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The Reinvention of the University, in Search of its Community¹

La reinención de la universidad, en busca de su comunidad

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Abstract

The 1999 student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) triggered a crisis not only at that one university, but in all of Mexico's public institutions of higher learning. The academic community mutely awaited the outcome, looking on, unable to understand what it was seeing. In view of this silence and the possibility of holding a new University Congress to rebuild the UNAM, and seeking to generate rational dialogue and reach a fresh understanding of the institution, considering its transformations and its future, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and Humanities (CEIICH) convened an assembly of specialists on the matter. Fifty-five speakers debated eight problematic issues in workshops: *The transformation of the university in Mexico and the world; The university and society; The State, the university and society; The government of the university and the participation of its communities; Democracy in the University; Regulations and university; and The future of the university*. This article is the prologue of the volumes which compile the results of that meeting.

Keywords: University, transformation, democracy, government.

Resumen

Frente a la crisis que representó la huelga de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México no solo para esa institución sino para el conjunto de instituciones públicas responsables de la educación superior en México, la comunidad académica permaneció a la expectativa, como impávida espectadora de acontecimientos que pareció no saber interpretar. Frente a este silencio y ante la posibilidad de realizar un nuevo Congreso Universitario para reconstruir la UNAM, el Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades (CEIICH) convocó a un encuentro de especialistas en este tema, buscando generar el diálogo razonado, y abrir nuevas perspectivas para re-conocer a la universidad desde sus transformaciones y su por-venir. El encuentro reunió a 55 ponentes, que debatieron en mesas de trabajo alrededor de ocho ejes problemáticos: *La transformación de la universidad en México y el mundo, La universidad y la sociedad, El Estado, la universidad y la sociedad, Gobierno de la universidad y participación de sus comunidades, La democracia en la universidad, Normatividad y universidad, y el por-venir de la universidad..* El presente artículo será el prólogo de los volúmenes que reúnen el resultado de dicho encuentro.

Palabras clave: Universidad, transformación, democracia, gobierno.

Introduction

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has in recent months³ [1999–2000] been much in the news. Attention has been called to the positions of the protagonists in this university conflict,⁴ which resulted in the longest strike in the modern history of the National University. One would think that during this grave conflict there would have been unleashed a broad discussion about touchy problems facing our university and the university system as a whole, with the goal of achieving the changes which would permit its renewal as a social institution capable of responding to the challenges and demands it is facing with the changing times. This, however, did not happen. Except for editorials in various publications or statements by renowned academics, high-ranking officials and those playing leading roles in the student movement, the university community folded its hands⁵ and waited mutely, unable to understand what it was witnessing.

This phenomenon can be explained if we look, even hypothetically, at two main reasons. On the one hand, the university community has experienced over the last decade a process of atomization strongly linked to policies and procedures for evaluation of all kinds. These have favored highly individualistic and competitive behaviors that do not adequately assess the fundamental purposes of education and knowledge. On the other hand, and above all when it comes to college communities concerned with understanding the problems of higher education, these very probably kept their distance because the old explanations showed themselves inadequate for dealing with new developments. There was a great need to reflect on the UNAM conflict and the processes of change in the university system over at least the last decade, but nobody knew how, and nobody wanted to be the first to start the urgent debate that would allow us to question the explanations that were valid in the past. The prevailing silence expressed in this way a crisis of ideas concerning the university, and the immobility preceded the reaction to an unexpected event.

Undoubtedly, the changes in these years have disrupted the social significance of the university, blurring its role as a basic unit of cultural reference for the society. To date, there has been no sufficiently clear derivation from this ongoing transformation, of the university's new institutional identity, nor of the fundamental functions that it would be called upon to serve. This ambiguity has also made it easy for the different actors to struggle with each other without showing clearly what project they are defending; thus they shelter themselves under the protection of worn-out symbolic references, which do not permit the immediate generation of agreements that will guarantee the viability of the university as an institution of society. Also, the officials of the university themselves have seen their identities changed as they have confronted new modes of existence favoring duty to oneself over the preservation of community interests under patterns of solidarity. In this sort of environment of fragmentation and loss of social references, we insist, knowledge itself has lagged behind, proving itself unable to explain adequately the sense of the transformations under way, their effects, and possible future directions things might take in dealing with the imperative of the university's definitive reform.

