

# The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon., OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Typeset in Bembo by  
Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*  
The Routledge international handbook of the sociology of education/  
edited by Michael W. Apple, Stephen J. Ball and Luis Armando Gandin.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Educational sociology – Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Apple, Michael W. II. Ball, Stephen J. III. Gandin, Luis Armando, 1967–.

LC191.R684 2010

306.43 – dc22

2009023567

ISBN10: 0-415-48663-7 (hbk)  
ISBN10: 0-203-86370-4 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-48663-7 (hbk)  
ISBN13: 978-0-203-86370-1 (ebk)  
ISBN13: 978-0-415-61996-7 (pbk)

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## The university in the twenty-first century

### Toward a democratic and emancipatory university reform<sup>1</sup>

*Boaventura de Sousa Santos*

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In an essay published fifteen years ago,<sup>2</sup> I identified three crises facing the university (Santos, 1994). First, the crisis of hegemony was the result of contradictions between the traditional functions of the university and those that had come to be attributed to it throughout the twentieth century. When it stopped being the only institution of higher education and research production, the university entered a crisis of hegemony. The second crisis was a crisis of legitimacy, provoked by the fact that the university ceased to be a consensual institution, in view of the contradiction between the hierarchization of specialized knowledge through restrictions of access and credentialing of competencies, on the one hand, and the social and political demands for a democratized university and equal opportunity for the children of the working class, on the other. Finally, the institutional crisis was the result of the contradiction between the demand for autonomy in the definition of the university's values and objectives and the growing pressure to hold it to the same criteria of efficiency, productivity, and social responsibility that private enterprises face.

What has happened since I wrote that essay? How can we characterize the situation in which we find ourselves? What are possible responses to the problems that the university faces today? In this chapter, I will try to provide answers to these three questions. In the first part, I will undertake an analysis of recent transformations in the system of higher education and their impact on the public university. In the second part, I will identify and justify some of the basic principles of a democratic and emancipatory reform of the public university, that is, a reform that allows the public university to respond creatively and efficiently to the challenges it faces at the outset of the twenty-first century.

### **Transformations in higher education**

#### ***The last fifteen years***

The predictions I made fifteen years ago have come to pass, beyond my expectations. Despite the fact that the three crises were intimately connected and could only be confronted jointly

and by means of vast reform programs, generated both inside and outside the university, I predicted (and feared) that the institutional crisis would come to monopolize reformist agendas and proposals. This is in fact what happened. I also predicted that concentrating on the institutional crisis could lead to the false resolution of the two other crises, a resolution by default: the crisis of hegemony, by the university's increasing loss of specificity; the crisis of legitimacy, by the growing segmentation of the university system and the growing devaluation of university diplomas, in general. This has also happened.

Concentrating on the institutional crisis was fatal for the university and was due to a number of factors, some already evident at the beginning of the 1990s, while others gained enormous weight as the decade advanced. The institutional crisis is and has been, for at least two centuries, the weakest link of the public university, since its scientific and pedagogical autonomy is based on its financial dependency on the state. While the university and its services were an unequivocal public good that was up to the state to ensure, this dependency was not problematic, any more than that of the judicial system, for example, in which the independence of the courts is not lessened by the fact they are being financed by the state. However, contrary to the judicial system, the moment the state decided to reduce its political commitment to the universities and to education in general, converting education into a collective good that, however public, does not have to be exclusively supported by the state, an institutional crisis of the public university automatically followed. If it already existed, it deepened. It can be said that, for the last thirty years, the university's institutional crisis, in the great majority of countries, was provoked or induced by the loss of priority of the university as a public good and by the consequent financial drought and disinvestment in public universities. The causes and their sequence vary from country to country. In countries that lived under dictatorships for the previous four decades, there were two reasons for the onset of the institutional crisis: to reduce the university's autonomy to the level necessary for the elimination of the free production and diffusion of critical knowledge; and to put the university at the service of modernizing, authoritarian projects, opening the production of the university-as-public-good to the private sector and forcing the public university to compete under conditions of unfair competition in the emerging market for university services. In the democratic countries, the onset of the crisis was related to this latter reason, especially beginning in the 1980s, when neoliberalism was imposed as the global model of capitalism. In countries that made the transition from dictatorship to democracy in this period, the elimination of the former reason (political control of autonomy) was frequently invoked to justify the goodness of the latter (creation of a market for university services). In these countries, the affirmation of the universities' autonomy was on a par with the privatization of higher education and the deepening of the public universities' financial crisis. It was a precarious and deceiving autonomy, because it forced the universities to seek new dependencies much more burdensome than dependence on the state, and because the concession of autonomy was subject to remote controls finely calibrated by the ministries of finance and education. Consequently, in the passage from dictatorship to democracy, unsuspected continuities ran beneath the evident ruptures.

