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Paulo Freire's ideas as an alternative to higher education neo-liberal reforms in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the principal arguments found in the work of Paulo Freire concerning policy and ethics in the field of higher education in Latin America. It critically analyzes the university reform in Latin America dominated by the thought and practice promoted by various international financial institutions (such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank [IDB]) beginning in the 1980s and then looks at the feasibility of an alternative Freirian view. The work of Paulo Freire celebrated the liberating role that public university education should play in the training of citizens and professionals, that is with a critical and ethical conscience, committed to the needs of the locality, region and the world. All this is in clear opposition to what has happened to Latin American universities, influenced by neo-liberal reforms over the last decades.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; Latin America; Paulo Freire; ethics; World Bank

Introduction

This article has a dual purpose: on the one hand, it discusses and analyzes Paulo Freire's legacy for higher educational reform. To do so, it is necessary to rescue the main arguments put forward by the Brazilian educator from his extensive output regarding the role of policy and ethics at the tertiary level in Latin America in different areas, including: education as an engine of social transformation; academic policies; teaching; research and some ethical and political considerations to stimulate a genuine higher education reform in the region. On the other hand, the article examines the role played by international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), with the neoliberal reforms applied to some higher education systems (HES) in Latin America over the last three decades. In particular it analyzes how the processes of privatization and commercialization in tertiary education, promoted across most of the region in past decades, was undeniably sustained by financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IDB.

State reform and free trade regimes

To understand the context in which the higher education reforms were developed in Latin America it is crucial to take into consideration the changes that befell the continent during the 1970s. Latin American state reform has been dominated by the control of government policy by various authoritarian regimes (for example, Argentina, Brazil and Chile). There was a significant change of direction in the role of the state that presupposed a change in the implementation of public and educational policy which would effect, structurally and ideologically, the development of HESs. In practice, the centralized state became a subsidiary state, with the basics of neoliberalism practiced openly and without checks. This radically transformed the ruling institutional structure and legal norms as a function of the free market and laissez-faire of the state (Espinoza, 2002). This transformation, evidently, produced a change in the curriculum, for example, in professional training. It favored the implementation of a curriculum oriented toward the development of the indispensable skills required by the labor market, such as those encouraging competition and productivity. The approach is in strong contrast to Freirian thought that aims to inculcate, in part, social participation, with the aim of cultural and collective change while giving greater emphasis to the process rather than the results.

According to Puiggros (2001) since the last century the structure of the modern Latin American state places public education systems as a principal axis that constitutes a fundamental area for the public. However, as a direct consequence of the decomposition of the welfare state and the increase in private provision of informal and formal education, the concept of public education entered into crisis (González & Espinoza, 2011). With the crisis experienced by the welfare state in the region, the educational scenario became extremely complex; on the one hand, there were growing demands by different sectors to enter higher education (vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities, etc.); on the other, neoliberal policies supported hybrid state supply. As a result supply was increasingly captured by the private sector and large international consortia (Laureate and Apollo, for example) that saw the opportunities for fat profits with the provision of educational services (Espinoza, 2005; Gregorutti, Espinoza, González, & Loyola, 2016). Since then profits and clientelism became rooted in tertiary education in various countries in the region. In consequence, the education of future professionals is based almost exclusively on the transmission of content and knowledge, favoring training based on subject fields and not on reflection or deliberation. Questions about ethics and morality have lost ground as educational content is replaced by subjects such as entrepreneurship and management. Training has become more individualist and personalist, separated from the most urgent social needs.

Further in the 1990s, Latin America has experienced the transformation of its production structure, based on opening to external markets; the increase in imports of traditional agricultural goods; the increase in exports of non-traditional agricultural goods and the attraction of foreign direct investment to industry and agroindustry. These phenomena are enshrined in the various trade treaties promoted by governments and inspired by free trade agreements (FTAs) (Espinoza, 2005; Verger, 2011). Without question the commercialization of tertiary educational services, propagated by various FTAs and the World Trade Organization (WTO), constitute a serious threat to public education systems which have to compete with unscrupulous groups (Laureate, Apollo and Sek are good examples) which only wish to maximize their return on investment.

