



Please cite the source as:

Gil, M. (2000). Scholars in the nineties: Actors, subjects, spectators or hostages? *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, 2 (1). Retrieved month day, year, from: <http://redie.uabc.mx/vol2no1/contents-gil.html>

Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa

Vol. 2, No. 1, 2000

Scholars in the Nineties: Actors, Subjects, Spectators or Hostages?

Los académicos en los noventa: ¿actores, sujetos, espectadores o rehenes?

Manuel Gil Antón

maga@hp9000a1.uam.mx

Departamento de Sociología

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Azcapotzalco

Av. San Pablo 180

Col. Reynosa Tamaulipas, 02200

Delegación Azcapotzalco

México, D. F., México

Lecture presented at

V Congreso Nacional de Investigación Educativa

Event organized by Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa¹

Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes, México

November 2, 1999

*For Craig McDonald Anton,
my New York cousin
In memoriam*

Abstract

Dr. Gil questions the role played by Mexican university academics in the transformation of higher education during the nineties. After outlining the general context of change and its importance, the author proposes avoiding the false dichotomy between restoring the past or installing, without reflective mediation, a schematic future. He suggests taking into consideration the current national academic body composed of several generations of scholars. Three phases are established in terms of the modification of academic activities during the last decades of the twentieth century, and the changes in the level of higher education are considered. Dr. Gil asks if the academics have been actors, subjects, spectators or hostages—both in regard to regulations governing their activity and in the modifications of university processes and structure. The essay ends by proposing a general agenda for research in the field of university studies, and emphasizes two problems: the need for a detailed description of the type and depth of changes, and the definition of the academic as a central actor in institutional life.

Key words: Academics, academic profession, higher education.

Resumen

Se cuestiona el papel que han jugado los académicos de las universidades mexicanas en las transformaciones de la educación superior en la década de los noventa. Esbozado el contexto general de cambio y su importancia, se propone eludir la falsa dicotomía entre restaurar el pasado o instaurar, sin mediación reflexiva, un futuro esquemático. Se propone considerar al actual cuerpo académico nacional conformado por varias generaciones de académicos. Se establecen tres fases en cuanto a la modulación de las actividades académicas en las últimas décadas del siglo XX, y se consideran los cambios en el nivel de la educación superior preguntando si los académicos han sido, tanto en los referentes que regulan su actividad como en las modificaciones a los procesos y estructuras universitarias, actores, sujetos, espectadores o rehenes. El ensayo termina proponiendo una agenda general de investigación para este campo de los estudios universitarios, y enfatiza dos problemas: caracterizar con mayor detalle el tipo y profundidad de los cambios, y la constitución del académico como un actor central en la vida institucional.

Palabras clave: Académicos, profesión académica, educación superior.

Introduction

In our day, certainties do not abound. The title of this contribution to the *Fifth National Conference of Educational Research* does honor to this era replete with questions, since it contains several: What has happened to Mexican academics in

the decade of the nineties? Have they been actors in the academic and political processes occurring in their institutions throughout the decade? In the transformation of the dominant references for recognizing their own activity, have they been able to take the role of active subjects? Probably, they have remained subjects—stranded—in networks of innovative relationships generated by others, a question that reduces them, on occasion, to the level of mere spectators regarding the change in the universities, or finally, to that of hostages of a system foreign and powerful, and oppressive? Whatever may be the option chosen (or if you prefer to think about the problem in a more complex manner, as a sort of variable combination of time and circumstances between the activity, the subjection, their simple presence in the seats of a foreign theater and the situation of appreciating them, perhaps, as a hostage of powerful forces), it must be based on solid analysis and appropriate empirical evidence.

These are straightforward questions; that is, they go into the category of questions for which I have no answer. My attempt on this occasion has as its axis, an effort to state them properly, so that they can be addressed through research—that hard, patient work which at first resists conventional answers, or those anchored simply in one's own personal experience, or which may be perceived in each one's institutional zone of reference. The issue is important, and the questions that emerge are not trivial; to understand them and state them well is a necessary step; it is, of course, foremost in these pages. It is toward criticism and joint reflection that they tend.

