

The double crisis of the chilean university*

Miguel Carmona and Nicolás Slachevsky
(review *Multitud*)

The majority of the most representative universities in Chile today were born at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth--the same time as the consolidation of the first republican tradition in Chile. The transformations of that institution, once reserved to the oligarchy and an incipient bourgeoisie, have always coincided with economic processes and social contingencies. In the 1950s and 1960s, during the reign of social-democratic governments, the university played a central role in civil life; universities began to claim their rights to directly intervene in university affairs, which not only constituted the first democratising impulse of the student body, but also, in its effervescence, gave birth to the Christian, nationalist and revolutionary political forces that marked Chile in the 1970s. Thus, the current political class was part of a generation that was educated in a free and public university system, whose political relevance resonated on a national level.

MIGUEL CARMONA AND NICOLAS SLACHEVSKY BOTH 18 YEARS OLD, ARE FINISHING SECONDARY SCHOOL AT THE LYCEE ALLIANCE FRANCAISE OF SANTIAGO, CHILE. THEY FOUNDED AND LAUNCHED THE PROJECT OF *MULTITUD MAGAZINE* (NAME INSPIRED BY TONI NEGRI'S WORK) ON DECEMBER 2008: IT HAS ALREADY THREE ISSUES, AND IS ONE YEAR OLD

Today, the Chilean university as a system of education is entering a structural crisis. Chile, as one of the first laboratories of the Chicago Boys and the new liberal economy, can be seen as an important point of reference for understanding the current crisis of western education systems.

In this sense, in the context of the sub-prime crisis and its influence on the education crisis, a sort of "double crisis" is being confirmed. Here, we would like to briefly study the legal and economic cases of Chilean education, the new emergent pressures of the student movement and, finally, its situation in the face of the great financial crisis currently underway.

THE CHILEAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

September 11th, 1973--the day of the coup d'état--the dictatorship (1973-1990) found a strong and autonomous university; the institutional participation of the students that was won with the university reform in 1968 made the university a kind of 'country project'. One of the first measures of the military dictatorship was to extend state interference into public universities (principally the University of Chile); the designation of delegate Deans--all active members of the army--was one of the most emblematic of these measures. This not only constituted an explicit violation of the autonomous university, it also marked the start of a process that would bring about a progressive deterioration in the institution of the public university that is still present. The effects of this military interference on education are still being felt, with the reorientation and the closing of important departments (like the limitation of economics to commercial engineering, or the direct suspension of philosophy and sociology for some time) along with the effects of the 1981 dismantling of the national alliance of the University of Chile (under the pretext of regional university independence), and contemporarily, the principle of college autonomy that plunged the institution into an academic and financial crisis.

The new paradigm of the university was therefore that of academic capitalism, where studies only correspond to a logic of individual inversion and not to a national democratic project. This is the same objective accompanying the reforms made through the dictatorship, which led to the privatisation of the university.

Parallel to the privatisation of public universities--which were to become the 'Traditional Universities'-- the dictatorship left as their legacy a great number of private universities, with the same logic of 'freedom of instruction'. In principle, this would be an element of the democratisation of university access. In fact, in 2008 the 42% of the 71.800 students that joined the university system did so at universities that didn't exist before 1981. Today, nearly 60 universities and 500,000 freshmen are enrolled, 5 times more than 25 years ago.¹ However, as we know, quantity doesn't imply quality and education in private universities leaves much to be desired, retaining the efficient management of the infrastructures as the only criteria for evaluation; other than a few rare exceptions (that can be counted on the fingers of one hand), beyond efficient management, few have good indices of student and professor quality.

No less disastrous was the case of basic and secondary education, where in an eagerness to 'decentralise education'--in which the state tried to intervene as little as possible in society--a law of municipalisation was passed that put the local government in charge of colleges in both administrative and economic terms. In the same way, three distinct types of colleges were established: private colleges (whose financing depended exclusively on private institutions), subsidised colleges (a mixture of financing from private business and municipal capital) and public colleges (with exclusively municipal financing). This sectoring of education resulted in a social sectoring of the country, because each city has an unequal economic power. This is visible not only in the quality ratings of education, but also in the infrastructure of the establishments wherein a notable deterioration is evident.

