

# Neoliberalism and Higher Education in Brazil

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**Abstract:** Public higher education has been strangled in Brazil by personnel policies, fragmentation through privatisation and competition with a growing private sector. Central to the productivist turn in Brazil is the annual 'CAPES report' which ranks departments and determines their funding. The Forum of Executive Officers of Graduate Programs in Anthropology was created, years ago, to discuss problems regarding anthropology's teaching and research. Its efficacy depends on the political skills of its members to influence interlocutors. We need to understand the sociology of change around us and the power structures of the agencies structuring our field of action to be able to propose solutions.

Two introductory distinctions are first necessary. One has to do with the different nature of the Brazilian university system when compared, for instance, to the North American one. The other is a distinction between the university as a whole, as an institution of modern life, and the place that anthropology may have within this institution. These two distinctions seem to be crucial because, as we know, 'audit culture', the 'politics of accountability', 'bureaucratic peace', and 'university' do not mean the same thing everywhere. In fact, 'neoliberalism' does not mean the same thing everywhere: a UK prime minister applying 'neoliberal policies', such as the downsizing of the state, because she was acting according to the ideologies of the elite of her own country, is different from national governments applying those same policies in response to pressures of multilateral

agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which is the case in Brazil.

In spite of these differences, it is always critical to recall that in all cases, nation-states are responding to the needs of flexible post-Fordist capitalism with different levels of social impact. Social inequality, ecological destruction, expenditures on war and discrimination against migrants are on the rise in many places while the quality of public services declines. After the end of 'really existing socialism' (1989-1991), the world witnessed the advent of triumphant capitalism, of 'really existing globalisation', a period of ideological and, most importantly, utopian crisis (in spite of a moment when the environmental movement temporarily filled this gap). Without a strong vision of a different future, we were left with the efficacy of technotopia, of its managers and of elec-

tronic and computer capitalism. This is the framework in which we now find ourselves. Diminishing the reach of public interests is but another name for capitalist accumulation in the early twenty-first century.

In a country like Brazil, where the degree of income concentration is scandalous, the decreasing capacity of public services surely represents another step in this profoundly deepening inequality. In spite of the obvious positive role of education in fostering social justice, inclusion and citizenship, in the last decade the public university system was one of the areas of the public sector that was most affected by 'neoliberal policies' based on the so-called Washington Consensus (all jargon much beloved by the media and by politicians eager to construct slogans). The Washington Consensus was a set of recommendations, embraced by development agencies in the late 1980s, that typically represented the neoliberal recipe: shrinking of the state, structural adjustment, privatisation and support of private enterprise and capital, reorientation of national economies toward foreign markets, weakening labour legislation, scaling down or finishing the welfare state, etc. Such a 'consensus' soon became the global model of development for conservative bureaucratic elites in states and multilateral agencies.

### Higher Education in Brazil

In Brazil, the best university education available has long been in the public university system, a system supported primarily by the federal government. There are also public universities funded by state governments, such as those in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. However, in the last fifteen years there has been a privatisation of higher education in Brazil with the advent of an impressive number

of *faculdades*, that is, small institutions offering primarily professional degree courses and a few undergraduate courses. This is surely a result of a complex combination of closely related factors including the employment of neoliberal policies, often recommended to the state by multilateral agencies, aimed at opening up this economic sector for entrepreneurs; the reduction of funds allocated to public universities that, in consequence, could not grow and absorb the increasing numbers of students coming out of secondary schools; and the growing awareness of entrepreneurs that higher education is an extremely profitable business. The 2002 Census of the Education Ministry (Correio Braziliense 2003) clearly showed the new situation: 63.5 percent of college students were concentrated in private institutions, with a new private college being opened every six hours. '[I]n five years the number of students registered in private universities and colleges increased by 84 percent, and in public universities by 31 percent ... Six out of ten of the largest universities in the country, those with more than nineteen thousand students, are private' (ibid.) These institutions, however, are known for offering, with some exceptions, a poor undergraduate education compared to the public universities that set the quality standards in Brazil. They usually offer undergraduate degrees in law, education, journalism, business administration and other fields that do not mean heavy investment in infrastructure, other than classrooms. Most of the professors are paid on an hourly basis and, in many places, do not have graduate degrees. Public funds and scholarships are given to private universities which, in turn, offer some places free of charge for students who cannot afford to pay tuition fees. Ironically, students in these colleges/universities are those in the middle class or in lower ranks of Brazilian society who did

