How hospitable is academia to critical thinking?
A Latin America perspective

Atilio A. Boron
Professor of Political Science, University of Buenos Aires
Director of PLED, the Latin American Program of
Distance Education in the Social Sciences

In the wake of the major transformations that took place in Latin American universities during the neoliberal age the issue of the always difficult relationship between critical thinking and academia has acquired an ever growing importance. Yet, despite its importance this issue is almost totally neglected these days. It is a sign of the times that a question that in the 1960s inflamed the Latin American public debate nowadays is regarded simply as nostalgia, as the immature longing for a past which has irreversibly passed away.

An initial digression on the role for the university?

Yet, the discussion on the “mission of the university” -as this issue was called in those years- is today perhaps more important than ever given the importance acquired by immaterial production and the so-called symbolic analysts in contemporary capitalism. It is at least ironic that in a moment in which the general public is overwhelmed by a plethora of fancy theorizations on the “information society” or the “society of knowledge” the discussion on the university, its nature and role, has been completely eclipsed.¹ (Castells, 1996, 1997 and 1998)

Should the university be, as they used to say, the “critical consciousness of the society.” Or should it just be, as it appears today, an institution in charge of the preparation of the administrative and technocratic cadres of a society in which knowledge is produced elsewhere: in the complex network of state agencies and huge transnational oligopolies. In order to perform a critical role the university must guarantee a rather unique combination of scientific excellence and outstanding humanistic formation. In other words, quite sophisticated

¹ It is quite telling that in the 1,500 pages of the thick three volumes of Castells’ The Information Age there is only one, in page. 353 of volume one, in which the reader will find a passing reference to the university.
analytical skills should be articulated with a vision of the good society. This thesis on the necessary critical role of the university is rooted in the seminal theories of great Latin American educators such as Paulo Freire and Darcy Ribeiro in Brazil, Risieri Frondizi and Rodolfo Mondolfo in Argentina, Justo Sierra and Pablo González Casanova in Mexico, and many others. Were the ideas of these greater thinkers which provided the theoretical and doctrinal foundations for the progressive reforms experienced by the universities of Latin America and the Caribbean in the sixties. However, with the advent of the dictatorships, in the 1970s, the discussion was suddenly wiped out from the public scene and the idea of the university as a critical consciousness of its epoch became a dangerous, subversive slogan that could cost the life of the people who sponsored it. As such it was banned and its spokespersons were persecuted, jailed and many of them killed. Unfortunately, the democratic reconstruction that started in the region at the beginnings of the 1980s marked by the irresistible ascent of neoconservative ideas failed to reopen the discussion and the question of the role of the university remained largely in the shadows.

An adaptative role?

Nevertheless, with the changes that took place in the 1990s the urgency of the question reappeared once again: what should be now, in the era of globalized capitalism, the purpose and “mission” of the university? According to the neoliberal theorists and policy-makers the response was quite clear: the university must train the young in the kind of professional skills required by the market. In scientific research this means to work in practical or “applied” projects that could be immediately transferred to the private firms in the most diverse branches of production. In the non-scientific areas this means train the young in the clerical and administrative skills needed to facilitate the normal working of the economic activities. According to the Washington Consensus theorists the satisfaction of the market needs is the only “realistic and responsible” approach to the matter: it assures both the individual satisfaction (because the university graduates will immediately find jobs) and the collective
benefit (because the system will find people trained with the skills required for its optimum performance). Any other answer to the question is an unhealthy tribute to sheer idealism or infantile nostalgia for a bygone past that will no return. Being the market the crucial institution of our society -a truth not only confirmed in the economy but in all aspects and dimensions of social life- it is only reasonable for the universities to adjust their activities to the necessities of the former. Thus, it is the market who provides the material incentives for the development of the different professional careers. If the university authorities are able to correctly “read” the market signals, their wisdom will surely be rewarded with the creation of a wide variety of jobs ready to accommodate the university graduates. But to reach such a felicitous outcome both the teaching programs and the research agenda of the universities should be devised in response to the dynamics of the market forces. Once again, the theoretical assumption of the perfect market equilibrium is introduced as if it were an empirical conclusion, which is not. Market equilibrium is rare, disequilibria being the normal pattern. And in the specific field of supply and demand of labour force, college trained or not, the most likely outcome of the capitalist markets is disequilibria.

