REVIEW ESSAY

POLITICS AND ACADEMIA IN LATIN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

Albornoz, Orlando. IDEOLOGÍA Y POLÍTICA EN LA UNIVERSIDAD LATINOAMERICANO. Caracas, Venezuela: Instituto Societas, 1972.

Boeninger Kausel, Edgardo et al. DESARROLLO CIENTÍFICO-TECNOLÓGICO Y UNIVERSIDAD. Santiago, Chile: Corporación de Promoción Universitaria, 1973.

Cunha, Luîs Antonio. A UNIVERSIDADE TEMPORÃ. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editoria Civilização Brasileira S.A., 1980.

Dooner, Patricia and Ivan Lavados [editores]. LA UNIVERSIDAD LATINOAMERICANA: VISIÓN DE UNA DÉCADA. Santiago, Chile: Corporación de Promocion Universitaria, 1979.

Levy, Daniel. UNIVERSITY AND GOVERNMENT IN MEXICO: AUTONOMY IN AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980.

Scherz García, Luis. LA UNIVERSIDAD LATINOAMERICANA EN LA DÉCADA DEL 80. PROYECCIONES DEL DESARROLLO EN AMÉRICA LATINA Y SU INCIDENCIA EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR. Santiago, Chile: Corporación de Promoción Universitaria, 1975.

Almost ten years have passed since publication of Orlando Albornoz's book on the politicization of Latin American universities and Daniel Levy's analysis of the relationships of Mexican universities with their government and society. The problems besetting Latin American

Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 25 No. 3, August 1983 416-423
© 1983 Sage Publications, Inc.

universities in the 1960s are still with us today and give no sign of disappearing in the 1980s. Our understanding of these problems has, however, improved significantly.

The book by Albornoz brings together various articles written by the author from 1965 to 1972; in its lack of unity and coherence, it is a good demonstration of the state of the art during those years. About half of the volume is concerned with student political activism, one lengthy article focuses on Latin American universities, and two chapters are on Venezuela. The author is obviously uneasy with the quantitative materials on student ideologies gathered through the standard sociological procedures of the time. The tables are often unintelligible, and the interpretations seem ad hoc.

Albornoz is at his best when offering his personal view on the political role of Latin American students. He points out that politicization affected only a minor part of the student body—those in the large, national, and public universities—to the exclusion of those in the poorer, more isolated, and private schools. Political activism was carried on by an elite, or rather counterelite, that was ineffective in attaining its political goals. The students had little to say about the internal academic aspects of university life, and very often used revolutionary means to try to transform the universities against their country's political regimes, with often tragic consequences.

Albornoz perceived the students as performing a positive role despite limitations; for him, they were "a candle in the dark" and very often the only voice of criticism against the unanimous conservatism of the traditional elites of their countries—the military, clerical, professional, and business leaders. They were guardians of modern political values and, as such, played an essential role in the political development of their countries.

The several volumes were published by the Corporación de Promoción Universitaria in Santiago de Chile. The work demonstrates that when the combination of student activism and right-wing military regimes brought to most Latin American countries an unprecedented period of repression and interference in their universities, the torch was sustained not by students but by their teachers, who tried to analyze the university system and their role in the future of the region.

La Universidad latinoamericana: Visión de una Década by Dooner and Lavados is a large volume of almost 700 pages and 26 chapters, some published previously, which gives a comprehensive view of how Latin American scholars perceived their own reality. The overall picture is uneven but impressive. Conceptual chapters show the authors'

familiarity with international literature, and one section deals with "general perspectives on the university in Latin America," ten case studies deal with different countries, and a concluding section deals with relationships between science, technology, and the universities. The articles can be divided into four categories: student activism, general characteristics of Latin American universities, the relationship of universities to the continent's general pattern of socioeconomic development, and scientific and technological research in the university context.

Paul E. Sigmund of Princeton examines the literature on student activism by looking at the variable personal background and ideologies of the individual students involved and the social impact of this set of phenomena on overall student activism. He notes that activists were recruited predominantly from the upper rather than the lower middle classes and were composed of an almost exclusively male group (facts have certainly changed in that respect!). Politically active students more often were found in the social sciences and humanities than in engineering and medicine, and more often in better rather than less notable universities. He notes student protest was more effective in its impact on society in times of crisis, and concludes this means that there is something abnormal about a political system in which students participate actively through their own organized movements. When this occurs, the risk of disproportionate authoritarian repression increases, and the normal function of the university as an educational institution becomes threatened.

Pablo Gonzáles Casanova, the well-known Mexican sociologist and former rector of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México, could not agree more. He strongly defends the student leadership's rationale and competence, saying it would be simplistic to claim that students are irrational, led by extraneous forces, or are privileged members of the elite. Like the intellectuals depicted by Karl Mannheim, student activist leadership is considered superior politically and intellectually, and this allows them to transcend their eventual limitations of origin and context. The only problem is that for unknown reasons, they tend to develop fallacious ideas that are presented persuasively to their colleagues, and these can have dreadful consequences.