The onset of the institutional crisis by way of the financial crisis, accentuated in the last twenty years, is a structural phenomenon accompanying the public university's loss of priority among the public goods produced by the state. The fact that the financial crisis was the immediate motive of the institutional crisis does not mean that the causes of the latter can be reduced to the financial crisis. The analysis of the structural causes will reveal that the prevalence of the institutional crisis was the result of the impact upon it of the two other unsolved crises, the crises of hegemony and of legitimacy. And in this domain, there have been, in the last fifteen years, new developments in relation to the picture I described at the beginning of the 1990s.

The public university's loss of priority in the state's public policies was, first of all, the result of the general loss of priority of social policies (education, health, social security) induced by the model of economic development known as neoliberalism or neoliberal globalization, which was internationally imposed beginning in the 1980s. In the public university, it meant that its identified institutional weaknesses—and they were many—instead of serving as justification for a vast political-pedagogical reform program, were declared insurmountable and used to justify the generalized opening of the university-as-public-good to commercial exploitation. Despite political declarations to the contrary and some reformist gestures, underlying this first collision of the university with neoliberalism is the idea that the public university is not reformable (any more than the state) and that the true alternative lies in the creation of the university market. The savage and deregulated way in which this market emerged and was developed is proof that there was a deep option in its favor. And the same option explained the disinvestment in the public university and massive transferences of human resources that, at times, looked like a “primitive accumulation” on the part of the private university sector at the cost of the public sector.

The two defining processes of the decade—the state's disinvestment in the public university and the mercantile globalization of the university—are two sides of the same coin. They are the two pillars of a huge global project of university politics destined to profoundly change the way the university-as-a-public-good has been produced, transforming it into a vast and vastly profitable ground for educational capitalism. This mid- to long-range project includes different levels and forms of the mercantilization of the university. As for the levels, it is possible to distinguish two. The primary level consists in inducing the public university to overcome the financial crisis by generating its own resources, namely through partnerships with industrial capital. On this level, the public university maintains its autonomy and its institutional specificity, privatizing part of the services it renders. The second level consists of the biased elimination of the distinction between public and private universities, transforming the university as a whole into a business, an entity that not only produces for the market but which is itself produced as a market, as a market of university services as diverse as administration, teaching programs and materials, certification of degrees, teacher training, and teacher and student evaluation. If it will still make sense to speak of the university as a public good when this second level is attained is a rhetorical question.

### ***The disinvestment of the public university***

The crisis of the public university as a consequence of disinvestment is a global phenomenon, although its consequences are significantly different at the core, the periphery, and the semi-periphery of the world system. In the central countries, the situation is differentiated. In Europe, where, with the exception of England, the university system is almost totally public, the public university has had the power to reduce the extent of the disinvestment at the same time that it has developed the ability to generate its own income through the market. The success of this strategy depends in good measure on the power of the public university and its political allies to block the significant emergence of the private university market. For instance, in Spain, this strategy has so far been more successful than in Portugal. However, it is important to bear in mind that, throughout the decade, a private, non-university sector emerged in almost every European country, aimed at the professional job market. This fact led the universities to respond by structurally modifying their programs and by increasing their variety. In the United States, where private universities occupy the top of the hierarchy, public universities were motivated

to seek alternative funding from foundations, in the market, and by raising tuition fees. Today, in some North American public universities, the state funding is no more than 50 percent of the total budget.

On the periphery, where the search for alternative income in the market is virtually impossible, the crisis attains catastrophic proportions. Obviously, the ills are long-standing, but they have been seriously aggravated in the past decade by the state's financial crisis and the structural adjustment programs. A UNESCO report from 1997 about the majority of African universities drew a dramatic picture of all sorts of shortages: the collapse of infrastructures, almost total lack of equipment, miserably remunerated, unmotivated, and easily corruptible teaching personnel, and little or no research investment. The World Bank diagnosed the situation in a similar way and, characteristically, declared it irreparable. Unable to include in its calculations the importance of the university in the building of national projects and the creation of long-term critical thinking, the Bank concluded that African universities do not generate sufficient "return" on their investment. As a consequence, the African countries were asked to stop investing in universities, concentrating their few resources on primary and secondary education and allowing the global market of higher education to resolve the problem of the university for them. This decision had a devastating effect on the universities of the African countries.

