

EXCELLENCE OR EQUALITY AT THE UNIVERSITY: THE LATIN AMERICAN CASE

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It would be a truism to state that for the Latin American universities, as well as those of the Third World, questions of excellence or equality can be resolved by accepting the idea that equality also means a *lack* of excellence (quality). In other words, we are dealing with universities that operate in countries where the process of democracy is still precarious and consequently the universities respond in a way that produces or legitimizes dominant classes. With regard to the qualitative level, the first duty is not to create or disseminate knowledge but rather to create functions in the Weberian sense of the word. Universities of the Third World are the germinators of new classes; but in general, in small societies, the possible social participation of those "new" classes is of a limited and elitist nature. The university does not play an intellectual role but rather a social role, in terms of creating and legitimizing its operative functions within a context where professional characterization is foremost instead of knowledge. Thus, in a Third World society, although it is important for an individual to obtain a university degree, it does not necessarily mean that he will also possess the knowledge and skills that this implies. The intellectual knowledge gained through university education may well be effectively divorced from the social function.

Universities of the Third World cannot reach a uniformly high level of excellence because the quality of the university is related to the social context in which it operates. While excellence in European and North American universities means scientific and technological capacity for innovation, social practice in Third World countries involves a transfer of technology. A country of the Third World transfers the very idea and organization of a university from a developed country; but in order to obtain a level of excellence, the university must adapt itself to the medium to which it has been transferred. A "symbiosis" must take place to generate an institution consistent with local circumstances. Even so, such an institution cannot reach equality criteria because the social philosophy promotes

conditions where either democracy or socialism is confronted with identifiable minority groups who control access to the dominating elites, specifically through the university.

The process of modernization requires internationally qualified human resources. Thus, the university of the Third World must sacrifice its natural base of social inequality to promote the level of excellence necessary to initiate or maintain social transformation plans. This is done through the creation of new universities supported by the private sector that is itself in great need of well-trained resources. This has been the leitmotiv of the emergence of universities created not only to satisfy intellectual interests but also to meet the concrete aims of the dominant economic groups in a society that requires qualified personnel to create and increase its wealth. In the case of Latin America we find that the social infrastructure is divided essentially into two groups: One attends to the needs of the masses, the public; and the other attends to the elite, the private group. In this manner, two models of universities have come forth. The old one corresponds to the public university inherited from the Spanish tradition and nationalized as a consequence of the independence wars of the nineteenth century. This public university, usually located in its own colonial premises, but sometimes following the pattern of the *cit  universitaire*, is in all cases organized after the traditional university pattern. It is autonomous, or covets autonomy, and is financed by the state. The other university is the modern one, created after the North American pattern, dedicated to the elite socioculturalization of the country and financed by the private sector of the society (community), even though the state may participate in its administration.

Generally in Latin America the public university is of poor quality or has a low level of excellence, for it drowns itself in its aspiration to become equal; the private university is the only one that can reach an international level of excellence by sacrificing any possibility of equality. Furthermore, the question of equality is one that must be approached at the primary school level because the social funnel allows only a limited favored group in the social hierarchy to enter even the public university. By looking at the figures of any Latin American or Third World country for students who have access to a higher education, one can observe the high rate of educational mortality at the primary and secondary levels. In other words, one way or another, only a small social portion enters the university and it will inevitably become a part of the social elite.

In the Latin American public university, a high degree of political agitation is traditional whenever the national sociopolitical context permits it. It is argued that this politicization is an obstacle to reaching a level of excellence and in this way the bases are laid down for the creation of a

new university, where one of the principles is the prohibition of political activity. In 1825, Jeremy Bentham discussed one of Bolívar's letters regarding the university in England: "The two great public calamities, Oxford and Cambridge universities, homes and seeds of political corruption in its most hateful forms, because of the rapid increase of the wealth of the country, have overloaded themselves with a larger quantity of students than they can actually handle, even though the maintenance expenses at those universities have increased so much that they will eventually close the doors to the useful teachings and the general habits of application."¹ Bentham felt that a private university should be created in London. On the same subject, Walter Ruegg has recently stated that "the decline in the standard of achievement of the German university is giving rise to distress in industrial and in governmental circles of the Federal Republic, which have proposed that something like the rigorous *grandes écoles* should be established for training their own staff."²

There is a certain belief apparent in Latin America that the traditional universities should be replaced by new ones that would adapt themselves to the exigencies of modernization. Here, the achievement of excellence becomes a synonym for depoliticization, and equality is ignored except in public universities which would become public calamities as a consequence, among other things, of their inability to control increased enrollment. Thus the dilemma between excellence and equality is subjected to a mechanism that denies equality to the university of excellence. It must then be asked if it is possible to elevate university quality in a mass society? If, in general terms, the developed countries have not been able to overcome this situation, it cannot be expected that countries with fewer resources can do it.

