Considering ‘New Formulas’ for a ‘Renewed University’: The Mexican Experience

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Abstract. In this paper, I analyse the impact of recent university transformations with specific consideration to the Mexican experience, and examine the ‘new formulas’ of the renewed university. I focus on some of the new regulation technologies in operation as part of modernization processes, highlighting their long-term effects on the recreation of the social roles and profiles of the institutions, and on the reinvention of the identities of their subjects. At the end, I further reflect on some visible consequences of these processes. Key words. governmental regime; institutional change; new identities; regulated autonomy

Throughout the world, the transformation processes faced by universities are being broadly debated in the context of the ‘new’ society of globally articulated knowledge. In most cases, positions are invoked concerning globalization, the knowledge society and the post-modern organization as to redeem the original versions of the post-industrial dream, based on narrow western views and centred on European and Anglo-American thought. In this context, the apparent triumph of information technologies, conquering space limitations and meticulously taking advantage of the smallest unit of time, has encouraged an exaggerated optimism towards what the new millennium might bring. The unquestionable supremacy of knowledge is touted as the key element in the global society. It will do away – this time definitively – with categories of the past. There will no longer be capitalism or socialism, only the global world of the market, democracy and information.
The renewed university is nowadays at the centre of this revamped discursive assault. As representation of the highest aspirations of modernity, it has been declared one of the most authentically modern institutions. In the social imagination, the university represents order through education, and reason through scientific knowledge. Because of its inclination towards objectivity, rigour and empirical proof, the university has been enthroned into the pantheon of social progress. However, at this time, it has to confront its post-modernization. The ongoing transformations in the world demand that the university once and for all abandon its serene ivory tower. To overcome its traditional isolation, the university should assume more flexible structures, capable of responding to the new scientific-technological demands. It should also contribute to the formation of the necessary ‘human capital’ for an increasingly dynamic, integrated and highly competitive economy. Therefore, the new millennium is the millennium of the renewed university.

In this logic, recent changes in the university are understood as responses to the imperatives of global markets. Opening up to uncharted forms of organization, university–industry–government agreements and collaborations are common. They guarantee the new production of knowledge through institutional forms with increasingly blurred boundaries (Gibbons et al., 1994; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1997; Soley, 1995). In addition, the relation between the nation-state and the university has been modified. New forms of control from a distance are coming into play, under the principles of market competition and regulated autonomy. Universities have also begun to diversify the educational and scientific programmes that they offer to the market, differentiating their portfolio of ‘products’ and promoting them on large advertising marques, next to other commercial items boasting the highest international standards of quality.

Given this situation, academicians and students are facing new modes of existence based on individualism and competition. Concurrently, new forms of administration and institutional leadership have been gaining ground, on the basis of which the university begins to be reconstituted as a bureaucratic corporation dedicated to the business of knowledge production (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). This ‘entrepreneurial university’, which adopts and adapts the organizational forms and discursive games of the giant corporation, faces a similar process in the opposite direction. That is, private corporations now absorb some tasks previously reserved almost exclusively for educational institutions as spaces of learning and self-formation, thus redefining the limits and spaces of influence that traditionally characterized the university.

Within the limits established by these discourses there are few spaces left in the university for observing and analysing the consequences of its ongoing transformation. Nonetheless, several scholars in various countries have been reflecting on this type of issues (e.g. Ibarra-Colado, 1998, 2000; Jary and Parker, 1998; Marginson, 1997; Readings, 1996; Slaughter
and Leslie, 1997). One of their focal points, the analysis of the social consequences of the reorganization of the university and knowledge, has also addressed the implications of such reorganization in the reinvention of modes of existence at the local level.

Despite the appearance of global tendencies in these transformations, it is of great importance to recognize differences among diverse national realities. In particular, we cannot lose sight of the fact that a new international division of university labour has begun to be consolidated. The production of leading knowledge has generally remained in the hands of main European and North American countries; also, it is in these countries that the higher-level cadre of most other countries of the world are educated. In contrast, the countries in the outer limits of ‘underdevelopment’ have been increasingly considered consumers rather than producers of leading knowledge, and their universities adequate only for the training of their own low- and middle-level technical and professional employees. The consideration of these issues facilitates a greater understanding of local transformations, appreciating differences between countries and avoiding uninformed interpretations of the supposed universal pattern that all should follow (Radhakrishnan, 1994).