This is a global process and it is on this scale that it should be analyzed. The development of university instruction in the central countries, in the thirty or forty years after World War II, was based, on the one hand, on the successes of the social struggles for the right to education, translated into the demand for a more democratic access to the university and, on the other hand, on the imperatives of an economy that required a more highly qualified workforce in key industrial sectors. The situation changed significantly, starting with the economic crisis that peaked in the mid 1970s. Since then, there has been a growing contradiction between the reduction of public investment in higher education and the intensification of the international economic competition based on the search for technological innovation and, hence, on the techno-scientific knowledge that makes it possible, as well as on the training of a highly qualified workforce.

As for the demand of a qualified workforce, the 1990s revealed another contradiction: the growth of the qualified workforce required by an economy based on knowledge coexisted with the explosive growth of very low-skilled jobs. The neoliberal globalization of the economy has deepened the segmentation of the labor markets between countries and within countries. At the same time, it has allowed both the qualified worker and the unqualified worker *pools* to be recruited globally—the former, predominately through *brain drain* and *outsourcing* of technically advanced services, the latter, predominately through businesses delocalizing across the globe and (often clandestine) immigration. The global availability of skilled labor permits the central countries to lower the priority of their investment in public universities, making funding more dependent on market needs. Actually, there is another contradiction in this domain between the rigidity of university training and the volatility of the qualifications required by the market. This contradiction was shaped, on one hand, by the creation of modular, non-university, tertiary training systems and, on the other, by shortening the periods of university training and making the latter more flexible. Despite ad hoc solutions, these contradictions became enormously acute in the 1990s and had a disconcerting impact on higher education: the university was gradually transformed from a generator of conditions for competition and success in the market into an object of competition, that is, into a market of university services.

### ***From university knowledge to pluriversity knowledge***

The developments of the past decade presented the university with very demanding challenges, especially the public university. The situation is near collapse in many countries on the periphery, and it is difficult in the semi-peripheral countries. Although the expansion and transnationalization of the market for university services has contributed decisively to this situation in recent years, they are not the only cause. Something more profound occurred, and only this explains why the university, while still the institution par excellence of scientific knowledge, has lost its hegemony and has been transformed into an easy target for social criticism. I think that, in the past decade, the relations between knowledge and society began to change significantly, and these alterations promise to be profound to the point of transforming the way we conceive of knowledge and of society. As I said, the commercialization of scientific knowledge is the most visible side of these alterations. However, and despite their enormity, they are the tip of the iceberg, and the transformations now in progress have contradictory meanings and multiple implications, some of them epistemological.

University knowledge—that is, the scientific knowledge produced in universities, or institutions separate from the universities but that retain a similar university *ethos*—was, for the whole of the twentieth century, a predominantly disciplinary knowledge whose autonomy imposed a relatively decontextualized process of production in relation to the day-to-day pressures of the societies. According to the logic of this process, the researchers are the ones who determine what scientific problems to solve, define their relevance, and establish the methodologies and rhythms of research. It is a homogeneous and hierarchically organized knowledge insofar as the agents who participate in its production share the same goals of producing knowledge, have the same training and the same scientific culture, and do what they do according to well-defined organizational hierarchies. It is a knowledge based on the distinction between scientific research and technological development, and the autonomy of the researcher is translated as a kind of social irresponsibility as far as the results of the application of knowledge are concerned. Moreover, in the logic of this process of the production of university knowledge, the distinction between scientific knowledge and other kinds of knowledge is absolute, as is the relation between science and society. The university produces knowledge that the society does or does not apply, an alternative that, although socially relevant, is indifferent or irrelevant to the knowledge produced.

The university's organization and *ethos* were created by this kind of knowledge. It happens that, throughout the past decade, there were alterations that destabilized this model of knowledge and pointed to the emergence of another model. I designate this transition, which Gibbons *et al.* (1994) described as a transition from "type 1 knowledge" to "type 2 knowledge," as the passage from *university knowledge* to *pluriversity knowledge*.

Contrary to the university knowledge described above, pluriversity knowledge is a contextual knowledge insofar as the organizing principle of its construction is its application. As this application is extramural, the initiative for formulating the problems to be solved and the determination of their criteria of relevance are the result of sharing among researchers and users. It is a transdisciplinary knowledge that, by its very contextualization, demands a dialogue or confrontation with other kinds of knowledge, which makes it more heterogeneous internally and allows it to be more adequately produced in less perennial and more open systems, organized less rigidly and hierarchically. All the distinctions upon which university knowledge is based are put in question by pluriversity knowledge but, most basically, it is the relation between science and society that is in question. Society ceases to be an object of scientific questioning and becomes itself a subject that questions science.