The question of the excellence of a university should sometimes be viewed as a worldwide interplay of abstract and concrete ideas, because in Latin America, as in any other area, political regimes that tend to standardize the minds also hinder the possibility of universalizing heterogeneous ideas. An example of this is the fascist regime in Chile, as is the homogeneous character of the Cuban university. If a society is prevented from freely discussing ideas, it is also prevented from properly keeping a university. Of course, in Latin America this situation varies from country to country; but if it is evident that equality has been extended in a country like Cuba, or has been prevented in a country like Chile, it is timely to state that only under a democratic regime can a university be at the same time excellent and equitable. This includes any type of democracy, such as democratic socialism, but naturally excludes any form of authoritarianism.

In the case of Venezuela, a liberal democracy, there exist both types of universities, public and private, because the society of the country is

made up of these two fundamental sectors.³ A line must be drawn between these two types: First, there are the public autonomous universities (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Universidad de Carabobo, Universidad de Los Andes, and Universidad de Zulia), which account for half of the population of university students; in the second sector (private-government), there are private universities (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Universidad Metropolitana, Universidad Avila, and Universidad Santa María) and nonautonomous institutions that are administered by the Ministry of Education (polytechnic institutes, pedagogical institutes, technological schools, colleges, and military schools). There are also three government universities that are not autonomous (Universidad Simón Bolívar, Universidad de Oriente, and the Universidad Centro-Oriente). Overall, half of the students in Venezuelan higher education attend the four public autonomous universities, while the other half is distributed between private universities and institutes.⁴ Approximately 100,000 students are enrolled in each of the two sectors, or nearly 7 percent of Venezuelan students at all levels. Education at the autonomous universities is tuition-free; fees are required at the private institutes and universities, although they are modest considering the standard of living.

As mentioned before, the autonomous universities are no longer efficient providers of leaders to industry and public administration, and, because of this, alternative universities have been created by private industry or by the government sector. On the other hand, it is true that the autonomous universities have built a reasonably large group of professionals who serve as bases for the country's structure. To this must be added the fact that the autonomous universities do not apply a policy of admissions standards in selecting students, while the other institutions do (except for the private universities, where anyone who can afford the tuition is accepted). An example of a university that does follow certain selection patterns in admitting students is the Universidad Simón Bolívar, which has been notably successful in its practical application.

However, the clearest proof of the failure of the Venezuelan universities to build the human resources necessary for economic and social development is the national government program financing an immense plan of education abroad. Called the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho program, its objective is to train large numbers of professionals and technicians in certain priority areas, especially personnel for the national administration of the country's oil and steel resources. This plan, still in its early stages, has been widely criticized as being expensive and difficult, because students are studying in foreign environments. It must be recognized that Venezuelan universities are historically oriented towards literature, the humanities, and, more recently, to the social sciences as well; they are not

capable of producing the large quantities of professionals and technicians that the country requires. However, if sending students from Venezuela to foreign countries is a policy that *can* be defended, it is also possible to advocate enthusiastically a policy that would create training centers within the country, in the zones where basic resources are developed (e.g., agricultural areas, cattle raising and fishing grounds, etc.). The Ayacucho plan has tried to apply criteria of excellence and equality by sending Venezuelan students to Europe and North America and by recruiting students from all over the country, granting some priority to those with highest academic grades and financing all their expenses. Both objectives are praiseworthy but difficult to realize.