For instance, in Mexico, where only 15 out of every 100 college-age youth attend the university (Gil, 1996: 310), research is increasingly concentrated in small ‘groups of excellence’ linked internationally. The formation of leadership cadre takes place in private universities and often in the United States and European institutions. Current reforms under way seek to further divide up the university, separating research and postgraduate work from the mass-scale formation of technicians and professionals (Ibarra-Colado, 1998: 139–45). To improve quality, the government assumes that it is necessary to decrease the student population and to reorient it to technological options and short-term programmes. This dual structure promotes the educational excellence of the elite while increasingly abandoning the education of the masses. At stake here is the control of the production of knowledge and its social distribution, a factor that makes universities into ever more conflictive settings.

Following from the above, in this paper, I analyse the impact of recent university transformations with specific consideration to the Mexican experience, and examine the ‘new formulas’ of the renewed university. I focus on some of the new regulation technologies in operation as part of modernization processes, highlighting their long-term effects on the recreation of the social roles and profiles of the institutions, and on the reinvention of the identities of their subjects. Without underrating the diversity of institutions and participants in these processes, I attempt to elucidate the common denominators that are present in the radical modification of institutional roles and, consequently, in the recreation of forms of existence or life styles of those who operate within the university. Specifically, I analyse the impact that modernization policies has had on the institutional conditions in which academic work is carried.
out, demonstrating ways in which these processes facilitated the con-
struction of new academic identities of ‘self-management and excel-
ence’. At the end, I further reflect on some visible consequences of these
processes.¹

The Renewed University: Institutional Changes and New Identities

Recognizing the essential characteristics of the new governmental regime
of the university and its specific mode of rationality (e.g. Foucault,
1978/1991), allows for distinguishing two main formulas in the regula-
tion and conduct of this renewed social institution. On the one hand, the
operation of new policies for institutional change is based on the articula-
tion of rules, technologies and procedures for evaluation of results and on
extraordinary funding programmes. On the other hand, the operation of
new policies for reconstructing behaviours and ways of being of the
university subjects is based on the articulation of individualized per-
formance appraisals and compensatory salary programmes, legitimized
through the quantification of academic performance.

I should clarify that this analysis of the production of effects associated
with structural changes simply means being able to appreciate the
changes in modes of existence or life styles of institutions and their
participants. It does not imply any a priori value judgements or a
determinist stance, since the results experienced are absolutely con-
tingent on the position occupied at each moment, and the sense on which
each subject reflexively constructs and implements such positions. There-
fore, it is not my intention to speak of the positive or negative con-
sequences of modernization or its inevitability. Instead, I seek to examine
the existence of such consequences, recognizing some of their possible
variations, and the value judgements expressed on the basis of positions
adopted at different moments by the social agents that participate in the
process.

Evaluation + Funding = Institutional Change

Since 1989, the modernization programme in Mexico has effected a
radical transformation in the nature and form of relations between the
State and the university. It has also redefined the main government
policies that regulate the Higher Education System and each one of its
institutions. To understand the consequences of these changes requires
identifying at the onset the array of forces that facilitated the incorpora-
tion of a new mode of rationality, on the basis of which such institutional
relations were transformed.

There were three major agents in this first level of institutional relations.
First, government agencies operated the strategies and programmes for
the educational sector and defined subsidy policies and the funding of
the university. In addition, new government agencies were created and
older ones were adapted to implement evaluation procedures and the
administration of extraordinary funds for special programmes.
Behind the State there was a second series of agents that denote the international dimension of the modernization programmes. There was convergence between the discourses and programmes of institutions such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the programmes that the Mexican government articulated with the support of these institutions’ analysts and experts. Of key importance is the weight of the policies promoted by such institutions. These policies foster a mode of market rationality on the basis of which they expect to regulate all university systems in the era of globalization.

