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Unfolding the meaning of public(s) in universities: toward the transformative university

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Abstract Drawing upon perspectives from diverse disciplines, this paper critically examines some taken-for-granted definitions about what is understood by 'public' and its relation to universities. It highlights the need to uncover assumptions and value orientations that are at the basis of these definitions and that tend to guide both conceptualizations and practices about the public role of the universities. It is argued that under neoliberal regimes, the public university takes on private aspects and the private university may even take on public aspects: Universities are here characteristically becoming *hybrids*. Despite these overlapping patterns, *absences* are discerned both in the idea and in the practices of public universities. The idea of the *transformative university* is proposed to help to remedy these deficiencies.

Keywords Public role · University · Transformative university · Neoliberalism · Equality

Introduction

Despite attention being now paid to the idea of the public university (Newfield 2008; Holmwood 2011; Burawoy 2011), we lack an overarching understanding of this field. The *concept of public* has been analyzed from diverse perspectives and disciplines such as economics (Samuelson 1954), sociology (Burawoy 2005), philosophy (Habermas 2010; Haas 2004; Dewey 2012), and political sciences (Hood 1995). Nevertheless, it is only in the last years that the concept of public in its relationship with universities has received special attention in the literature (Barnett 2015; Brunner 2014; Marginson 2006, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015; Holmwood 2011; Nixon 2012a; Masschelein and Simons 2009, 2010;

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Watson et al. 2011; Williams 2014), partly due to the emergence of neoliberal policies, privatization, and the retreat of the state (Rhoads and Torres 2006; Rhoads and Slaughter 2006; Slaughter and Leslie 1997, 2001; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Currie et al. 2003).

In the process, diverse definitions emerging from the disciplines listed above have been used and applied in order to capture what it means to be 'public' in universities. Some of these definitions are more normative and some others more descriptive (Marginson 2014), but 'public' here turns out to be a contested concept. Some continue to hold that state and public are equivalent; some, on the other hand, wish to drive a wedge between them. Neither of these positions adequately reflects the complexity of the relationships that now hold and so some clarification is called for. We may also see both that some meanings of 'the public university' are being jeopardized, and that, perhaps surprisingly, spaces are opening spaces for other meanings to be pursued (Sayer 1997, 2000).

In this paper, I offer a review of the definitions in the literature as to what is considered to be public in universities and provide examples from different contexts. I also include some data originating from interviews that my research team and myself have been conducting with academic scholars and senior managers of universities across continents (Fondecyt Regular 1141271; Fondecyt Inicio 11110102), and in which we have asked them about what might be defined as public in universities. At the same time, I critically examine some taken-for-granted definitions that seem commonplace but that tend to reflect certain assumptions and value orientations. Concurrently, I argue that, within a neoliberal regime, the contested concept of public leads to a schema in which the public becomes private and the private is even taking on aspects of public. Finally, I suggest that more critical perspectives are insufficiently represented in the current discussion, and I go on to propose the concept of the 'transformative university' as a 'feasible utopia' (Barnett 2012: 26–28; Sayer 2000).

Context and history

The concept of public and its definitions cannot be separated from a context crisscrossed by historical, political and cultural factors both national and global. Hence, for example, what is understood and defined by 'public' in a context where most universities are funded and regulated by the state (in Germany or Finland, for example) is different from a conceptualization developed in countries where neoliberal policies have gained traction and privatization is significant (USA, UK and Chile, for example). In the former examples, public universities are state-owned institutions; there is little room for private universities. In the latter examples, the conceptualization of public universities is fuzzy since *both* state and private universities exhibit a hybrid funding pattern (involving both state and private sources).

The Chilean case is illustrative here. In 1981, the Pinochet regime decreed an expansion of private universities without any kind of regulation, substantially reduced funding for state universities, and initiated a financing of private universities. Not surprisingly, in such a context, a debate has developed around the public nature of universities, a debate that focuses both on what is inherently public in an institution no longer financed only by the state *and* on what might be public within private institutions.

