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ABOUT THE END OF FREE PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN BRAZIL¹

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Abstract

This article discusses free public higher education in Brazil. First, it contextualizes the topic and then systematizes the arguments in favor of charging tuition fees, justifying them in the light of empirical evidence and concepts used to support those arguments. In the same analysis, it presents counterpoints to the arguments raised and briefly discusses ideological and financial interests that call for the end of free public higher education.

PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION • EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES • FREE TEACHING • HIGHER EDUCATION

SOBRE O FIM DA GRATUIDADE DO ENSINO SUPERIOR PÚBLICO BRASILEIRO

Resumo

O artigo reflete sobre a gratuidade do ensino superior público brasileiro. De início, contextualiza-se o tema e, em seguida, são sistematizadas as teses favoráveis à cobrança de mensalidades, verificando sua validade à luz das evidências empíricas e dos conceitos utilizados para sustentação dos argumentos. No mesmo movimento de análise, apresentam-se contrapontos às teses levantadas e, por fim, são discutidos brevemente os interesses ideológicos e financeiros que clamam pelo fim da gratuidade do ensino superior público.

PRIVATIZAÇÃO DO ENSINO • DESIGUALDADES EDUCACIONAIS • ENSINO GRATUITO • ENSINO SUPERIOR

¹ This text is dedicated to professor Celso de Rui Beisiegel (*in memoriam*), a scholar and restless supporter of the Brazilian public education.

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A PROPOS DE LA FIN DE LA GRATUITÉ DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR PUBLIC AU BRÉSIL

Résumé

Cet article discute la gratuité de l'enseignement supérieur brésilien. Il contextualise d'abord le thème pour ensuite systématiser les thèses favorables à la non gratuité afin d'en vérifier la validité à la lumière des données empiriques et des concepts utilisés pour soutenir ces arguments. Des points opposés à ces thèses sont aussi présentés et finalement sont abordés brièvement les intérêts idéologiques et financiers qui réclament la fin de la gratuité de l'enseignement supérieur public.

PRIVATISATION DE L'ÉDUCATION • INÉGALITÉS ÉDUCATIVES • ENSEIGNEMENT GRATUIT • ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR

SOBRE EL FIN DE LA GRATUIDAD DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR PÚBLICA BRASILEÑA

Resumen

El artículo reflexiona sobre la gratuidad de la educación superior pública brasileña. Inicialmente se contextualiza el tema y a continuación se sistematizan las tesis favorables al cobro de la matrícula, verificando su validez a la luz de las evidencias empíricas y de los conceptos utilizados para apoyar los argumentos. En el mismo movimiento de análisis, se presentan contrapuntos a las tesis planteadas y, finalmente, se discuten brevemente los intereses ideológicos y financieros que exigen el fin de la educación superior pública gratuita.

PRIVATIZACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN • DESIGUALDADES EDUCATIVAS • ENSEÑANZA GRATUITA • EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The gratuity of public higher education is a relatively recent fact in Brazilian history. Bosi (1986, p. 64, own translation) states that “strictly speaking, before the age of 30, only the first four years of formal education were contemplated with the provision of widespread public school”². As for the 1946 Constitution, “limiting the gratuity of public secondary and higher schools only to students who actually had minimal financial resources [...] paved the way for a hybrid figure, paid public education”³ (BOSI, 1986, p. 65, emphasis added, own translation). According to Luiz Antônio Cunha (1996), several fees were charged to the students: for the “chairs” attended (which were equivalent to the disciplines of today), enrollment, exams and the issuance of diplomas. It was only in 1947 that the official education became free for all levels, with the state of São Paulo being the pioneer in this. In federal establishments and other states, education maintained the aforementioned charges. Gradually, fees became lower and lower, leading to what we now know as state-owned, free, public higher education (CUNHA, 1996, p. 143).

² In the original: “a rigor, antes de 30, só os quatro primeiros anos de educação formal eram contemplados com a previsão da escola pública generalizada”.

³ In the original: “limitando a gratuidade das escolas secundárias e superiores públicas tão somente aos alunos que de fato provassem mínguas de recursos [...] abria caminho para uma figura híbrida, o ensino público pago”.