Finally, the country’s universities themselves, headed by their high-level officials and supported by an administrative and political cadre, represent the third major participating agents. In this scenario of relations among institutional agents, the modernization of the university should be understood on the basis of the operation of new institutional policies, and its specific rules, technologies and procedures, intended to produce change based on the concept of regulated autonomy. These policies, more complex than those in the past, link up evaluation, funding, and institutional change, with the purpose of steering universities in accordance with governmental strategies and programmes, providing them with a new identity which signals their renewed social functionality.

Modernization, thus, presupposes a radical break with the past. The State seems to no longer need, as in the past, a university that legitimizes its social project; one that allowed the government to effect political exchanges with the sectors that demanded higher education. Today, political backing for the government takes other forms. This begins to displace the university as a basic cultural reference point of society in favour of its being reconstituted as a ‘modern bureaucratic corporation,’ dedicated to the production of professionals and of the knowledge required by the new modes of operation of the economy and society (Readings, 1996).

The redefinition of these new power relations is also entailed by a new articulation of government agencies with the very strategic mass communication sector, mainly with television and radio. In this context, it is important to observe the heightened role being played by mass media as a cultural artefact on the basis of which consciousness is moulded, reorienting the collective social imagination in entirely new terms. The university now appears in these media outlets under its new modern organizational/entrepreneurial identity: the university will be from now on an institution searching for its own specific ‘academic’ purposes, strictly at the margins of all political contamination. In accordance with this logic, they should be guided by strict criteria of technical efficiency, fulfilling their new functions as essential engine of the modernity that the country has been so far lacking.
Therefore, it should not be surprising that throughout the 1990s the government shifted its emphasis from planning and regulating universities to a process of verification of results. This change, centred on an auditing process, implies the negotiation of a more complex strategy, in which a discourse of ‘excellence’ takes material form by means of different rules, technologies and procedures. As I have pointed out on other occasions (Ibarra-Colado, 1996), the discourse of excellence for Mexican universities was concretized through the operation of evaluation technologies that, paradoxically, allowed the government far greater regulation and intervention in the system.

To clarify, it is commonly assumed that the neoliberal mode of rationality implies a reduction in state intervention through transferring relations among the participants from the realm of society to the market. However, as the case of the Mexican university shows, what occurs is a transformation in the forms assumed by such intervention, which becomes more direct and effective and less visible for society (e.g. Weiss, 1998). In fact, the institutions advance along this course by means of the instrumentation of self-evaluation systems, developed from the bottom up, through which their accountability now appears as another sign of their ‘autonomy’.

Yet, this shift is aimed at controlling from a distance the activities of the institutions, by means of periodically monitoring their results. In appearance, the universities are now responsible for their own functioning, but will have to demonstrate to the State and society that they fulfil the functions for which they were created. These functions are now redefined as terminal efficiency, the level of employment achieved by the graduates, the links they maintain with industry and society, and the flexibility of adapting these functions and structures to the requirements of new circumstances. At the same time, these self-evaluation processes and criteria allow for the differentiation and categorization of each institution with respect to others, determining the access that they might attain towards extraordinary resources or towards preferential treatment on the part of the government.

These new government policies also allow for a more coherent regulation of the National University System in its unity and diversity. The regular evaluation of results for each institution leads to an overview of the system as a whole, detecting institutional specificities that were simply ignored in the past. Recognizing the specific features of each institution within the National System requires greater co-ordination among units. This brings about a more integrated and flexible system, which takes advantage of complementary elements and differences, facilitating additional economies.

In summary, analysis of this first level of relations among institutions shows the radical character of changes in the governmental regime of the university. The university has encountered in the evaluation and funding programmes the opportunity to achieve the institutionalization of its new
identity as a modern bureaucratic corporation at the service of the economy and society. Under the auspices of a regulated autonomy, whose counterpart is control from a distance by government agencies, the university today faces a new mode of existence marked by the accountability of its performance.

Merit Pay + Academic Training = New Identities

The second array of forces and relations that I wish to briefly examine concerns other organizational spaces; those pertaining to the subjects that make the very existence of the university possible. In this case, the same mode of rationality is at work, but it does so by employing a different set of rules, technologies and procedures through which the modes of existence or lifestyles of the ‘subjects’ of the university are reinvented. Today, these university subjects are unlike those that occupied their spaces in the past; the mindset and the actions of individuals and groups have been radically transformed, foreshadowing a scenario in which ‘excellence’, independently of its meaning, is erected as a norm.

