

CEPAL

Review

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Meaning and function of the University: the view of Medina Echavarría

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Medina Echavarría's thinking on the subject of the University can easily be outlined. However, a detailed treatment implies the double task of dealing both with the variety of situations in Latin American universities and with the complexity of Medina's thinking. Each of these tasks is difficult enough in itself; together, they constitute an almost insuperable challenge, at least for my abilities. I have therefore concluded that the most sensible method might perhaps be to examine what are or what were Medina's main concerns with respect to the University, and the extent to which its subsequent development has met those concerns or to what degree they have lost their validity.

It is common knowledge that Medina Echavarría was a great sociologist. However, his thinking reached far beyond the canons of a discipline which he cultivated with unshakable rigour and with a clear awareness of its limitations. In the old and good sense of the term, Medina was a humanist. It is thus not surprising that he should analyse the Latin American University in terms of three dimensions. The first of them, the sociological dimension as such, was concerned with interpretation of the causes and consequences of the various social factors which invested the University with its peculiar characteristics and determined the challenges which it must take up. The second is a philosophical dimension and has to do with the concept of the University in his writings. Lastly, and certainly no less important, there is the ethical dimension, an ethic of responsibility in the Weberian sense, concerning the way in which the leaders of society, and particularly the universities, should behave if the essence of that concept of the University was not to succumb to the social pressures which threatened it.

The first dimension, the sociological interpretation of the University, can only be understood within the more general framework of the role of education in modern industrial societies. It is the most developed societies "which perceive the cardinal problem of the age to be the need fully to understand and take into account the connections between education, the state of the economy and the social structure" (p. 105).¹

This concern implies at least three principles. The first is the pressure of widespread egalitarianism. "Fundamental democratization" implies the generalization of secondary education, a development which is almost complete, and gradually of higher education as well. The second is the need to maintain and expand the production capacity, i.e., to provide all citizens with an increasingly high level of training. The third is the general technification of existence, what Skelsky has called "the pre-moulding of life by science", a topic to which Medina constantly returns in his writings.

Education is thus a factor in social development and an instrument of social transformation. Several substantive questions arise in both these connections, but I have been forced to omit them for reasons of space. There is one, however, which must be mentioned. The need for education to constitute an adequate source of training, i.e., one tailored to development needs. This requirement affects all standards or levels of education, but it is particularly pressing with respect to higher education, "which is the level which has to supply the technical and administrative managers of this kind of society" (p. 133). This functional role has to be made compatible in some way with other kinds of needs, "no less urgent ones, which derive from

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¹All the page references in this article refer to José Medina Echavarría, *Filosofía, educación y desarrollo*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI Editores, second edition, 1970.

education's traditional task. The two aspects of this traditional task, which the classical sociology of education has always emphasized, are of course, on the one hand, the transmission to young generations by adult generations of a specific cultural heritage; and, on the other hand, the role of this transmission function in the maintenance of the social cohesion of a given society" (pp. 133 and 134).

The requirements of these different functions are not incompatible in themselves, but nor are they easy to harmonize. For tensions emerge from the different needs which, by its very nature, education, considered from the sociological standpoint, must seek to satisfy. The new and the old requirements and their harmonization impose the necessity of profound transformations in the education system and of course in the University. Medina took a special interest in these changes and it is worth quoting the way in which he stated this concern. "The question is, why are certain changes in the Latin American universities so difficult, yet apparently so essential?" (p. 143).

In order to elucidate this question it is necessary to recall the more general factors which prompt on all sides proposals for university reform. They are essentially two: the increasing "mass extension" of the University and the intensive and widespread pre-moulding of life by science. At the time when he was writing, Medina attached less importance to the "mass extension". He thought that phenomena of that kind were untypical in Latin America. "And when the difficulties entailed by this phenomenon are analysed, they are found to be due to the weaknesses of university organization itself rather than to the effects of the supposed avalanche" (p. 149). Today we know that this avalanche is far from being "supposed". The growth in the middle classes to which Medina himself alluded and the influence of other factors have made it impossible to contain the increase in university enrollment. Paradoxically, this phenomenon also occurs in countries which have not been able to make primary education universal.

As well as assigning secondary importance to this mass extension, Medina thought that the most important and decisive factor for the sociological analysis of the university situation in the

various countries of Latin America was the degree of pre-moulding of life by science. "The Latin American societies are still not impregnated jointly and homogeneously with this pre-moulding of life by science which is the dominant feature of the industrialized societies" (pp. 149 and 150). In other words, the differences between and within the Latin American societies in this respect mean that the demands made by the social system on the universities are not the same everywhere. However, the demands for an increasing functional differentiation of universities are quite widespread. In simple terms, they have to do with science and research, vocational training and cultural training. "All vigorous university systems manage somehow to satisfy the demands of these three functions" (p. 154).