Higher education reform and the role of international agencies

Neoliberal reform of higher education in Latin America

During the 1980s, 1990s and the past decade, the reforms were undertaken in a context in which education was understood to be a subsector of political economy and not part of social policy. With this framework, educational reform was increasingly dominated by economic interests and the quality of educational supply substantially deteriorated (Espinoza, 2002, 2016; González, Espinoza, & Belfegor, 2015). While Latin America's educational reform has been both radical and gradual, there are strong similarities between both approaches which are: (1) the privatization of supply; (2) institutional self-financing; (3) the diversification of university and non-university supply; (4) the need to increase the public and private institutional base; (5) incentives to ensure that public universities diversify their financial sources by the sale of services and undertaking consultancies; (6) the redefinition of the role of the state; (7) financial accountability; and (8) educational services regarded as a consumer good (World Bank, 1986, 1995, 2015; Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo IDB, 1997, 2008).

The direct result of these processes has been the over growth of a private institutional platform, greater concentration of enrolment particularly in the private sector (in many cases with low selectivity) and a deteriorating quality of teaching, research and infrastructure in public universities (Espinoza, 2016; González et al., 2015). As a direct consequence of these transformations over recent decades, tertiary education has been converted into a consumer rather than public or social good. Questions of values or education based on ethical principals have been replaced by an education oriented to the market and to business. This is consistent with the open commercialization and liberalization of various services (educational, social security, housing, etc.). It reinforces the ideological value of competition as the norm of human relations. Private return has become the key component in the discourse of our authorities and governors and the logic of clientelism has been fully imposed within higher education institutions. The state has assumed a subsidiary role and only intervenes when there is a crisis.

Following Cerdas (2008) it can be shown that the principal ideas or ideology that supports and sustains higher educational university reform are: the inevitability of global neoliberalism; market oriented reforms guarantee better access to education and equity of the system as a whole; participation of the private sector in the sale of educational services increases the system's efficiency compared to the inefficiency and bureaucratization of public universities, among others. These arguments, according to Freire (1998) are questionable because they ignore the actors that participate in the process, assume that globalization is inevitable rather than the resulting expression of an economic development controlled and directed by capitalism in its most extreme version. Higher educational reform is not a neutral process for it confronts us with the inescapable ethical, moral and political human activities of teaching and learning. Clearly teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum, but at particular times and historical contexts, with very different projects and the ideas about the role of education in social life (Freire, 1994a). So whatever reforms imposed on a society at any given moment in its development can be reversed and go in other directions (Freire, 1998).

The paradigm promoted by the World Bank as well as the IDB presupposes that universities play a subsidiary role in capitalist economic development. So too, it is expected that higher university education becomes a space for the profitability of capital. For Boaventura

de Sousa Santos (2005), public universities have had to submit to the dictates of the free market economy in order to survive, significantly overturning the role and mission that they should play in contemporary society—that is a center for the production of culture and critical thought. As Cerdas (2008) correctly argues:

... to convert university education in a field of capitalist values diminishes the conception of university education as a right and the student as a political subject; thus strengthens the notions of buying and selling of services and the student as a client of the educational system. The emphasis is placed on the individual's access to training oriented exclusively to meet the needs of the labor market, which is how higher education is subordinated to capital accumulation. And also the ideological value of competitiveness is reinforced as standard relationship between human beings. (p. 315)

Freire (1972, 1998) in clear opposition to the fundamentals that guide tertiary system reforms in the region advocates the promotion of a liberating education and training for critical thinking, very far from that instrumentality of the market that prevails to the present.