With the civil-military dictatorship (which began in 1964) in power, expanding the federal undergraduate public network would impact the priorities of investments in the country's infrastructure sectors, which were considered strategic (MARTINS, 1987; ROMANELLI, 2001). The focus has shifted to Brazilian post-graduation and research. The military favored the opening of private establishments through interference in the Federal Council of Education, created in 1961 and responsible for authorizing the opening of both courses and institutions. Most of the board members were linked to the lucrative sector (MARTINS, 1989). The state has also funded educational entrepreneurs through non-taxation for many years, even with the empirical evidences that such institutions already acted as companies. Tax exemptions for private educational institutions are codified in the 1946 Constitution. Since this date, they have remained untouched until their regulation in the 1988 Constitution (Article 213), the 1996 LDB (Law of Guidelines and Educational Bases). The article 20 and the creation of decrees in 1997 discriminated profit-making institutions (which would not be exempt from tax from that moment on) from other private institutions that would be classified as non-profitable (confessional, community and philanthropic), which ensured tax immunity. All educational institutions were exempt from tax for engaging in an activity which was, given its character, legally prohibited from making a profit. Oliveira (2009, p. 741, own translation) summarizes: "It was disguised, because the legislation prohibited educational institutions, 'by their nature', to make a profit"⁴. Objectively, however, tax exemptions constituted a legal instrument of indirect public funding for higher educational entrepreneurs, because by not paying taxes for many years, they obtained a wealth accumulation that other companies could not. Durham (2003, p. 25, own translation) points out the mechanisms that such institutions used in order to hide their profits from student tuition:

[...] designation of maintainer members for very high-paying management positions, diversion of funds to other ventures or for the private use of the maintainers (acquisition and maintenance of executive jets, luxury cars and use of large representation allowances). An effective control of these expenditures has never been established.⁵

Along with the tax exemptions, there were subsidies, such as the educational credit, conceived in 1976 by the former Minister of Education of the civil-military dictatorship, Jarbas Passarinho, and since 1999 called Student Finance Fund for Higher Education (Fies, in the Brazilian abbreviation). As a result,

⁴ In the original: "era dissimulado, pois a legislação proibia que as instituições de ensino, 'pela sua natureza', dessem lucro".

⁵ In the original: "designação dos membros da mantenedora para cargos de direção com salários muito elevados, desvio de recursos para outros empreendimentos ou para o uso particular dos mantenedores (aquisição e manutenção de jatos executivos, carros de luxo e utilização de grandes verbas de representação). Nunca se conseguiu estabelecer um controle efetivo destes gastos."

since 1970 the public participation in the total higher education enrollment has decreased. Exactly 48 years after that, the latest systematized data, of 2015, indicate that among the 8.03 million students enrolled in higher education, 6.08 million were in private institutions – in the vast majority of cases in for-profit institutions – and Brazil has not developed a significant public university network (CUNHA, 1975; SAMPAIO, 2000; DURHAM, 2003; MARTINS, 2009; ALMEIDA, 2014). It is the educational entrepreneurs, their representative associations connected to the political power, as well as international organizations that serve as an intellectual and financial support, as it will be shown later, promoting the discourse of “social injustice” in the Brazilian public higher education and making an ostensive campaign to turn it into a paid service.

THE THESIS OF THE “ECONOMIC ELITISM” OF THE STUDENTS

The thesis states that in public education the student body is predominantly composed of “very rich”, “richer” or from the “economic elite” students (CASTRO, 2001, 2005). This theme frequently emerges in the public sphere, stimulated by documents produced either at the governmental level or by international institutions. In November 2003⁶, a document entitled *Gasto social do governo central: 2001 e 2002* (Social spending of the central government: 2001 and 2002) was released, produced by the Secretariat of Economic Policy of the Ministry of Finance, whose secretary was Marcos de Barros Lisboa. This document states that “around 45% of the federal government resources for higher education benefit only individuals who are among the richest 10% of the population” (BRASIL, 2003, p. 35). Already in 2001, two years earlier, the Institute for Labor and Society Studies had released the document entitled: *Desenvolvimento com Justiça social: esboço de uma agenda integrada para o Brasil* (Development with social justice: an outline of an integrated agenda for Brazil), which read:

