

Policies, Learning and Ethical Positions in the University-Community Articulation: Higher Education Legitimacy in the Southern Cone

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Abstract

This chapter characterises the policies deployed by some Southern Cone countries as means to address inequalities. It describes the construction of ethical and pedagogical positions in students involved in extension policies, from a qualitative research project developed among students of a psychomotricity course in an Argentine public university.

Keywords

ethics – extension – Argentina – pedagogy

1 The Expansion of Higher Education and University Extension Policies

Since the last decades of the 20th century, societies, states and universities have seen their multiple relationships modified, expressed in social demands for education and knowledge, and in frequently divergent institutional profiles. Since then, we are witnessing an expansion of higher education in the global South, where the demand for greater access to and graduation from university is responded to by the expansion, segmentation or fragmentation of the offer. While some countries are responding to this trend through the privatisation of higher education, others are combining the creation of new courses of studies and universities, the development of scholarships and access programmes for students from previously excluded social sectors, and other actions linked to the territorialisation of universities (Fuentes, 2017; Trincherro & Petz, 2014).

This is the case of universities in the global South of Latin America. While countries like Chile expanded the offer of higher education through the

growth of the private sector, others, like Argentina, experienced a growth of private universities until the mid-1990s, and, since then, the offerings of public universities, created in two waves – in the mid-1990s and between 2004 and 2014 – grew in greater proportion, encompassing 79% of the enrollment at universities. The case of Brazil, with a very heterogeneous offering of public and private universities, expresses the greatest divergences at the national level in the region, because it combines policies for the creation of public universities with others that strengthened a for-profit private sector. Currently the private sector (for-profit and non-profit) concentrates 75% of higher education enrollment in Brazil.

These clear trends do not entirely reflect the more subtle changes in the socio-cultural relations that universities establish with societies, territories and states. Since the beginning of the new century, universities have experienced a shift in their relationship with local actors and governments; such modifications were built from below and from above. From below, these changes followed alternative traditions, typical of the reformist university ethos and the political commitment that students and teachers developed from the 1960s onwards. These experiences became tradition, and continued in small academic spaces and units: chairs, rural extension programmes, researchers with a historical relationship with indigenous or agrarian movements, etc. From above, the university authorities of public institutions began to assume political and ideological positions that led them to influence, accept and promote institutional policies that would more directly address inequities in access to higher education and the contribution of the university to inclusive development (Arocena, 2011; Arocena & Stutz, 2015). Mato (2013) characterises this as the new forms of university social linkage, involving the processes of teaching and research, as well as extension in the relationship between university and community.

Among those programmes, it is worth mentioning those developed in Argentina, which were deployed both as public policies and through intra-university articulations. The *Secretaría de Políticas Universitarias* (Secretariat of University Policies, SPU), which is part of the National Ministry of Education, began a line of programmes with specific funding to strengthen university extension in public universities around 2005. The aim was to encourage the articulation of university education with social and community needs, both within and around universities. One such programme – the *Programa de Voluntariado Universitario* (PVU) (University Volunteer Program) – began in 2006 through the implementation of specific projects developed by professors and extension departments of the universities, subject to an external evaluation

that determined whether they would receive the endorsement from the SPU and funding.

The PVU enabled the transfer of material resources for the development of community projects, and the expansion of the extension and related teaching activities of national universities.¹ Other programmes, such as “University, Culture and Society”, “Cooperativism and Social Economy in the University”, “University, State and Territory”, sought to generate synergies among teachers, researchers and students of the universities and their social context, encouraging and prioritising – through external funding – the implementation of more specific and complex projects, because they involved transfer actions. Although they did not involve all the courses, professors and students from public universities, those programmes marked a specific orientation and a greater hierarchy and visibility of extension activities, both inside and outside universities.² The public universities also outlined their own guidelines.

The Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional (CIN) (National Inter-University Council), created in 1985 as a consultative body for policies affecting the system, is composed of the rectors of the national and provincial universities and carries out its work through working commissions (academic, research, etc.). The Commission of Extension, University Welfare and Territorial Linkage is one of the most important groups, bringing together the Secretaries of University Extension of each institution. It is an articulating body that produces data and defines common guidelines for the institutions. In its orientations and exchanges, the territorial dimension has been crucial. According to a survey carried out in 2015 by the CIN (2016), 61% of the universities developed training instances via university extension for neighborhood leaders, young people and teachers in their territories, 74% deployed projects for older adults,³ and 63% executed projects at the request of civil society organisations in the jurisdictions where they are located. Many of those initiatives were fostered, coordinated and legitimised through a commission which organises annual meetings and encourages the publicity of extension programmes.