The role of international agencies in the implementation of higher education reforms

Financial institutions such as the World Bank, the IDB and the International Monetary Fund, among others, represent the visible face of the implementation of neoliberalism in underdeveloped countries. Latin America is no exception. These institutions have, during recent decades, shaped state reform and open trade, consistent with the interests of transnational capital and the governing elites. For the IDB (1997, 2008) and the World Bank (1995, 2015), the market is the computing engine for university activities and the main control mechanism required for professional training. It is market demand that determines how many professionals and technicians are to be trained in our societies, as well as setting the curriculum. For the sectoral specialists at the World Bank, higher education should concentrate on the development of leaders and the technical capacities for the economic growth of nations (World Bank, 1995). From this perspective, market orientation is the best way to guarantee access to education and the equality of the system as a whole. The sale of educational services by the private sector increases the efficiency of the system compared to the inefficiency and bureaucratization of public universities.

The World Bank argues that the high private rate of return from tertiary education justifies the payment of fees by families and students. To facilitate this process, they propose programs for bank credit and scholarships so that students have choices about how to finance their education. The IDB (1997), for its part, in one of its strategic documents identifies a range of criteria for the reform of higher education that it is willing to support under specific conditions. First, it makes the assumption that students should be considered as 'clients' for the university system and thus makes them partially responsible for the payment of the services to which they have access. Second, they propose that for governments and universities to improve efficiency they should promote self-financing schemes by the sales of services and payment for degrees or certificates (through bank credits) by students and their families. Third, it is assumed that a university degree generates high private returns and so is a lucrative investment for those students that choose to study after secondary school. Last, the IDB, in common with the WB's strategic documents argues that the principal mechanism that determines professional training is the market.

In consequence, it can be concluded that both economic gains obtained by higher education graduates and market demand represent the parameters that determine both the social function of the university and individual choices. The World Bank and to a lesser degree, the IDB, are today the financial institutions that exercise the greatest influence on the implementation of macroeconomic and sectoral policies for underdeveloped countries, including a majority in Latin America. Today World Bank education loans amount to US\$4 billion per year, of which around thirty percent is for financing tertiary level reforms.

Why the WB's arguments for higher education reform are questionable: Theoretical and ethical considerations

International financial institutions, including the WB, advocate a university reform that, on the one hand reinforces pressures on the most vulnerable sectors, and on the other, tasks universities with the work of educating leaders and the technical capacity for the systemic continuation of capitalism. The ultimate purpose of the reform is to reduce it to a functional link to higher education within the framework of a specific historical form of material production and the power relations that flow from it. Faced with this scenario, Freire invites us to internalize a socio-political and historical conception of education, where the latter cannot be oriented according to the vagaries of the market, but is congruent with the need to overcome oppression, understood as a historical condition and not destiny (Cerdas, 2008).

The arguments used by the international financial institutions are questionable on a number of grounds. Consistent with Puiggros (2001) and Espinoza (2002, 2008) limiting state funding in Latin America to public higher education (within the framework of structural adjustment and post adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank) is unacceptable, even with the argument of strengthening primary education, as proposed by the World Bank, for it is the obligation of democratic governments to develop a democratic educational policy that allows the improvement and consolidation of public educational systems and to define the arrangements with the private sector to ensure they meet local and regional needs. With regard to the need to strengthen public education, Freire's work does not lack arguments. Basically, he states that education is a fundamental pillar for the welfare of all society and people should be able to rely on the presence of a public education system (including the university level) consistent with the needs of all social groups, but especially the most vulnerable.

The World Bank's educational policies have also been criticized because their economic analysis is uniquely and exclusively based on the *human capital theory* (Ginsburg, 2012; Heyneman, 2012; Jones, 2006; Ngcwangu, 2015; Siqueira, 2012). In this context, the educational systems of developing countries and their respective actors (teachers, students, parents, administrators) operate within the logic of the 'free market' or capitalist economies. The human capital theory, in its most influential theoretical approximation utilized by the World Bank for the analysis of educational policy, regards education as an investment for future labor productivity, both for society and for individuals that seek education (Hunter & Brown, 2000; Jones, 2006). The returns on investment are measured by the profits obtained over a lifetime, discounting for present value. Knowledge and skills are considered the fundamental educational outcomes, including less tangible results, such as initiatives and habits of hard work, recognized as factors that impact work productivity (Samoff & Stromquist, 2001).

