

Dr. Prometheus visits Latin America

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“He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the Universe”
Prometheus Unbound
Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1820.

I.

When Guy Neave and some of his colleagues spent an academic term in Latin America almost twenty years ago, they soon lost track of one of their party, Mr. Prometheus. While he has been cited on various occasions, the distinguished author continues to be worried about his charge as he showed most recently in one of the Fulbright Brainstorms when he asked,

“ Whether today Mr. Prometheus is unbound, still shackled or merely released on parole from what is conceived by the canons of Ultra-liberalism as the dead hand of the state ...” (Neave 2004, p. 1)¹

This question originated with changes in western European higher education in the 1980s, particularly between the university and the State. These changes can be seen as a series of shifts - almost personality changes: from a facilitator to an interventionist state; from the friendly to the evaluative state; from policies set by social needs to policies based on budget possibilities; from negotiated policy coordination to products and process control; from collegiate administration to managerial and entrepreneurial logic; from the internal needs of each institution to the needs of the labour market and firms; from block grants or guaranteed financing by the State to contracts that require universities to meet specific standards, objectives and performance measured by efficiency and impact indicators (Van Vught 1989; Neave and Van Vught 1991).

Paradoxically, in Western Europe at least, with the exception of the United Kingdom - the altered relations between the State and higher education did not result in greater direct intervention and control - but rather in a style of self regulation which the Dutch Ministry of Education and Sciences called, in the 1980s, “steering at a distance”; that is, giving the universities and other higher education institutes more autonomy and responsibility.

So its worth asking have universities been liberated? Has Prometheus’s sacred knowledge improved the lot of Man - or is it just another way - subtler and more effective - to tie him to the rock. Neave’s answer, although full of subtleties, seems to point to the second conclusion. According to him, writing with Van Vught, these shifts “mean neither more nor less than a reworking of the traditional strategy of rational planning and control” (1991, p. 394)². In other words Prometheus is still chained.

II

This message - as well as those of other writers notably Burton Clark from the United States - arrived in a subcontinent where from the XVI Century, both the tradition and the trajectory of universities had developed in a very different way from Western Europe (Schwartzman 1992).

In Latin America most universities were almost completely autonomous while enjoying state support - Prometheus unbound in Macondo, and the state - a forceful Leviathan in other

¹ Which recalls the original question, “Are we right to think of western higher education systems like poor Prometheus, chained to a rock with his guts exposed day after day for the eagles of cost cutting and intervention” (Neave and Van Vught 1991, p.397). [Author’s translation from Spanish text]

² Author’s translation from Spanish text.

respects - acted as a kindly, if blinkered, local banker. How did these relations work? The state made direct contributions to each university, negotiated on the basis of past history and usually free of conditions, either about performance or efficiency. While they enjoyed preferential treatment from a benign (at least to them) State they received few if any stimuli to improve activities, or to innovate and respond to social and development demands (Brunner 1996). Indeed they were often discouraged from doing so.

The region continued to follow this pattern of higher education - reduced access, few graduates, little scientific technical research for most of the twentieth century - at least up to the time of Mr. Prometheus's holiday and apparent disappearance.

In fact, it was only in 1985 that Latin American higher education moved from an elite to a mass system (Trow 2006) with 15 percent of the relevant age group attending tertiary institutions. In contrast to Western Europe, two third of Latin America's undergraduates were enrolled in public while one third or more (and growing) were enrolled in private institutions; but which laid the basis, although passively at first, for greater heterogeneity and institutional differentiation. This "Private Prometheus" (Altbach 1999; Neave and Van Vught 1994), it was then imagined, would have the potential to unleash the power of the market to restructure and improve higher education systems.

However there continued to be great differences between systems, not least in terms of internal efficiency. Using the ratio of graduates to enrolled students, by the mid 80's that for Latin America varied from 40 undergraduate students (Peru) to 7 (Brazil) per graduate; while that for Europe at that time, examining systems as diverse as Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Ireland and Norway ranged between 3 and 6.³

So too, research results were disappointing. In 1981, the two largest countries Brazil and Mexico together produced around 3,000 articles in the principal journals, around the same amount as Belgium or Denmark considered separately. Together Latin America produced fewer scientific-technical publications than Sweden and contributed less than 1.2 percent of the world total.⁴

With this as background, how was Neave's inquiry treated in Latin America?

Well, at one level the question was perplexing; and at another the response drew on Latin America's capacity for 'ideological utilitarianism'.

Perplexity, because Latin America has always expected grand thoughts from Europe about universities and higher education. The histories of Salamanca and Alcalá were as well known as the examples of Paris and Bologna and there was considerable interest and discussion around the "idea of the university" of Kant, Humboldt, Cardinal Newman, Jaspers and Ortega y Gasset. But systematic research into the functions and structure of higher education systems really did not exist although there were individual exceptions⁵. Only as recently as the beginning of the 1990s did a field of higher education studies emerge in Latin America, coinciding with the publication of Clark and Neave's *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (1992) and which had a theoretical and empirical impact - as examples and policy suggestions - in this continent.