[...] the free Brazilian public higher education is an example of how inequality is constructed and perpetuated. The only ones who have access to it are the 40% richest of the population. 80% of the seats are filled by the 20% richest.⁷ (INSTITUTO DE ESTUDOS DO TRABALHO E SOCIEDADE - IETS, 2001, p. 5, 18, emphasis added, own translation)

The argument that supports the “paid public university” was replicated, according to an article in a prestigious scientific journal⁸. The income levels used

⁶ There is another previous document, dating from April 1991, entitled *Proposta de uma nova política para o ensino superior* (Proposal of a new policy for the higher education), which proposed, at the time, the idea that the public university should be paid, since it served to the rich class.

⁷ In the original: “a universidade pública gratuita brasileira é exemplo de como a desigualdade é construída e perpetuada. Praticamente, só têm acesso a ela os 40% mais ricos da população. 80% das vagas são preenchidas pelos 20% mais ricos.”

⁸ *Ciência Hoje*, edited by Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência (SBPC) (*Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress*).

for the definition of the social categories were: the richest 10% earn at least BRL 571.00 a month; the middle class earns between BRL 131.67 and BRL 571.00 and, finally, the poor earns less than BRL 131.67 (CORREIA, 2005, p. 61).

In the argument raised, there are three interconnected elements which deserve discussion. The first element would be of *empirical order*. Thus, for the refusal or acceptance of the premises presented, we would have to empirically verify whether or not they correspond to reality. In other words, to discuss the “empirical truth” of the statements, their “factual content” (SALMON, 1978).

For the case under analysis, it means analyzing the socioeconomic profiles of students of public universities. Regarding this theme, there are global researches contemplating all the Brazilian public education (federal, state and municipal) and specific researches of each institutions. In the first group, both the data from the former National Course Exam (or simply “Provão”, an informal name used in the past for what is now known as the National Student Performance Examination – ENADE), as it was pointed out in the study of Sampaio, Limongi and Torres (2000) and the data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD/IBGE), in any of its editions, disallow the thesis of economic elitism in public universities (SCHWARTZMAN, 2003; CRUZ, 2004; SOUZA, 2005; CORBUCCI, 2007; ANDRADE; DACHS, 2008; CARVALHO, 2011). Researches carried out by university organs and/or researchers that study access and permanence in the public university also found different results regarding the public higher education students. (HUTCHINSON, 1960; FORACCHI, 1982; NÚCLEO DE APOIO AOS ESTUDOS DA GRADUAÇÃO, 1993; CARDOSO; SAMPAIO, 1994; HIRANO *et al.*, 1988; FERREIRA, 1999; SANTOS, 1997; BOSI, 2000, GHISOLFI, 2000; CARVALHO; GRIN, 2004; ALMEIDA, 2009).

Such investigations reveal a more nuanced and complex reality, pointing out that although there are great educational inequalities in access to higher education, in this social space a *heterogeneous middle class profile* composed of economic and symbolic cleavages predominates, in which a *privileged small segment* composed of an upper middle class is overrepresented in the most disputed courses. In other low and medium competition careers, we can observe sectors of the *typical middle class*, *lower middle class* and, in recent years, through various inclusive policies such as quotas, bonuses and the effort of community preparatory courses, the presence of more *low-income individuals*. Therefore, the thesis of “economic elitization” is inconsistent, since, by not addressing the empirical elements of the socioeconomic profiles according to the student’s career, it ultimately takes a part (a stratum of students allocated in the most competitive courses) for the whole (group of students mostly from public higher education), resulting in invalid argumentation, due to a generalization that is not supported by the reality under study.