Definitions about what is considered to be public are dynamic and vary according to political cultures and to state-higher education relationships (Marginson 2014), so rendering the concept of public problematic, having a fuzzy nature. Certain definitions of

'public' might be dominant, reflecting current interests (social, financial and political, for example), while some others might remain in the shadows.

Financial and legal dimensions

In analyzing definitions of 'public,' probably the main meaning associated with universities refers to its *financial and legal dimensions* that point to the *ownership* of higher education. From this perspective, prima facie, public universities are those that are financed by the state in effect receiving their financing from the public purse. The state is the owner and universities work according to state regulations and policies (Germany, France and Cuba are illustrative cases here). In continental Europe, for example, when one poses the question about what is public and the role of the state in universities, it seems an 'awkward question' (interview Fondecyt Regular 1141271, scholar from Austria): Public universities are owned by the state, and there is little space—if any—to conceive of the idea of public outside those universities. Figures support this idea: The OECD (2014) data show that in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Czech Republic, and Slovenia, public expenditure on higher education is more than 80 % (that is, the costs of universities are met primarily by the public taxes). Therefore, in countries with a long tradition of state-funded universities, public comes to seen as equivalent to the state, and it is difficult to sustain a distinction between state and public.

On the other hand, in neoliberal settings, state universities are having to fend for themselves in raising income from 'private' sources. Such is the case of Chile, where state universities receive merely 15 % of their budgets from the government (Contraloría General de la República 2012), while the state has become an important source of indirect funding for *private* universities (for example by subsidizing and guaranteeing student loans or by funding research). On the one hand, these facts challenge the idea that public universities are state universities (in the sense of their mainly being financed by the state). On the other hand, they lead to a situation in which both state and private universities exhibit a dual scheme of support, deploying *both* public and private sources of financing.

The definition of 'public' might go beyond financial and legal dimensions since a private university might be associated with public dimensions. Brunner, for example, considers that 'from their hazy origins, universities [both state and private] … have been public' (2014: 48) because they were created to be beyond the interests of a group of individuals, and to have an impact on society. Brunner suggests too that the interchangeability of the terms 'public universities' and 'state universities' originated during the creation of nation-states in the seventeenth century in which the state was financing universities, but that interchangeability—on his view—does not bear weight today in the wake previously mentioned of a dual funding system. This latter development opens a way to the thesis that non-state (private) universities might have and promote public aims or values, while state universities might not.

The economic perspective: public goods for the public good

In economics (Samuelson 1954; Marginson 2011, 2012, 2015), 'public' refers to goods and services that are both produced and available to everybody without distinction and that are non-rivalrous (their use does not reduce availability to others) and non-exclusive [they do

not imply an additional cost for the consumer (Holcombe 1997)]. Multiple users can access these goods without affecting their quality and quantity (Ostrom and Hess 2010). A public space such as a park or a public library fits this definition: Both might be used by and are available for everybody, for free, and their use does not affect their quality or quantity.

Marginson distinguishes between 'public goods' and 'the public good.' Public goods (plural) primarily benefit individuals, while 'the public good' 'tends to emphasize joint or collective activities and benefits, or a resource accessible to use by all' (Marginson 2011: 417).

Key here is knowledge, its creation, transmission and transfer as central tasks of the university. Knowledge might be open, available and free for everybody, and this might constitute a benefit or contribution to an individual and/or the entire society (advancing knowledge in health and diseases, producing new technologies to improve lives, solving problems in protect the ecology and so on). The fact of being public may even enhance the value of knowledge (e.g., Wikipedia).

Nevertheless, in examining the public role of universities and the creation of scientific knowledge, conceiving knowledge as a public good might be problematic (O'Neill 1998). Scientific knowledge is only partially non-excludable in the sense that it is 'accessible only to those persons who have the required sills and competencies to understand it' (Kauppinen 2014: 403). At the same time, in analyzing scientific knowledge for the public good [in the sense of involving a benefit to the global community (Barnett 2015)], knowledge might be conceptualized as a commodity in the sense of something that is useful or wanted (Marx 1992). That is to say, knowledge can be exchanged in the market and used for profitable purposes. Universities produce and sell expert knowledge in markets to be consumed (Kauppinen 2014; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Clark 1960), for example, through patents, consultancy or professional training, and to serve the interests of a limited group of individuals or institutions.