In the case of Latin America it is the universities themselves which have to some extent kept ahead of social pressures, establishing vocational courses in response to the new demands of development. Despite this, the universities have not proved strong enough to take up this challenge without prejudice to their basic tasks: "These are: 1) to expand and improve the vocational-training function in view of the needs stated in the economic development plans; 2) to make good the deficiencies of secondary education and thus to strengthen the cultural function—more out of necessity than in compliance with a doctrine. All the more so when it is a question of serving as a necessary instrument for completion of national integration, which has still not been achieved in some places; 3) to foster pure science and a broad programme of scientific research, research dictated not only by the acknowledged gaps in the system of sciences but rather and primarily by problems requiring more urgent solution" (p. 162).

At a time when almost all of us were obsessed with the theory of the training of human resources and the corresponding planning of the requirements, Medina thought that the main difficulty was for the universities to accept the rigours of planning as he conceived it. He was no doubt right. It should not be forgotten, however, that the essential conditions of his approach never obtained, and it is difficult to see them being established in the foreseeable future.

Medina held that educational planning was impossible unless the planners had a very clear idea as to what kind of society they were planning for; or, to put it another way, the type of person which they were trying to train for a specific society (p. 141). This is true, although it means that the society or its dominant groups must be clear about this as well, so that the planners have no alternative but to act accordingly, unless they merely wish to build castles in the air without any social foundations. It is a commonplace that the desired type of society and person are never clear, to say the least, in the Latin American societies. There is every indication of the continued existence of intense conflict over societal projects overlying the unanimity on generic principles which mean nothing because they involve no concrete commitments. The lack of such a clear political project is the reason why the countries of Latin America have had many plans and many planners but never any planning as such. The greatest achievement of this effort to modernize by transplant, which is what educational planning amounts to, has been the more or less accurate diagnoses—as forecasts, not as transformations—of future trends.

Medina thought that in a planning process diagnosis will only achieve its true meaning if it is made in the light of the desired objective. The point, in fact, was to estimate correctly the distance between the present state and the desired state and to identify the tools needed for attaining that state. Since this was not possible, I think that there was created a kind of diagnostic code indicating what has to be known about a country's situation. The universities have only been able to do this, except in very special situations, by embodying in their plans the consensus for a degree of continuity instead of the consensus for genuine change.

On the other hand, the expansion of university education has been so evident that there is no need to cite figures to confirm its scale. Latin American universities have reacted in different ways, and very detailed reports would be required in order to convey the full complexity of the situation. In general terms, however, it can be said that "for reasons easily understood, the worst consequences of this process have been coped with much better by the elitist private

universities than by the public ones. By limiting their intakes and transplanting the North American model, many private universities have resisted the expansion process or have absorbed it without detriment to the standards which a select clientele considers satisfactory. This has not prevented the proliferation in some countries of small private universities with very poor standards and with no resources that would make them worthy of the name of university, but which satisfy the more modest aspirations of a different clientele. It is usually the public universities which have paid the dearest cost of expansion. The explosive growth of enrollment in public universities can nowhere be accompanied by a like growth in financial resources.

But there is something even more serious, something which had worried Medina. Admissions are growing much more quickly than the supply of suitably qualified teachers. Accordingly, large numbers of poorly trained teachers are hired, and existing teachers are asked to lecture with the aid of a microphone in order to be heard in a vast hall or, more commonly, both procedures are used. To this drop in standards is added the fact that the University is being converted into an institution increasingly concerned with certifying knowledge, despite the steady decline in the likelihood of its success in this purely vocational task. As Medina had seen, a sharp contraction occurs in the "space of young people's education".

The pressures are irresistible, and in many countries any measure limiting admission to university is considered incompatible with the requirements of democratization. There is thus a proliferation of preliminary courses, sometimes called general studies—a term which Medina did not like—or even basic studies. The justification of these changes is quite simple. The aim is to discharge one of the great functions of the University—the transmission of a cultural heritage which should never be neglected because of the requirements of vocational training. But although this function exists, it is quite clear that other functions, often more important ones, also exist. In most cases it is not a question—because it would actually be impossible—of transmitting a cultural heritage at the traditional university standard but rather of the much more modest task of making good the defects of secondary education.

Clearly, this stage also functions as a prior selection system for the vocational courses. In the past, students entered these courses directly; now they still enter university directly but at a lower level. It is interesting to note that in the past some vocational courses never neglected to transmit the cultural heritage, for they were trying to train not just professionals but ruling groups as well. Medina paid a tribute to the success of faculties or schools of law in performing this function. It is therefore not sufficient to justify preliminary courses by reference to the need to provide something more than purely vocational training, for while that would justify the necessity of the content, the failure to impart this content earlier would require a different justification. It lies in this function of screening for the vocational courses. In some universities the preliminary courses also perform a function of "political socialization", for the social sciences occupy a leading or exclusive place at this stage, because the level at which they are taught to the students favours ideological rather than scientific discourse.