On November 21, 2017, the World Bank brought back to discussion the same thesis of the “richest”, a generic and not very accurate language when discussing social class. Referring to the composition of students of Brazilian federal higher education institutions, the document states that “65% of students

are in the richest 40% of the population” and, therefore, must pay the university tuition (BANCO MUNDIAL, 2017). The data from the VI Survey of Socioeconomic and Cultural Profile of Students of Brazilian Federal Higher Education Institutions reveal that 51.4% (in other words, more than half of the students) have a family income of up to three minimum wages. A very small group of 10.6% has a family income of ten gross minimum wages. This is the general overview picture. If we divide the data in terms of Brazilian regions, there are more variations that lead to very distant conclusions from the ones that state that students are the “richest” (ASSOCIAÇÃO NACIONAL DOS DIRIGENTES DAS INSTITUIÇÕES FEDERAIS DE ENSINO SUPERIOR; FÓRUM NACIONAL DE PRÓ-REITORES DE ASSUNTOS COMUNITÁRIOS E ESTUDANTIS, 2016).

Proponents of this thesis make a direct and mechanical equation between *average income stratum and economic elite*. In order to do so, they divide the students in five parts (quintiles, 20% groups) and, based on an average income stratum, they classify the “rich x poor” and/or “richer x poorer” pairs. Thus, one of the most debated and controversial categories in the humanities framework, the middle class – for a more precise definition, important attributes such as parental education, certain financial reserve, certain financial wealth, status of the work performed, among others, must be considered – is simply and strictly defined in terms of *average income distribution*:

[...] the so-called Brazilian middle class is at the top of the social pyramid and, *statistically*, is in the range of the richest people in the country. The monthly per capita household income does not need to reach 700 reais to be among the richest 10% of the Brazilian population [...] in the statistical sense, the true Brazilian middle class is in the central part of the income distribution.⁹ (IETS, 2001, p. 18, emphasis added, own translation)

Thus, if an individual is situated in the middle of income distribution, the individual is simply defined as belonging to the middle class, and that is it. Here there is a *methodological* problem. For a more scientific definition, it is not enough just to use statistical aggregation, without making the relevant task of discussing, for the concrete situation of study, what these quintiles of income mean, who are these “poor” or “poorer” and who are these “rich” or “richer” people? Under which social conditions are these income divisions immersed when one thinks about the complex and particular situations of the large Brazilian urban centers? At what effective cost of living? And how is family composition structured? Do these families have their own houses and some income or wealth reserves? Are

⁹ In the original: “a chamada classe média brasileira está no topo da pirâmide social e, *estatisticamente*, encontra-se na faixa das pessoas mais ricas do país. A renda familiar per capita mensal não precisa atingir 700 reais para que se esteja entre os 10% mais ricos da população brasileira [...] *no sentido estatístico*, a verdadeira classe média brasileira situa-se na parte central da distribuição de renda.”

they individuals who pay rent? Are they people who do not have any financial reserves? And other essential questions could be elaborated for greater accuracy of the classifications. Statistics, which is important for the scientific development, cannot replace the necessary methodological work in any theory that aims to explain reality. In other words, the operational definition of social classes and social class fractions cannot be performed solely with statistical aggregate; there is a whole analytical work to be done. The essential aspect here is to know how the categories are defined for understanding the reality under study and also, from this construction, to verify how such categorizations – given the complexity of the reality (partly always arbitrary) – dialogue with the empirical world that they seek to explain. The social scientist can never forget the inherent limits to the construction of social categories:

[...] the empiricist theory will say that social classes are in reality [...] the main objection to the realistic theory consists in saying that: in reality, there is never *discontinuity* [...] *from a strictly statistical point of view*, it is impossible to say where poor ends and rich begins [...] the issue of stratification is very justified [...] *are the constructions built or found?*¹⁰
(BOURDIEU, 1979, p. 86, emphasis added, own translation)

There is also in this thesis another *conceptual, theoretical* problem. Notions from distinct and concurrent theoretical registers (social class theory versus elite theory) are mixed, as if they were part of the same conceptual framework. The middle class and the economic elite now have the same *conceptual, categorial status*. The theory of elites¹¹ in social sciences appears in studies regarding the sociology of political groups, since, underlying the various existing theoretical trends – unity of the elites, democratic elitism, circulation of the elites – it focuses on the issue of power, especially, but not only, the political one. In other words, the essence is the study of groups that struggle to occupy the most decisive positions, those that define the directions of a collectivity. Thus, in order not to completely empty the concept, losing the greater precision of its meaning, in the elite – whether intellectual, political, economic – are the people who occupy positions considered crucial in terms of decision making (MILLS, 1985, p. 69).