It might even happen that knowledge production works as a disbenefit or even possesses a perniciousness (Marginson 2011; Vallega 2012). This happens when science is misused or when knowledge serves narrow and even ideological interests and represents a hegemonic approach that 'excludes other knowledge' (Marginson 2011: 417). For example, some public policies sponsor some disciplines over others (to the detriment of humanities, for example), while educational policies may prioritize some discourses over others (for example, competence, training, and transnational labor markets).

In this context, some problematic situations appear especially in relation to universities financed by the state. One might inquire into the implicit guarantee that research tasks are not guided by private or political interests; or as to knowledge, its creation and dissemination being controlled and regulated by the interests of certain stakeholders (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) (Calhoun 2006). Here, questions arise about the autonomy of the university and whether it acts under the influence of or according to public interests, or under the interest of powerful groups.

Educating or training professionals?

Professionals benefit from their higher education and, at the same time, their attributes (knowledge and skills) 'may spill over to other workers' (Marginson 2011: 416). Here, training professionals benefits both individuals (in a private way) and the wider society though a multiplier effect (Marginson 2012). In other words, training professionals

improves productivity through transferable skills and knowledge and the promotion of human capital (Becker 2009; Schultz 1961). Teaching professionals in a way, then, *directly* may constitute a limited public good, being extended only to a proportion of individuals (graduates) in society, but indirectly may benefit the whole public good. During the last decades, though, policy framing has focused instead on teaching and learning as a private good for individual benefit (Williams 2014).

The matter as to whose interests teaching is serving generates further considerations. Which disciplines, kinds of knowledge and skills have been chosen to be strengthened and promoted and by whom? Are all of them being advanced or only those that are profitable to certain powerful groups? An example that serves to address these questions is the model of competences adopted in the 1990s among European universities following the Bologna process. The claim behind this educational reform was that of promoting the standardization of transferable competences so as both to promote mobility among countries and to fulfill labor market needs. This policy resulted in a curriculum being reduced to teaching hard (disciplinary) and soft competences (collaborative work, leadership, communicative skills and so on), but rather neglecting dimensions such as dialogue, critical thought and reflection (Barnett 2001). A professional and technocratic curricular model oriented to students becoming skillful in applying knowledge, solving problems, and adapting to complex situations became stronger. A matter for debate is to what extent this model of competences was created to serve the public good or rather the interests of the industry and business sectors.

Equality as part of the public role of universities

Another controversial perspective in analyzing the 'public,' in its relationship with universities, is that of access and quality (Clark 1960). Access to universities might be limited by the payment of fees (access to funds to meet university fees being not available to everybody); or through scores obtained in entrance examinations or interviews for prospective students. It might also happen that although universal access might be secured as a broad local or national policy (Clark 1960), quality education can only be guaranteed in elite universities. In this context, questions arise around why access and quality education might not be available as public goods in the multiple sense of being available to everybody without distinction, non-rivalry and non-exclusion.

In countries such as Chile and the UK, universities do not constitute a homogeneous group of universities in terms of status and prestige (Bourdieu 1993). In these countries, some of the oldest universities—usually research-intensive universities [including world class universities (Altbach 2004)]—accommodate students who share similar backgrounds from the higher social classes and who, in general, possess higher cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1993). Newer universities—generally teaching-oriented universities—recruit students who in practice have little chance to enroll in a prestigious university, that is, students from the lower socioeconomic classes who are often first-generation students in the family (Finnegan 1993). Consequently, some of these less prestigious universities promote participation by enabling students from lower classes to access the university system (Archer et al. 2003), such students and their families typically making much effort to meet any entrance fees.