In this way, as indeed might have happened by many other routes, we encounter a problem which caused Medina great concern: the problem of the University in its political aspect and, specifically, the problem of the relationship between the University and the State. History shows how complex and hazardous this relationship has been. It also shows that free universities have been compatible with régimes offering little or no political pluralism.

University reform is essential in the Latin American situation. There are three feasible kinds of change: political ones, which originate from the State; corporative ones, which emerge from the University itself; and those changes in which the parallel efforts of the University and the State converge. Changes of a political kind have a long history in Latin America and it is worth making a brief analysis of the most recent ones, i.e., those undertaken by the authoritarian governments which Medina did not have an opportunity to study. The most notorious of these authoritarian interventions was the attempt at "ideological purification", for want of a better name. All teachers, and even administrators declared to be or suspected of being "Leftist" were excluded from the universities. In their

place were appointed rectors, deans, teachers and administrators who were "ideologically pure", i.e., uncontaminated from near or far by the Marxist virus. This process was obviously very painful for its victims, who regarded it as a great transformation of the University and today they also regard their readmission as a great change; this is no doubt true in general terms.

It is impossible not to wonder about the significance of this process in institutional terms. When he referred to reforms of a political kind, Medina was thinking of those reforms "which had placed the University on completely new or rebuilt foundations" (p. 165). Did this process involve any genuine reforms? It is hard to believe that it did, certainly not in Medina's terms. The structural changes were very timid and they therefore produced very meager results. This is perfectly consistent with the publications on questions of national security. The cases in which national security requires education to undergo substantial change are few and far between. The danger lay in the ideological leanings attributed to most of the teachers. Once these teachers had been removed and replaced by persons with the right attitude, i.e., favourable to the régime, it was thought that the basic task had been accomplished. These developments were accompanied, obviously, by the suppression of courses which were "dangerous" owing to their ideological connotations, such as sociology, or by the banning of the use of certain texts in the teaching of sociology. The decision to exorcise the "danger" inherent in certain courses was taken to absurd lengths. For example, in Uruguay a new course, concerned strictly with the natural sciences, was eliminated because its first graduates had been "Tupamaros". In general terms, however, the problems of very different kinds which affected the universities under the authoritarian régimes led to so few genuinely structural changes that it is impossible to speak of a reform or, if you like, of a counter reform. This is confirmed by what happened when democracy was restored: large numbers of people returned to their posts in a virtually unchanged organic structure.

The general plan under the authoritarian régimes emphasized the strictly vocational function at the expense of the transmission of the cultural heritage; however, except in a few cases,

the inflexibility and resistance of the universities meant that the change was more in form than in substance.

It is a strange fact, and one warranting an analysis which cannot be made here, that even when the doctrine of national security manifested a true obsession with the problem of education, there was no education plan worthy of the name. For example, in a lengthy document in which this doctrine is expounded and applied with reference to Uruguay, written eight years after the *coup d'état*, the teaching profession is subjected to specific analysis. There are three initial assumptions: i) that virtually all the leaders and a high proportion of the members of the teaching profession profess Leftist ideologies; ii) that they use the classroom to impart these ideologies to their students; iii) that they succeed in this purpose. Education, especially secondary and higher education, is regarded as a mechanism for the production and reproduction of Leftism. Since the authors of this document have no doubt at all about the actual capacity of education systems to transmit values and ideologies, good conservative teachers are regarded as agents capable of turning this situation around. This whole problem amounts, in essence, to a question of selection of teachers and not of transformation of the system's structures. These structures need to be changed only if, as in the case of certain legislation or regulations, they prevent those responsible for personnel selection from acting with maximum freedom. But this eagerness to abolish the rules which guarantee rights is typical of authoritarian régimes and represents a general phenomenon which transcends the purely educational sphere.

Although unintentionally, these régimes brought about important changes in the area of research which produced a proliferation of private centres, concerned particularly with the social sciences and usually supported by foreign foundations. Designed to provide a replacement for the research work which could no longer be done in the universities, these institutions managed to achieve a much higher level than they had had in the past. Here, and again unintentionally, they demonstrated how unfavourable the university ambience is for research. Following the return to democracy, it has become more difficult for these centres to obtain sufficient

funding, for the circumstances which justified their creation and operation no longer obtain. However, they have continued to operate, and the most significant development is that many researchers expelled from the universities under the authoritarian régimes have preferred to remain in these private centres.