¹⁰ In the original: "La théorie empiriste dira que les classes sociales sont dans la réalité [...] la principale objection à la théorie réaliste consiste à dire dans la réalité, il n'y a jamais de discontinuité [...] de vue strictement statistique, il est impossible de dire où finit le pauvre et où commence le riche [...] La mise en question du découpage est très justifiée [...] les constructions sont-elles construites ou constatées".

¹¹ For a summary of the studies about elites see *Grynszpan* (1996).

A VARIANT: INVERSION OF PRIORITIES OR “ROBIN HOOD” IN REVERSE

Basically, it is about taking primary education as a priority in the public education spending in detriment of the higher education, which is seen as a “waste of money” because it would favor the “richest” – here there is a subtle combination with the previous thesis: “the profile of the national public spending on education is tremendously distorted by privileging the higher education segment” (KLEBER; TREVISAN, 2010, p. 29-30). The argumentative basis is that higher education would only generate a personal gain. Since those who do it are already privileged, “richer” or from the “economic elite”, it can be deduced that the “poor”, the “excluded ones” would be transferring resources to the “rich” through taxes – hence the metaphor of the distribution of income in reverse. The economic concept of “positive externality” is used in this argumentation. Carlos Eduardo Gonçalves, professor at USP School of Economics, states that:

[...] this is what we call positive externality in economics. If you learn how to read and write you vote better, you become a more productive worker and this generates gains not only for you but also for those who are around you. The impact of this is substantial for primary education, lower for middle education and much lower for the tertiary education [higher education].¹² (MONTESANTI, 2016, own translation)

Yet, there are two counterpoints to this thesis. Regarding the first point, about the spending between different levels of education. Corbucci (2007, p. 23) points out that the spending with basic education in the countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Development Cooperation (OECD) corresponds to 1/3 of what is spent on higher education. In Brazil this proportion is much smaller (1/14). The explanation is that the spending in Brazilian basic education is insufficient, but not because more money is spent on higher education. Therefore, it is not a supposed competition between spending on education that would be the core of this issue. Proponents of the inversion of priority thesis do not consider some basic hypothesis, such as the fact that higher education requires a more expensive material and human structure due to its research, teaching and extension activities. The second counterpoint relates to the question of the *social function of public university*. Carlos Henrique de Brito Cruz, former dean of the University of Campinas and former president of the São Paulo State Research Support Foundation (Fapesp), argues that public higher education requires contributions that go beyond the strict dimension of personal gain:

¹² In the original: “é o que a gente chama de externalidade positiva em economia. Se você aprende a ler e escrever você vota melhor, você se torna um trabalhador mais produtivo e isso gera ganhos não só para você, mas para quem está ao seu redor. O impacto disso é grande para a educação primária, menor para a educação média e muito menor para a educação terciária [ensino superior].”

[...] The reason that societies, since the year 1000, have created good higher education in universities has nothing to do with the wealth or poverty of the students who attend it. The reason has to do with the need, essential for the development of nations, to qualify people with the highest levels of education. People who are able to work with human knowledge, who make room for new discoveries and use those that were already made in order to create well-being and development. The university does not serve 'the richest 10%' - it serves Brazil.¹³ (CRUZ, 2004, own translation)

Thus, it is a limited vision to think that the benefit of higher education is exclusive to the student. In other words, we would not have the largest medical-hospital complex in Latin America without USP School of Medicine and the intellectual leaders who developed there. We would not have a company that manufactures aircrafts such as Embraer without the scientific knowledge developed at the Aerospace Technology Institute, a federal higher education organization. The examples could be multiplied here in several social spheres. As Cunha states (1996, p. 147, emphasis added, own translation):

[...] the product of a *true* research university, cultural and artistic production, and service, concerns the *entire* society. It is a very narrow view that defines it only in terms of those who will take a course, their future professional interest. A college course has only a small part directly and exclusively related to the student's future professional activity.¹⁴

THE THESIS OF THE HIGH COST OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENT

It is argued that the average annual cost of the private university student in Brazil is much lower. According to the World Bank (2017), the "average cost of a student in a private college is BLR 14.000 per year. In the federal colleges, this cost jumps to BLR 41.000". In this comparative analysis, there is a *methodological error* made by the supporters of the end of gratuity. They do not deduct expenses that the public university has and which are not exclusively related to the educational activities. All public universities have costs such as hospitals (serving its surroundings),

¹³ In the original: "Os motivos que têm levado as sociedades, desde o ano 1000, a criar boa educação superior em universidades nada têm que ver com a riqueza ou pobreza dos alunos que a frequentam. Têm, sim, que ver com a necessidade, essencial para o desenvolvimento das nações, de qualificar pessoas com os níveis mais elevados de educação. Pessoas capazes de trabalhar com o conhecimento humano, que dão lugar a novas descobertas e usam as já feitas para criar bem-estar e desenvolvimento. A universidade não serve "aos 10% mais ricos" - serve ao Brasil."

¹⁴ In the original: "o produto de uma *verdadeira* universidade-pesquisa, produção cultural e artística, e prestação de serviço, diz respeito ao *conjunto* da sociedade. É uma visão muito estreita a que o define apenas em função de quem vai fazer um curso, de seu interesse profissional futuro. Um curso superior tem apenas uma pequena parte direta e exclusivamente ligada à atividade profissional futura do estudante."

university restaurants with discounts or subsidies for low-income students (the so called “trays” or “URs” – university restaurants), museums, science outreach centers, radios, science parks and the retirees’ salaries. In this last item, for example, these are pension expenses. For a well-constructed comparison, it is necessary to separate such elements from the calculation. We should also ponder that, although the cost of the public university student was higher, it would be relevant to consider if the cost-benefit relationship would compensate for the society in terms of social investment. This brings us to the next thesis:

THE QUALITY INDISTINCTION THESIS AMONG THE MODELS

The proponents of the charge of tuition argue that, besides being more expensive, the knowledge gained by students of public institutions is not much different from that of lucrative private colleges (KLEBER; TREVISAN, 2010).

The only possible way to measure the knowledge acquired by higher education students in Brazil, with all its limitations¹⁵, is the Enade. What do the various editions of Enade reveal? With very rare exceptions, the federal public universities always perform better than the private ones. The private institutions that are doing well are generally the most well-established and non-profit institutions, without owners or investment funds behind them. In other words, those that come close to the public model of higher education, which, in Brazil, constitute a minority. This performance was already proven since the creation of evaluation instruments for the Brazilian higher education:

[...] the set of public IES [Institutions of higher education] presented the highest percentage of courses considered excellent and/or good (A and B). In all eight “Provão” editions, more than 40% of the courses offered by these institutions obtained at least the B concept. This result was largely due to the better performance of IFES [Federal institutions of higher education], followed by the state institutions.¹⁶ (CORBUCCI, 2007, p. 21, own translation)

By saying this, we do not mean that a well-qualified student is an exclusivity of the public higher education, since we know that there are institutions and courses in this system that have serious complications in terms of infrastructure and quality of teaching and research. There are interstate and interregional differences and hierarchies. However, there is no empirical

¹⁵ In practice, MEC does not exert a consistent control. Some universities violate evaluation systems by only allowing their best students to take the Enade test. With this practice, they can increase the grade and give the idea that they are very well positioned in the evaluative ranking. See Pompey, Lordelo e Silva (2012) and Saldaña (2012).

¹⁶ In the original: “o conjunto das IES públicas apresentou maior percentual de cursos considerados excelentes e/ou bons (A e B). Em todas as oito edições do Provão, mais de 40% dos cursos ofertados por essas instituições obtiveram pelo menos o conceito B. Em grande parte, esse resultado foi devido ao melhor desempenho das Ifes [instituições federais de ensino superior], seguidas pelas instituições estaduais.”

foundation in the proposition that there is no longer a qualitative difference in the education comparing public institutions and the lucrative private sector. The main difference between such institutions is that the public ones are focused on the production of knowledge resulting from research: “nine diversified research and doctoral universities are national or regional reference institutions. They are all public”¹⁷ (STEINER, 2005, p. 333-334, own translation). The difference is related to a structural issue: the dominant higher education model practiced in Brazil, which revolves around a logic of immediate profit, does not hire doctoral teachers because it reduces profit. Well, this directly affects both the innovation and the much-claimed productivity of the Brazilian worker. As a result of the predominance of low-quality, profit-making private universities, there is already a high rate of *functional illiteracy* in higher education: 38% of students cannot fully read or write because they do not master basic reading and writing skills (CARRASCO; LENHARO, 2002).