As it happened with the last wave of public universities creation in Argentina, in Brazil, new higher education institutions were conceived in harmony with territories and populations previously excluded from higher education. During Lula's administrations, 14 new federal universities and 124 campuses were created in locations other than state capitals, and 38 federal Institutes of Education, Science and Technology were opened, offering undergraduate degrees at the bachelor, technological and graduate levels (Barreyro, 2010). However, the strength of the policies was the admission of students through scholarship programmes and the modification of the admission systems

(quotas for African and indigenous populations, as well as from low-income households).

At the national level, extension policies did not have the same impetus as others linked to the evaluation of undergraduate and graduate courses, for example, or the traditional hierarchical structuring of scientific research and the evaluation of researchers through their publications. But, as in Argentina, the set of Brazilian public universities also developed guidelines and articulations within the public subsystem that sought to prioritise extension in public universities. Thus, for example, the Fórum de Pró-Reitores de Extensão das Instituições Públicas de Educação Superior (FORPROEX) (Forum of Extension authorities from Public Higher Education Institutions) has been holding annual meetings for 47 years, establishing mechanisms for the socialisation of extension experiences and the construction and legitimacy of this function in the Brazilian university system. These are spaces for inter-institutional articulation and the delineation of guiding policies – given the university's autonomy – that have the power to lead institutional efforts in certain lines and projections of the university. In the Brazilian case, this is a trend that first materialised in a partnership between FORPROEX and the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1998 – when the National Extension Plan was set up – and was further developed in 2012 in the document defined by the same Forum (Guimaraes et al., 2015). They established the meaning of extension, linked to the dialogical interaction between universities and society, to the interdisciplinary nature inherent in the three university functions (teaching, research and extension) that should promote transformation in the university and other sectors of society.

In general, I observe an idea of social transformation in the region that crosses the formulations and orientations of the actors in university extension policies, which the term 'extension', as we have previously pointed out (Fuentes, 2016), does not fully cover in a relevant way. University policies, in addition to the expansion of the offer through the creation of universities, were generally oriented towards the promotion of student training practices in extra-university contexts, and these contexts were frequently marked by social problems linked either to poverty, cooperation with local states in certain areas (teacher training, youth recreation, etc.) or work with the productive and social economy sectors, both in Argentina and Brazil. A major assumption of these policies is that since universities are still institutions that are not accessible to everyone, the knowledge produced in them cannot be limited to the privileged classes. A second axis, identified as transversal, is the revision of the ideology of university reform: to transform society, it is necessary to transform the university at the same time.

The Uruguayan case is unique, because of the weight of the University of the Republic, located in Montevideo, which maintains a dominant position over higher education in the country, but which is immersed in internal and external processes of demand for democratisation. In 2006, a process of deconcentration was initiated through the creation of various initiatives called Poles of University Development, Regional University Centers, among other devices deployed in the interior of the country. According to Heinzen (2019), this expansion was achieved through the capitalisation of previous experiences of extension and research that existed in some of the localities, and was articulated through an adaptation of the institutional offer to the possibilities of the territory and the relations with actors and local governments. The interesting thing about this process is that some of these Poles and Centers acquired a striking integration between teaching, research and extension/transfer, positioning themselves as nodes for local development, for the integral territorial deployment of university functions, and not only to expand teaching and deconcentrate it territorially. As Arocena (2011), an intellectual who was also Rector of the University of the Republic and one of the promoters of this policy, says, it is a matter of outlining a response from the South, that is, from the conditions of unequal access to higher education that also produces inequitable territorial profiles. The diagnosis is based on the modification of university structures, that is, on thinking about the relationship between the university, society and its specific territories in more complex ways than the bureaucratic division between teaching, research and extension, or merely the increase of teaching.

In general, these processes linked to social transformation have an inherent relationship with the expansion of the educational/cultural good: they aim to strengthen education/schooling at all levels, seeking to establish a relationship of legitimacy that makes the university contribution to societies more perceptible. At the same time, they strengthen and articulate themselves in relation to other public actors, producing a process of territorialisation and state-university articulation, as a way of giving each other (local states and the university) legitimacy in the local development of educational, social and cultural policies (Fuentes, 2016).

These alliances must be read in the political and ideological context, with affinities and networks of circulation between governing bodies and university leaders, which gives them both strength and fragility over time. The development of these articulations increased in the convergence between governments that defined themselves as progressive and that found a certain ideological linkage with rectors and leading groups in public universities – above all from the governments of the Workers' Party in Brazil, the successive Kirchnerist

governments in Argentina, and those of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay. The evidence of this harmony, which favored local and national articulations between universities and governments, is that when the governing bodies changed in 2015 (in Argentina) and 2019 (in Brazil), the incoming governments from other political parties deployed budget cuts for public universities and a strong discourse of contestation about their role in national societies.