A general look at the context

As for attempting to think about the academics of the nineties—since we are still in that decade, it is not easy, because there is a multiplicity of changes in almost all the dimensions of Mexican academic and social life. The transformation of the country is undeniable, although the interpretations of this transformation are most varied. Understandably, this generates an upwelling of questions about the direction and the destination to which it leads. The most prominent feature, to my mind, in the social scale, lies (if you want partial but relevant) in the fulfillment of several generations' desire: the arrival of increasingly dramatic and open forms of political and social relationships. What is paradoxical about this achievement, although well known in the history of our species, is that a major-magnitude change always involves a powerful tension between a longing for yesterday's stability, on the one hand, and on the other, and the uncertainty and vertigo generated by the change. Had we not better go back to the way we were, in view of how arid, complicated and unfamiliar this new way is turning out to be? It is not comfortable living with too many questions to answer, and unprecedented tasks to

perform, and we long to return to the certainties, to the old ways and customs—often criticized, but stable and predictable. The tension is severe; it confuses us. The desire to open up and go forward tangled up with the traditional security of the familiar evil, which, viewed from this angle, doesn't seem so bad after all—particularly because the changes haven't borne fruit as fast as we expected.

Let's tell it like it is: we are leaving behind a system of vertical and closed domination—authoritarian and corporate—that strongly resists the democratic and receptive trends of a nation mostly young, filled with expectations and concerns. It is not easy to learn to build the new structures suited to the flood of social energy while watering down the patrimonial styles of yesterday. Nevertheless, it is necessary. The direction seems clear, but it is a long-term process—that of democratization; and the trend toward the supremacy of the law and the rules agreed upon by everyone and applicable to everyone, on the subject of a stale culture of arbitrariness negotiated in conditions of an asymmetry of variable forces. The formal adoption of new rules can never be enough. Those rules must find an incarnation in the habits of daily life.

One way to see it is that we are on a path toward social participation. That, I think, is positive. There are, then, reasons for optimism, but these must be accompanied by other news: the road is long, and we have no insurance, since we are dealing with an in-depth modification of the ways in which we long ago learned to live.

The models, the new forms of social relations attuned to current times, whether imagined or transferred from other latitudes where modernization was the result of primarily-internal processes, have not been simplistically adopted. Quite the opposite. They are constructed in a manner contradictory and creative, but also processual. They generate a sort of copies—better said, *originals*, thanks to the impact of powerful cultural forces and results of historical inertia. It is like putting on a new suit, and there you are! But then you will have to get the right size, and right away the abstract tailor of globalized modernity will have to alter it to fit you. And that takes time and patience, and it happens gradually and differently in all the diverse spheres of social life.

At this point, I leave off my reflection on the change in this country's overall scale, indeed, on similar trends in our planet's environment of our planet, since I am certainly not the person best suited for trying to understand it in depth. I am a witness to it, and share this way of putting it into words.

The magnitude of the change

Because of the above, I find myself among those who think that both in the nation's environment and as regards higher education, the nineties are confirming the depth of the transformation which began around the early eighties. At that time the economic and social policies embarked upon to deal with the country's crises could be viewed as contextual arrangements (or disarrangements). The river would now run back into the channel where it had always flowed. During the eighties and the last ten years, this hypothesis does not seem to satisfy the need to explain. Rather than just the return of the river to its age-old bed, we have seen changes in the riverbed itself, which is a very different matter.

It was not, as we have said, a "cash problem" that we experienced in 1982; it had nothing to do with a temporary adjustment to the policies of economic development and social spending. It involved the beginning of a change in the logic of fundamental questions as important as the role of the state in the economy; the effects of the market on developmental coordination; and the course of social spending based on taxes levied.

In tune with (according to some), or dragged along by (according to others) impressive transformations on a global scale, the top project of the country's leadership changed in fundamental ways. It is not possible here, in this limited space, to give a detailed comparison of the national state of affairs, from the beginning of the eighties to the present. It is enough, just as an example, to compare those days of a closed economy with recent levels of openness unthinkable then; or in another realm of thought, to compare the authoritarian, politico-electoral "certainty" of those times, with the customary uncertainty of today's practices.

I think there are reasons for working with the hypothesis of a change of epoch on a worldwide scale, and a redefinition of the model of development on a national level, with implications in every sort of structure and social relation, including, of course, higher education. It does not have to do with a new and already-defined developmental model, nor with one which is complete and precise; the model, instead, is being gradually produced, and has distinctive features. During the last 15 years we have not lived through a passing change, belonging more to fashions than to models. The projects of the world and of society have altered substantially.

If this is so, in the general state and social concept it is logical to observe modifications of the function and the characteristics assigned—or assignable—to higher education in our country. I would therefore like to express the idea of a

context of profound change as a condition of contour extraordinarily influential in the performance of our higher education system during the last fifteen years.