The tension between these two models of knowledge highlights the extremes of two ideal types. In reality, the kinds of knowledge produced occupy different places along the *continuum* between the two poles, some closer to the university model, others closer to the pluriversity model. This heterogeneity not only destabilizes the current institutional specificity of the university, it also questions its hegemony and legitimacy in such a way as to force it to evaluate itself by self-contradictory criteria.

Pluriversity knowledge has had its most consistent realization in university–industry partnerships in the form of mercantile knowledge. But, especially in the central and semi-peripheral countries, the context of application has been non-mercantile as well—cooperative and dependent on the solidarity created by partnerships among researchers and labor unions, NGOs, social movements, particularly vulnerable social groups (women, illegal immigrants, the unemployed, people with chronic illnesses, senior citizens, those afflicted with HIV/AIDS, etc.), working-class communities, and groups of critical and active citizens. There is a growing sector of civil society developing a new and more intense relationship with science and technology, demanding greater participation in their production and in the evaluation of their impact. In multi-ethnic and multinational countries, pluriversity knowledge begins to emerge from inside the university itself, when incoming students from ethnic and other minority groups understand that their inclusion is a form of exclusion. They are confronted with the *tabula rasa* that is made of their cultures and of the traditional knowledge of their communities. All of this leads scientific knowledge to confront other kinds of knowledge and demands a higher level of social responsibility from the institutions that produce it and, consequently, from the universities. As science becomes more ingrained in the society, the society becomes more a part of science. The university was created according to a model of unilateral relations with society, and it is this model that underlies its current institutionalism. Pluriversity knowledge supplants this unilateral notion with interactivity and interdependence, both processes enormously invigorated by the technological revolution of information and communication.

## **Democratic and emancipatory reform of the public university**

### ***What is to be done?***

In the second part, I will try to identify some of the master-ideas that should preside over a creative, democratic, and emancipatory reform of the public university. Perhaps the first step is to identify the subjects of the actions that need to be undertaken efficiently to confront the challenges that face the public university. In the meantime, in order to identify the subjects, it is first necessary to define the political meaning of the response to such challenges. In light of the precedent, it becomes clear that, despite the fact that there are multiple causes of the university crisis and some of them are long standing, they are currently being reconfigured by neoliberal globalization, and the way they affect today's university reflects that project's intentions. As I have suggested for other areas of social life (Santos, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007), I think the only efficient and emancipatory way to confront neoliberal globalization is to oppose it with an alternative, counter-hegemonic globalization. Counter-hegemonic globalization of the university-as-public-good means that the national reforms of the public university must reflect a country project centered on policy choices that consider the country's insertion in increasingly transnational contexts of knowledge production and distribution. These will become increasingly polarized between two contradictory processes of globalization: neoliberal



globalization and counter-hegemonic globalization. This country project has to be the result of a broad political and social pact, consisting of different sectoral pacts, among them an educational pact in the terms of which the public university is conceived of as a collective good. The reform must be focused on responding positively to the social demands for the radical democratizing of the university, putting an end to the history of exclusion of social groups and their knowledges, for which the university has been responsible for a long time, starting long before the current phase of capitalist globalization. From now on, the national and transnational scales of the reform interpenetrate. Without global articulation, a national solution is impossible.

The current global context is strongly dominated by neoliberal globalization but is not reduced to it. There is space for national and global articulations based on reciprocity and on the mutual benefit that, in the case of the university, will reconstitute and broaden long-lasting forms of internationalism. Such articulations should be cooperative even when they contain mercantile components; that is, they should be constructed outside the regimes of international trade policy. This alternative transnationalization is made possible by the new information and communication technologies and is based on the establishment of national and global networks, within which new pedagogies, new processes of construction and diffusion of scientific and other knowledges, as well as new social (local, national, and global) commitments circulate. The goal is to resituate the role of the public university in the collective definition and resolution of social problems that are now insoluble unless considered globally. The new university pact starts from the premise that the university has a crucial role in the construction of its country's place in a world polarized by contradictory globalizations.