Demagoguery was rampant in the 1980s and 1990s, during the inception of the neoliberal reforms in higher education in Latin American countries. Their advocates tirelessly announced that with the reforms introduced in higher education the students would succeed in their job hunting activities once graduated. Once again, reality did not match these rosy promises. Impervious to this outcome, the so-called reformers and their disciples in the region insisted that are the markets the ones to decide what to teach and what to investigate, leaving aside extravagant courses, disciplines and research agendas. After all, who cares for a philosopher, or an anthropologist? What is the market value of their wisdom? Does Latin America really need astronomers? Should we waste our scarce resources training the youth in ancient history, or political theory? Do Latin American societies need people to study nuclear physics?
Obviously, this attitude is completely unacceptable for any sensible person, not to mention one endowed with a strong humanist formation. First, because the history of science and knowledge in general reveals that the role played by the markets stimuli was always marginal, and that the growth in the humanities and sciences was alien to the commercial imperatives. Plato, Aristotle, Servetus, Linneus, Copernicus, Galilei, Newton, Einstein, Freud, Darwin and Marx, as well as many others, made substantial additions to the human knowledge without any kind of mercantile consideration and, in many cases, precisely against such kind of considerations. Yes, since the twentieth century on in advanced capitalist countries scientific activities became more and more influenced by research agendas jointly developed by big industrial oligopolies and powerful state agencies. However, there are no compelling reasons to expect that the role of the markets in knowledge production in a broad range of disciplines, from the humanities to astronomy to mathematics, may be very much different today. Secondly, even if this were the case the intrusion of the market imperatives would also be unacceptable because the progress of human knowledge must not be impaired, guided, or controlled by businesses profit-making calculations. Surrendering to the despotism of the market forces and the profit imperative may well end up in a new type of technological barbarism, likely father of all sorts of misfortunes for the mankind. For instance, the research leading towards finding an effective vaccine against AIDS must not be impaired by commercial considerations. Similarly, the research on the impact of agrotoxics and all sort of herbicides on the humans should not be left behind because it will affect the profitability of huge corporations like Monsanto, to take an example of today’s politics.

Of course, there are other responses given to the question about the mission of the university. If the first one argued for market adaptability, a second, rather conventional, response favours the reproduction and dissemination of knowledge. This is one step forward, but still insufficient. The emphasis is placed in the reproductive aspects of the university more than in its capacity to produce new knowledge and theories. In that case,
the universities of the Third World become simple reproducers, more or less sophisticated according to the circumstances, of the knowledge, theories and methodological approaches developed elsewhere and not necessarily relevant to our problems. Examples of this distortion have been typical in our universities. For instance, the marginal role played in our schools of medicine by the study of the Chagas disease (affecting millions of people in the region) as compared with the inordinate attention paid to study of physical illnesses proper of affluent societies, like hypertension of obesity; or training our medical students in the use of highly sophisticated electronic instruments disregarding the basic tools of clinics needed to serve the overwhelming majority of the population. Similar examples of academic distortion can be drawn from the exact sciences and, last but not least, the social sciences as well. In the later the propensity to fit within the limits of the dominant paradigm and the apparently irresistible tendency to imitate the intellectual fashions of the North has led to a regrettable situation in which the outstanding contributions made by Latin American social scientists in the second half of the past century is nowadays almost completely ignored by the younger generations who, on the other side, are quite familiar with the last papers produced in the field of “rational choice”, neo-institutionalism or neoclassical economics. Incidentally, it has to be noted that this professional disease: the uncritical imitation of anything produced in the North, especially if is written in English, has become particularly acute among the economists with the consequences that our countries know too well.

Financial dependence and its impact on the quality and ideological orientation of scholarly production.

Of course, the critical financial situation of our universities helps to explain this disjunction between university and society. Given that in Latin American universities the salaries of professors and researchers has been kept at low levels, or straightforwardly frozen for years, the role of the foreign financial influences has become more and more crucial at the time of determining our research agenda. With the World Bank’s prevailing criteria in use for the assessment of the “productivity” of our professors
and researchers, in order to improve his or her payment they are forced to publish more, and quicker. In Latin America these days, although not only in Latin America, universities salaries are low and improvements can be reached by productivity-tied incentives, “productivity” being measured by the number of articles published in journals of “high international impact” or by books also published abroad, especially in America. Given that the evaluators tend to dismiss, or underestimate, publications made in journals or publishing houses based in Latin America the rush to publish in American journals or in some university or commercial presses of the United States (and in much lesser degree, Western Europe) has become an almost irresistible force. Then, if the production of our colleagues in Latin America is regarded as “acceptable” by their counterparts in the United States or Europe and consider their work publishable there, their salaries will be raised because the evaluating agencies at home, possessed by a strong albeit unconscious racist or colonialist bias, would reward our scholars accordingly. A six page article in the American Political Science Review or in Journal of Politics is graded much higher than a three-hundred-page book published by a major commercial or university press in Latin America.