What is in play

Only thus, as I understand it, can we appreciate in its proper dimension the dilemma that seems to characterize higher education in our day, and that Eduardo Ibarra has expressed very well as the abrupt passage—the rupture—from a corporatist and bureaucratic model, to a strategy that rests in the growing predominance of individualistic trends supposedly capable of coordination by the logic of various markets. Ibarra points out that there is an attempt to modify yesterday's behavior in such a way as to lead to sterile atomization, because the main lack he detects is the reflective and organic ability of the academics and other stakeholders of university life, to generate structures of relationships based on the culture of autonomy. In his judgment, the times we are living imply the reconstitution of the identities of the institution and of the subjects, and that what is in play is the dominant rationality in the process. Return to vertical dependence, consecration of ego-mercantilist logic or the generation and regeneration of rational, but competent solidarities? This, if I am right in my interpretation of it, means that the idea of a new governmentality is in play.²

In another theoretical tone, also enlightening, Susana Garcia-Salord proposes the sterility of a passage, without thoughtful and sensitive mediation, from a model of inclusion in university citizenship (as a student or academic) relatively undifferentiated, belonging to expansion and vertical bureaucratic coordination of the establishment, to another, characterized by exclusionary selection based on indicators of supposed universal and necessary value. Basing her view on her anthropological research, concentrated on the generational trajectories of the academics, she sheds new light for understanding diverse rationales present in the different epochs. Garcia-Salord says, and with reason, that it is incorrect to propose as an insuperable dilemma, the logics of “investment in democracy” and institutional construction, on the one hand, with the absolutist tendency to invest in oneself, thereby to appear as “somebody” because of guilt feelings at suddenly being classified as “nobody”.³

I had recourse to two colleagues' recent works from which to cite examples of the forcefulness of the transition that is taking place, and its risks. I insist, along with them, that we are not doomed—if reflexive ability grows and gets organized—to the transition of the corporate and its obvious limitations regarding an individualistic atomization which leaves the institution without foundation, and the community of subjects without reference; that it is not necessary, in the logical sense of the term,

to go from a university with strong features of non-differentiation to the exclusive realm of the selected unique, of the academics who haven't "a shadow of a doubt" about their trajectory.

I think I understand them well, or on rereading them (to be sure of their positions), I can ratify the relevance of understanding the depth of the changes in progress and the need to escape the caricatures of the past or of the future; for this we need to reinforce the use of criticism, funded research, and the ability to understand the processes in which we are immersed in a horizon historically marked by diversity, and which therefore, is a generator of very different types of adaptation processes.

Change is inevitable. It is not optional; but the direction of the change, its coordination and course are not mechanically defined. It is therefore necessary to question ourselves, and then to clarify our views through the labor of investigation, as to whether the academics have been actors or subjects, or whether they have been instead, spectators or hostages of the transformation, and in any case, to try to understand why it has been this way and not that.

Who are we talking about?

I will now try to put a bit of underpinning under these reflections on the information produced in 1992 by the Interinstitutional Team of Researchers on Mexican academics,⁴ the beginning of their employment—the first contract of the sample studied would have happened this way: 11 of every 100 got their first teaching position before 1969, giving the industry more seniority in our study. Between 1970 and 1985, 62% were admitted, and this is the period of maximum increase in the number of positions and of hiring new academics, 25 of every 100, the last group, would have been engaged between 1986 and 1992, when they were interviewed.

To complement this view, it is necessary to update the data by getting closer to our day. The generation of new positions has never been lower than. Between 1990 and 1997, a total of almost 33,000 new positions opened up in all the levels, the private sector being for the first time the principal producer of academic positions (6 out of every 10, mostly part-time),⁵ which indicates its role of leadership in the system's growth during this decade, a fact that we must not overlook in our analysis. In round numbers, the university BA degree and technological degree levels now have 140,000 positions of academic employment.

Based on this information and for purely exploratory purposes, we can imagine, taking into account some hypothetical trends of entering and leaving the market,

that the current assortment of academics in Mexico could be described in the following way:

- 5% with seniorities of more than 30 years as academic personnel, that is, they entered the market before the expansion of the seventies.
- Approximately 50% who were first hired in the seventies and early eighties, when expansion was very rapid and the wage and institutional conditions were relatively good.
- 20% who entered the profession in what we call the crisis—between 1983 and 1990—when wages were suddenly reduced and the institutions navigated as best they could, with what was indispensable, or even less, and
- Finally, the rarities, the 25% who obtained their academic position during the nineties, marked by the processes of income unequalization based on periodic evaluations.⁶

These are very rough estimates because we do not have enough official information—in the system environment or that of the institution—for greater accuracy, but what matters is not whether the proportions are exact, a question to which only specific studies could provide the answer, but the proposal for a national academic body with diverse histories and trajectories that would now permit the consideration of several generations.

