favor of the market, and a distrust of the efficiency of the public sphere, in addition to forfeiture of social rights in the current government, I believe there is a fundamental difference between what happened twenty years ago and what is happening now. For, while in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government – agree with him or not – there was a clear and structured plan for higher education within the project of the country which then was being built, the same cannot be said of the current government. You do not see a new or structured policy, be it for private or public higher education. These institutions, in fact, as already mentioned, are finding themselves constrained to reduce the debate of higher education to the mere possibility of their own survival, to how they will simply get by until the end of this year. There is no new strategic plan for the future, while the old plan (consolidated in the National Education Plan of 2014) is increasingly falling by the wayside. The debate concerning federal university spending, on the other hand, is simply discussed in the same breath for the need for cuts in public spending in any other sector of the government. Education seems to have been reduced to a mere “expense” and not an investment for future generations or even for the economy that aims for new heights.

The panorama of Brazilian higher education, given the historical characteristics specific to its private sector, will not be able to make a structural leap in the short term without a strong and decisive rededication to the strength of our public universities, in which the overwhelming majority of our laboratories, researchers, and production of science and technology can be found. It is a time of impasse. But it will also always be one of hope and optimism, or, as one certain critique has put it, “pessimism of reason and optimism of will”. Or, as we like to say in Brazil, “hope is the last thing to die”.

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