It is important to underline the existence and depth of this colonialist bias overdetermining the economist bent because, as a social scientist, I can testify that while some North American or European social science journals are excellent others are terrible; and that in Latin America there are some journals as good as the best in the North, while others are definitively as bad as the worse. But this kind of reasoning is not very popular among the evaluating agencies and, as a result they place a very high premium (which is translated into the salary of the professor) for any paper published in the North, while giving almost not credit at all for a book, not to mention an article, published in a country of the periphery of the capitalist system.

The unfortunate result of this operation is that both the research agenda and the curricula of our universities have come to be increasingly dependent upon the theoretical and practical priorities established by our
colleagues in the editorial boards of the American journals, who decide that is and what is not publishable, or in the hands of the editors of the commercial or university presses of the United States or Europe. Their research agenda, thematic priorities and theoretical approaches not always coincide with ours or are the most convenient for our societies.

In addition, this dependence from foreign sources of financing can also work in an indirect manner. Given that the university budgets have little money to finance scientific research, it has become a common practice among our social scientists to compete for grants destined to conduct the so-called applied social research demanded by governmental agencies and, in many cases, by the international financial institutions who provided the funds for the neoliberal reforms. But as most states in the region are bankrupt the money needed for this policy-oriented research comes also from outside sources, basically from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the IMF. Thus, at the end of the day our social scientists are forced to give up any pretension of developing a research agenda of their own, or of conducting long-range research as done in the 1950s and 1960s, or of working with a particular theoretical and methodological framework that may be not agreeable to the donors. In addition, this policy-oriented research is “prêt a porter,” and has little relationship with veritable social science. The professors are expected to produce a typical consulting paper and not a social science research report. The theoretical and methodological framework to be used is carefully specified beforehand in the contract and cannot be modified by the consultant, and the findings are largely built-in in the basic premises of the theory and methods specified in the job description. Result: bad social science, no matter the million of dollars spent in this peculiar kind of “social research” whose real aim is to legitimize, with the assistance of a pseudo-scientific work, the policies decided in advance. As a result, no valuable knowledge is produced to alleviate some of the more critical problems faced by our peoples, like poverty, for instance.²

² No time to go into the details of this process here. We have examined these issues in extenso in Boron, 2008.
As a result, the mission of the university and its autonomy are greatly affected by its financial vulnerability. In addition, most universities in the region have also to bear the distorting influence of extra-university actors that retain the upper hand at the time of appointing rectors, presidents and deans. Of course, this influence is later disseminated throughout the entire university life, including curricula, research and teaching. This does not only happen in Latin America because the influence of governmental authorities is also felt in Europe and in the public universities of America, although in lesser degree when compared to our countries. Moreover, the public and very especially the private universities are also subjected to the influence of corporate interests in the form of big individual donors, rich alumni and the powerful CEOs that sit on the Board of Trustees. This is the pattern in the US, but is also becoming increasingly the pattern in many private universities in Latin America.

Thus, the problem of academic autonomy is a major one and not only confined to our region. However, in our countries quite often the impact is exceedingly large. Too often the voice of the government is crucial in the appointment of the rectors of many public LAC universities, even against the opinion in contrary of the overwhelming majority of the faculty and students. In the countries in which the impact of the University Reform of 1918 has been very strong -especially in Argentina, but also in a handful of other countries- the authorities are elected by the university community (professors, graduates and students) without, or with very little, exogenous interference. Yet, this practice has been subjected to a fierce attack in recent years by the advocates of the neoliberal consensus and their allies in the university. Unfortunately, and in spite of its crucial importance, the question of university autonomy still has not made its way to the public agenda.