Let us focus our gaze for a moment, on those who, according to my calculations, are the majority group: those who entered the academic field before 1982, and who have been working in the public sector up to the present. Let us consider that their average work seniority, today, is close to 20 years, and that in age, they are approaching their fifties. This group of academics lived, and built, the expansion phase of the institution, when because of the employment increase, there were more jobs available than people interested in filling them; people got academic work with pay and employment stability that later on would be seen as very positive. Under these conditions they began their careers, and were socially and institutionally recognized, with a certain amount of prestige for dedicating themselves, primarily, to the work of teaching so as to serve the increasing annual number of students. At one time, around 1982-83, wages and institutional conditions collapsed for this great body of teachers ; you could say that the crisis came and blew us away. Experts assert that the purchasing power of the teachers' salaries fell by almost 60%, but above all, work references and requirements suffered a severe shock; that was when the famous, but terrible phrase was coined: *"If you make like you pay me, I will make like I work."* Not everything operated in the logic of the structurally-favored simulation, but there were indeed times in which, for example, so as to hold onto a teacher giving only his classes,

some institutions would offer what passed for a fulltime job, but in which the teacher would work only part of the hours, so as to improve (or keep) his previous income level. This stage much distorted the work space of which we are speaking, although, of course, it had different effects on different regions, institutions, disciplines and levels of study.

When we reached the nineties, here came the systems of differentiation of income by means of periodic evaluations. This same group faced the change in standards for recognition of work, and presumably, its quality. Such was the depression of the contractual salary, that the additional income became not occasional stimuli, but pesos and centavos destined for daily subsistence. *Change, they said, or at least pretend to change so you don't get left out of the new economic scenario and status distribution.*

This group of academics, as a whole, has gone through three different general labor conditions in the course of their careers; first, a context of relative economic abundance and of stable conditions combined with low indices of academic hiring regulations. Then, they lived through the acute collapse of wages together with great reduction in the already-small amount of internal regulations required for job stability. And finally, they face the need of reconversion of their activity and profiles, in many cases, with the purpose of adjusting to the unequalization of income, regulated in a manner punctual and precise in the tabular sense of the term.

So much variation in the circumstances of a labor group, the majority of whom also inaugurated the exercise of a peculiar and specialized role, must unquestionably be taken into account when rebuilding and understanding what has happened. The required adjustments to this sector over time, in terms of organizational adaptation to sudden changes of reference, have not lessened, since having begun in relative abundance, they need research on how they have conformed and evolved, surely in all sorts of ways, in institutional and regional contexts and variable disciplines. There us a vast amount of research business pending, and I have only mentionedo the group that has lived through all three stages.

How was the experience, and what were the general perceptions, of colleagues entering the profession during the phase of the so-called crisis, and what has the process of adjustment been like in the stage of differentiation? Unlike the first group, these people had to compete fiercely to get their first jobs, because there were few positions, and those interested in getting them had multiplied, knowing how hard it was to find employment at the time, and later on. And what do we know about the teachers who began their careers in the nineties? Certainly job requirements have increased and the expectations of job security are not the way

they used to be—going to an institution and applying for work, being hired, and continuing in the position, under increasingly competitive conditions. What do we know about the relations, for example, between the established academics, with tenure⁷ and access to additional income, and the young teachers coming into the institution?

As you can see, the questions go on and on. What has happened to the academics who work in private institutions during these years? How do things differ if we take into account regional, institutional and disciplinary diversity? And furthermore, the convergence of broad retirement processes for older personnel with the recruitment of those who will take their place in the years to come, how is this convergence being designed—if it is being designed—taking into account a very probable escalation in the requirement for upper-level studies?

