

The public dimension of Chilean universities: contesting discourses

Abstract

This paper addresses ways in which discourses around the public and the private evolve in contexts of neoliberal higher education. To do so, we analyse the case of Chile, a paradigmatic case of marketisation in higher education (OECD, 2014).

Prompted by the Chilean students' movement (2011-2013), the demand for free public education for everyone has been a subject of discussion with a large reform of the higher education system being a matter before the parliament. The public dimension of universities has been a matter of controversy since then and has gained traction. By means of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993, 2003), we analyse articles in two leading newspapers that are ideologically opposed to each other (conservative versus liberal) over a year (2013-2014). We identify a variety of discourses around the meaning of the public/private divide in relation to universities and how they are contested by their respective ideological opponents.

Framework

In Chile, in 1981, the Pinochet regime implemented a number of policies inspired by neoliberal principles that assumed that the market can regulate itself so limiting state regulation and strengthening the private sector (Jessop, 2002). As a result, there was a major reduction of the public sector (Taylor, 2002). Neoliberal policies have been reinforced by democratic governments from 1990 onwards.

As a consequence, the higher education sector experienced a rapid growth of private universities with hardly any regulation and a significant cut of funds to state universities which have had to find other sources to survive. 81% of students are enrolled in private higher education (SIES, 2014). Furthermore, a system of loans for student university fees was established, passing on the financial burden to students who finance 73% of higher education, compared to an average of 16% for other members of the OECD (OECD, 2014).

Prompted by a number of longstanding problems in Chilean education such as high levels of student debt, dubious quality of education and corruption scandals involving some private

universities and the national quality assurance agency, in 2011 a student movement prompted a public debate on education, demanding free and high quality higher education (Bellei, Cabalín and Orellana, 2014). The movement has radicalised the public discourse on neoliberalism and education, culminating in a more general critique of the privatisation of public goods (Mayol, 2012). As a result, the current government is implementing a reform programme providing tuition-free higher education, albeit under some conditions that are not yet clear.

In this context, there have been heated debates in the media on the meaning of the concept of the public role of universities, resulting in blurred conceptualisations of the ‘public’. In this presentation we explore the following research questions:

- What are the discourses around the public role of universities?
- Which ideologies underpin these discourses?
- In which ways do these discourses differ across diverse sectors of Chilean society?

Methodology

By means of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1993, 2003) we seek to analyse the relationships between neoliberal higher education and the transformation of discourses around the public role of universities in Chile. Further, we are examining how these discourses are ideologically shaped by two opposite political postures.

The research is currently in progress (Fondecyt 1141271) and we present parts of the data we are examining. We are analysing newspaper articles, opinion pieces and editorial notes in relation to universities that were published over the course of a year (2013-2014) in two leading newspapers that are ideologically opposed to each other - the conservative ‘El Mercurio’ and the liberal online newspaper ‘El Mostrador’. We found 46 articles in ‘El Mercurio’ and 145 articles in ‘El Mostrador’. It is important to note that the year 2013 was the last year of a four-year period of a centre-right government. It was partly against the context of radical student movement that the following year, the main opposition coalition party led by Michelle Bachelet won the election.

We categorised the data taking into account the literature around the public role of universities (Barnett, 2015; Brunner, 2014; Calhoun, 2006; Marginson, 2006, 2007; 2011, 2014, 2015, paper in this symposium; Holmwood, 2011; Nixon, 2012a; Masschelein, & Simons, 2009, 2010; Williams, 2014, paper in this symposium) and the main themes emerging from the data. We are analyzing discourses around the public role of universities and, in particular, examining the contested political positions that shape them.

Results

We identified a variety of discourses around the public/private divide in relation to universities and how they are played out between their respective ideological opponents in the media.

El Mercurio (conservative role)

The most salient theme is the newspaper's critique of the student movement and its demands for free quality higher education. According to El Mercurio, Chile would regress in its provision of higher education if it acceded to the claims of the movement, not following the supposedly successful global tendency towards hybrid public/private provision. Another idea is that of private universities offering public goods for the benefit of the broader society. In this way, it is argued that private universities should *also* be financed by the state. Other positions are marginalised in this discourse (5 of 46 articles).

El Mostrador (denouncing role)

Most of the articles denounce scandals around the national accreditation agency, the bankruptcy and closing of a private university, universities (mainly private universities) being involved in for-profit illegal or quasi-legal actions and the leakage of money to foreign holdings. Additionally, in a supportive vein, it covered the student movement intervening in the relationship between the state and the universities. In these articles we distinguish three different approaches associated with the 'public': free public education as a social right that is, higher education as a non-rivalrous and non-exclusive public good; state universities as public universities; and private universities having public aims or missions.

Discussion

There are contested views within the mass media over the idea of the public in relation to universities. El Mercurio stresses the role of the private provision of higher education in offering diversity and choice. At the same time, El Mercurio disconnects state and public, so as to allow for a *connection between private and public*. In turn, an apparent justification emerges for private universities to receive *public* funds. El Mostrador, on the other hand, denounces the weak role of the state in regulating both the quality of universities and profit-like behaviors of some private universities. It also considers that the student movement can legitimately act as a force in regulating the relationship between the state and the market. Students in Chile are playing a part in re-establishing the state as a guarantor for public education in the sense of a free public service for the benefit of the broader society. Despite El Mostrador's liberal orientation, the discourse of private universities contributing to the public good can also be encountered in some of its articles, pointing to blurred conceptualizations around the public and the private that cross supposedly separate ideological positions.

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