WHAT INTERESTS ARE AT STAKE?

The privatist view of higher education has been present in the debate regarding the public education policies since at least the 1960s, especially in those years, through reports and recommendations – Meira Mattos Report, the MEC-Usaid Agreements and the work of Rudolph Atcon (CUNHA, 1988, mainly the chapters 4 and 5). Nowadays, this discussion is brought to the table with high energy, reflecting both ideological and financial interests linked to such international organisms. In this regard, the actuation of the World Bank to end public free higher education and to foster the financial interests of lucrative higher education (LEHER, 2004) stands out. As Mundy and Menashi (2012) state, since the 1980s, the World Bank has supported the strengthening of the private sector in education in peripheral capitalist countries.

The investments in higher education (college or financial) made by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – a member of the World Bank Group – in Brazil since 2000, either with long-term loans and/or in shares, have totaled a few hundred million, as for example, Ideal Invest¹⁸ (including shares), Estácio Participações S.A., Faculdades Mauricio de Nassau (Ser Educacional group), Anhanguera Educacional Participações S.A. and Fundo de Educação para o Brasil). Therefore, the institution is a *partner* of some of the most important groups of lucrative Brazilian higher education. Such financial interests occur because the education sector today is a highly profitable, billionaire and also almost risk-free market, as it is supported by government resources – regardless of the ruling party – through the Student Finance Fund (Fies) and tax exemption through public

¹⁷ In the original: “nove universidades de pesquisa e doutorado diversificadas são instituições de referência nacional ou regional. Todas elas são públicas”.

¹⁸ Ideal Invest, creator of the Crédito Universitário Pravalor (Pravalor University Credit), having as a partner the ex-president of Banco Central, Armínio Fraga (IFC, 2017).

programs for the access of higher education, such as the Programa Universidade para Todos (ProUni – Program University for All).

Between 2010 and 2014, the amount of public resources for universities and private institutions went from BLR 880.3 million per year to BLR 13.7 billion, and BLR 6.6 billion financed university students from the eight largest educational conglomerates. The data from the 2014 Higher Education Census show that these eight largest groups (Anhanguera Educacional S.A., Gaec Educação S.A., owner of the Anima brand, Estácio Participações S.A., Kroton Educacional S.A., Ser Educacional S.A., Devry Education Group, Laureate International Universities and Unip), among which five are publicly traded, are responsible for 27.8% of Brazilian higher education enrollment or 2.1 million students, which exceeds public school enrollment (25.1%) (TOLEDO, 2016). Consequently, the ideological dimension spread, above all, by the supporters of the neoliberal thought (ANDERSON, 1995; MIROWSKY; DIETER; 2009), which presents a supposed “economic elitism” of the public university, is related to the financial dimension led by educational entrepreneurs who become millionaires by merging or selling their educational institutions, becoming the main shareholders of investment funds that concentrate capital and disrupt the competitive foundations in order to generate the *oligopolization* of the market.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the text it was possible to observe that the gratuitousness of the Brazilian public higher education is a very recent historical fact, beginning in the State of São Paulo in the second half of the 1940s and gaining a national legal fullness only with the Federal Constitution of 1988. It is recurrent, in the speech of educational entrepreneurs and their intellectual and financial partners such as the World Bank, the discourse of “social injustice” due to the gratuitousness – late in our country, we should add – of public higher education, given that at this level of education, supported by the money of the entire society, there is a predominance of people linked to the “economic elite”. The primary motto of the article was to systematize the arguments defended by those who are in favor of the charge of tuition in the public university education. In this effort, it was possible to verify that the argumentative strategy used by them is mainly based on four closely related theses. Thus, we proceed to a critical analysis of the assumptions of these four theses, highlighting their methodological, theoretical and empirical limits. The basic thesis – since the others, for the most part, are consequences of the first – is that the “economic elite” dominates public education. There are three fundamental problems in this thesis that invalidate it. The first is of an empirical nature, since the objective analysis of the researches on the socioeconomic profiles of the students of public universities does not allow us to say that most of them fall into the so proclaimed Brazilian economic elite. The second is methodological, because it uses a strictly statistical parameter in terms of average income distribution. Consequently, the operational definition