As a consequence, on the one hand, privileged students reinforce their cultural and social capital through studying in elite research universities (Bamford 1961; Bernstein 2003). They enter the most prestigious and well-remunerated professions (Pretorius and Xue 2003; Langa Rosado and David 2006; Thomas and Perna 2005) owing not only to the

quality of the skills and knowledge they have acquired but, also, to the networks that they develop especially while at university (Hochberg et al. 2006). On the other hand, non-prestigious teaching-oriented universities educate students from diverse backgrounds, most of who are not as well prepared in comparison with privileged students when they start their university degrees (Wu 2009). This situation is understood by teachers in such institutions who sometimes do not have large expectations of their students, who in turn represent a set of teaching challenges (interviews, Fondecyt Inicio 11110102). At the same time, such teachers often work in more precarious conditions, they are young and less experienced teachers, they have to teach a large number of students, and usually they are hired by the institution specifically to teach; all of this affects the teaching–learning process (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013; Guzmán-Valenzuela and Di Napoli 2015). Such differences across the higher education system indicate that promoting equality is not seriously embraced as part of the public role of universities.

A further point about such stratification across the sector was reinforced by a former rector of a Spanish University (interview, Fondecyt Regular 1141271) who refers to the degradation of university education in continental Europe after the Bologna process. According to his view, the attempt to widen participation that was successful in the 1960s and 1970s, at least in Spain, has regressed: Nowadays, attention and funds are put into those postgraduate programmes or research centers—paradoxically hosted by universities financed by the state—that generate both income and prestige to the university and not into the undergraduate programmes. The elite university, then, coexists, is financed by, and is situated within the public university system. From this perspective, financial factors and status collide to produce more stratification within and across universities.

Promoting a more equal society as well as enhancing widening participation has been, especially between 1970s and 1990s a kind of mantra for university policies (Dearing 1997; Kennedy 1997). Nevertheless, public prestigious universities are actually reproducing and solidifying social stratification (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Davis 1998; Hartmann 2000) and are rarely reaching the poorest people of the society.

A socio-philosophical perspective on the public role of universities

From a *philosophical point of view*, Habermas (2010) advances a concept of the public sphere in which citizens voice their opinions, and analyze and critique societal events that affect them directly or indirectly. Such a public sphere constitutes a political and social space which is autonomous from the state. Universities would assist in promoting this public sphere provided that they offer heterogeneous spaces being inclusive of a wide range of values, political perspectives, ethnicities and social classes that are relatively autonomous from the state and that form open zones in which freedom of thought and expression are encouraged. An idea here is that universities not only transmit knowledge but also expand it by reflecting on and critiquing it (Smolla 2011).

An important matter here lies in the classroom and the role of teachers in promoting pedagogical spaces that harbor and respect diversity as part of the public role of universities. A useful concept is what Fanghanel and Cousin (2012) call 'wordly pedagogies' and Nixon (2012b) 'interpretative pedagogies.' These pedagogies prepare students to live in a globalized world by promoting their reflexivity and by strengthening their abilities to recognize and accept diversity as well as building a participative community attached to both a local context and the global world. The public sphere is here understood in the sense

of a critical reflection that acts independently from powerful groups as well as preparing citizens to live with others (Fanghanel and Cousin 2012) in favor of a better society.

Universities might even become spaces of resistance and so promote social changes that both reflect and promote values of democracy, justice and equity. Additionally, it could take the form of a university that critiques and resists neoliberal and marketized practices, which are controlled by powerful groups (Giroux 2002, 2007). However, rankings, productivity, income generation, knowledge commercialization and competition (Ball 2012; Rhoads and Torres 2006; Rhoads and Slaughter 2006; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Currie et al. 2003; Mollis 2007) have promoted individual interests that are stronger than the common good (Williams 2014). In this context, students are treated and behave as customers and academics compete in their academic careers, or are at risk of dismissal [the expression 'publish or perish' (Parchomovsky 2000) reflects this situation]. These examples negate the idea of the university as a space that promotes the public sphere so reflecting the way in which the public sphere has become 'colonized' (Habermas 1984) by neoliberal ideologies.

But there may still be room for feasible utopias (Barnett 2012; Sayer 2000). University students from diverse parts of the world, especially in Latin America, have demonstrated that they are not passive consumers of higher education but are agentic actors (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2016). Student movements in Chile, for example, have been pressing for a free and high-quality university education for everybody. These claims pose, however, some dilemmas: Students from low-income families are less likely to access and be successful in high-quality universities (because of their low-quality educational background). The latter not only reinforces social stratification across the sector (elite universities receiving rich students and low class-students attending poor quality institutions) but allows students from the richest families to study for free. A possible solution to this dilemma would guarantee universal access to everybody but, again, this solution poses tensions between accessibility and excellence (Calhoun 2006; Clark 1960).

