

## UNIVERSITIES IN CRISIS: LEARNING FROM BRAZIL

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Imagine the situation. I'm at IFCS, the Institute of Philosophy and Social Science at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. The ancient building is right downtown, lined by listless homeless on its perimeter. It is embedded in streets lined with informal vendors, housing a red light district, and populated by drug dealers that, from time to time, invade the academy. The bustling traders stand cheek by jowl with book stores, a few grandiloquent coffee houses and the resplendent Portuguese Library. How many sociology departments can boast such a testy environment? The university is vulnerable to its environment in more ways than one.

Students and staff are on strike – who knows for how long – and the evening panel on “universities in crisis” has been included in the strike program. At 6p.m., the appointed hour of commencement a handful of students are lounging around in the auditorium – ironically called the Hall of Nobles, renamed for the occasion, People's Hall. By 6.45p.m., surrounded by an entourage, the star of the evening arrives: the newly elected – a strange idea to a gringo – rector. The auditorium is now overflowing with people eager to hear what their new rector would have to say. The show can begin.

But Roberto Leher is no ordinary rector. Professor of Education, former President of the Brazilian union of faculty, and a leader of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), he was elected with support from students and staff and a significant proportion of faculty. Our socialist rector, elected by the people, proceeded to congratulate the students on their strike action and then delivered a savage attack on budget cuts and the creeping commodification of the university. At the end of his speech he receives rapturous applause, but it's not clear how he will handle the budget crisis once he assumes office.

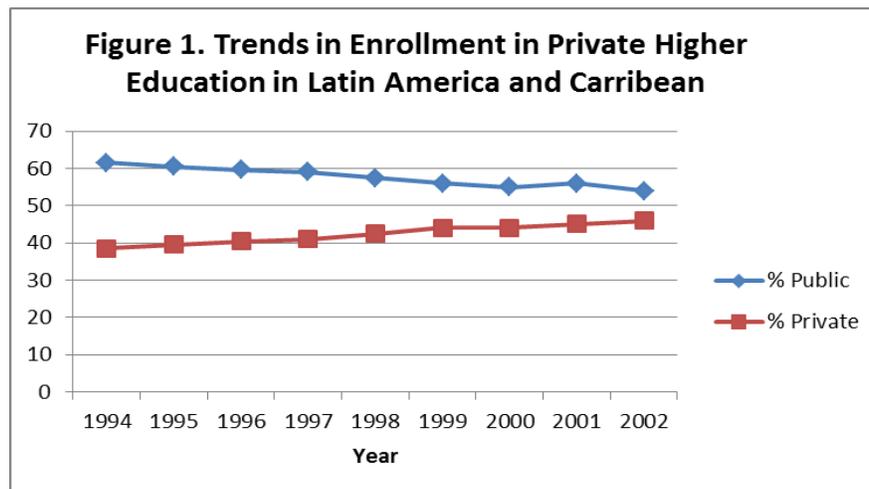
### ***Privatization: Combined and Uneven***

This looks like a Brazilian crisis, but it is not – it is a crisis with Brazilian characteristics, the nature of which I will explore against a broader background. Universities are in crisis everywhere, not just in Brazil, not just in Latin America, but in Europe, North America, Asia, Middle East and the post-Soviet world. The combined and uneven development of capitalism on a world scale has finally induced the marketization of the production and dissemination of knowledge. To be sure the encroachment has been uneven with many parts of Europe and some parts of Latin America so far facing a more limited, but nonetheless real process of privatization whereas universities in the US, the UK, and elsewhere in the Global South are succumbing to privatization. The encroachment of the market in knowledge production and dissemination has combined with preexisting national systems of higher education to produce very different outcomes, complexes of crises that affect different levels within each system in distinctive ways. But there are commonalities, too.

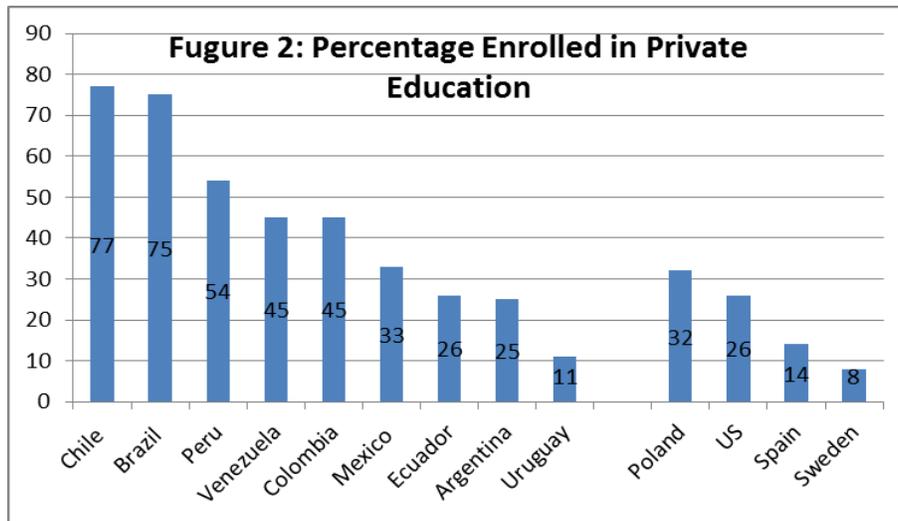
The diversity of responses accompanies the consolidation of a global field of higher education that incorporates national systems in a world hierarchy, graded according to