The counter-hegemonic globalization of the university-as-public-good is, thus, a demanding political project that, in order to be credible, must overcome two contradictory but equally rooted prejudices: on the one hand, that the university can only be reformed by the university community and, on the other, that the university will never reform itself. These are very powerful prejudices. A brief examination of the social forces potentially committed to confront them is in place. The first social force is the public university community itself; that is, those within it interested in an alternative globalization of the university. The public university today is a very fractured social field within which contradictory sectors and interests fight each other. In many countries, especially peripheral and semi-peripheral ones, such contradictions are still latent. Defensive positions that maintain the status quo and reject globalization, whether neoliberal or alternative, predominate. This is a conservative position, not just because it advocates the maintenance of the status quo, but mainly because, deprived of realistic alternatives, it will sooner or later surrender to plans for the neoliberal globalization of the university. University personnel who denounce this conservative position and, at the same time, reject the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalization will be the protagonists of the progressive reform that I am proposing.

The second social force of such reform is the state itself, whenever it is successfully pressed to opt for the university's alternative globalization. Without this option, the national state ends up adopting, more or less unconditionally, or succumbing, more or less reluctantly, to the pressures of neoliberal globalization and, in either case, transforming itself into the enemy of the public university, regardless of any proclamation to the contrary. Given the close, love-hate relationship that the State carried on with the university for the whole of the twentieth century, the options tend to be dramatized.

Finally, the third social force to carry out the reform are citizens collectively organized in social groups, labor unions, social movements, non-governmental organizations and their networks, and local progressive governments interested in forming cooperative relationships

between the university and the social interests they represent. In contrast to the state, this third social force has had a historically distant and, at times, even hostile relationship with the university, precisely because of the latter's elitism and the distance it cultivated for a long time in relation to the so-called "uncultured" sectors of society. This is a social force that has to be won through a response to the question of legitimacy, that is, via non-classist, non-racist, non-sexist, and non-ethnocentric access to the university, and by a whole set of initiatives that deepen the university's social responsibility in line with the pluriversity knowledge mentioned above (more on this below).

Beyond these three social forces there is, in the semi-peripheral and peripheral countries, a fourth entity that may be loosely called national capitalism. Certainly, the most dynamic sectors of national capital are transnationalized and, consequently, part of the neoliberal globalization hostile to the emancipatory reform of the university. However, in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, the process of transnational integration of these sectors is filled with tensions. Under certain conditions, such tensions may lead these sectors to see an interest in defending the project of the public university as a public good, especially in cases where there are no realistic alternatives to the public university for the production of the kind of technological knowledge needed to strengthen their insertion in the global economy.

## Conclusion

The university in the twenty-first century will certainly be less hegemonic but no less necessary than it was in previous centuries. Its specificity as a public good resides in its being the institution that links the present to the medium and long term, through the kinds of knowledge and training it produces and by the privileged public space it establishes, dedicated to open and critical discussion. For these two reasons, it is a collective good without strong allies. Many people are not interested in the long term, and others have sufficient power to be wary of those who dare to suspect them or criticize their interests.

The public university is, thus, a permanently threatened public good, which is not to say that the threat comes only from the outside; it comes from the inside as well (I emphasized this aspect in previous work).

The conjunction between factors of internal threat and factors of external threat is quite obvious in evaluating the university's capacity for long-term thinking, perhaps its most distinctive characteristic. Those who work in today's university know that university tasks are predominately short term, dictated by budget emergencies, interdepartmental competition, professorial tenure, and so forth. The management of such emergencies allows for the flourishing of types of conduct and professional that would have little merit or relevance were it possible and urgent to focus on long-term questions. This emergency-ridden state of affairs, which is surely due to a plurality of factors, must also be seen as a sign that powerful outside social actors are influencing the university.

The proposal I have presented in this chapter is antipodal to this global and external logic and seeks to create conditions to prevent it from finding a welcoming plot for its local and internal appropriation. The university is a public good intimately connected to the country's project. The political and cultural meaning of this project and its viability depend on a nation's ability to negotiate, in a qualified way, its universities' insertion into the new transnational fields. In the case of the university and of education in general, this qualification is the condition necessary for not making the negotiation an act of surrender and thus marking the end of the

university as we know it. The only way to avoid surrender is to create conditions for a cooperative university in solidarity with its own global role.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter has been translated by Peter Lownds of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The first version of this text was presented in Brasilia, on April 5, 2004, in the context of the official calendar of debates about university reform organized by the Brazilian minister of education, Tarso Genro. A much larger version of this text was published in: Rhoads, R. and Torres, C.A. (eds) (2006) *The university, state and markets – the political economy of globalization in the Americas*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 2 A chapter in the book *Pela Mão de Alice* (1994) Oporto: Afrontamento.

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