I have tried to show, using a very simple exercise of distribution of seniorities and work conditions, the complexity of the problem and the difficulty of responding in a generalized way to the original questions: actors, subjects, spectators or hostages in the nineties? And up to this point, we have only thought about the general conditions for academic work, for job development. Now, let us take a very brief look at other aspects of the change in university life in the end-of-century decade

Crucial issues⁸

Academics, besides witnessing the variation over time of their basic orientation references, during the nineties have seen or participated in processes of change in the central issues of higher education. The agenda of the nineties has included novel topics and novel processes, or if not novel, definitely emphasized in their importance when compared with the past. As a rough estimate, we can mention the following:

A considerable increase in the procedures of institutional and intra-institutional evaluation. Whether internal or external evaluations, during these years we have experienced procedures of intense scrutiny of what happens in our establishments. Were the academics the main actors on the subject of evaluation exercises, or has their participation been reduced to filling out forms that the administration then compiles or organizes? In the case of these so-frequent processes, have they produced changes in the quality of academic service and activities, or have they been developed in formal levels, remote from daily practice?

Another important aspect of the nineties lies in the institutional patterns of growth and diversification of the system on a national level. During these years, the attention to new enrollment and the production of academic positions has occurred principally in institutions of the private sector or in public modalities that tend to diversify the types of establishments. This is the case with the technological universities or the research centers not related with traditional university structures. Apparently we are moving into a growth mode of the system specialized by function, diversifiers of institutional missions and objectives, with greater ability to regulate the flow of applicants. While this is true, and those concerned are even more assiduous in covering the entire country, there is a higher risk of increasing the segmentation of qualities in the academic experience and in work production and prestige destinations for their graduates. What has been the participation of the academics facing these phenomena? One feels, at first, that at this level we have acted more like spectators watching the transformation in progress—and the phenomenon is not trivial.

As to the logic with which public resources are distributed, the decade has shown us a strong tension between traditional models for the assignment of funds, mainly operative at the discretion of the educational or institutional authorities, and procedures which include greater participation of the powers that be in the institutions. At the same time, the allocation of resources among institutions is a subject of much discussion, and there have been explored, during these years, mechanisms of funds distribution through the presentation of projects as well as competitions for the special funds, such as the Fund for the Improvement of Higher Education (FOMES for its initials in Spanish). What is the academics' level of participation in this dimension? Have they become, in increasing numbers, administrators of the resources allocated with a certain freedom? More probably, what predominates is the passive reception of what the relevant authority thinks we require.

Moving to another part of the territory, the decade has included new aspects untouchable yesterday. Just the words: the economic responsibility of the students and their families in relation to the public institutions—whether study should be gratis—the academic requirements for continuing with studies and the transition between student levels—the question of the conditions for study—the universities' forms of government, especially in regard to the processes of election of authorities and the construction of collegiate spaces; the models of organization of academic life, particularly processes of decentralization and adoption of departmental alternatives; the aspect of links with other actors of the social life, involving relationships with companies or entities for which the university is the service provider, and last, although not in importance, reflection on the meaning of

autonomy in increasingly-open institutions, located in political contexts that increase the need for rendering accounts to taxpayers and their representatives.

The list is long. In all these categories, there have been changes in an important number of Mexican institutions. Have the academics been mere spectators, or have they taken part in such variable and diverse decisions? How have they reordered their systems of reference in the face of serious modifications in the structures, or their modes of participation and pressure in new contexts? Are the institutions or the subsidiary units where we work more “ours” today, in the sense of symbolic belonging derived from the strength of the academic bodies as the central actors of the processes, or on the contrary, do we live more and more in organizations increasingly unrelated in their mechanisms of fundamental operation? The questions never cease.

Two broad lines of response

I have the impression that, in principle, there have opened two polarically opposed lines of response to the set of questions noted here. Both are impressionistic, in the sense that they do not rest upon sufficient research to give solid support, but are very much present in our work and conversation spaces.

The first, of pessimistic cut, would opt for carrying the hypothesis toward an intense weakening of the academics’ action, or if you will, to the reduction of their repositioning in the sphere of the individual, tending to view them as mere spectators of the institutional transformation, or in the end, as at the mercy of the institutional forces that subjugate them. In that case, the activity that is presumed general from this approach has been reactive, direct adjustment in simple response to the changes in general conditions, throwing out of kilter previously-established spaces of academic, policy, labor or human relations. In this view, the process is conceived primarily as destructive and negative. It has broken, they insist, with the deep sense of university labor.

At the other pole, the abrupt changes are seen as perhaps susceptible to improvement, but necessary and on track. From this point of view, what are diluted are academically sterile academistic corporate agreements, and with the new attitude there are generated better conditions for academic work, coordinated, they argue, by the academics themselves. They form the evaluatory commissions, often by processes of election, and these bodies of *pairs* have the final voice in the final assignment of stimuli, scholarships and scores, as well as resources for academic work, and therefore, its orientation. Isn’t this how things ought to work?