According to Gonzáles Casanova, the fallacy of extreme radicalism and opposition to all forms of political "reformism" result in students playing into the hands of the extreme right, foreign monopolies, and the imperialists, thus becoming ultimately responsible for dictatorial regimes that, in many Latin American countries, replace the old populist and

civilian governments. This analysis obviously reflects the conflicts between Gonzáles Casanova and the Mexican students during his rectorship and covers only part of the reality. The students were not always so radical; and there are, of course, many explanations for right-wing military governments in Latin America besides student activism.

All these analyses of student activism demonstrate that one's attitudes can never be inferred from one's socioeconomic or class origins alone. Being in a university is what makes most of the difference. It is therefore important to understand what the educational institution is, and how it changes. Two articles, one by Jorge Graciarena and another by Ernesto Schiefelbein and Aldo Solari, address this question.

Graciarena, for many years a sociologist working at the Economic Commission of Latin America, relates the reform movements of the Latin American universities with the socioeconomic changes that occur in the region. His approach is both historical and functional: he believes that changes in the university system are adjustments, albeit delayed, to the historical transformations of modernization and economic development in the Latin American countries. These adjustments encourage more technical education, more scientific research, closer links between the university and its environment, and more internal and external democratization. The speed, variations, and smoothness of these adaptations depend on the existing university structures and the more general political contexts.

As an example, the Brazilian university reform of 1966 is described by Graciarena as leading to a technically competent but "dependent and demobilized university." This is explained by a process of political and economic development of a domineering state open to foreign capital. In another article in the same volume, Graciarena makes a detailed analysis of the development of the system of higher education in Brazil, which he considers "chaotic," and he concludes with a plea for more stringent planning and rationality. Brazilian higher education was allowed to grow in an anarchical fashion, he claims, because it did not intend to adjust the educational system to the needs of socioeconomic planning, but rather to divert the pressures of a rising middle class from more strategic political and economic areas. In contrast, the Catholic University of Chile before Pinochet was a model of a university that wanted to be "the people's lucid and critical consciousness" in accordance with the political policy Chile was attempting at the time.

Schifelbein and Solari recognize there is a tendency to place educational systems under a global plan, but note that because of the

tradition of political autonomy of the Latin American universities, they tend to escape such a general plan. The authors see what happens to higher education less in terms of the functional needs of the region's historical development and more in terms of the interplay of different interest groups within and outside the educational systems. They believe one should not be very optimistic about the possibility of making the universities comply with whatever functions or goals are set for them. The results, they say, will always have much less to do with stated goals than with the different emphases given to social groups, however irrational and unfair that may be.

This difference in perspective reflects hard lessons from the collision between the Latin American universities and the repressive regimes of Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and many other countries. The different articles dealing with questions of science and technology illustrate the same differences. There are still those, like Marcelo Robert of the Economic Commission for Latin America, who support the idea that science and technology should be developed within the Latin American universities as part of a global plan aimed at "bringing the cultural, social, economic, geographic, and human structures of the country closer to an ideal goal for the society" ("Imagen Objetivo de la Sociedad"), something that has been called a "Civilization Project." Most of the articles, however, take a more sober view of the realities of the Latin American universities and of their potential for scientific and technological research.

Francisco R. Sagasti shows that scientific research at the universities can be only part of a broader scientific and technological establishment created in a country; Jaime Lavados believes science at the university should be seen in its relation to the universities' teaching and educational tasks, and sciences should not attempt to solve all the problems of scientific and technological underdevelopment in their countries. Edmundo Fuenzalida takes a more pessimistic view to advocate that universities give up their attempts to develop their own scientific and technological centers, because of the need for all the other functions performed by a university in Latin America.

These references are a superficial review of the complexity and variety of views, analyses, and interpretations to be found in these books on the Latin American universities. They suggest there is disagreement between those who see the educational system as a direct translation of social, political, and economic variables and those who attempt to define specific characteristics of the educational system and then to examine their interplay with their environment. The books by Luis Antonio

Cunha and Daniel Levy are good examples of this contrast. Each makes the kind of in-depth analysis based on detailed evidence uncommon in a literature widely characterized by essay-length treatments and collected papers.