Policy responses from Latin American governments

The transformations taking place in the university scene of Latin America and the Caribbean and the policy responses adopted by the
governments of the region raise a series of problems that directly or indirectly negatively impinge on the sheer existence of critical thinking. As asserted before, under the predominant neoliberal ideological climate, education is treated as any other commodity exchanged in the market. University education cannot, and should not, be considered apart from the market logic that permeates the most diverse institutions and practices of contemporary capitalist societies. Subtle changes in the lexicon used in the working papers, research reports and articles and books written on educational matters under the paramount influence of the World Bank—either through the Bank’s own experts or the work of local researchers and ministerial staff financed and/or trained by the World Bank—show how, gradually but steadily, during the last quarter of a century the pseudo-technical language of economics replaced the discourse hitherto used by UNESCO originated in the traditional source of the humanities. Former Harvard President Derek Bok expressed, in recent years, his deep concern with this trend and the dangers posed by what he calls the “commercialization of university education” to the core academic values of the university. (Bok, 2003) This orientation consecrated the triumph of the barbarous idea that education is a commodity and, as any other commodity, has to be traded in the marketplace where a numberless figure of isolated and selfish individuals, endowed with equal economic capacities, perfectly well informed and acting rationally, “buy” educational services freely sold in the market by a heterogeneous group of providers like the state, the churches or private businessmen of any sort. As happens with any commodity traded in the markets nobody could claim to have a “right” to own any good or to have free access to a specific service if the person does not have the resources to pay for it. Much more nonsensical would be to request the governments to deliver those goods and services free, and higher education should not be an exception to this rule. (López Segrera, 2003a and b)

One of the consequences of the neoliberal predominance has been the generalized acceptance gained by the hitherto bizarre idea that universities should be regarded as profitable, money-making institutions
able to live on their own incomes. It is regrettable to acknowledge that this absurdity has become a sort of conventional wisdom of the times, shared though with varying degrees of enthusiasm by university professors and administrators, educational experts, relevant policy-makers and, more generally, the public opinion manipulated by the bourgeois press. The proponents of this thesis argue that the supposed vitality of the American university system - assumed as the non-plus ultra model of higher education which should be imitated elsewhere in the world - lies in its private nature. The carefully omit to say that all the major private universities in the United States benefit from extraordinary subsidies from the federal government and, to a varying lesser degree, from the state and local governments. In some cases the amount of these subsidies, under a variety of forms: research grants, affirmative action programs, special consulting contracts, etcétera, reach hundred of million of dollars. As a result, none of the major American private universities meets their needs without the fiscal assistance of the state. In Europe, the university system is mostly public, and its standard of quality is no inferior to the American. Yet, for the neoliberal ideologues it is not a good system because depends on the state budget and because educational services are almost entirely free of charge. Therefore, it is not a good example to follow. Contrary to what was asserted by the humanistic conception of the past, education is not longer a citizen’s right or the state’s obligation vis a vis its citizenry but a service like any other (i.e., health or social security) and, as any service, has to be acquired through the market. “There is no free lunch”, conventional economist say and state officials assent.

Little wonder then if some of the innovations put into effect by the “reformed” public universities in Latin America have little relation with the quality of academic standards or, even less, with the promotion of critical thinking. The paramount concern of these reforms has been to insure that universities would be able to function with the financial resources generated by themselves, thus reproducing in the educational sphere the more general trend towards the privatization and commodification of all kinds of goods and services required by society to
sustain its own existence. Moreover, this mercantile impulse frees a considerable portion of the always scarce state’s resources that can be redirected to the payment of the external debt, granting large subsidies for the big corporations or other similar goals. Watching with regret this sad spectacle Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí observed that the university passed from being regarded as a social institution -autonomous, republican, laicized and democratic- to be considered as a “social organization” ruled by utilitarian principles, functional to the preservation of the existing social order and completely deprived of all critical intention. (Chauí, 2003) Extensive empirical research provide illustrative examples of this trend in Brazil. (Trindade, 2001)

The most important transformations that recently took place in our universities have an underlying philosophical clearly contradictory with critical thinking.³ Among them should be underlined the following:

- The steady privatization of higher education, a two-pronged process: one, via the subtle but pervasive introduction of fees in hitherto free public universities; or, two, through the inordinate and deregulated expansion of private universities, the overwhelming majority of which are just “chalk and blackboard” institutions, conceived as sheer commercial enterprises with no room whatsoever for critical thinking.