Therefore, reacquaintance with the university is presented as an urgent priority, not postponable, so as to be in condition to press forward with its collective reinvention, ensuring its future as a community.

In this scenario, and facing the possibility of having a new University Congress to reestablish our institution, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and Humanities (CEIICH) decided to launch an initiative to revive rational dialogue and to open new perspectives for becoming reacquainted with the university since its transformations, and with its future. To do this we summoned a large group of specialists in university issues; these persons would represent the diversity of positions on university issues, while ensuring at the same time, a rational dialogue, plural and open. We have sought at all times to preserve the diversity of disciplines cultivated at the university, encouraging the interdisciplinary conversation that has characterized the Center since its founding. In addition, the call was based on the experts' freedom to define the working sessions, although we always attempted to incorporate some of themes forgotten in this type of event.

Meeting Agenda

At the beginning of this effort to become reacquainted with the university, the list of problems facing us was extremely varied and enormously complex, and was not fully identified. We decided to start by formulating a set of key questions that needed answers, and that we expected to trigger the reflection we wanted to encourage. These questions outlined eight problematic axes:

- 1) *The transformation of the university in Mexico and the world.* Can we consider the transformation of the university in Mexico as separate and independent from the of transformation of the university in other countries of the world, or does it reflect an integral trend associated with the processes of globalization synthesized in what is called the “ knowledge society?”
- 2) *The university and society.* How important is the university to society today? In what measure will it continue to promote the construction of a more fair-minded society through broad and indiscriminate socialization of knowledge and culture? To what extent can the university promote respect for human rights, the procurement of social protection of the environment, and the protection of the diversity and plurality that characterize the nation?
- 3) *The State, the university and society.* In what way have the relations between state, university and society changed? What importance have such relations acquired in light of the link between knowledge, politics and the economy? How has it been possible to implement specific audit procedures in the institutions while defending their autonomy? Or to put it another way, what significance does the university's autonomy take on today under the new competitive arrangements for oversight and funding? To what extent are the university's problems associated with the financial constraints it has historically faced, and

to what extent are they due to to a discretionary and unfair use of available resources?

- 4) *Government of the university and of its communities.* In what sense should the university transform its governance and decision-making structure to make consensus possible, ensuring widespread and effective participation by the community? What is the desirable equilibrium between the various forces of the university to ensure governance, i.e. preservation of plurality and diversity, channeling of conflicts and generation of consensus? How can there be built a structure of norms that would be shared, accepted and respected by all, and would provide a scenario in which the ground rules agreed upon would lead to more just and equitable relationships?
- 5) *The university officials.* What is their place, and what place should they occupy in the new institutional setting? How have the identities of academics, students, workers and officials been being reconstructed, and to what extent have their mechanisms for direction been adequate for guiding their behavior? Is it necessary to transform the present leadership mechanisms to strengthen the participation of the university community as related to its essential meaning as a collective?
- 6) *Democracy in the university.* To what extent does the democratization of the university go beyond the forms of designating or electing representatives and authorities? What relationship does the university democracy have with the exercise of academic human rights? Is the university prepared to guarantee the right to learning, teaching, professionalism, development of knowledge, thought and artistic creativity—in a word, to the training of persons with the right to carry out academic functions of a higher quality? What relationship is seen between this democracy and the financial autonomy of the institution?
- 7) *Regulations and the university.* What role have regulations played in the transformation process of the university? To what extent are rule changes needed to provide the university with stability and assurance as a social space for participation concerning the production, transmission and socialization of knowledge? To what extent has the lack of clear regulations been a source of conflict and an obstacle to the transformation of the university?
- 8) *The future of the university.* If current trends continue, what type of university might we have in the future? To what extent is it necessary to redirect these trends and work toward a different sort of university project? In what aspects should the university differ from its present profile, so as to guarantee its future for society? What are the axes that could guide a new university project so as to ensure its presence as a basic cultural institution of the society?

Of course, this set of questions in no way exhausts the inventory of problems facing the university. However, it shows some of the fundamental concerns of those who are discussing their current situation, and who are working for the re-

creation of their future. In our ability to answer these questions rest our chances of reacquaintance and participatory reinvention of the university.

