FOCUS: Asimetrías del Conocimiento en América Latina

Fernanda Beigel (ed.) (2013)
The Politics of Academic Autonomy in Latin America
Surrey, England: Ashgate, 290 p.

Reviewed by Javiera Barandiaran
Global & International Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara

Beigel and her collaborators set out to challenge the common but false juxtaposition between pure, original and autonomous academic knowledge produced in U.S. and European universities, and politicized, dependent and vapid knowledge produced in Latin American universities. Some scholars have challenged the pure versus political knowledge dichotomy by proposing new theoretical frameworks, as in the influential work on 'Mode 2' knowledge production by Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott and Michael Gibbons. Beigel and her co-authors, however, abandon abstract ideals and instead examine the practice and politics of Latin American academic communities. This approach proves to be highly informative and methodologically rich: The authors — all sociologists and social scientists at the National University of Cuyo in Mendoza— present detailed information obtained through interviews, archives and curriculum vitae. This information is analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively to highlight the agency of Latin American academics between the start of the Cold War and the 1980s. As such, the book speaks directly to real and perceived asymmetries in knowledge production in the Global North and South.

Together, the chapters in this book illustrate how state officials and academics in South America shaped the reception of foreign aid, led regional academic cooperation, developed idiosyncratic ideals and in some ways survived the brutal military interventions of the 1970s. The chapters of section I show how South American governments re-shaped UNESCO's efforts away from universal academic ideals to narrower technical aid programs. Cold War politics motivated foreign aid for universities, making foreign funding controversial among local scholars. Nonetheless, efforts to create new training schools absent direct foreign support often floundered (chapter 4). Section II builds on this material by looking beyond international diplomacy to different actors, including the U.S. government's Fulbright program, the Catholic Church and Society of Jesus and university cooperative agreements. A number of trends characterize this period: First, at the start of the Cold War, Chile's and Argentina's universities grew dramatically. Santiago de Chile in particular grew from

an intellectual and cultural backwater to a "center on the periphery", where well-funded and vibrant new centers like FLACSO attracted exiled Brazilian social scientists and students from across the region. Second, over time foreign aid became less top-down and more bottom-up. For example, bottom-up initiatives included regional exchanges and intra-university cooperative agreements signed during that last decade (chapter 7).

A third trend sections I and II anticipate is the unfortunate, divisive nature of such foreign aid. This theme is picked up in section III, where its full consequences become evident. Chapters 8 through 10 detail the descent into left-wing radicalism, guerrilla warfare and state violence that characterized Chile and Argentina in the 1970s. Project Camelot, a U.S. spy operation that masqueraded as social science research, was pivotal in breaking the fragile trust between some local academics and U.S. collaborators and aid agencies. Despite the participation of some important U.S. scholars, Chilean social scientists refused to participate, and U.S. research support in general became suspect (chapter 8). As modernization gave way to radicalism, social scientists split: While some did not think much of U.S. scientific support, others saw it as evidence of the region's dependence — a crutch that would perpetuate dependence, not a bridge to an empowered future (chapter 9).

Chapter 10 discusses the career trajectories of dependence theorists from different disciplines. Within the university, these academics behaved as scholars, making their activism compatible with academic life and not vice versa. Economists, who faced clearer career rewards and milestones when compared to sociologists, had an easier time leading this double life.

It is difficult to exaggerate the dramatic changes to life, including academic life, that occurred in Chile and Argentina after the military coups of 1973 and 1976 respectively. Section IV deals with some of the aftermath. Thousands of students and faculty were killed, disappeared or forced into exile. Some were saved, often by foreign organizations working with local counterparts (chapters 11 and 13). Interestingly, scientific funding during Argentina's military dictatorship increased: Argentina's science agency (CONICET) received a budget increase proportional to the fall in university funding (chapter 12). This funding maintained many established research institutes, mostly in biomedical areas, and spread throughout the country. It also established several "spectral" social science research centers led by non-academics with links to the military regime. Thus, Argentina's social sciences suffered both direct state violence and a symbolic violence as social scientists were replaced by untrained, puppet "academics".

Perhaps because the volume has no conclusion it does not reflect on four tragic ironies that cross these historic events: First, foreign influences and resources that helped radicalize many students and academics later saved many after the military take-over. Second, related to this, the regionalization and internationalization these foreign exchanges facilitated were sources of strength for universities and

academic communities. Why else would the military governments have stamped out such exchanges as thoroughly as they did?

Third, scientific research and creativity — including "anti-academicism" in Argentina — flourished at universities enjoying expanding resources and student access. As chronicled in this volume, in the 1960s a highly educated generation of Argentineans turned against the schools and universities that trained them. Over the past few years, the same phenomenon has been observed in Chile: The first generation of Chileans to enjoy widespread access to education, including higher education, has become the harshest critic of academic life in Chile today.

Fourth and most tragically, one of Latin America's greatest scholarly contributions to the world — dependency theory — was both evidence of the region's intellectual originality and locals' lived experiences of dependency. Dependency theory helped fuel suspicions of foreign funding, internationalization and university expansion. Together, these observations point to still unresolved questions about academia in Latin America: To what level should governments fund science given other pressing social needs? Does academics' privilege relative to many of the populations they study weaken the validity of their work or its social legitimacy? Should university access be subsidized, or does this only benefit the comparatively well-off? And why have these questions driven a certain "anti-academicism" in Latin America, when they apply also to academic life elsewhere? As scholars, we have an opportunity (perhaps a duty?) to reflect on questions like these that speak directly to how educational opportunities (re)produce social inequality.

Beigel's analysis is strongest in her critique of "international-trade based metaphors" like an international division of scientific labor or export-import models of science and knowledge production. These accounts erase local agency, imply that autonomy outside the center is logically impossible and cannot account for observed increases in scientific productivity in such peripheral places like China, India or Brazil (18-19). Beigel develops Chilean and Argentinean academics' agency using Bourdieu's forms of capital in their professionalization. Two shortcomings, however, need to be pointed out: First, the volume focuses almost entirely on Chile and Argentina, making the claim to be speaking about all of Latin America misleading. The absence of other countries should be justified or the scope of the volume narrowed. Second, the focus on Bourdieu's homo academicus shifts attention away from universities and their context. Beigel seems to justify this by arguing that universities alone did not drive the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s (10). Nonetheless, at times the analysis feels too concerned with events within university walls, as if these existed independently of the convulsed society outside. Despite these shortcomings, this book will be of interest to scholars of Latin American politics in the 1960s and of university politics around the world.