- The chaotic diversification of courses and careers -most of them “practical”, only concerned with the satisfaction of the demands of the market- requiring shorter terms of study with an eminently technical curricula;

- The decentralization taking place in large universities, both along regional lines and within the university itself, granting increased levels of autonomy to internal schools, departments and institutes and forcing them to find in the private sector -via contracts with local firms- the resources needed to fulfil their function;

the introduction of accreditation and evaluation criteria and agencies, most often motivated by budgetary urgencies derived from the need to slash governmental expenditures than by purely academic considerations, in charge of the Sisyphus tasks of assessing “faculty’s performance and productivity”, something exceedingly difficult to do especially when everything is measured with the rude and improper yardstick of the “cost-benefit analysis” sponsored by the evaluating agencies (Aboites, 2004);

in line with the former, the paramount influence of the “peer review” for the evaluation of the scholarly achievement of the faculty. This procedure, if applied in the past, would have expelled from academia the highly heterodox and unconventional theories developed by people like Galilei, Copernicus, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein, among many others. Today we are facing a situation in which unconventional ideas, theories and methodologies are swiftly rejected by the high priests in charge of reassuring the unchallenged predominance of the dominant paradigm in the social sciences. The crisis of these disciplines, unable to predict or anticipate major political or economic changes (like the implosion of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the current world economic crisis) is the direct result of the systematic exclusion of any form of alternative thinking.

Finally, the increasing presence of foreign universities, very especially United States universities, that had opened branches in most countries of Latin America. This was possible thanks to the perverse logic of our educational legislation that while reinforced to unprecedented levels the bureaucratic mechanisms of control and surveillance of the public universities -undermining their administrative and academic autonomy, not the mention the political and ideological autonomy- has dramatically weakened the agencies and instruments in charge of overseeing the performance of private universities;

See also Aboites, 1997 and 2003.
Threats and constraints curtailing the development of critical thinking in the universities.

In this rapidly changing university context there are also other factors that contribute to weaken the critical impulse. Let us briefly examine the two most important.

a) General restrictions to academic freedoms

According to Franz Hinkelammert the dictatorships that razed the region in the late sixties and seventies introduced a radical rupture in the academic environment of the universities of the region. These universities had undergone a rapid process of “modernization” - introduction of new fields of study and careers, increased accessibility, expansion of the full time faculty, etcétera - since the mid-twentieth century in accordance with the democratizing impulse arising as a result of the turbulent (and still unfinished) processes of enfranchisement and extension of the citizenship to the popular sectors that had changed the social and political face of Latin American societies in the post world war II era. Hinkelammert asserts that during this period these universities enjoyed high degrees of institutional autonomy and good budgetary allocations coming from the national governments. “Public financing and university autonomy combined to increase the spaces of academic freedom.” (Hinkelammert, 1990)

Yet, with the rise of dictatorships in the 1970s (in a process openly or covertly supported by Washington) tight political and ideological control substituted the academic freedoms. “Control” that, as a matter of fact, ranged from the wholesale purge of disaffected professors to their mercilessly beating up, as it happened at the Faculty of Exact Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires shortly after the coup d’etat of June 1966. Other expressions of this “control” were the forceful retirement of faculty in the Brazilian universities after the Institutional Act of 1968; the assassinations and disappearances widely known in Argentina, Chile, Brazil; the physical destruction of the university campus, as the bombing of the university library of the University of El Salvador in San Salvador; and the continuous
harassment of university professors that still today (especially in Colombia and Guatemala, but also in Mexico) occurs in some countries of the region. But Hinkelammert calls the attention towards other, subtler forms of intervention that also is instrumental in the suffocation of critical thinking: the political control established by the institutionalization of a rigid paradigm which established what is serious science and what is not. This is of paramount importance in the social sciences and the humanities -where the suffocating tyranny of the *pensée unique* is felt at its maximum strength- but also in the so-called “hard sciences” as well. The general ideological features of our epoch cannot but decisively influence the intellectual atmosphere prevailing in the universities. It is an undisputed fact that the accentuated ideological displacement of the public consciousness to the far right that today prevails worldwide -epitomized in the new US National Security Doctrine, the so-called “war on terrorism” and so on- has created an increasingly intolerant environment in academic institutions both in the advanced capitalist nations and in the periphery of the system as well. The narrow-mindedness of this new cultural ethos, compared with the one that predominated in the 1960’s has prompted the rise of authoritarian and intolerant attitudes and policies that have severely curtailed academic freedoms in the countries of our study. The above mentioned role of the peer review is one of the clear ways in which this process of control is carried out to its extremes.

