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THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the 18th Century, when the privilege of education was recognized as a right, it has been proven that this benefit constitutes the most important asset when it comes to social and economic mobility. For this reason today, when educational policies are being changed, it is necessary to reflect on the principles that inspired educational policies until now, and on those which will be the fundamental principles of education in the Global Age.

Although the right to education was accepted in theory by the monarchies and the democracies of the late 19th Century, it was not until after World War I, that the middle and lower classes had access to formal instruction. It took an additional fifty years to see the same happening in Latin America, where there is still a long way to go before we will be able to see a significant impact of education on the lives of those who aspire to have a better quality of life.

In Chile, the first step taken by the State to guarantee education to all Chileans was the creation of the Instituto Nacional in 1813, followed by the Universidad de Chile and the Teacher's College in 1842 and 1843, respectively. These initiatives were inspired by libertarian thinkers such as Camilo Henríquez, editor of the first Chilean newspaper, who called for education for all, stating that the new "states cannot bloom, without the participation of the young", a principle that condenses the spirit of Chilean education.

Even though Chilean education had a libertarian as well as a democratic orientation from the beginning of the republic, it was not until the mid 1960s that this principle was fulfilled, when a threefold increase in the enrollment in public universities allowed thousands of high school students coming from poor families to enter university for the first time. Today, forty years after this historic event, we reflect on the role of education in a global, rather than national, context.

In principle, global education is not intended to provide the student with content knowledge and professional skills for the development of the national and local communities. On the contrary, global education is primarily an added value whose goal is to produce knowledge that generates wealth, allowing individuals to fulfill their material expectations.

Despite the philosophical differences between both concepts, the discussion presently taking place is more focused on the system's management and financing, rather than on its contents and goals. On the one hand are those who would like to keep education in the hands of the State, as a national investment in the development of knowledge, and on the other, there are those who would like to see education as a private investment on the development of scientific knowledge for profit. This is the reason why it is important to reflect on the effects of the State's foregoing all its educational prerogatives and the repercussions of this shift in sensitive areas such as quality of knowledge and social mobility.

State-run universities and schools are not a Latin American phenomenon. The European Union, China, Russia, Singapore and India rely on public education systems for their development and growth. The same is true in the United States, where 65% of universities are in the hands of the states, and 95% of elementary and secondary students attend public schools.

During the last decades, there has been a vigorous drive for the privatization of educational services in Chile. This is reflected in the creation of State subsidies for private schools and the opening of dozens of private universities, while the budgets of public institutions have been drastically reduced.

The positive side of privatization resides in the possibility of redirecting public funds to other areas that are in need of resources. Nevertheless, despite the apparent advantage of this privatization, this proposition raises some questions, particularly regarding the quality of teaching as well as the quality of the research generated in private institutions.

Because of its reliance on economic success, the present changes in the Chilean university system are not comparable with those carried out in the 1960's, when the goal to give free access to the university for a large number of student from low income families.

As discussed before, in a neo-liberal economic system, the condition for remaining in the market is that the company generates profit, but this is a principle that has not been openly debated in university and faculty forums. In this respect, questions about quality and credibility –not to mention continuity– of private education remain to be answered.

In the meantime, almost 200 years after Camilo Henríquez stated that “Los Estados no florecen, sin la educación de la juventud” (“States don't flourish without youth education”), the university community wonders whether the new university will be able to emulate its historical role, bringing into effect the country's needs and the community's aspirations or if it will have to revise its philosophical foundations in order to fulfill its mission.

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