“standards” that mark the richest universities – the so-called “world class universities” – most of them to found in the United States. These standards were begun innocently enough by Chinese universities seeking to emulate the best in the US, but then those standards became the basis of world rankings, enthusiastically embraced by nation states, keen to sport their universities as among the best. Compulsory participation in this global field is also paradoxically driven by the selective withdrawal of public funds that throws universities increasingly into the hands of private clients whether they be large corporations or rich students – clients that have an interest in branding universities according to their investment potential. Privatization and rankings go hand in hand. The result, however, is a series of interlocking crises of finance, governance, identity and legitimation.

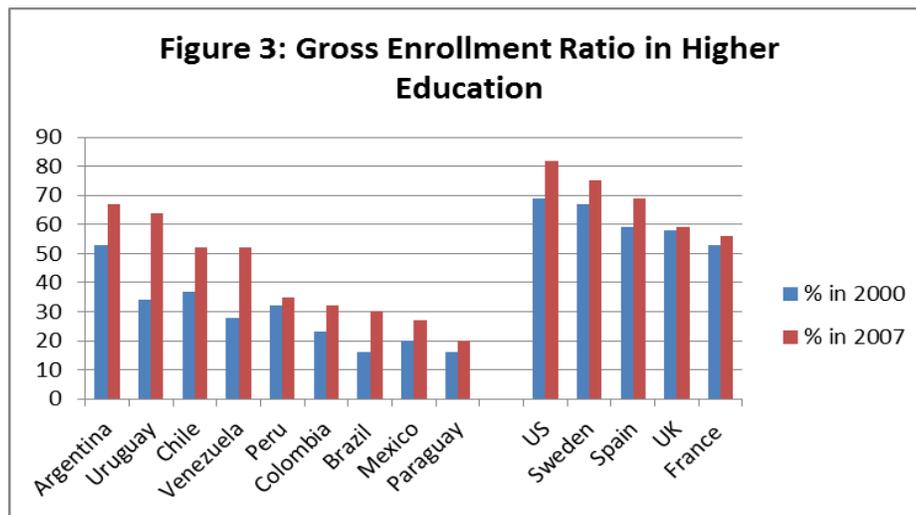
A few figures suggest the differences in the form and degree of privatization. First, taking the distribution of student enrollment in high education one can see how, taking Latin America and Carribean as a whole, there is a secular decline in public education and an equivalent rise in private education (Figure 1). .



However, the change is very uneven. Figure 2 shows how some countries the proportion of private education is very high (Chile and Brazil) whereas in other countries (Argentina and Uruguay), it is far lower. In both Chile and Brazil the system of public higher education represents only about 25% of student enrollments. In Brazil it represents the best of higher education whereas this is less true in Chile where (ass in other Latin American countries) Catholic institutions predominate.



Finally, we also see that throughout Latin America, and indeed the world, higher education has been expanding in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century. The Gross Enrollment Ratio is the proportion of students attending any form of higher education as a percentage of the recruitment age (18-24). In 2007 Argentina and Uruguay had enrollment ratios over 60% that put them in the same league as advanced capitalist countries. Brazil, on the other hand, had a much lower ratio, less than half those of Argentina and Uruguay. Of course, this says little about the quality



of higher education. Furthermore the Brazilian system seems to be expanding at a faster rate than any of the others, and in so far as this affects the public sector, it puts great strain on university budgets whether there are budget cuts or not. In short, privatization is moving ahead everywhere but with different consequences shaped by national contexts. Let us examine those consequences.