Human capital theory has also been criticized because the economic analysis of the role of education fails at the point when distinctions have to be made between education and schooling (or formal education) given that the number of years of formal education is used to measure quantity of education of an individual or society (Lima, 2011; Hickling-Hudson & Klees, 2012). This is the typical human capital approach which assumes that education is significant for the transmission of knowledge, information and understanding. For many analysts it appears obvious that people with knowledge, information and understanding will be more productive. What may appear obvious is sometimes false. To begin with, people with knowledge, information and understanding are not necessarily the most productive workers. Who is the most productive or not depends on the social organization of work.

The analysis of rates of return have also been questioned because they cannot be used as the only tool to guide decisions on allocation of public resources for education and the provision of training (see Jones, 2006; Klees, 2002). Further both the validity and the scope of rates of return analysis have been questioned as limited and untrustworthy. For example, Bennell (1996a) has analyzed and criticized the work of George Psacharopoulos showing that the global and regional calculations on public and private rates of return have serious methodological problems. According to Bennell (1996a) the assumptions regarding opportunity costs for each educational level consistently bias the rates of return of education in favor of elementary education, ignoring the current value of the contribution made by school children to domestic output and relying instead on prevailing wage rates in the relevant age cohort. Similarly, it is assumed that the opportunity costs of higher education can be linked to the average salaries of senior high school graduates in the 18–25 years of age cohort, which are rarely adjusted for unemployment, although it is well known that unemployment is concentrated among school dropouts from secondary education (as against graduates of higher education).

The analysis of rates of return is also questioned as the principal planning tool used by World Bank experts because: (1) it emphasizes results obscuring education as a process; (2) uses information based on old data (lifetime income flows) to act as a guide for decisions concerning the present and future of labor markets and the supply of educated people to such markets; and (3) is inappropriate because the data is not comparable or insufficient (Bennell, 1996a, 1996b; Colclough, 1996; Coraggio, 1994, 1995; Cummings & Riddell, 1994; Espinoza, 2002, 2016; Heyneman, 2001). In this context, there is often no discussion about the limitations of each national case study used by World Bank experts (see for example, Psacharopoulos, 1973, 1980, 1987, 1994).

Up to this point, we have discussed the role played by the World Bank as the largest multilateral institution that finances or co-finances tertiary level financial projects worldwide, as well as reviewing the criticisms made about their theoretical approximations (human capital theory) and methodologies (rate of return analysis) used by the Bank to decide how, where and when resources should be loaned to developing countries.

The legacy of Paulo Freire and the neoliberal reforms of higher education

In this section we analyze the principal contributions of Freire's work to the higher education reform in Latin America by using his most relevant texts and documents. There are three dimensions that guide the analysis: education as an engine of praxis, reflection and

change; academic policy, teaching and research; and some ethical and policy considerations to promote a genuine higher education reform.

Education as the motor for praxis, reflection and change

Freire's pedagogy is above all a 'pedagogy of the oppressed'. It is not concerned with adaptive models nor our social transition but models of rupture, change and total transformation (Freire, 1973). Literacy and the task of education will only be authentically humanist by the way it can, on the one hand, achieve the integration of the individual to his local and national reality; and on the other losing the fear of liberty, able to generate its own process of recreation, search, autonomy and solidarity. So true education assumes praxis, reflection and action by a man or woman to transform it (Freire, 1973). Freire's work reveals a concept of educational activity that is openly opposed to the vision that international financial institutions and governments supportive of the neoliberal economic model have of educational activity. Freire calls on us to promote an education that liberates and forms critical thought, far from the competition and instrumentality of the market, which are exactly those pillars that maintain the policies promoted by the World Bank and IDB.