A Universidade Tempora, The latecomer university, by Luis Antonio Cunha, gives a good historical overview of the development of the Brazilian higher educational system until World War II. He divides the country's history into four periods: the Colony, the Empire, the First Republic, and the Vargas period. For each period there is discussion of the economic and political background, followed by a description of what happened to the systems of higher education at the time. The relationships are discussed on an ideological level; for instance, it is stated that the regional elite in São Paulo was more liberal than the national elite in Rio de Janeiro. This is related to the fact that the University of São Paulo was organized with a liberal political perspective, while the University of Rio de Janeiro followed a more rigid and authoritarian pattern. This does not explain, however, why the University of São Paulo is a more successful undertaking than its counterpart in the country's capital. There is no attempt in the book to explore why the Brazilian university was organized so late compared to other Latin American countries, or why it never had the autonomy and political weight of other universities in the region.

University and Government in Mexico by Daniel Levy is concerned with incongruities. How is it, he asks, that an authoritarian regime such as that in Mexico can tolerate so much autonomy in its university? Autonomy can have different meanings and degrees, and much of the book discusses how appointive, academic, and financial autonomy is exercized in the Mexican university.

The book concludes that as expected, the Mexican government exerts very little control over what is taught, who gets appointed, and how much and how well money is spent by the Mexican university. Moreover, attempts to impose a planning system on the universities have basically failed, including the establishment of tuition. In spite of occasional confrontations, including the gruesome 1968 massacre of hundreds of university students in Mexico City, there was never an effort to establish day to day control over the university's activities.

To examine how autonomy can exist in an authoritarian system, Daniel Levy produced a book that is original and innovative in a variety of ways. It is an empirical study based on interviews, first-hand information, and quantitative analysis, and in this way is a healthy contribution to a field crowded by essays that are impressionistic or limited to the use of survey data. Chapter six on financial autonomy, for

instance, gives a time series for a budget that is unusually well presented and illuminating. More important, the study considers the relationship between the university and political system an empirical and theoretical problem to be explored and analyzed, and not, as is common in the field, an assumption to be taken for granted. The result is that one learns not only more about the Mexican educational system but the Mexican political system as well. As Levy uses the educational system to explore basic questions about the political system, he successfully treats the educational system within the context of the wider political system. This is a strong approach for comparative analysts and the book is filled with references to other countries and experiences.

Levy's explanation of the autonomy of Mexican universities is that the government is not completely authoritarian but works along a reconciliation model when dealing with the student population. In his own words, "our findings underscore the relative weakness of regime control over middleclass institutions. By contrast, a good deal of work on Mexican authoritarianism has dealt with less-privileged strata" (1980: 150). Compare this statement of findings with what happens in other countries, considering Mexico's recent political history.

It is obvious that the revolutionary rhetoric found among Mexico's university teachers and students is not equivalent to that in other Latin American countries. The Mexican regime is as "revolutionary" as any, and the radical terminology is very often used as a code of communication between sectors of the same political elite. One should look for a partial explanation in Mexico's political history and revolutionary past, but one should also take into account the social inequalities in a country that has maintained privileges for a small middle and upper sector at the expense of the majority of its population.

In the latter sense, Mexico is similar to other Latin American countries, such as Venezuela and even Brazil, where the pattern has been the cooptation of former student radicals into the government's political and administrative structures. Mexico's situation is in contrast to Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, where a more extended middle sector led to much more serious confrontation between the authoritarian regimes and the university communities. It is likely, nevertheless, that Mexico's peculiar political culture has accommodated more student radicalism and protest than have other countries with equivalent levels of social inequality and overall political authoritarianism.

A further question is how this autonomy and reconciliation can have affected the quality of the Mexican university. In a section entitled "University Resistance to Reform," Levy suggests that even though the Mexican university considers itself a progressive institution, what

dominates is the defense of its corporate privileges at the expense of rationality and academic quality. He also shows that whenever the government interferes, it does so repressively and without the ability to improve it. This is not, however, a major concern of his book.

Ultimately, the question of academic quality is basic and unavoidable. What makes the study of the university institution so challenging and important is not the fact that students and teachers constitute a sizable interest group, even that universities are often the recruiting ground for revolutionary leadership. It is the promise they hold of providing their countries with the knowledge, capability, and leadership needed to move into a better future. This is not simply a question of technical competence nor is it simply a matter of politics. What these books look for, and provide only partial answers for, is the special chemistry that may combine these two elements into a new and liberating philosopher's stone. In the process, we learn more about the real world.

—Simon Schwartzman

Simon Schwartzman teaches at the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas and is a researcher at the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação em História Contemporanea do Brasil, Fundação Getulio Vargas, both in Rio de Janeiro. He is the senior author of Formação da Comunidade Científica no Brasil *(Rio de Janeiro: Cia. Editora Nacional/FINEP, 1979) and editor of* Universidades e Instituições Cientificas no Rio de Janeiro. *(Brasília: Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, 1982). He is also author of* Universidade, Ciencia e Ideologia: a Política do Conhecimento *(Rio de Janeiro, Zahar Editores, 1981).*