2 The University Ethos in Transformation and the Community as “Teacher”

In the case of Argentina, national policies, intra-university systems and institutional policies have favored the emergence of an alternative ethos to the dominant professional one. With the term ‘ethos’, I characterise a position and relation with the institutionalised knowledge that is constituted from a relation of utilitarian possession with knowledge to be applied in spaces of liberal exercise of the profession. This simplified characterisation does not explain the complexity of the Argentine universities, faculties, courses, faculty and students, where other traditions and alternative ways of building the relationship with the disciplinary and university knowledge have been deployed. But it allows for the understanding of the ethos of the courses (law, medicine, psychology, etc.) that concentrate the largest number of students in the country, which follow professional patterns, concentrated on individual performance and/or oriented towards the private economic sector. From the dominant ethos, knowledge is the monopoly of professors and university institutions, and the knowledge acquired has both an instrumental and a symbolic character, that is, it reproduces the prestige associated with the liberal professions.

In 2001, a course in psychomotricity began to be taught at a public university for the first time, the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTFEF). This places it in a tension: to consolidate its prestige, it may have followed the previously installed models of professional formation of the ‘nearby’ fields, like medicine, psychology, kinesiology, or it could have built its prestige in ways differentiated from the liberal professions. Without being an exclusively dual option, the evolution of the course and the decisions adopted by its coordination placed the course of psychomotricity in a position that, without disregarding liberal training, which seeks to ensure that graduates could enter the labor market in positions linked to individual clinical work, also legitimised other profiles and, above all, another type of relationship with knowledge and its appropriation during the course.

Academic research described and analysed the transformation of higher education in the last decades of the 20th century (Naidorf, 2005; Rubinich,

2001). The reforms promoted by international financial organisations, such as the World Bank, sought to install not only the criteria of education as a private good, but also a series of regulations for teaching, scientific activity and management that were tied to processes of accountability (Writhg & Rabo, 2010). These widely resisted new regulations were installed and extended through various programmes and policies. Meanwhile, the characterisation that was made of this process in the university institutions accurately identified the emergence of other knowledge-producing agencies (Palamidessi et al., 2007) that competed with the universities. Generally, those dynamics sought to make universities providers of services to the private sector, largely subsuming their political, economic and academic autonomy to this function.

This process pierced the legitimacy of university institutions, in spite of the resistance of their actors, but it gave rise to the visibility of alternative ethos, of the contributions that universities make to society and especially to the territories where they are located. If the monopoly of teaching and the production of 'higher' knowledge were no longer the exclusive patrimony of the university, the relationship that was established with extra-university actors in more subordinate positions acquired greater relevance, because it gave legitimacy to local processes of construction of situated knowledge.

In the case under analysis,⁴ it was the authorities and professors who, placing themselves in the traditions of the political commitment of Argentine universities and of the new orientations of university policies (PVU, for example), sought to expand the scope of psychomotricity and their future professionals among organisations, schools, hospitals and other institutions located in the neighborhoods. On the one hand, the implementation of extension projects in institutions allowed for the expansion of social knowledge about the discipline and its relevance in different areas. On the other hand, it facilitated the formation of professional profiles in the country, where the demands for greater specialisation and complexity in the field of childhood and ageing as well as in care practices were and are still growing.

Daniel Mato (2013) speaks of "intercultural collaboration" (p. 153) in the relationship between universities and other actors, to characterise the co-production of knowledge in the elaboration of practical responses to the demands of the communities involved, which allow to value the projection of knowledge from social groups towards the university. Throughout the research, I have come across stories and experiences of students and teachers who valued the learning acquired in the volunteer projects. Diverse and unequal social actors taught the students issues about their position in the neighborhood, and local families shared knowledge about household and parenting practices of care. The research shows that community actors – from children to professionals and educators in neighborhood organisations – become 'teachers' and trainers

of students and professors, which allows them to overcome both certain paternalistic views – political, religious, philanthropic, etc. – on the ‘needs’ of the community, as well as the perception of community actors as mere object or spectator of ‘superior’ knowledge, as if they were devoid of knowledge, which is relevant to the construction of professional mastery, its contextualisation and understanding.

Sennett’s (2009) categories of workshop and craftsmanship are useful to understand students’ training practices in volunteer and extension projects. The notion of workshop, as studied by Sennett (2009) in the experiences of medieval craftsmen and free software developers, allows us to make visible a community that teaches, trains and places the subjects as apprentices. Understanding university education as the training of artisans, and the community as the workshop where they are trained, favors the valuation of knowledge and practices of people living in contexts of poverty in which the students’ volunteer practices are mostly developed as training and learning practices that enrich, challenge and project knowledge towards the university. Sennett’s approach also allows for the incorporation of the ‘quality’ perspective, in the sense that the demands of community actors are what regulate the good work, the exchange and the job well done that the students learn under the supervision of their professors.