Let me describe the logic of these transformations considering the particular case of academic staff, which presents important parallelisms with respect to other social agents in the university. Academics are now subject to a profound process of professionalization that implies the radical reinvention of the ethos that gave them a sense of worth in the past. Academic vocation has been supplanted by university work, with a shift from solidarity to competition, and from commitment to the institution and to other academic colleagues to the assumption and practice of possessive individualism without major mediating factors. In this case, the changed relation between the university and its subjects gives way to an array of forces that facilitate the configuration of a new set of rules, technologies and procedures for academic professionalization.

The composition of this second space of relations is more complex than what I have observed in the case of institutional regulation policies. In this case, there is a traversal linkage between the university, the State and other more general governmental programmes. Salary policies negotiated among them become the reference point for relations that are enacted in the most personal spaces of the university.

The first element in this configuration of forces is the impact that institutional regulation policies previously described have produced in the operation of each university, reorienting the conduct of its subjects. The university itself, supported by its governing and administrative bodies, becomes a mechanism for implementing government strategies and programmes. Of course, the very relations between government agencies and each of the particular universities in the system determine the manoeuvring room in each case, and explain why certain programmes are implemented and certain resources are obtained in some
cases but not in others. Tensions are thus displayed between the particular histories of each university and the strategies and government programmes applied in a general fashion.

In this new space of relations, the institutions involved become primary agents, acquiring identifiable characteristics in the form of their officials and management-level functionaries. They adapt the normative framework, and design new rules, technologies and procedures to carry out evaluations. Further, evaluation bodies and committees, in all of their different institutional modalities, apply the auditing procedures and determine the differentiation that grants directionality and sense to such evaluation processes. In effecting these operations, the institutional structures and their members constitute themselves as real forces.

It is in these reconfigured organizational spaces that we should examine the formation of new policies that articulate, for each and all academic staff, evaluation procedures and academic training with their salaries, giving way to the process of reconstitution of their identities. At this level, the starting point of government strategies was based on a thorough redefinition of salary policies. With modernization, retribution has also implied new differentiation technologies that allow, in this case, for control from a distance of the academic staff and for a more precise institutional assessment of their work. Professors and researchers have been acquiring a practical autonomy – or a ‘supervised freedom’ as Hunter (1994: 74) suggests – that allows them to decide how to carry out their work, with the ‘only’ limitation of being periodically evaluated on the basis of their work products and productivity. Similar to the reconstituted space of relations between the institutions and the State, in this case an emphasis on greater flexibility has also begun to operate. For instance, policies limiting legal salary increases, implemented during the first part of the 1980s, now find their justification in a policy of extraordinary compensation through competition between institutions. This is the time of merit pay and pay for performance in Mexico.

However, the other major agents participating in these relationships, the subjects of the evaluation, cannot be overlooked. Academics become incorporated in different ways and under different modalities into these new modes of existence. Some do so on a strictly individual level, operating under the new system with the intention of maximizing their marginal utility, for which they mobilize all the means at their disposal. There are also research groups that, on the basis of a collegiate structure, recognize the trajectory and the merits of their members. Through these operations, the groups acquire greater organic cohesion, enhancing their possibilities for intervention and negotiation. In addition, some of the more outstanding members participate in the evaluation bodies and committees as authentic gatekeepers, thereby protecting the interests of the groups that they represent. Finally, some other academics have organized themselves in a third modality, interorganizational in character, equivalent to disciplinary academies or professional organizations.
These three modalities operate simultaneously and, furthermore, in contradictory fashion, clearly demonstrating that evaluation processes imply intense practices of negotiation and exchange among agents, oftentimes with results being determined independently of the topic under evaluation. The behaviours that become verified by the evaluation are those that allow for lost trust among the agents to be rehabilitated or restored. In this context, unions may acquire renewed agency. While legislative reforms between 1978 and 1980 limited their negotiation capacity, and excluded them from hiring and promotion processes, unions today are facing a new and still ignored opportunity. These opportunities appear out of the innumerable conflicts that the new evaluation practices are generating, and for which the institutions are not adequately prepared.