### ***Budgetary Crisis***

Privatization means that erstwhile public institutions face withdrawal of state funding, creating a budgetary shortfall that easily becomes a crisis if there are no other sources of revenue. What sources of revenue might there be? For the best universities it is possible to invite wealthy alumni or other donors seeking recognition to offer endowments, but this rarely adds up to much and can come with strings attached. Alternatively, universities can offer corporations cheap research facilities – both physical space, research infrastructure and the cheap labor of graduate students – in return for investment. Only the most prestigious universities can attract such funding and it, too, can favor a particular corporatist outlook on the part of the university, inclining it toward the interest of big business. In many parts of the world the major source of new revenue comes from student fees. While it is true that in much of Europe student fees are still limited, British and US universities have made up shortfalls by ascending fee structures. The English case is the most dramatic where in the space of two decades the fees rose from virtually zero to 10,000 pounds. In the US fees for public universities have been increasing for more than 4 decades. Once the ideas of student fees is introduced there seems to be no limit to their increase.

Moreover, fees become increasingly calibrated to the market power of the discipline with medical and law schools commanding greater fees than the humanities and social sciences, and economics commanding greater fees than sociology and anthropology. Another appealing strategy is to attract foreign students who will pay higher pays than domestic students, but this may require teaching in English, which gives enormous advantage to such countries as UK, Australia, US and Canada although other countries are introducing courses in English in Business Schools and allied disciplines, all of which comes with further distortion of the original mission of the university. As in other Latin American countries, Brazilian public universities are constitutionally barred from charging student fees, which closes off such a safety valve and so the pressure mounts on the other side of the equation – cost reduction.

The alternative strategy for coping with budgetary short falls is to reduce expenditures. Here there is a vast array of strategies. The most immediate strategy is to simply defund capital maintenance and renewal – fail to keep buildings in working order, letting physical infrastructure deteriorate. One can reduce services to students and faculty. All these strategies involve reducing the size of the work force. The alternative is to reduce the cost of the labor force by deploying a variety of strategies of “precarization” that transform the labor process and reduce the wage bill. There is the outsourcing of auxiliary labor – low wage service labor such as janitors, clerical workers, canteen workers, gardeners, etc. – to labor contractors who deny workers basic labor rights and protection. There is the insourcing of teaching by replacing faculty with low paid graduate students and lecturers. The two labor forces are segregated from each other and pitted against each other. New technologies of distance learning can be deployed to erode and deskill the teaching function itself. And, in Brazil, there is talk of even outsourcing faculty themselves through the creation of cooperatives of labor. More generally, there is an offensive against the benefits of all employees – health insurance, pensions, and sick leave.

According to the constraints under which they operate, different university systems tackle the budgetary crisis by orchestrating different balances between expenditure reduction and revenue creation all of which are mediated by and reverberate into crises of governance.

### ***Governance Crisis***

Once a university faces budget short-fall there develop external struggles to recover revenues and internal struggles as to who should bear the costs. Where the emphasis is to seek external revenues, whether from corporations, student fees or the state, the university develops an administrative arm that makes it look ever more like a corporation. The university administration develops a sales department to attract fee-paying students and corporate investment. It seeks to brand the university as having a superior product, and one measure of its superiority is its place in national and global rankings.

The university becomes imitative of a corporation and its structure comes to look ever more like a corporation with astonishing increases both in its personnel and in the payment of its personnel. The President of a University is selected by a Board of Trustees, composed of prominent politicians and businessmen and he is paid a CEO salary, with corresponding implications for the pay of the army of new administrators and consultants. At the very moment the university faces a budget crisis administrative costs balloon.

The administrative apparatus built on “expertise” rules over the faculty, students and staff. Gone is any semblance of accountability to those who teach and serve the university. In that sense the university has become a corporation, more responsive to the market than its education mission. Here the crisis of governance is the transition from a collegial form of rule to an oligarchy of administrators.

But there is an alternative model of governance, represented in many Latin American countries by the legacy of the Argentinian Córdoba Revolution of 1918 that led to the democratization of universities across the Continent. The Rector, equivalent to the President or Chancellor of a University, is not chosen by a Board of Trustees, but elected by students, staff and faculty, in varying proportions. Here at the Federal University, I am told, faculty carry 70% of the votes, students 15% and staff 15%. The Rector receives a modest salary, little more than his prior faculty salary. Without student fees to increase the Rector’s way out of the budgetary crisis relies heavily on reducing costs which comes at the expense of students, faculty and staff – a strategy that collides with the democratic character of university governance. The result is not a ruling oligarchy but continual turmoil and strikes that paralyze the operation of the university.

### ***Identity Crisis***

Responses to the budgetary and governance crisis call into question the very meaning of the university. There have long since been debates about the university’s true purpose, whether it is teaching or research, whether it is to train specialists or create well-rounded citizens, whether it is an elite institution pursuing excellence or whether it should open its doors to all and sundry, whether it is a mass university defined by a bureaucratic machine or a multi-university with many functions. But today the debates are far more serious and preempted daily by decisions that threaten the university’s viability.