The response was immediate, and the initiative rapidly took shape. The Encounter: of Experts in Higher Education "*Becoming reacquainted with the university, its transformations and its future*" had fifty-five participating speakers and the collaboration of over thirty colleagues who moderated the panels and debates, and conducted the respective report sessions.⁶ Moreover, the work of the Encounter began with a reencounter, for Don Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, researcher emeritus of our university, generously agreed to return to the Center he set up and promoted during its first stage, to lead the Inaugural Conference, which undoubtedly put into perspective the most sensitive issues facing the university.

Results of the Encounter

The Encounter was convened for two purposes. On the one hand, we wanted to promote a set of dialogues and discussions that would enable us to appreciate the great university's dilemmas, while advancing on new explanatory routes which we hoped would develop in a systematic way during the coming years. On the other hand, we were trying to arrive as a collective at a set of proposals for stimulating the necessary debate awaiting the community, apropos sharing the responsibility for the urgent transformation of the UNAM and all the country's other universities. The Encounter opened in the CEIICH a permanent line of research on higher education, whose purpose is to coordinate research, ongoing projects, and initiatives that seek to join forces and encourage inter-institutional dialogue. The results of the encounter make up three volumes that allow dissemination and deeper exploration, as well as the continuation of this new stage of university studies. It is our hope that we have been able to prepare the set of materials collected in this work in such a way as to address these purposes in an adequate manner.

The texts are organized in four notebooks according to the thematic reorganization of the 15 work groups that made up the Encounter. The first of these notebooks is a compilation of the materials dedicated to the discussion of relationships between the State, the university and society, considering the backdrop of economic globalization processes and various aspects of the necessary democratization of society and its institutions. The second notebook includes texts that address the analysis of state policies concerning the university. Addressed are relevant aspects of government programs in the last decade, highlighting the processes of assessment and funding of the institutions, and the changes expected and/or made in the forms of university governance. In the third notebook are works that examine the training processes and change of university actors, especially its academics, students and authorities. It also insists on the importance of the relationships that these actors maintain with one another as producers of what the institutions are and what their future could be. Finally, the fourth notebook is made up of documents that reflect on the various kinds of knowledge cultivated in the

university, especially its social relevance. Scientific research and the humanities, the arts, the dissemination of science and knowledge, and the training of researchers, are activities that constitute the university's *raison d'être*, and demand that it be preserved to meet the needs of society.

The reading and comparison of each text and its proposals, will almost certainly bring about the generation of new angles of reflection until now unnoticed, as well as other proposals that would improve the efforts of the community to guide the transformation of their institution. The university is looking for its community, awaiting its reinvention based on rational dialogue and the building of consensuses that will give it social meaning as it faces its future.

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¹ Prólogo a las próximas publicaciones del encuentro de especialistas en educación superior: "Reconocimiento de la universidad, de sus transformaciones y su por-venir". This meeting of experts was held at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and Humanities, National Autonomous University of Mexico, July 7 -21, 2000. Some of the papers may be found at: <http://serpiente.dgsca.unam.mx/ceiich/>

² El Dr. Cazés, director del Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades (CEIICH) de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, es el autor de la iniciativa de generar una línea de investigación permanente sobre educación superior que se inauguró con este seminario, contando con el apoyo del Dr. Eduardo Ibarra y el Dr. Luis Porter para su coordinación.

³ This article was first published in Spanish in the REDIE Vol. 2, Núm. 2, 2000, soon after the riots ended.

⁴ The UNAM student strike lasted from April 20, 1999, to February 6, February 2000, almost 10 months, after which the community prepared to form a new University Congress. Its implementation and success would depend on the willingness of all for reasoned debate, i.e. recognizing and listening to the views of everyone in an atmosphere of respect and pluralism. The construction of the necessary consensus for ensuring the reinvention of the UNAM would be possible only if the collective will could be recovered.

⁵ Good examples of the positions taken on the subject of the university conflict are collected in Tello Peon, Nelía E., José Antonio de la Peña Mena and Carlos Garza Falla (eds.). (2000). *Deslinde. La UNAM a debate, México: Cal y arena*. In this work, Manuel Gil asks where are the university students, showing the urgency of the UNAM's organizational reform, it it truly desires to participate in its community.

⁶ With this Encounter began the work of the newly-established *Permanent Seminar of Studies on Higher Education Studies*, which decided to establish the Center to expand existing spaces for academic reflection on this important matter, thereby contributing, from interdisciplinary perspectives, to a knowledge of its most urgent problems and the search for possible solutions.