These academic professionalization policies involve another strategic element that plays a major role in the reinvention of academic identity. I am referring here to the aggressive policy of academic training enacted by the government since the beginning of the 1990s. Of particular importance in this case are the scholarships granted by the National Council of Science and Technology and the creation of the Professorial Improvement Program (PROMEP) for full-time academic staff at all the institutions of higher education.

There is a dual significance to these policies. First, they have been represented as a programme, projected in the medium term (2006), with the purpose of reconstituting the academic staff of Mexican universities and facilitating its appropriate generational renewal. Second, these policies consider for the first time different educational modalities, disciplinary specificities, and type of contract (full, half or partial time), thus reconstituting academic identities based on classificatory schemes that pose as the professionalization of teaching and research activities. Therefore, the PROMEP recognizes differentiated academic trajectories that require different academic training policies.

Further, the composition of the academic staff must now respond to the specificities of the institutional mission and to the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical formation that is required in each academic programme. Thus, the academic training policy seeks to establish the bases for consolidating a very different academic subject. This subject would participate in the production and transmission of knowledge, leading to the consolidation of a national academic market that could gradually expand as a result of the free-trade agreements promoted by the government at an international level.

The two mechanisms that I have examined regarding evaluation and professionalization by no means exhaust the complexity implied in these modernization processes and the concomitant creation of new subjectivities. Other technologies and procedures are also at play here, including the Allotment of Resources to Science, the List of Mexican Scientific Journals, the List of Excellent Rated Postgraduate Courses, the
National indicative exam prior to the BA and the General Professional Quality Exam, to mention just the most important. The first two, together with the National System of Researchers, function as mechanisms for guiding the work of researchers, indicating the requirements that they must meet to obtain financing for their projects and recognition for their results.

The List of Excellent Rated Postgraduate Courses seeks to orient students and professors in training toward programmes that respond to a certain profile very much linked to priorities established in government strategies and programmes, in accordance with reports produced by government analysts. The objectives here are to balance demands, attend to priority areas and discourage enrolment in fields of knowledge that are already saturated. Financial support functions, once again, as a mechanism to convince participants of a given course of action and to annul any possible resistance.

Finally, the latter two technologies, the National indicative exam prior to the BA, and the General Professional Quality Exam are giving shape to a new mechanism for regulating the student body, also on the basis of encouraging competition based on prioritizing individual performance. Despite the resistance that has emerged in response to these new mechanisms, they have begun to show their viability as a result of the social insertion of neoliberal practices, whose logic now dominates many other social spaces.

Some Visible Consequences

These presumptions, on which the university should now function under its new governmental regime, are logically coherent but not very plausible if we observe the contingent realities of their operation. The new model promises to construct a society of responsible and independent subjects, and of institutions accountable to them. However, not recognized is the opportunism that characterizes the behaviour of social agents, nor the fragility of a model that is governed more by economic motives that imply destroying the competitor than by ethical behaviours based on solidarity. In addition, this idea of responsible action leads to a profoundly voluntaristic belief that has little to do with the viable conditions demanded for the appropriate operation of the model.

As indicated, one of the most significant effects of the modernization logic under which the university now operates is the recreation of the functions of the institutions and the production of new identities for their subjects. In the case of the university as an institution, a debate is under way concerning whether such modifications imply the displacement of the university as a basic cultural reference point of society, in favour of the lesser status held by many other organizations that provide some service to society. The university thus ceases to be an ‘institution’ of society to become an ‘organization’ of the market. Its importance in the
collective social imagination is displaced to being a provider of educational services to society, as has been the case with other ‘products’, such as hospitals, real-estate companies, insurance companies, factories, shopping malls and banking institutions, to point out some of the most obvious examples.