At stake is the university's autonomy. In order to meet the budget crisis, the university undertakes strategies of revenue seeking that leave it beholden to large corporations. Should the university sell its soul to Halliburton, British Petroleum, Petrobras? Are there ways of protecting the university's autonomy in the face of such joint ventures? Do they in fact promote the vitality of the university? And do they actually contribute to solving the budgetary crisis or do they mean further maldistribution of funds, favoring those parts of the university that produce research attractive to corporations, and particular individuals so involved? Would this mean the down-sizing or even elimination of programs in the humanities and social sciences? In short, to what extent does the university become an arm of corporate capital?

Second, who rules the university internally? In the Brazilian model described above this is a subject of deep contestation as participation by students, staff and faculty is built into its constitution. When the cuts come there is an intense struggle over should bear them. However, in the US model, the principle of shared governance is being usurped by administrative fiat, and mock consultation. So in the US the administration decides without consultation and the hallowed principle of "shared governance" flies out of the window. Divided against each other, with their differential relations to the market, faculty are so busy defending their own turfs that they forget their common interests and the ever expanding managerial apparatus gets its way with ease. As the ranks of the tenured faculty are slimmed down and the casualized labor of lecturers replaces them, so they adopt short-term protective strategies and are complicit in the administrative expropriation of their power.

Third, the globalization of knowledge production has its own problems. In principle, having global reference points for the production of knowledge, transnational collaborations, and student and faculty exchanges is a fine idea. But we should be careful not to confuse globalization with universalization. In an unequal world, the creation of a steeply hierarchical global field of higher education produces its own pathologies, especially clear in the humanities and social sciences, but not exclusively so. Given the concentration of resources in the global north, and especially in the US, the latter's domination establishes criteria of excellence that pulls knowledge production out of its local context, and gears it to problems and frameworks defined in the north, problems that may have limited applicability to the South. Striving to be part of global production means finding a place as a world class university, which means, among other things, publishing in world class journals which are defined as those published in English (generally) and in the North and especially the US (generally). Acutely sensitive to this problem Brazil's academy has sought to define its own system of evaluation, ranking its own Portuguese language publications, but insulation comes at the cost of a certain exclusion from the global hierarchy. Slowly but surely, "international" journals are making their way into the national ranking systems.

The situation gets even more difficult as Northern universities set up campuses across the world, competing for the best students who are then branded with the prestige of Northern elite universities. At the same time, nation states that want their own universities to be considered world class pour resources into one or two institutions at the expense of the rest, and so the global hierarchy deepens national hierarchies, creating chasms between one or two universities and the rest. In short, the dilemmas created by an international field of higher education, the

dilemmas of global versus local knowledge will not go away in this very unequal world of higher education.

These are but a few of the challenges facing the university today, challenges which have no easy answer, but present a crisis of identity for the university and its inhabitants, matters that should be widely debated in the university conceived of as a community of critical discourse. But the university faces challenges to its credibility from without, from its relation to publics and to these I turn next.

### ***Legitimation Crisis***

The identity crisis is inextricably connected to an even more threatening legitimation crisis that concerns the very credibility of the university. For so long the university was simply a taken-for-granted institution, central to modern society, a public good that forms an economic, political and cultural pillar. Today that centrality is called into question. Increasingly, it is seen as a credentialing machine with an increasingly irrelevant content. There are claims that students learn little to nothing at the university, that faculty research contributes little to society, and that administrators wallow on fat salaries.

Better spend the money on prisons than universities, so the latter have to tighten their budgets, and students have to pay higher fees, take out loans, which drives them to degrees that are likely provide them with jobs, especially as jobs become ever more scarce and/or precarious, even as the debt continues to strangle their lives. Is the university degree worth the paper it is written on if it cannot deliver secure jobs? And yet it is necessary if not sufficient to obtain a job, the returns to education are still positive. If students march out of the humanities and even the social sciences can they continue to be funded, and the university becomes a collection of professional schools – business, engineering, medical, law. How to make a claim for Shakespeare in this context? How different is the situation in Brazil? Perhaps the Federal University retains its legitimacy even as its funding is cut, but what about the enormous private sector, where students with state subsidized loans, pursue courses that will somehow enhance their careers, but to little avail.