Advancing the public role of universities: toward the transformative university

In this section, I propose the idea of a transformative university taking elements from all the diverse conceptualizations of public so far described but going further. The realization of the transformative university will be a 'realistic project' (Bourdieu 1998: 128) if it meets the following criteria: It explains what needs to be changed; it identifies actors to change it and provides both 'norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation' (Bohman 2010).

The idea of a transformative university is inspired by critical perspectives (Horkheimer 1993; Habermas 2010; Bohman 2010; Giroux 2007; McLean 2006; Fraser 1990). The transformative university is a reflective and critical university that attempts to transform the world so as to live under democratic values of freedom, inclusion, equality and justice. It is a university that contends with the status quo and the establishment and that promotes within and outside its walls a more equal society in which citizens can express a diversity of visions and values. What is public is here understood in the sense of a social commitment to society, for the sake of the 'public good' in global and collective terms.

The idea of a transformative university might be considered as a desirable utopia but impossible to be realized (Sayer 2000) nowadays. While the university acted in the past as

a powerful institution that contended for human rights (Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela 2012), denounced abuse in totalitarian regimes [for example in Latin America (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi 2016)] and even harbored individuals whose ideas conveyed radical visions, now it seems paralyzed. Universities have become more concerned with surviving in an academic world where resources are fewer and competition is fierce, where there are strong political and financial interests that undermine the autonomy of the university and its academics (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013), and where the purposes they serve prevent the university from realizing public and social values such as equity, social benefit, freedom, and democracy. These latter value orientations may appear in university mission statements as normative goals but, in practice, represent a rather empty discourse that lacks concrete realization (Merton 1938). These values form part of a utopian discourse that has difficulties in flourishing because of super-structural forces that barely allow space for resistance.

But there are some grounds for optimism since there are spaces where it is possible to extend democracy and resist dominant forces and so act as part of the public sphere to which Habermas pointed. Pedagogical spaces built by both teachers and students in the university and where students are not consumers but 'producers of knowledge' (Neary 2014) form but one example. In this pedagogy, students and teachers jointly create knowledge (Rowland 2000) through active and systematic investigation to solve real problems in a community (Neary and Winn 2009). Also, pedagogical spaces and extracurricular activities may promote reflection on events that affect society (wars, terrorism, health immigration processes, refugees, racism, ecological disasters, and so on). Other community-oriented activities include actions and campaigns to help vulnerable people, the defense of civic rights or addressing environmental catastrophes (Network 2005).

These kinds of actions are connected to what has been termed variously the 'public engagement' of the global university (Masschelein and Simons 2009; Watson et al. 2011); the 'civic duty' of the university (MacFarlane 2006); or 'the publics' (plural) in the sense of addressing the needs and rights of various civil society groups (Barnett 2015). Analogously, student movements show how students can organize themselves forcibly to press for what they consider a right (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Bernasconi 2016; Guzmán-Valenzuela 2016). Further, academics might be part of the public space in a more active way by promoting the transformation of public policies (Joignant 2011) as part of their roles as public intellectuals (Cummings 2005) or by creating spaces for critical voices within and outside the university (for example, by giving evidence to parliamentary committees or public inquiries).

Nevertheless, all these actions are largely palliative. 'Being public is a choice …that we take on' (Calhoun 2012: 1), so actions and measures need to be put into practice in order to recover the transformative dimension of the university, especially in those highly segmented societies where elites buttress a system in which cultural capital is concentrated in a small group of individuals. This is especially so in regions where the gap between rich and poor people is evident (in Africa, Latin America and some countries in Asia).

The realization of the transformative university

In what follows I will suggest some practical aims and actions as well as 'norms for criticisms' of the transformative university in the form that Bohman (2010) suggests. At the same time, drawing on Barnett's criteria of adequacy (2012) in promoting new

imaginaries about the university, I will outline ways of advancing the public role of universities through the transformative university.