For Paulo Freire the future is a possibility while in neo-liberal thought it is destiny (Gadotti, 2002, 2005). Neoliberalism is presented as if it was the only realistic response, disqualifying any other alternative proposal. It disqualifies or disregards the state, political parties, as well as public institutionality. Thus Freire attacks market ethics based on the logic of control and summons in their place the ethical integration of the human being as the counterweight (Freire, 1998). In this context, he believes that education in general, certainly including the tertiary level, cannot change direction, because of the paradigm of neoliberalism (the roles of markets and firms) that only emphasizes the efficiency of the processes and from this perspective, ignores the essence of human beings. In this paradigm, according to Freire, human beings act as economic agents, the 'human factor', normalizing inequality (Freire, 1998). Freire proposes the development of political consciousness and educational action that leads to the transformation of individuals and their environments. In this way, knowledge is a guide to practice, allowing a person to act on the real world and transform it. The search for knowledge is a liberating learning experience understood as the search for new relations and practices that allows a change in the real world, improving the conditions of life and fostering the development of the oppressed. So a critical pedagogy should have as its central concern the forms of popular organization, by which knowledge is both an explanation and protest (Freire, 1972).

Freire (1976) points to the commitment that should be assumed by all professionals to society upon completion of university studies. It is therefore essential to have a professional capable of acting/transforming reality, reflecting on it and its implications. On this particular point, he argues that commitment as a professional, however, can be dichotomized from the original commitment to man, noting:

The more that I am educated as a professional, the more systematic my experience, the more I can serve our cultural heritage, which is mankind's heritage and who everyone should serve the greater my responsibility to men and society (p.5)

In the same way Freire (1976) believes that professionals cannot evade their commitment to the national or country-wide project because this would demonstrate a lack of ethics and an inadmissible lack of commitment. He writes:

In a mainly alienated society, to be a professional in a hierarchically structured society is a privilege; in a society that is beginning to open out, the professional is a commitment or should be so. To escape from this commitment is not only the denial of self, but of the national project. (p. 7)

From Freirian thinking comes the 'banking concept' critique of education, embraced by the majority of Latin American governments since the 1980s onwards, in an environment of growing privatization and diversification of educational supply (university and non-university). In this, the academic university is seen as a superior being that explains and transmits knowledge to the ignorant, where being educated implies a passive reception of knowledge (Freire, 1976). Freire criticizes 'banking education' because it establishes an asymmetric and unequal relationship between those who 'know' and those who 'don't know'. In this process of interaction between teachers and learners at least three things happen: (1) the 'don't knows' renounce their knowledge, which is the result of social practice that recognize as valid only knowledge that is transmitted; (2) the 'don't knows' renounce their ability to build knowledge, submitting to those who have built it elsewhere; (3) the 'knows' renounce their ability to learn and recuperate social experience from the 'don't knows'; and (4) those that 'know' are the educators, who think, speak, discipline, authorize, choose, act (Freire, 1972; Freire & Faúndez, 1986). These ideas are closely linked with current Herbartian pedagogy found in Latin American university systems since the late nineteenth century. In contrast, Freire states that each individual ought to be able to create and transform the world according to their needs.

The educator must respect those being educated by never denying them their dreams or utopia, respecting their ideas, including the most conflictive. Freire criticizes those who underestimate and belittle the lived experience, because they are the ones that have the capacities to nurture reflective, constructive and conscious dialogue (Freire, 1985). The educator must understand that every learner builds a different significance from what is learnt. Consequently, knowledge should be able to transform the social and cultural environment as an equal cognitive option, with curricula that fit the context (González & Visbal, 2010). Such a view naturally calls into question the prevailing model in most Latin American societies where the academic is a mere transmitter of content and theory, the majority of which are often disassociated from practice. It is obvious that for the governing elites and supporters of neoliberalism, the predominant educational model, called 'banking education' by Freire, maintains the status quo and avoids educating professionals with critical, reflexive and transforming spirit.