Excellence per se does not exist; it is a concept whose value is relative to the social context where it is to be evaluated. There is a level of universal excellence, of course. An artist or a scientist may reach a decided standard of excellence and may fix it there; by this it is understood that the university, as creator and disseminator of knowledge, may reach a minimum level of excellence. Whatever may seem excellent to a developed country may not necessarily be useful to a country from the undeveloped group. In this sense, the universities of the Third World should not strive to attain the level of excellence of universities in developed countries. To do this is to imitate patterns and to maintain the trend of colonialism. Each area of the Third World should propose its own standard of excellence. A university that seeks to achieve the levels of excellence in universities of the developed countries, regardless of attempts to universalize its own historical-social dimension, simply stimulates the transfer of the "model" university from an alien environment, and nothing more.

The Ayacucho plan, which will send Venezuelan students to developed countries, will stimulate the young students' linguistic, cultural, and consequently the country's dependency. A level of excellence must include the notion of national conscience, and this can only be done by maintaining direct contact with the reality of one's country. How different it would be if the students under the Ayacucho plan were going abroad to study on the postgraduate level, having first graduated in Venezuela.

With regard to the equality of the Ayacucho plan, a rather common criterion in Venezuela has been applied: The best method for providing equal opportunities when allocating scholarships is to give them to students with the highest academic grades. In a liberal democracy such as Venezuela, which is quite rare in Latin America where most of the countries are authoritarian, this concept is understood to grant equality to everybody. But of a population of twelve million people, only 200,000 are acquiring higher education. It is not possible to speak of equal opportunities when half the school-age population is deprived of any education

beyond the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Only one out of every one hundred primary school students completes higher education. There is a strong association between the socioeconomic condition and the educational level reached. Students who complete their higher education are not necessarily the most competent intellectually but rather the most competent from the socioeconomic point of view; those who finish an educational cycle, whether middle or higher, are those with the means to do so. Those who will study abroad under the Ayacucho plan will be students who are the best qualified, socially speaking. Even if the plan should act to the contrary, it would be very difficult for a young student from the interior of Venezuela to adapt himself to an industrial city of Europe or North America.

Venezuela is one of the most homogeneous societies in Latin America and perhaps the most effective social democracy. We need to consider some of the social structure elements of the country as obstacles faced by higher education with regard to equality. We must also examine the fact that Venezuela, as most other countries of Latin America, is a mixed society, where blacks and Indians are discriminated against in social opportunities, especially higher education. Most Venezuelan commentators deny the existence of discrimination of any type, but it can be observed in the racial composition of the elites, where there is usually a higher quantity of whites. Two other variations affect the possibility of equality in higher education: Sexual customs, whereby women's opportunities remain limited, and age—half of the population is less than twenty years old, hence, anyone over thirty is automatically considered "old." In general, these obstacles to equality are faced not only by higher education but by education in general.

There are no empirical studies to prove or deny the above considerations, but if we examine the organization of the primary school in Venezuela, we realize that it leads towards a rigidly stratified regime, where socioeconomic conditions are fundamental in importance. Another factor that has been added is the nationality condition, the national origin. In the last twenty years, Venezuela has incorporated a population of approximately 10 percent of Mediterranean origin, Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians, and recently, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Peruvians. These immigrant groups, particularly the European, have rapidly ascended the social ladder and have incorporated themselves into the new middle classes. They rear the first generation born in Venezuela, usually send them to "national" schools, and in the eagerness for success, their children are in a better position to acquire higher education than discriminated sectors of the Venezuelan population.

Thus, when considering the composition of Venezuelan society, it

must be borne in mind that approximately one third of the discriminated population is comprised mainly of second-generation Venezuelans with a maximum expectation of an incomplete primary education. One third of the native lower-middle class, if not discriminated against, still aims for a complete primary education. The remaining one third of the population is made up of people ranging from middle class up to "elite"; people with great potential for higher education, among whom are the first-generation European immigrants, traditional members of the "elite" society, who take university education for granted and who usually study undergraduate and postgraduate courses abroad. These references concerning Venezuela can be applied to mixed Latin American societies with a high percentage of Indian origin, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, as well as to a country with African origin, such as Brazil. Thanks to the social transformation that Cuba experiences as a result of its revolution, its population is homogeneous; however, this is an exception.⁵

The three groups that make up the Venezuelan university community—professors, students, and administrative employees—develop complicated political processes from which their leaders emerge. It is true that in each of these processes the political forces represented are the same as those that are active in the national political arena. Its mechanisms to win votes, its financing, etc., do not notably differ from those used by the society at large; but in the long run, the university develops a peculiarity in its political mechanisms. We need not add that there are national political parties that appeal principally to the intellectual and that therefore use the autonomous university as their main office.