of students income groups lacks a more rational foundation, since it leaves aside central aspects for a more consistent categorization of the student body of public universities, their origins and social trajectories. In both problems, it is clear that without rigor, after dividing income into quintiles, proponents of the thesis of economic elitism take the middle stratum – understood in their conception only as those situated in the average income distribution – as part of the “richest”, from the “elite”, in an opposition to other strata. This leads to the third problem, of a theoretical nature, since, for a more scientific definition, one cannot mix notions developed in different theoretical fields and, surprisingly, concurrent: social class theory (middle class) and elite theory. It is known that the discussion regarding the middle classes or layers is extremely complex and controversial in the social sciences due to the empirical difficulty of delimiting them, as well as the multiplicity of existing theoretical-methodological contributions. Yet, despising it or diverting it from its field of development does not advance its understanding.

A second proposition in favor of charging the tuition lies in the priority of public educational spending. Its proponents argue that, since public university education favors the elite, this would ultimately contribute to greater inequality, since such resources could be employed in the elementary education, benefiting “poorer” individuals. There are two counterpoints to this thesis. The first refers to the educational spending between levels of education, since comparative research indicates that the *per capita* spending on higher education tends to be higher in any nation than that destined to basic education. Therefore, Brazil is not inefficient in this area. The second counterpoint is linked to the social benefit of public university education. Proponents of the “priority reversal” thesis believe that the benefit of public higher education is exclusive to the student who attended it. As it could be argued, such a view is limited because the functions of a public university extrapolate this dimension of personal gain and are linked to broader and more strategic goals of any country. The third proposition is the idea that the average annual cost of a private university student in Brazil is much lower compared to the high cost of a public university student. There is a methodological error in this comparative reasoning, since the calculation of public spending is based on the division of the annual budget of the public university divided by its number of students, resulting in very high numbers by Brazilian standards, since the social security of retired employees and other costs that universities have are not eliminated. Finally, one last thesis is that the knowledge acquired by the students of public institutions is not very different from that of private colleges. Such reasoning is not supported by reality, since national higher education evaluation exams reveal exactly the opposite.

It follows from the analysis that was carried out that the theses addressed here do not deal with the central issue: the perverse historical distribution of income among the Brazilian social classes and its intimate connection with the deterioration of the public school just as the lower income groups begin to access the higher education. These two structural elements, together with other specific factors of the particular universe investigated in a diverse country such as ours,

could advance the understanding of the socio-educational injustice in the context of public higher education.

What possible scenario of evolution should we consider? What is under discussion is the *attack on the public education system as a whole*. Public education, at all levels, is a social right of the citizen and a duty of the state, of the public sphere of modern society, a right that has been hard earned over the nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries. This is the target to be reached, in a historic moment in which combative speeches – the supposed economic elitism of the public university is one of them – emanated from the privatizing interests of international organizations and their internal partners gained greater penetration in the decisive spaces of power, maybe on a scale that was never seen before. There is an inescapable fact that emerges as a challenge in this field of studies and research: how to think about possible alternatives for the expansion and democratization of free public higher education, making it more diverse, in order to meet the different interests of portions of the Brazilian population by congregating public research universities, technology colleges, institutes of technical education, among other legitimate options that are sought by students, especially the lower income ones, if there are increasingly higher governmental incentives to the private sector, profitable and of a poor educational quality, as it is pointed out by the recurrent evaluations? It is important to emphasize that in the most developed countries of the world the public model, which combines state and private non-profit institutions, predominates.

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