To challenge 'banking education' Freire proposes the encouragement of an education that has the character of problem solving which limits and opposes a one directional system of 'banking education'. From this perspective 'problem solving education' strengthens communication between equals, with the purpose of changing knowledge and training. This presupposes that the educator and learner have a horizontal and equal relationship, breaking with the predominant practice in university lecture halls. The learner ought to be able to discover the relationships within his or her social environment and the possibility of transforming that environment. In this sense literacy is a method of building consciousness which implies politicization (Gaitán, 2007). According to Freire (1970, 1985) the role of the progressive educator is to challenge the ingenious curiosity of the learner, for with him or her, the critique is shared. Educational practice, with this method, allows the learner to both learn about his or her environment and transform it according to his or her needs.

There is no doubt that universities should guarantee the conditions necessary for a rational discussion of national and local issues, in their classrooms where ethics and politics constitute the substantive elements of the discussion-reflection. In this field, university students should acquire a critical awareness that allows them to be able to face the structural problems of the environment and society in general, by praxis. In other words, it is not enough to recognize popular knowledge, but a university praxis is required for the making of critical citizens. In this context, public universities should play a leading role (Stirling & McGloin, 2015). Consistent with the above approach Freire (1972) announced that the pedagogy of the oppressed was a humanist and liberating pedagogy to be associated with two distinct but interrelated moments. The first, where the oppressed recognize and identify the world of oppression, committing themselves, in practice, to its transformation. And, second, when this oppressive reality has been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to be for the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of men and women in the process of permanent liberation.

Academic, teaching and research policies

For Freire (1994b) it is impossible for a university to transcend society's political and social systems. Given this assumption, he argued that all academic policy has an underlying point of reference with the global system and its context and in which it had a place. Thus a neutral and autonomous academic policy is inconceivable. Freire added that there are academic policies that reflect political and ideological positions, both in terms of understanding the academy and how to think about science. So it is important to challenge serious academic policies such as scientism which is deeply disconnected from daily reality. Freire believes that academic policy is implicitly associated with issues of power. And the question of power is at the heart of reflection, practice and academic policy (Stirling & McGloin, 2015). Hence the internal conflicts that occur within the academy are conditioned by both a greater external power and the ideological choices and policies governing academic and scientific policy in every society. Consequently, before a given academic policy can bear fruit it is essential that it involves the vital, physical and organizational experience of the actors involved (Freire, 1994a).

As with academic policies, so Freire is highly critical with the prevailing teaching in our universities. Indeed, according to Freire, teaching, by failing to recognize the existence of popular education rejects practice based on society and disregards the autonomy of individuals to take charge of their own lives as a process of struggle and social transformation. Universities constitute channels for domination by the elites—and they do not permit the liberation of the oppressed. From this point of view, he argues that it is indispensable to create spaces for knowledge and critical thinking as a way of creating real alternatives which change reality (Freire, 1994b). Freire considers that the principal pillar of the teaching university is continuous dialogue about common experiences of individuals and social groups. It is only in this way that it is possible to limit the intentions of the curricula contents that dominate traditional university teaching which constrains students' reflective, critical and ethical capacities. In fact, intellectual practice within universities implies, without question, political action (Ordoñez, 2000). For Freire, one of the ethical problems of the university intellectual is to ask how universities reproduce the ideologies of the ruling class and what their true foundations are. He suggests that all academic policies reflect ideological positions and that there is no such thing as a neutral academic policy (Ordoñez, 2000).

Freire was looking for a fundamental epistemological change of direction in the teaching-learning processes within universities. For him, the dialogue between educator and student should be able to convert itself into knowledge construction and exchange. He was seeking to leave behind the dominant tradition of Herbartian philosophy, which has dominated university classrooms since the end of the nineteenth century and where the educator is a mere transmitter of knowledge and the learner is a recipient (Education Bank), (Freire, 1976). It is the predominance of this philosophy in our classrooms that has impeded the cultural and scientific take-off in our Latin American societies.