The new democratic régimes restored the guarantees which the universities had traditionally enjoyed, but they showed little interest in promoting in this sphere plans for political reform, in the sense which Medina attached to this concept. In other words, the restoration of democracy left the field open for reforms of the corporative type. It is well to remember, before attempting to analyse these latter reforms, that although Medina was unambiguously opposed to strictly political intervention in university affairs, he assigned considerable responsibility for what happened to the universities themselves. "This kind of intervention has been due in many cases more to the weakness of the universities' claims than to the vigour of political ambitions" (p. 163). Or, put another way, "the University needs the social legitimacy of a universally recognized authority in order to face up to the State. And it does not have this authority if its prestige as an institution is wanting. This goes far beyond the case —common enough— of the 'politicization' of the University which itself invites, owing to confusion of limits, interference by the State" (p. 164).

These texts are thus open to two interpretations. Firstly, the University is incapable of securing proper legitimacy and therefore of offering resistance perceived to be legitimate to the manifestly illegitimate encroachments of political power. The second and even worse interpretation is that, in addition to its inability to establish its own legitimacy, it is the University itself which destroys that legitimacy by becoming totally politicized. In the first case, it lacks the necessary instruments to resist intervention which is in any event arbitrary; in the second case, it all happens as if the University had wanted it to. This approach is connected with Medina's poor opinion of corporative reforms and, specifically, of the reforms carried out in Córdoba, which in his view initiated the politicization of a number of universities, a development which has proved to be their greatest peril.

The familiar distinction between cloistered, militant and participant universities, in which sociological hypothesis and philosophical assumption are virtually inextricably combined, stems from these concerns. A cloistered university is always the exception and it is totally unviable in Latin America. Its antithesis, the militant university, is no less so. For "it puts an end to the University itself". In other words, if the University seeks to transform itself or if it becomes a microcosm which reproduces exactly the conflicts and passions of the world, its inherent scientific task fades away and "all that is left is shouts instead of reasons". Medina of course was in favour of the "participant" University, i.e., an institution which, among other functions, attaches special importance to analysis of contemporary problems but does so from a distance, with the characteristic objectivity and spiritual tranquility of scientific work.

Earlier, both during and after the military interventions, Latin America had known the phenomenon of militant universities. I personally believe that this is something as undesirable as it is inexplicable. Universities, especially the big ones, are important power centres which find it difficult to avoid political confrontation and are more likely to attract it instead. The apolitical solutions or, to put it better, those which Medina called genuine participant universities are very rare. What we have is a complex set of "militant" forms.

Often, and this occurs above all in private universities, there is an unopposed group which promotes a clearly defined political plan. Whatever the power of this group within the society as a whole —and clearly it must have some— this development is a trial for the University. Sometimes this situation lends itself to equivocation. If the group in question is fairly ingenious, it can give the impression that its behaviour is consistent with strictly academic standards and that the University which it controls is genuinely "participant" because it is concerning itself with contemporary problems. In other cases, the internal power is distributed among all the political groups of any weight within the whole society. Latin America has also experienced the phenomenon of universities, which transform themselves into centres of political opposition to the government. In extreme cases, such as the

situation which developed at the time in the universities of Caracas and Montevideo, the "militancy" actually became what I would call "delirium". This is what happens when the dominant groups or those which appear to themselves to be dominant seek to transform a university into a basic tool of "total revolution". Exclusive ideological propaganda takes the place of scientific research and seeks systematically to don its vestments.

The processes of redemocratization seem to have been accompanied by a decline in the intensity of the phenomenon of "militant" universities; this decline seems to have been helped on its way by, amongst other factors, the substantial changes in the composition of enrollment. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the reforms on which the State and the University agree are hard to bring about.

Perhaps the best way to view the situation of the University in Latin America and its inability to perform its higher functions is to consider, as a conclusion to this article, this thought of Medina: "The openness of a university's activities to the world —its only means of influencing the world— is therefore found only in "participant" universities, i.e., ones which are neither militant nor cloistered. A "participant university" is one which tackles the problems of the day by taking them as a subject for rigorous scientific study, with a view to establishing only what can be said from that standpoint. The criterion of the objective neutrality of science was established long ago. And although the sociology of knowledge believes today that it has discovered the secrets of its genesis —which in no way affect the nature of its validity— and although it can spend much time debating the range of the limits within which it seems acceptable, there is no doubt that the unshakable principle of the university dialogue will survive as long as science itself".

"Is the University of today the 'prime mover of history' in Latin America? Is it the place in which 'the highest awareness' of our era unfolds? Does it, in short, offer its spiritual power in all its fullness? Despite the best of wills, the answer is very far from being an emphatic yes and contains worrying reservations" (p. 169).