Of course, specific national circumstances operate to modify this general influence, usually for the worse. The presence of a powerful guerrilla movement in Colombia, for instance, and the steady militarization of public life in that country has collected a heavy toll -including human lives- over the academic freedoms of Colombian scholars. Concerned professors who favor a negotiated settlement of the military conflict are regularly blackmailed by the government and, to a lesser extent, by the most violent wings of the guerrilla. And this situation affects not only the social sciences and the humanities but the natural sciences as well, seriously disrupting the different facets of university life.
In Mexico the very strong influence of the White House on the Mexican authorities, the necessity to overemphasize the alignment of the country with the ideological inclinations prevailing in the Washington, and the uprising of the Zapatistas gave rise to a noticeable hardening of the political and ideological control over the mass media and the academia, both strongly influenced by governmental financial outlays. Thus, scholars that showed some sympathies for the Zapatistas, or voicing critical opinions regarding the results of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are being quietly cornered to the margins of academia, relegated in promotion, and deprived from access to governmental controlled research funds. More recently, a Colombian senior professor at UNAM was kidnapped and transferred back to Colombia under accusations of being a member of the guerrilla in that country. (Aboites, 2003)

In Argentina, Brazil and Costa Rica the wearing down of academic freedoms proceeded more subtly. The absence of an armed conflict -more open and violent in Colombia, more latent in Mexico- deprived the established powers of the necessary pretexts to launch an all out assault against academic freedoms. Yet, the political will is there and the effects are already clearly seen in all sorts of administrative instruments and new procedures created precisely with the purpose of aligning discontented faculty and assuring that the main policy orientations of the government will not face, as in the turbulent 1960’s, a multitude of critical voices nested in academia.

b) The GATS offensive and the free-trade accords.

The increased pressures over underdeveloped nations to sign the GATS agreement carry in themselves very serious threats to university life and, very especially, to the prospects of critical thinking. As it is well known, GATS is a set of multilateral rules proposed by the World Trade Organization in order to regulate the international trade in services. In previous international trade agreements the object of these commercial rules were goods and products, but no services. Yet, the increasing role of the latter in the global economy thanks to the financialization of capitalist accumulation, mainly the
extraordinary growth of new financial instruments and banking services, prompted the introduction of a normative framework to guarantee the full fledged liberalization and deregulation of trade in services. The ideological and political victory of neoliberalism is clearly expressed by the fact that, under strong pressures of successive American administrations, education has come to be included as one of the twelve “service sectors” to be liberalized along, for example, communication, transportation, finance, tourism and health. As noted by Jane Knight, one of the leading experts in the field, the GATS agreement is

“administered by the World Trade Organization (WTO) which is made up of 146 member countries. The WTO is the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the majority of the world’s trading nations and ratified in their parliaments. The GATS is one of these key agreements and is a legally enforceable set of rules.” (Knight, p. 67)

As said above, GATS considers education at all its levels, from pre-school kindergardens to higher education at graduate level, adult education and any other educational programs, as another service, no longer regarded, as before, as a citizen right which should be preserved beyond the reach of the market logics. Key elements in the GATS proposal are the following:

- **Coverage**: includes all the internationally traded services, education not being an exception.
- **Target decisions** are all rules, laws, regulations and customary practices issued or tolerated by national, regional or local governments that may interfere with the international trade. In this case, trade in educational services.
- **Unconditional obligations**. There are four, and apply to all service sectors: most favoured nations; transparency; dispute settlement; and monopolies.
National treatment, meaning that equal treatment should be granted to all providers of educational services, no matter whether they are local or international providers.

Progressive liberalization. This clause means that there is a built-in agenda by which after completion of every round of liberalizing negotiations there should be a progress in trade liberalization in the same or other areas: more sectors should liberalized and more trade limitations should be removed. (Knight, pp. 71-74)