The college reforms of the dictatorship were passed a day before the end of the dictatorship, on March 10th in 1990, with the publication of the Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza (LOCE).² Until the approval of the new Ley General de Enseñanza this year--in name of the 'freedom of instruction' cited in article 19 n°11--the law established the right to set up and maintain a college in the manner of a business (namely, requiring one to be 18 years of age or older and holding a primary and secondary education).³ Additionally, it held that the financing of public and subsidised colleges, depending on the municipality, also depended on their requisites. This favoured well-to-do classes who had easier access to higher quality private institutions with higher enrolments.

Currently, education in Chile is governed by a new Ley General de Educación (LGE), which was signed on the 9th of April 2009 after more than three years of pressure from antagonistic student mobilisations and intense negotiations between parliamentary parties.⁴ However, the extreme rigidity of the Chilean legislative system, inherited from the dictatorial constitution, limited possible advances in new educational policies, thus putting greater emphasis on state quality regulation and more control over instructional freedom. In structural terms, the LGE didn't mark a radical change in respect to the LOCE; policies of profit and a municipalisation of education have been maintained.

In the end, a situation has been created that the student movements call an 'educational apartheid'. This situation has the following vicious cycle: it begins at the level of primary education, with very limited qualified public schools and well qualified teachers (despite the common perspective that a primary school education is a fundamental requirement for each individual). It continues to the secondary school level at scientific-humanist colleges and industrial or commercial schools (technical education): the first maintain a situation similar to that of the primary schools, aside from approximately ten schools (the so-called "emblematic schools") that have attained a level of quality in comparison to the majority of other schools by setting up a strict selection criteria for distinguished students, of which only a small proportion come from public primary schools; the second offer a minimal number of options to encourage students to overcome their social situations, many of whom come from social risk groups and see a technical professional career as their only option (albeit a difficult one). This is followed by university studies where the excessive fees of particular departments act as a natural filter. These fees, along with the Prueba de Selección Universitaria, condition the entrance to traditional universities with a result that only 24% of those who score higher than 600 points (the minimum for such universities) actually come from municipal establishments.⁵ Inequality is drastic; even under the criteria of quality given by the PSU only 57.81% of the youth studying at municipal colleges score higher than 450 out of 850, compared to 93.86% of those studying in private colleges.⁶

All of this is added to the problem of the scarce valorisation of Chilean professorships. The average salary for basic or secondary teacher is 500,000 Chilean Pesos a month, the equivalent of approximately 910 U.S. dollars or 650 Euros (where minimum wage is 159,000 Pesos, or approximately 290 U.S. Dollars or 210 Euros). The salary of a university professor is not much higher, around 700,000 Chilean Pesos.⁷

Hence we can see that education in Chile is not only badly paid in terms of labour, but is predominantly inaccessible to a large part of the population, which is tied to high enrolment numbers in lower ranking schools (which are the majority).

STUDENT MOVEMENT

Up until 2006 there were no significant conflicts directed at questioning the education system. The student movement was limited to the university and, as such, among professors; controversy principally focused on contingent or local problems and not structural ones. However, a difference was marked in May 2006 when a series of protests began among the secondary students of public colleges paralysing all colleges of Chile. The aim of the movement was the abrogation of the LOCE, the end of municipalisation and profit in education. The movement rapidly extended to subsidised colleges and, later, to private colleges and universities. The media coverage was intense and by the beginning of June, when the protests were generalised, the government and the political sectors were forced to acknowledge the crisis of the Chilean education system and in response created a Consejo Asesor Presidencial de la Educación.⁸