On the other hand, this new focus became an inevitable part of an ideological debate about higher educational policy. There is nothing uncommon about this occurrence - on the contrary, this always seems to happen when visitors arrive in Latin America bearing gifts. They become

³ Calculations based on UNESCO (1997)

⁴ Based on data from The Task Force on Higher Education (2000), Statistical Annex, Table F

⁵ For example, Medina Echavarría (1967); CEPAL (1968); Solari (1968); Schertz (1968); Rama (1970, 1982, 1987), Schwartzman (1981) and Brunner (1985).

allies or enemies in the ongoing national polemics and eventually end up being little more than rhetorical ornaments in Latin America's own culture wars.

This new research focus however - based on authors as diverse as Neave, Van Vught, Clark, Teichler and Kogan among others - was adopted by both sides and used to support the two main positions that continue to influence higher education debate and policy design in Latin America. These positions - for want of anything better - might be called 'traditional' and 'modern' and both make their appeal to Prometheus.

For the traditionalists, the chained Prometheus justifies the university *status quo* as it demonstrates the risks to university autonomy from neo-liberal or Thatcherite policies. In this case, Europe is used as an example of perverse effects when a state instead of helping public universities, promotes self regulated coordination and uses public funds to manage the institutions from afar, but not hands off.

The modernists, on the other hand, use Europe as an example of a positive world wide trend, pointing out that, as there the time has arrived for Latin American universities to re-evaluate and change the contract between them and the state. In this version, Prometheus neither robbed the gods nor is chained, but is alive and well, being paid for doing not too much. It follows that if things were better ordered the market would impose negotiations, the provision of a new job description, and a conversation in which young Prometheus is firmly told that the State may finance part of his education, but never all and always against agreed performance standards.

III.

It has been over twenty years since Prometheus' visit and his happy friendship with traditionalists and modernists in Latin America. During this time higher education systems have been transformed, 'massified' and have grown more differentiated and complex. They are much more diversified, get funds from many different sources, have changed the way they are administered and sometimes how they are governed. Something the same seems to have happened in Europe, although in the context of greater resources, stronger institutional traditions, and greater potential regional unity under the European Union's commitment to the Bologna process.

Neave agrees that Prometheus's situation has changed (2004, p. 11). "His degrees of freedom, responsibility and answerability have certainly grown. At the same time, so too have the draw of reward and penalty of failure [...] The Gods, where-ever it is they sit, whether in Quality Assurance Agencies, National or Regional Evaluation Committees, have accepted his parole. They have also made very clear to him that the price of freedom is success as they - or their Masters - have for the moment, defined it".

In Latin America, by and large, the theory and policy analysis as well as the values and sentiments that underpin it - Gouldner's background and domain assumptions, (1971) - are now part of the common language and make up the analytic instruments of the growing group of higher education researchers. More remarkable, higher education institutions and governments have adopted the same language as well as the idea of the Neavean notion of the 'evaluative state' (1988) as a key part of their discussions and strategies.

Universities now accept that they should be accountable and to do so they should develop self evaluation processes and external review procedures. Governments, from Mexico to Chile, use the language of evaluation and their common procedures - self-evaluation, peer review processes, performance indicators, effectiveness of academic programs, administrative decision making and planning systems, goal achievement, mission statements, evaluative reports, etc.

Further, even if a bit timidly at first, there is an unmistakable tendency to discuss formula and performance based funding, conditional contracts, competitive funds, etc.

So it would seem that Prometheus was more helpful to the modernizers than the traditionalists who want to maintain the status-quo. But is this really so?

IV

First, it must be admitted that the language by which higher education is discussed has undergone changes not only as a result of North American and European research and academic influence but also because of World Bank proposals and texts. Equally these messages did not fall on stony ground because the economies and societies that make up the region - Chavez notwithstanding - are more open and competitive with a more efficient and modern domestic production base than ten years ago. Globalisation is understood to be an educational challenge.

But when higher education is looked at in terms of actual performance and international indicators the changes are less dramatic than the language and the *status quo* far less vulnerable even though the relationship between the State and universities (public and private) has been defined without acrimony as in Western Europe.

So for the modernists it looks like that these new and potentially radical ideas have been less successful to kick start change as providing a new corporate and bureaucratic language - influential with organisations, institutions and governments - with which to discuss higher education. As always happens in Macondo, innovations are absorbed first by the ideologues before being neutralised in practice, showing the continued divide between words and deeds.

Take for example Guy Neave's "evaluative ethic" which many of us talked about in the late 1980s. In Latin America this soon became an "evaluative culture", which is blander and less demanding. It is as if puritan values (close to and part of the evaluative ethic and Weber's Spirit of Capitalism) were absorbed and changed internally by Latin American Catholic baroque culture, ending with a greater ritual and liturgical meaning, but losing its force for innovation and change in the process.

And so Prometheus, having accompanied G. Neave on his visit, is still here - less protected and slightly disenchanted - but free of the Leviathan's heavy hand even if (and living under an assumed name) he has to earn his keep with the modest wage of a public official supplemented, one can feel sure, by consultant fees at market rates. Dr. Prometheus is now something of a proselytiser - a free man, roaming without restraint through capital cities and towns. And this is much better than when he was beaten up and persecuted by dictators, even though there are times when he is nostalgic about not being treated as and living like a gentleman. Now his burden is that he has to earn a living for which improved higher education remains an absolute necessity.

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