Once accepted that education is a service or, in coarse economic terms, a commodity, there is no point in discussing exemptions because of the supposedly peculiar nature of this “service.” And regardless whether a country has made a specific commitment to uphold the rules of the WTO in the educational services or not, the fact is that the “unconditional obligations” succinctly listed above are mandatory for each country that has signed its entrance to the WTO. Additionally, the GATS rules include a clause of “progressive liberalization” called to exert a determining influence in all the service sectors and, very especially, to ensure the irreversibility of the policies adopted by a given country no matter under what conditions those policies were officially approved. It should be reminded that many underdeveloped nations, all of them heavily indebted, were forced to accept trade liberalization as part of the “conditionalities” imposed on them as a requirement to get new loans to pay their external debt, or to access to a loan renegotiation. The impact of this un-heard of commodification of education on academic freedom of professors and teachers is easy to discern. If education is a business, and if businesses are supposed to yield profits, considerations regarding intellectual creativity, critical awareness, academic freedoms, and scholarly excellence are completely out of the mark. Having stripped education of its spiritual and humanistic values as a key element in the formation of the citizen and having sent it to the market place, all those kind of concerns are not only superfluous but also inconvenient and misplaced. Even more, the time-honoured discussion on the “mission” of the university already mentioned at the beginning of this paper seems to be definitively foreclosed. Under the aegis of neoliberalism all major institutions
of modern society: family, school, university, labour unions, political parties, were re-engineered to become obedient servants of the market logic. Yet, the trend is not reasserting itself without countering resistances, but even for the more optimist the future of the university is at stakes, and the prospects are not heartening. (Dos Santos, 2001 and 2005; González Casanova, 2001)
ANNEX I

On “politically correct” social science theory and research

There are many stories that illustrate the advances against critical thinking and academic freedoms. Let us briefly exposed some of them. For obvious reasons the names of the involved scholars would not be disclosed.

In Argentina, a leading senior professor in the study of human rights violations during the military dictatorship was denied promotion on the grounds that the language used to describe and analyze his/her data lacked the parsimony and “value-neutrality” proper of scientific undertakings. His/her analysis was considered inconsistent with the methodological canons of social science and, therefore, “political”. A long battle ensued, the situation came to a stalemate, but the research process was irreversibly damaged: the research team dispersed, the research momentum was broken, and the results were never published. Also in Argentina, a respected provincial university deprived a highly prestigious architect, known by its international and national prizes, from his/her chair because his/her open defense of the professors union and of the social responsibility of the university in one of the more poverty-stricken areas of the country.

In Mexico, a well established scholar with a very active insertion in the international circles of his/her profession was downgraded from her academic position in the National System of Researchers, a special governmental program by which the professorial elite is granted special research subsidies and salary incentives not accessible to the rest of the colleagues. The reasons given by the administrators were that the “peer review” of his/her recent scholarly activities judged that his/her work has become “journalistic” in language and that his/her research strategies were incompatible with the rules of social science research. The involved scholar had been very vocal and sided with the Zapatistas in supporting the devolution of the lands to the aboriginal peoples in Mexico.

In Colombia a professor at the National University involved in the peace negotiations between the government and the guerrilla saw his/her life seriously threatened by the right-wing “paramilitary” forces that oversee the behavior of suspected scholars and students in the campus. He/she was forced into exile for more than two years. His/her classes were interrupted, and his/her research was aborted.

Also in Colombia, the same happened to a distinguished scholar from one of the best private universities in the country, frequently hired as visiting professor by the most renowned American universities. He/she was forced into exile for almost three years.

In Brazil, some of the most vocal critics of the status quo were never incorporated into academia once the military dictatorship that had forcefully retired him/her was over. Returned from long years of exile, Professor X, whose work had received generalized recognition because of its originality and depth, had to quietly accept that the retirement decided by the military would not be reversed by the new, supposedly democratically elected university authorities. No university press ever dared to publish his/her work.
ANNEX II

Liberalism in action: the Free Trade Agreements against university’s autonomy and critical thinking in Colombia

An example of the detrimental influences that GATS-type negotiations can have on the universities in Latin America has been recently provided in Colombia. In response to pressures from the US Trade Representative negotiating a bilateral free trade agreement between the United States and Colombia President Uribe issued the Decree 2566/2003 reforming the university system of his country in order to “adjust it to the new conditions posed by the free trade of services and the opening of the educational markets.” The Treaty under discussion requires that all levels of the educational system be opened to the free play of supply and demand. The purpose of this reform is to facilitate the arrival to the country of a host of the foreign, mostly private, institutions to compete on a equal standing with the national institutions. Given that according to official estimates only 5% of the high school graduates enter to the universities, public or private, the estimated profitability of an “investment” in higher education is formidable. President Uribe is ready to concede this in order to get the Free Trade Treaty with the United States signed as soon as possible. With this initiative the Colombian state should set limits to the governmental financing of public universities, put an end to all kind of “subsidies” to educational institutions, and homogenize the contents of courses and research priorities in accordance to the needs of the markets, to the disadvantage of independent search of truth. (Mendoza, 2004)
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