By August, however, minority sectors of the student association began to realise the inadequacy of the answers offered by the government. Even if the Consejo Asesor Presidencial de la Educación (comprising all sectors of civil society) brought satisfactory solutions with respect to student demands, the LGE--the law that was finally written in congress (agreed upon by both the government and the right wing)--didn't address the profit in education, municipalisation or the principle factors of educational inequality. In June 2008, the student movement began to militantly re-articulate itself, demanding the end of profit in education and the modification of the LGE before it was to be voted on by congress. Satisfactory solutions were not offered and the situation stalled until the law was passed in April 2009. The failure of the later student movement, despite its organisational similarity to that of 2006, lay heavily in the manipulation of the mass media. In 2006, all journals and publications spoke in favour of the student movement (perhaps because the 2006 movement was critical of the Michelle Bachelet government; a context in which the majority of the mass media belonged to the political opposition). Two years later, the same media disbanded the movement, for instance by painting it as productive of senseless vandalistic action and linking its leaders to political parties and their problems.

The university movement, on its part, was concentrated in the state universities De Chile and De Santiago de Chile, organised mainly in contingent student centres, but it also found additional points of mobilisation in a series of private universities with a strong left. There is no instance of common representation amongst these institutions other than through their respective student centres. The central role of the historical university movements from the 1960s and, again, from the 1980s with the first demonstrations against the dictatorship, were felt in the imaginary of today's university movements. The university demands, however, did not reach the scope that was attained by the growing college movement during the democratic years. Today, the goals of the majority of representative university organs are geared toward the protection of the public university, even when the path to a unity of demands still appears distant.

THE UNIVERSITY FACING THE CRISIS

In this context, the economic crisis that is affecting the whole world and keeping the country in recession finds education already submerged in a much earlier crisis. Today, talking about a double

crisis of the economy and the university goes far beyond the measure in which the economic contingencies have effected the financial situation for the institution of the public university. Instead, it indicates a problem at the very base upon which the university was founded in Chile.

As we noted in the first part of this article, the university in Chile is based on the model of individual academic inversion and has as its primary objective student's insertion into the labour market. In fact, student's state loan determines also the will of the individuals, generating logics of social reproduction, forcing them to enter immediately into the labour market's competitiveness to evade a debt situation. From the moment that the market fails and the mass of available works become insufficient (compared to the mass of university students), the university and its objectives fail too, which makes its own crisis even more evident. The economic crisis makes the model of university privatisation unsustainable.

The university, in fact, loses its active role in social integration the moment that the less privileged sectors of society are effected by the economic crisis. Not only is there an increase in student loan default, but the same model of self-financing means that the poorest sectors are even further away from the possibility of enrolling in university and opt to work instead. This increases the level of desertion of those already enrolled in higher education; what results is a consequent increase in social inequalities.

This double crisis throws the very existence of a social role of the Chilean university into question and highlights the democratic spaces that the commercialisation of public institutions has marginalised. The economic crisis has reawakened a strong consciousness around the structural failures of the neo-liberal model and, on the university level, it has reminded us that social inequalities are produced by dynamics of exclusion that persist in educational development, which in Chile can be traced back to the military dictatorship. The university in Chile is not only no longer a 'country-project', but it can be directly spoken about in terms of business and profit. In a certain sense, this model of self-financing the university is, in itself, a violation of university autonomy.

NOTES

* This article originally appeared in the Chilean journal *Multitud*. Translated by Jason Francis Mc Gimsey

¹See the 'Chilean Universities' Quality Research'. URL: <http://aquevedo.wordpress.com/2009/10/13/ranking-2009-de-calidad-de-universidades-chilenas/>

²Translators note: 'Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza' / Constitutional Law of Instruction.

³Translators note: 'Ley General de Enseñanza' / General Law of Instruction.

⁴Translators note: 'Ley General de Educación

(LGE)' / General Education Law.

⁵ Translators note: 'Prueba de Selección Universitaria' / University Entrance Exam.

⁶ See the oficial data of PSU 2008's results.

⁷ See the reference webpage of the Education Ministry for academic orientation. URL: www.futurolaboral.cl

⁸ Translators note: 'Consejo Asesor Presidencial de la Educación' / Presidential Council for Education.