In those PVU projects⁵ the community and the territory work as a space of artisan training dialogue with the same native perspective of psychomotricity at UNTREF, where what matters the most is the creation of a space of regulation and exchange of knowledge and power, rather than the application of techniques for the solution of individual problems. Students learn how to deal with uncertainty and misunderstandings in their interactions with local families, prioritising dialogues, meetings and their frequent presence in local institutions. Therefore, they learn to manage the exchange of knowledge under the assumption that it is delineated, by means of trust built between them and non-university actors (Vieites & Fuentes, 2019).⁶

In this way, the ethos changes, legitimising the socialisation of knowledge and its projection towards the university, and allowing the re-legitimation of the university and its formation in specific contexts. Universities also build their public legitimacy on the basis of their extension policy. Activities in the community are usually widely publicised by the institutions’ communication offices. In other words, they make the prestige of an institution that is still perceived as relatively closed and elitist. This happens in societies that are widely unequal, such as those in the Southern Cone, and there it acquires its logic.

However, these legitimisation processes have their limits, at least in their public visibility and stability. National political orientations have such weight that they can erode constructed processes. Thus, for example, the PVU in

Argentina was almost dismantled during the years of the new political administration of Mauricio Macri's government, between 2015 and 2019, with discourses that strongly contested public universities. This makes outreach a field for analysing the relationship between universities and states, both in terms of their strengths and weaknesses.

3 Conclusions: Territorialisation as a Political-Pedagogical Process

The territorialisation of the university as a political and pedagogical process constitutes an institutional strategy to legitimise itself and its role in a socio-cultural context, where such legitimacy is not given, since it competes with other knowledge-producing actors and other ways of building social prestige, associated with privatisation or with the mere professional profile. Although the process of global university reforms at the end of the 20th century led to the erosion of the symbolic monopoly over the production of knowledge at universities, the weight of projects and political initiatives, both national and of the university system itself, at the beginning of the new century, counteracted a view centred exclusively on the training of professionals, according to the demands of the labor market, oriented exclusively towards the classical liberal professional practice and ethos.

This installed and hierarchised modes of training, despite not being dominant, represent a political tendency that enjoys its own prestige and relevance, and vary according to political orientations at the national level. Therein lies the confluence of processes produced from above and below in the university system and its limits.

In the research, the processes of listening, diagnosis and reflection on the task carried out by students in community spaces, constituted an axis that allowed them to overcome both paternalistic and technical tendencies in the development of the relationship between university and non-university actors. The relationship enables students to construct an ethical position, valuing the contribution of local organisations in their formation and the local knowledge.

This is fundamental, both for the legitimacy of existing universities, and for the policy of institutional expansion: given the public investment required by the system, universities must deploy as poles of territorial development. Therefore, higher educational institutions should develop an active extension policy, with their legitimacy not depending exclusively on either the entry of new students or any accountability mechanisms. The extension and the territorial commitment and development are present trends, not dominant but prestigious in the field of higher education policy in the global South.

Notes

- 1 By 2016, of the total number of extension projects developed at the Public Universities, 62% corresponded to projects financed by the SPU, while the rest received their own funding from the universities.
- 2 However, it should be mentioned that the extension function remains subordinate in the evaluation criteria of university faculty. In response to this, some universities have established a hierarchy of extension and transfer tasks, as part of the dedication of teachers, and the tasks for which they are evaluated. Other initiatives, which also did not become massive, but marked an attempt to alter the predominance of academic logic, were the promulgation of the system of Social Technological Development Projects (PDTs) within the framework of the National Ministry of Science and Technology and the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). Created in 2013, it allows the homologation of technology transfer projects to social sectors outside the academy and universities, and the researchers are evaluated according to that project, and not necessarily through their scientific publications.
- 3 As part of the policies of greater articulation between states and universities, since 2009, the University for Integrated Senior Citizens (UPAMI) has installed an initiative of the public social work of national retirees and pensioners so that universities can develop specific courses and extension workshops for their members.
- 4 Under the umbrella of two research projects: an individual one as a researcher from CONICET/FLACSO and a collective investigation under my direction carried out at UNTREF, regarding community learning of psychomotricity students.
- 5 These projects usually involve teachers of psychomotricity and other disciplines that make up university course on psychomotricity, such as anthropologists and psychologists/psychoanalysts.
- 6 I am not analysing here the persistence of the professional university ethos in the classical liberal disciplinary fields, such as economics, medicine, and law, where the hierarchy of extension is still veiled.

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