A dean and a faculty council direct each faculty (or school). The deans are elected by the members of the faculty, and the faculty council is made up of representatives of professors, students, and people graduated from the faculty in question. In March of 1975, the Universidad Central de Venezuela, the principal university in the country, elected its deans. Later in the year, the professors and the students elected representatives for the faculty council and other governmental organizations, such as school councils. In early 1976, the director of the university and its administrative employees were elected. Thus, in a period of approximately fifteen months, four important political processes will have taken place whose decisions affect academic affairs, with each of the four virtually paralyzing the university on the days prior to the election.

Each candidate for deanship, membership of any council, and especially the directorship, belongs to or is backed by a national political party. Each voter, according to his level (professor or student) is duly

instructed by the political party he represents to vote according to the party's wishes. Each candidate publishes his political "program," which usually coincides with that of the political parties represented. As a consequence, academic leadership is an open game for politicians who subdue with their power and strength those who only possess academic credits.

What can be expected from a system where university leaders are promoted mainly because of political influences? Can we expect that a determined level of excellence will ever truly be reached? It is doubtful. It is true that in any university, anywhere, there exists a political fight for academic positions, and there is a certain relationship between political ability and academic ability. In Venezuela this does not happen accidentally; it appears as if there were a law by which a person with limited academic ability automatically has greater political ability and is therefore closer to becoming a leader of the autonomous university.

An essential factor in university excellence is the open-market possibility for professors, whereby the institution can choose from among highly qualified individuals in other sectors of society—such as politics and private industry—through free competition. The traditional Latin American pattern, however, is one in which the professor carries on various other activities, even if deeply dedicated to the university. In Venezuela the concept of "exclusive dedication" has been applied through a contract in which a professor is forbidden from performing any remunerated activity outside the university. In practice, however, this mechanism is observed only by those who would not survive meaningful open competition, while others still undertake nonuniversity activities, even if nonremunerated or part-time. On the other hand, thanks to the contract regulations, professors are hired for life and are almost totally unremovable, as are the administrative employees. With these elements at hand it is easy to predict that a level of excellence is a utopian idea. This is in addition to the fact that the autonomous universities cannot select their students. They must accept everybody who finishes high school, but in most cases graduate only those students whose socioeconomic parameters permit them to complete the curriculum.

In view of the preceding, can the level of excellence exist in a university of the masses? Again, we doubt it. Recently the Universidad Central de Venezuela witnessed an increased enrollment in its night courses. Evening students face the same academic problems as day students; moreover, because of having to fulfill a day's work before going to class, they are less apt to learn and continue to attend indefinitely. In the long run, the political corruption and endemic weaknesses of the social system penetrate and influence institutions, including the university.

Even if some in the universities work at the international level of excellence, the impact on the university of the masses will be basically "anti-university."

This helps to explain the present tendency in Venezuela to create (1) private or "experimental" universities that, since they are financed by the national government, enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in their academic affairs, and (2) investigation organizations, such as the IVIC (Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Investigations) or the IESA (Institute of Higher Administration Studies), that grant advanced degrees outside the university system. However, it is not sufficient to bypass the situation by creating private universities or other institutions outside the national university system. This is an ideological answer to conventional interests that would render human resources for such narrow interests and not for the democratic social development, i.e., for the entire society. Such is the tendency, and it must be stated. The obvious possibility for reaching any level of excellence in the Venezuelan universities, and in Latin America, in general, lies in the development of superior centers of knowledge that operate with mechanisms different than those currently used by the universities; these could become the *good* educational institutions in the *good* society, understanding by this a democracy with equal opportunities for everybody.

Using Herzberg's terms,⁶ traditional education systems stimulate the tendency toward individual hygiene rather than individual achievement. A society whose educational content suffers under the influence of a cultural exogenous penetration banishes the possibility of a notion of Latin American conscience, in each individual country and on the continent as a whole. In other words, socioeconomic dependency is manifested in a brutal cultural dependency, and it is easier to transfer science than technology. In short, when exogenous pressures prevent a scientific and technological universal reaction, as well as one that would be related to the historical moment of the people of Latin America, then it is very difficult to reach a level of excellence in our universities—that is, an international level of excellence, a universal level. There can be no excellence in societies whose educational systems are poor.