not pass the *vestibular*, the highly competitive college entrance examination that screens who gets to be a student in a public university. The strategy of the well-to-do in Brazil has long been to send their children to expensive private elementary and secondary schools so that they will be able to pass the *vestibular* and get the best university education for free. Indeed, long before neoliberal policies for higher education were in place, elementary and secondary education was highly privatised. The perverse consequence is that most students in public universities, especially those who want to graduate in prestigious professions such as medicine, law, engineering and others, come from private schools and from well-established families. Lower-middle class children, or even poorer ones, whose families could not afford to send them to the most competitive and expensive private elementary and secondary schools often have to go to private colleges. The state is subsidising the reproduction of the middle class especially of those of its members that are best off. In recent decades, the response to this inequity has not been to strengthen public education in the elementary and secondary levels in order to give equal opportunities for all students irrespective of their family income. In fact, what has happened is a squeeze of the public university in a move that is apparently destined to privatise all education in the country by threatening what remains good in the public system.

The leadership of the public system is almost unparalleled in regard to graduate education. After 1968, when during the military dictatorship (1964-1985) a huge reform of the university system was implemented, a nationwide public system of graduate programs has consistently grown in Brazil. Since advanced education and research call for professors with doctoral degrees, good libraries, laboratories

and research funds, private institutions seldom venture into this area.

In education, thus, the main factor to consider when discussing neoliberal policies in Brazil is the intense entrance of private capital into a sector that was previously dominated by public institutions. Quality is the last barrier between public and private university systems in Brazil, especially regarding undergraduate education. Some of the best private universities are already making investments in quality by hiring the masters and doctors that the public sector is training. Since the larger environment is one where downsizing of the state prevails, the federal government has not allowed public universities to replace the numbers of professors and researchers who retire. And this is another problem related to the larger 'neoliberal environment'. Since the federal government has changed the rules of retirement, professors who were at an age when they could retire did so even if they did not want to leave their departments and laboratories. They were afraid of losing the labour rights gained before the reforms. Where do these mature professors and researchers go when they retire? They often go to teach at private institutions. There is another process going on within public universities that may be dubbed 'fragmented privatisation from within', meaning that the time and attention that a professor dedicates to his/her activities within the public system are diminishing and becoming secondary in his or her workload. For many, in view of low wages, consultancies became a priority; teaching and researching became secondary. In sum, public higher education has been strangled in Brazil at the entrance (new professors have not been hired in the proportion needed), at the exit (mature professors retire earlier), from without (competition from the private sector) and from within the system (internal fragmented privatisation).

Apparently, the new Centre-to-Left federal government in power since January 2003 is willing to implement public policies that aim at relieving the existing precarious situation. But it is too soon to assess whether measures such as the hiring of thousands of new professors for the public universities will fully remedy the losses already suffered. Another reform of the university system is on the horizon and is likely to be implemented in 2005. Many analysts of the Brazilian university system and powerful institutions such as the ANDES (the national union of university professors) argue that the new reform will reinforce the privatisation of higher education in the country. Whatever the results, it is difficult to say whether these and other measures are part of lasting initiatives. Public university education is a responsibility of the federal ministry of education. In this sense, the fate of public universities in Brazil is directly geared to the dynamics of the national political system. Every four years (or even more frequently as the term of the education minister, a political appointee, does not necessarily match the term of the president), authorities may change and set different kinds of priorities. Such a situation forces federal university professors in Brazil to be politicised and to follow state policies in order to struggle for the survival and improvement of their institutional, professional, academic and scientific lives.