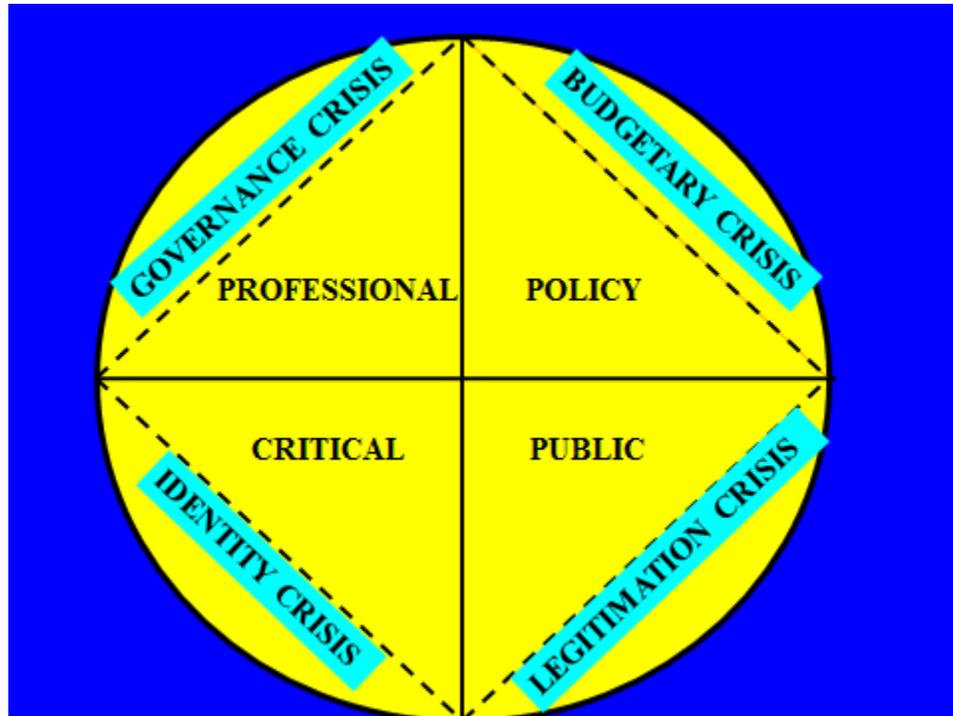
The assault on the public university leads to a self-perpetuating withdrawal of legitimacy. As it becomes a private good so this then justifies ever greater, questioning its role, a drain on public funding, creating a downward spiral of legitimation, and further cut backs.

### ***The Integral University***

How can one save the university? How can one think of the university in the context of these multiple crises. To each crisis there is a corresponding function, essential to the operation of the university today. The survival of the university will depend on connecting these functions together.

The budgetary crisis can be mitigated only by the university selling its wares to clients, which is its policy function. The danger lies in being captured by such clients and it is unresponsive to the broader interests of the university that are sacrificed for private profit. There has, therefore, to be careful oversight of the relations between university and its corporate

investors. The policy function is served by the professional function, the production of policy relevant research and students. But the professional function has to also have autonomy as research develops through the advance of research programs, scholarly programs. Just as there is a danger of policy function being drawn into the orbit, so there is a corresponding danger that the university be subjected to external forms of regulation, whether this be direct political control and indirectly through auditing of research and teaching.



Professional and policy functions are the instrumental functions of the university and left to themselves the university will become the instrument of external forces, hence it is important to counter-balance them with what I call reflexive functions of the university. On the one hand the university is a community of critical engagement that is continually examining the basis of its own activity, questioning the foundations of its research and teaching enterprise. In the face of a crisis of identity we need to build debate and discussions across fields, schools, and disciplines. In other words, we have to put the idea of shared governance into practice, holding the administration accountable to the administered. This is indeed what the new rector has in mind when he calls for the creation of a congress that will consider how to expand internal debate and discussion about the direction of the university and its multiple interests.

But in the final analysis that can only work if we also tackle the legitimation crisis building new relations with diverse publics, not the publics of the rich and powerful but of the weak and subjugated, to develop public debate about the goals and direction of society. The purpose is not to serve society with solutions, but to discuss the broadest issues and long term

challenges. The university can no longer rest on its laurels it must wade out into society, engage society in public debate. Its survival depends upon become a self-conscious political actor, a modern prince if you will, and avoid becoming a political actor by default and instrument of others.

We have in short four models of the university: a market model in which financial issues prevail, a regulatory model in which administration and audit prevail, a model of critical engagement in which the university becomes its own public, transcending the silos that divide it, and finally, a model of deliberative democracy wherein the university develops a reciprocal accountability to the wider society. Just as we need all four functions, so we need to ensure that none of these models prevails over all the others. An integral university of today has to draw on all four models. Upon such unstable compromises its future rests.