At the extreme of simplification, I have come to hear, as a supposed key to understanding the dilemma of Mexican higher education, the following disagreement without any reflexive mediation at all; on one side, the university with its worries and social responsibility, and on the other, the university academic. That's the way things are, my dear. Which to choose? Neither, of course, because it's a false dichotomy.

Without arriving at the extreme of this last simplification, I find reasonable the diversity of approaches; the two general trends outlined contain important elements for analysis: one is very apprehensive, and should be, over the fact that the transition looked upon with disdain, the tradition of previous development, is valuable; and the other, perhaps very on edge and rigid, aims to solve, also with good reason, the obvious problems of the previous model.

I confirm an old idea, or as the classicist would say, "I think, therefore I *insist*". It is not possible to exhaust the discussion with two impossibilities. It makes no sense to propose *restoration* of the past as if the change were not a *fait accompli*, and we not a product of that same change. It is at the same time, a road impassable—the founding of a new model without bearing history and its achievements in mind, since they also comprise us.

What is indispensable is to think about things, to investigate in depth, to share our points of view and affiliate ourselves at once to the recognition of diversity in evolutions and the senses with which is conceived, in an intelligent fashion, the past and the achievable future.

A proposal for progress

We do not begin from zero to investigate in depth and to try to give answers to the questions set down here. It is true that the information collected about the academics is still not enough to give us an adequate understanding of their assimilation processes, variations in the mechanisms for entering academic work, different patterns of transition and adjustment to the conditions as variables in the period, their integration patterns and procedures for constructing referential values systems at different levels and times during the exercise of their activity. But we have undeniable advances that lead us to propose new questions, based in what has been achieved.

In comparison with the eighties, the knowledge based on Mexican academics has increased dramatically. As an example, let the following indicator suffice: During the last three years, there have been at least 12 doctoral theses on the subject,

and according to my information, there are another four in progress—a thing unthinkable yesterday.⁹ These works include, among other things, studies on academics in certain regions of the country, research on the disciplinary impact on degree programs, excellent reconstructions of what happens on the job, questions about identity or gender, analysis of the evaluation systems, and even specific studies on the impact of the some institutions' policies of differentiation.

Furthermore, during these years there have been published valuable articles on the diversity of academics according to their functions or their specific vocations, and we have several books that explore other dimensions of this object of study, both in our country and in other latitudes.

With what we know, and taking in account the extent of our ignorance, always a matter of necessity, let us ask how some lines of work and analytical underpinning be could put in order so as to move forward in comprehensive response to the phenomena I have tried to present in these pages. Based on my own research work, and paying careful attention to that developed by my colleagues in the field, I am going to ask three questions that to me seem relevant:

1. As I understand it, we need the gradual development of a research agenda in the field of Mexican academics, for it has overtones revealing it as a designated area of issues and research problems that can be treated with different approaches and theoretical approximations. Jesus Francisco Galaz-Fontes (1999), regarding this subject has recently made a comprehensive proposal, in which he highlights the five guidelines he suggests: we need the historical studies to clear up our so-frequent pre-conceived notions of the past; we need national censuses and surveys that would allow a better description of the academics in the various establishments where they work, and periodic repetitions of these so as to be conscious of the changes and the constants over time; it is necessary to increase the number of studies on academic work and its dynamics, taking into account different axes of variation (regional, institutional, intra-institutional, disciplinary and functional) as well as those related to such factors as age and gender. Another necessary line is that regarding the *academic degree program* and its peculiarities in intimate relationship with studies on the academic market. These broad lines, which Galaz-Fontes proposes and develops with more detail, are rooted in a perception which I consider correct: the Mexican system of higher education has been transformed in the last forty years, and this has changed the conditions of academic labor. It is necessary, then, to study these impacts on the diversity of situations which the level presents in our day.

2. It is necessary to delve deeper into the analytically-founded description of the nature of the changes that have occurred in the Mexican higher education system.

It is not a trivial thing to clear up whether we are dealing with passing fads of adjustment, or with profound modifications consonant with a change of model(s) or development of the level.

If the idea of a change of model is sustained, then it is necessary to begin precise studies on the periods, their characteristics and the impact they had on the generation or transformation of the ethos that gives identity to the various groups of academics.