### **Anthropology and the University System in Brazil<sup>1</sup>**

Anthropology is a graduate degree in Brazil. After 1968, a nationwide graduate system started to develop in a format similar to the North American courses. There are thirteen graduate programs in anthropology where more than 150 professors worked in 2001. Students usually get

acquainted with anthropology during their undergraduate courses—especially students enrolled in social sciences, history, international relations, law and other humanities courses—when they have to study an introduction to anthropology or other disciplines before graduation. In private schools, students may occasionally have contact with anthropology in undergraduate courses taught by anthropologists who hold graduate degrees, but none of such institutions offers undergraduate degrees in anthropology. Sometimes anthropologists may teach sociology or other disciplines in private colleges. In this case, they usually impart an anthropological flavour to their courses.

In the period 1991-2002, 244 doctoral dissertations in anthropology were written in Brazil. Research in Brazilian anthropology is led by the public graduate programs, which are free of charge and where many students receive scholarships from two federal agencies, CNPq (National Council of Scientific and Technological Development, linked to the Ministry of Science and Technology) and CAPES Foundation (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, linked to the Ministry of Education). The latter is responsible for an evaluation of all graduate courses in Brazil. Central to the productivist turn in Brazilian higher education is the annual 'CAPES report' that every graduate program has to submit. A peer committee annually reads the reports of an academic area and every three years ranks programs. The ranking system determines the kind of financing a given program receives from CAPES and is the main comparative source of academic prestige in the country. CNPq, for instance, does not have its own evaluation system; in fact, it relies on the ranking produced by CAPES.

The consolidation of a public graduate system in Brazil is considered by many a success story, especially when compared

to what happens in other Latin American countries. Indeed, in 1992, 1,780 doctoral students received their degrees in Brazil. In 2002, ten years later, this number rose to 6,893. There is a relatively wide consensus in Brazil that the existence of an evaluation program, one relying almost entirely on quantitative measures, helped the consolidation of such a public graduate system. However, there is a great difference of opinion concerning how the evaluation should be conducted. Currently, it is uniformly applied to all graduate courses in the whole country. It relies on a numeric system created by a mixture of colleagues from different universities in Brazil and staff of the CAPES Foundation. Several of the latter, especially those in the most powerful positions such as the president and board members, are also professors from the public university system temporarily working for CAPES. The overall conception of the report reflects the hegemony of the 'hard sciences' in the Brazilian scientific milieu. The report contains a few textual descriptions of a given program and a long list of indices that are evaluated and graded by a committee made up of colleagues from different graduate programs in the same discipline. These indices cover information such as the number of professors working on a particular program, the faculty:student ratio, the 'productivity' of faculty and students (meaning publications, participation in congresses and other academic meetings, amount of courses taught, number of students advised per professor etc.), agreements and exchanges with other national and international institutions, and so on. The CAPES annual report is in electronic form and is a tedious and long document to produce, with its many items and details. The Executive Officer and the Secretary of the Graduate Program in Anthropology of the University of Brasilia, where I work, for instance, organise an

over 400 page-long document every year based on the information professors, students and staff provide.

The Forum of Executive Officers of Graduate Programs in Anthropology was created, years ago, to discuss relevant problems for anthropology teaching and research. It usually meets in congresses or other gatherings organised by the ABA (Brazilian Association of Anthropology). The ABA has since its inception organised open discussions on the teaching of anthropology in Brazil. Recently, it promoted a year-and-a-half long research project on the characteristics of the practice of anthropology in the country (see Trajano Filho and Ribeiro 2004). One of the goals of such an overarching research project was to provide a picture that could go beyond that of CAPES annual reports. We are surely within the realm of politics. As such, Brazilian anthropologists, especially through ABA, their representative institution, are always paying attention to the policies that interfere with their practices. However, the efficacy of their political actions depends, like in other political situations, on their skills in making their points and influencing interlocutors, and also on certain political junctures and alliances that may define the presence of a colleague who, as president of CAPES, is more sensitive to the particularities of anthropological issues and demands.