The matter of equality is solved in the same manner at the Latin American university. There can be no equal institution in a society whose social structure does not correspond to social democratic conditions. The social barriers in Latin America make the university an institution of "elite builders" and tend to repel, one way or another, members of the lower social classes. It is not possible for the vast quantity of the discriminated population in Latin America to acquire a university education. This is a luxury those sectors cannot hope for, as they must work to survive. It is

almost a sin to speak of higher education in countries such as Haiti, or in impoverished areas of Brazil, or in the misery belts that surround the big cities of Latin America.

In summary, the Latin American university, in general terms, is a creator of functions but not an innovator. Excellence is innovation; Latin America transfers but does not innovate or invent. If an inventory of the different cultural goods of a Latin American were made, it would come to light that the implements used, from concrete goods to abstract goods, are in general transferred from the metropolitan centers of innovation and invention, scientific and technologic. If the same inventory were to be taken in a city of a developed country, it would be observed that few elements from cultural innovation in the Third World would be present.

For Latin American universities to become units of knowledge and not merely mechanistically functioning units, a social revolution would have to take place, one that would bring liberation from existing constraints and limitations, thus determining the area's necessary level of excellence on an equal and democratic basis. The Third World does not need to invent what has already been invented, but it is necessary to adjust the known knowledge in such a way that the adaptation to industrialization and modernization does not repeat the evils of the industrial society. A level of excellence would be one determined by the necessities of Latin America and not one imposed by the developed countries.

For the Latin American university to be excellent, it would have to be capable of determining its own level of excellence. For the university to be equal, it would have to foster a revolution in society that would overcome poverty, discrimination, traditionalism, and the despair into which the majority of Latin Americans have fallen. This comment can be applied to any country of the Third World. Under these conditions, to try to reproduce educational institutions that imitate the level of excellence of the developed countries would be a luxury as futile as the conspicuous consumption easily observed in any "new rich" bourgeois Latin American city. It is tragic to realize that while the countries of the Third World cannot reach the level of excellence pointed out by the developed world, they will fail to recognize their own limitations; it is hopeless to expect a general social revolution that would attempt to create institutions where democratic equality would function. Furthermore, even if the social revolution became a reality, is the university an institution that can be expanded without being damaged? The dilemma of excellence vs. equality still persists in the Latin American universities but it does not alter the organization of Latin American society. We must emphasize again the multiple and common problems faced by the universities of the Third World in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; they may require a variety of solutions

but will in every case have to reflect individual national conditions.

Let it be stated for Latin America and its universities, then, that excellence and equality are conditions still to be reached.

NOTES

1. Letter dated London, 13 August 1825, in "Bolívar y su época" (Publications of the X International Education Conference, Caracas, 1953), 1:234–38.
2. "The Intellectual Situation in German Higher Education," *Minerva* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 114.
3. On the political organization of Venezuelan society see my book *Desarrollo político en Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1974) and José A. Silva Michelena, *Crisis de la democracia* (Caracas: Universidad de Venezuela, 1970). Also see my book, *La sociedad venezolana* (Valencia, Venezuela: Universidad de Carabobo, 1973).
4. For more details on the recent organization of Venezuelan higher education, see Luis Manuel Manzanilla, "Política de educación superior en Venezuela" (Ponencia presentada ante la Conferencia sobre Innovaciones Educativas, Guadalajara, México, 3 a 7 de marzo de 1975). A more complete analysis is *Sistema analítico de la educación superior* (Caracas: OPSU [Planning Office for Higher Education], 1974). A chapter of my *Ideología y política en la universidad latinoamericana* (Caracas: Publicaciones del Instituto Societas, 1972) is devoted to the Venezuelan situation at the level of higher education.
5. Even in a society like America, one can see these situations. In addition to Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), see William H. Sewell "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," *American Sociological Review* 36, no. 5 (October 1971).
6. See *The Motivation to Work* (New York: John Wiley & sons Inc., 1959) and *Work and the Nature of Man* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1966).