In these pastures, we can drink from the classic streams of the discipline of Sociology, thereby to know the contradictory and complex landscape of forms of communitary relations with others, of an associative nature which, truly, are pure only at the level of the typical construction of the concepts.

On the other hand and in consequence of the hypothesis of the profound change, we must reorient the universities. For this, I find it interesting to consider a process of “secularization” of almost all of the university’s previous functions. It was the space for the democratic construction of the society, for the struggle for progress, the one channel—so it seemed—of social mobility, the exclusive supplier of criticism of domination, the preferred breeding ground of the elite, and another series of important tasks that included, sometimes in a secondary position, the in-depth cultivation of knowledge. If one subscribes to the hypothesis of change as a basis for the social model, this implies recognizing the growth of alternative social spaces in which are disputed power and the projects of the nation—the political parties, the Congress—new channels of social mobility and very diverse sources of social criticism. In other words, the society has grown in modernization, has become diversified, and this is notable in our case. Perhaps because of it, the universities—the university students—long for a past heavy with functions shared today with other institutions. But at the same time, they find themselves in better conditions, because of the removal of *exclusive* tasks, and an increased ability to concentrate on in-depth knowledge, whose social effects are fundamental.

3. A key theme to face is that of the constitution of the academic, of the academics, as a social actor and institutional specific. Down through the years, we find propositions of orientation and identification of academic personnel from outside their own systems of relations, complex and variable. From the perspective of the administrative authorities they have been viewed as a bank of classroom hours or a workforce. They have been considered—and with this we agree—as a workforce from the perspective of abstractly human work, an issue that led us to seek identity in labor unions.

Although not in any sense a minor issue, this experience does not seem to contend adequately with the peculiarities of a job having a sharply-defined ethos. On the other hand, the academics have been seen as human resources to convert from general projects, with scarcely any attention paid to the history of their constitution and its structural variations.

How did they see themselves, what modalities of relation did they construct in different stages of the system's evolution, and how were their references changing, in part, along with changes in the environments, and moreover, with their own experiences and developments within of the institutions and in relation with inter-institutional interchange networks?

Susana Garcia-Salord considers this to be a central theme when she affirms that it has to do with an *old problem*, that is, of a matter which has remained constant, as a dilemma, throughout the last decades:

[...] the historical inability of the academics to generate a strategy of reproduction, as an occupational group, which would contemplate and take charge not only of the functional diversity of the group, but also of its heterogeneity, that is, of the fact that in its constitution is stated the inequality and the difference in material, social, cultural and symbolic resources, as well as the discrepancy in scientific concepts, policies and ideologies (Garcia-Salord, S., 1999).

On the subject of research it is necessary to reconstruct with precision the various strategies designed and carried out by academics for the reproduction of their jobs, perhaps marked by diversity, fragmented and often truncated, and immersed in processes of transit between communitarian and associative concepts. It is a basic theme, and can be phrased thus: What have been the processes of construction of academic identity explored over the years, their methods and their outcomes? Would it be possible to reconstruct analytically, or imagine prospectively, a gradual process of general compilation of interests, accompanied by a variety of disciplinary and institutional subcultures that would relate with each other in an extremely complex fashion? Whether as a question for research, or as a strategy for increasing the reflective and organic ability of the academics, this issue seems fundamental.

The three questions I have proposed are necessary for progress, to my mind, for being able to give a well-founded answer to the initial questions. It will be necessary, of course, to distinguish clearly the levels of observation in the studies; we need generalized reconstructions along with detailed analyses of individual cases, possibly in the institutional environment, for disciplinary communities or generations.

Actors, subjects, spectators or hostages? Perhaps all these possible roles have been played by the academics, at different times and in relation with different problems; the issue is to reconstruct the how, and try to understand the *why*. This is what research is, and as you can see, we have work in abundance.

References

Galaz, J. (April, 1999). Notas para una agenda de investigación sobre el académico mexicano. Paper presented at *Primer Congreso Nacional de Ciencias Sociales*, Mexico, D. F.

García Salord, S. (April, 1999). Un reto para el fin de siglo: desterrar la sombra de la duda y restituir la vigencia del interés general. Paper presented at *Primer Congreso Nacional de Ciencias Sociales*, Mexico, D. F.

Gil, Antón, M. (October, 1999). El mercado de trabajo académico: notas sobre la evolución del espacio laboral en la universidad mexicana. *Este País*, 34, 34-37.