The transformative university:

1. Gives an opportunity to everybody with abilities to obtain a university degree without distinction, exclusion and rivalry.
2. Gives access to the best possible education at universities (providing and assuring high-quality education for everybody and not only for an elite group).
3. Ensures that all students learn and develop disciplinary knowledge and skills that allow them, on graduation, to secure worthwhile positions in the labor market (instead of social networks and social class status playing such a prominent part of career paths).
4. Promotes the creation of scientific knowledge for the public good (so as to benefit the wider society) and not as a commodity.
5. Promotes a close pedagogical relationship between academics and students and in which students become co-producers of civically oriented knowledge (Neary and Winn 2009).
6. Creates discourses and spaces of reasoning (Barnett 2012) and criticality. The role of the university here is questioning, challenging and contesting dominant discourses based, mainly, on neoliberal ideologies. The latter means that the university creates spaces in which both academics and students take value-oriented positions (Giroux 2002) and act as 'engaged intellectuals' by creating counter narratives.
7. Is not a closed institution, but it is open to wider publics. The transformative university offers not only intellectual but also social and political projects and is engaged and works jointly with both the local and the broader community in order to advance them (Watson et al. 2011).
8. Advances knowledge around its public mission by conducting systematic empirical research that observes, analyses and even measures (Marginson 2014) its public role and proposes new and possible ways of advancing its role according to local, national and global perspectives.

Universities by themselves cannot transform the whole society, and more structural changes in global and national policies are needed. The realization of the transformative university needs a collective impulse promoted by both political and university leaders that challenge a culture based on competition, profit and that deepen inequalities, exclusion and stratification. In any case, a first step is that of developing critical and rational perspectives that illuminate new, desirable and feasible ways of transforming the current society (Sayer 2000) and universities can play a key role here. A crucial second step is that of seeking political, financial and institutional means as well as forming strategic alliances between the university and the state to put into practice these goals.

Conclusions

It is possible to distinguish between the public role of the university as idea and as institutional practices (Barnett 2016). As idea, diverse definitions of 'the public' have been identified emerging from specific disciplines favouring different dimensions (legal, financial, economic, philosophical and sociological); some of them are normative while others are more descriptive. Universities (both private and state) might receive public financing and may be oriented to producing public goods (knowledge and professional preparation for example)

that may also benefit the public good (both among individuals and across the whole society). Universities might encourage access to high-quality higher education for citizens without distinction, rivalry and exclusion, so promoting a more equal society. Universities might also become zones of open debate so as to enhance the public sphere. It emerges, therefore, that 'the public' is a contested concept, especially in relation to higher education. There are value differences interests and ideologies that underpin the ways in which 'the public' is construed.

In practice, the university falls short of what is ideally defined as 'public.' Universities, often in receipt of large public funds, sometimes act against the public good; they are not even neutral on occasions but even pernicious. They strengthen neoliberal practices and societal stratification and/or act in their own interests. Under these circumstances, the 'public university' hardly justifies the appellation of 'public.'

The public role of the university is therefore *doubly deficient*, as idea and in its materialization in institutional practices. Accordingly, it has a double set of *absences* (Bhaskar 2002). There are absences in the public role of the university as idea, and here it has been suggested—as exemplars—that the idea of the public role of the university might be imaginatively stretched out in the direction of the transformative university. This *transformative university* is practically committed to both individuals and the well-being of the wider society. This commitment involves two kinds of elements: On the one hand, goods that constitute the university that are both for the benefit of individuals (in the form of different public goods) and for the broader society (for its public good); and, on the other hand, the university has a social commitment to transforming society through an expansion of the public sphere (at once open and critical) and through the promotion of a more equal society.

As institution, it is not easy to move in the direction of such a public role due to the power of structural global and national forces, not least those neoliberal forces that seek to impose the interest of powerful groups. The contemporary university represents, is part of, and promotes a set of neoliberal agendas. It is time for the university to recover its reflective stance and so reclaim but reinvent its public roles and put them into practice in a systematic way to transform society.

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