There are two particularly contentious issues from the point of view of anthropologists regarding CAPES's annual evaluation. First is the universality of the annual report, i.e. the fact that the report's format is the same for all disciplines across the board. Second, and more important, are the prescribed average times students are allowed to take in completing their graduate degree work. According to CAPES, the ideal average is two years for a Master's (until recently the M.A. degree was highly prestigious in Brazil) and four years for a

doctoral degree, i.e. six years in total. Anthropologists are amongst those who complain the most about these impositions. Indeed, as a bureaucratic-institutional model of time and production it is doomed to clash with academic and scientific notions of time and quality. Can a good doctoral dissertation be made in six years when students have three years, at least, of coursework? What about the appropriate amount of time to spend in fieldwork? Are we going to give up some of the foundational basis of our discipline because of a centralised state agency where anthropology is but another, and rather small, area? Don't we need to act politically in Brasília and change these people's minds? Who are these people? We are also 'them', some say, since the committees are made up of colleagues. Is it fair, in a country where inequality is shameful, to keep graduate students within public universities for more than six years? Isn't that too expensive for tax payers? Does not the country have other priorities such as fighting hunger and illiteracy?

### **Final Remarks**

Each of these questions prompts further questions and I am sure some of them have been and are being raised in other countries. It is rather difficult to strike a balance between audit cultures and politics of accountability. Both of them seem to be related to demands of transparency and efficiency. But audit cultures resonate with connotations of bureaucratic domination, of impersonal, distant modes of control for the sake of production. Politics of accountability, in turn, can be related to the struggle of NGOs demanding information and public responsibility from governmental or private institutions for the sake of enhancing the awareness of civil society on critical issues. Can we do without some

degree of auditing and accountability within complex institutions such as universities? I don't believe so. I am thinking not only of what bureaucrats may need in order to close accounts and budgets or to increase the number of students and dissertations. I also recognise that universities and research centres often are places where most of the hegemonic elites are (re)produced and where many highly destructive ideas, systems and artefacts are conceived. We need to develop a clearer perspective of which universities we are concerned with, as these may be quite different from the university we want to see. My previous question also seems to raise the point that what we are currently facing is an exacerbation of the role of auditing and accountability. Finally Taylorism has made its way to the university system of production. In this context, auditing and accountability have a twofold role: they are a pedagogy of new forms of academic production and a mode of extracting surplus labour in order to immobilise alternative visions, especially those that might be critical of the larger institutional and political environment. Resistance should be expected, but the scenario, in many countries, does not look so promising. It appears, from the many signs coming from different positions within the world system, that we are headed towards a more conservative and more domesticated university life. The profession of university professor is under such pressures that it is becoming discouraging for younger generations.

Indeed, many of the issues discussed here have to do with the nature of work under flexible capitalism, a brand of capitalism that intensively favours growth of the service sector (an assertion that, to some extent, explains the renewed interest entrepreneurs, managers and planners have in private education). What do we consider to be work? Teaching load?

Numbers of articles in world-class journals? Fame? Is academic work measurable by numbers? But, if we do not use numbers to create a general overview of the university how are we to separate the overworked professor from the one who has been teaching the same old course for decades? Of course, the issue is not numbers *per se*. Rather, it is what numbers are being generated, by whom, and for what. This is, in short, a matter of power and control. Who wants to control what and why? This question is particularly important for the fate of public universities in Brazil, given the growing competition of private colleges and universities. Should public universities be elitist as they mostly are, setting standards to the system as a whole, or should they be massive institutions? Are the options mutually exclusive?

To go beyond these dilemmas we need to set an agenda that recognises not only that most of our problems are being caused by neoliberal policies but also that, on the other hand, there are great demographic and sociological changes as well as ideological expectations (some of which the university system itself helped to create) pressuring the universities. Central here is the need to democratise access to higher education everywhere. If we do not understand the sociology of change around us and the power structures of the actors and agencies structuring our field of action we are not going to be able to find solutions. Are we to rely on institutions such as unions to counterpoise the drive capital is making? How corporative and ideologically misplaced are these institutions today? Or are we to be backed by social movements and/or parties that understand the critical and strategic role of the university, of science, of the intelligentsia for the future of any modern society?

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### Note

1. Many of the figures in this section come from Trajano Filho and Ribeiro (2004).

### References

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