Gil Antón (Dir.) & Equipo Interinstitucional de Investigadores sobre los Académicos Mexicanos (1994). *Los rasgos de la diversidad: un estudio sobre los académicos mexicanos*. Mexico: UAM-Azcapotzalco.

Ibarra, E. (1999). Evaluación, productividad y conocimiento: barreras institucionales al desarrollo académico. Paper presented at *Primer Congreso Nacional de Ciencias Sociales*, Mexico, D. F.

Translator: Lessie Evona York-Weatherman

UABC Mexicali

¹ La Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa agradece al Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa (COMIE), por permitirnos publicar esta conferencia.

² See: Ibarra, E. (1999).

³ See: Garcia-Salord, S. (1999, abril).

⁴ See: Gil Anton, *et al.* (1994, pp. 60-61).

⁵ See: Gil Anton, M. (1999). In the seventies and eighties, of every ten new jobs, approximately eight were produced in public institutions.

⁶ This distribution produces these results through the estimating of different rates of retirement from the market and recomposing the proportions with the new jobs generated from 1992 to date. It has to do with a very approximate exercise, since we do not have data to make it more precise; the deficit of information on jobs and academic personnel is a feature with which, seemingly and unfortunately, we will have to make do for some time.

⁷ What has been translated as 'tenure' ('plazo', or 'place'), has, in Mexico, a meaning different from tenure in the USA, for instance, where it can guarantee a stable position for all of the teacher's working life. In contrast, the Mexican system obliges the teacher to compete for her position at comparatively short intervals; the winner of the contest gets the job, and it is possible for a teacher who has worked at a university for many years to lose her position to a recent graduate.

⁸ This part of the conference was produced using the content of Fuentes, O. (1991). *Las cuestiones críticas*. *Universidad Futura*, Nos. 8 and 9. See also, for this ordering of the questions: Gil Anton, Manuel: *La universidad, la estupidez y el futuro*, in *Etcétera*, No. 343, August 26.

⁹ On the basis of partial information, we must consider the following: 1) García Salord, Susana (1998). *Estudio socioantropológico de las clases medias urbanas en México: el capital social y el capital cultural como espacios de constitución simbólica de las clases sociales*. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM. 2) Landesmann, Monique. (1997). *Identites academiques et generation. Le cas de enseignants de biochimie de l'Université Nationale Autonome du Mexique (UNAM)*. Université de Paris X-Nanterre, Francia. 3) Stefanovich, Ana (1998). *Modelo general para la evaluación del trabajo de los académicos en las instituciones de educación superior*. Facultad de Educación, Universidad Anahuac. 4) Izquierdo, Miguel Angel (1998). *Estrategias, oposiciones y conflictos entre maestros de la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, en su competencia por los estímulos económicos*. Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos. 5) Grediaga Kuri, Rocío (1999). *Profesión Académica, disciplinas y organizaciones. Procesos de socialización y sus efectos en las actividades y resultados de los académicos mexicanos*. Colegio de México. 6) Rodríguez Jiménez, Raúl (1999). *Mercado y profesión académica en Sonora*. Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación Superior con sede en la Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. 7) Medina, Patricia (1998). *La construcción social de los espacios públicos: trayectorias profesionales de maestros normalistas frente a universitarios. ¿Polos opuestos o procesos y proyectos compartidos?* Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM. 8) Chavoya Peña, María Luisa (1998). *Institucionalización y profesionalización de la investigación en la Universidad de Guadalajara*. Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación, con sede en la Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. 9) Arenas Basurto, Jorge (1999). *Políticas de evaluación en la comunidad científica de México (1984-1997): el SNI y el Programa Pride en la UNAM*. Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José Luis María Mora. 10) Valero Chávez, Aída (1999). *El impacto de las políticas de estímulos para el personal de carrera en la organización del trabajo académico de la UNAM. (Las posturas de los científicos y de los científicos sociales)*. Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación con sede en la Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes. 11) Romo Beltrán, Marta. (1999). *Cultura académica, curriculum y práctica magisterial*. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM. 12) Bartolucci, Jorge. (1997). *La modernización de la ciencia en México: el caso de los astrónomos*. Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM. Doctoral theses in process of production: a) Galaz Fontes, Jesús Francisco. Claremont Graduate University, USA. b) Casillas, Miguel Ángel. Escuela de Altos Estudios en Ciencias Sociales, París. c) Pérez Franco, María Lilia. Colegio de México. d) Álvarez Mendiola, Germán. Departamento de Estudios Educativos-CINVESTAV.