In the *Pedagogy of Hope* Freire (1994b) argued that teaching and research to converge in the knowledge process—where the space is the classroom—and where teaching and learning are made concrete. With reference to this he pointed out:

My experience teaches me that the learner needs to self-educate, but this implies that it is necessary to recognize that the student is able to know and wants to know as do other students who are equally capable of knowing, with the educator between the two—and so reach knowledge. Teaching and learning are in this respect moments of a greater process: to know ... (p. 44)

In his work, Freire questions the role that teaching and research play in the Latin American university system by examining if there is an obvious hegemony of ‘intellectual elitism’ that protects conservative structures in scientific disciplines as well as the distribution and production of knowledge often unrelated to the necessities of society. This approach rejects by definition the popular knowledge based on the experiences and the daily life of people; rather it advocates knowledge that can be generated on college campuses (González & Visbal, 2010).

Conclusion

Ethical and policy considerations to promote a genuine reform of higher education: An approximation from the contributions of Freire

The reforms experienced by higher education in the majority of Latin American countries since the 1980s has resulted in a series of transformations that are difficult to square with the ideal of becoming more just, equitable and with greater solidarity. From this perspective it is more urgent and necessary to rescue and apply Freire’s ideas, and so be able to understand the wave of neoliberal reforms that have swept the continent, in order to undertake various changes to our HESs.

Although Freire’s work concentrates on the school system, adult and popular education, some of these classic texts (for example, *Education and Change* (*Educación y Cambio* [1976]); *The Role of the Intellectuals* [1994]; and the *Pedagogy of Freedom* [1998]) provide a glimpse of some of the fundamentals and proposals by which to understand and discuss the central points of what a future higher education reform should incorporate. Some of these premises of ethical and political character are listed below.

Higher education should be understood as a public good and not as a consumer good. From this it will be feasible to construct a society which is more just, with greater solidarity and inclusion, where social justice constitutes an ethical, political and judicial imperative for society. As higher education is a public good it should be subject to continuous public scrutiny, so that it can respond satisfactorily to citizen demands and the challenges imposed by science.

Higher education and its various associated functions (teaching, research, management and communication) should focus on responding to and satisfying the needs of society as a whole and not only resolve the interests of the market and business. It should facilitate the strengthening of public universities. Pedagogical practices based on Herbartian pedagogy should be banished from the university classrooms, so that the students take an active, reflective, critical and transformative role in society. Education should aim to develop individual autonomy and the establishment of humane and solidarity relations among them. The role of the state as the agent that channels social demands and as the regulator of supply for the tertiary level should be made more powerful. Education should serve the construction of societies (emancipating education) liberated from the oppression of one class above another.

Education is a form of intervening in the world whether one assumes it to be a mechanism for the reproduction of the dominant ideology—or one understands it as an instrument to overcome the limits that these ideas impose on us. Education should reconstruct itself with a new *ethos* based on cooperation, where technical knowledge is not separated from other knowledge (the humanities, science and the arts) nor from its social consequences. It is essential to understand that education has greater scope beyond training students for specific technical skills.

Higher education reform, as a result, cannot be seen from a neutral perspective, for independent of our position, we are confronted with the inescapable ethical dimension of the human activity of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning, according to Freire, do not occur in a vacuum but in particular times and historical contexts, where there are different projects and conceptions about the role that education plays in social life and the world. University education ought to guarantee an ethical and integral education for the student that will allow him or her to act in a way that is conscious and realistic about his or her environment, adapting it to meet his or her needs. Intellectualism and scientism should be banished from university classrooms because they do not contribute to the success of social welfare and reject, a priori, the knowledge of popular classes which have grown from their experience and day-to-day work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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