In the case of the university subjects, be they academics, students, officials, or employees, the discussion turns to the consequences of encouraging a utilitarian behaviour in which it is assumed that the end justifies the means. This process is viewed as producing a displacement of the substantive purposes associated with the university’s endeavours, in favour of objectives strictly linked to individual economic realization. In question here is up to what point the desire to become an educator or researcher essentially to make money displaces the substantive value of any life project in favour of the quest for a ‘better society’. The argument is linked to what has occurred in other professions, where what is done is done because one is paid to do it.

To date, the results from the new mechanisms that regulate the institutions and guide the behaviour of their participants have been far from achieving an acceptable level of performance. First, there has been much variation in the outcomes from the new evaluation mechanisms. At the level of the university system, several institutions have introduced important modifications to their academic structure and functioning, in response to a more precise definition of their institutional project. Many have produced elaborated programmes to facilitate the diversification of their financial sources as well as adapting their policies concerning tuition and grants.

However, in other cases, the institutions have developed the capacity to respond by projecting a certain institutional image to the outside world, without necessarily or substantially modifying their internal functioning. At issue here are the evaluation strategies. They imply the implementation of new norms to foster certain behaviours on the basis of which the institutions should demonstrate, even if only symbolically, that they fulfil the function that society has bestowed upon them. It is possible to appreciate at this point the importance of discursive games and the mobilization of symbols which, when appropriately placed in evaluation documents and reports, can project the desired ideal of the institution without it being necessarily related to how things actually go on.

Furthermore, more than a few institutions saw in the auditing mechanisms the means for compliance with bureaucratic requirements for obtaining additional resources. The auditing process signalled for these institutions the opportunity to put their best face forward rather than undertaking a self-study for adequate knowledge of the overall institutional situation that would then translate into concrete change measures. The evaluation mechanisms were used, in many occasions, to justify
decisions derived from negotiations or political agreements adopted beforehand. Evaluation thus led to an institutional culture of simulation instead of improved quality through institutional change.

The story is not very different when one considers how the evaluation mechanisms have been functioning in the case of academic staff. An important sector has continued to frame their activities as a life project based on the value of knowledge for the development of society. However, a larger group of academics are now guided by opportunist criteria. Operating under the premise that the end justifies the means, several members of this group now mutually accuse each other of simulation, corruption and plagiarism. This gives rise to conflicts whose workplace consequences could lead to the reappearance of the bygone days of unions as social actors. Lately, the number of cases of contracts being rescinded and educational decisions being adopted that imply workplace consequences (suspension of bonuses and scholarships, seniority in the workplace, cancellation of educational positions, etc.) has multiplied. At the same time, the institutions do not have organizational structures to regulate the conflicts that are now growing in response to the existing impunity. In their place, some other solutions have started to emerge such as the National System of Researchers recently established to regulate cases of non-compliance or violation of the regulations or of professional ethics.

The recent training programmes have also open another set of unexpected consequences in the form of political pressure exercised by government agencies to fulfil the established goals, even if they prove to be of little viability under strict criteria of academic excellence. The excessive orientation towards meeting numerical goals without placing sufficient emphasis in the forms of operation that guarantee the sought after substantive changes promote a weakening of postgraduate programmes under ‘fast track’ modalities in which what is important is to finish first without caring about how. These programmes might produce a tremendous explosion of paper teachers and doctors, whose diplomas would join the ranks of the official statistics without qualitatively transforming them into subjects able to produce and communicate the desired type of knowledge. This situation is not surprising. A feature of professionalization is that, when a mass of individuals share a certain activity, any move towards differentiation tends to operate on the basis of individual trajectories and the position that each acquires within their community of reference. The diplomas are not a guarantee that they in fact posses the skills supposedly acquired.

A strong articulation with remuneration or special income schemes is also at play here. The scholarships offered to promote the acquisition of higher degrees improve the financial conditions of the participants. At the same time, there are incentive programmes for those who satisfactorily conclude their studies and for those who want to return to the
country after a long stay abroad, such as the governmental programme for
the retention and repatriation of Mexican researchers. Thus, ‘study’
becomes a new modality of remunerated work.

What is the balance sheet here? First, it is necessary to recognize that
positive effects have resulted from opening up the possibility of real
change in many institutions and encouraging academic work, which in
this mode of rationality eliminate obstacles to performance and put an
end to inertia. However, these cases seem to be more the exception than
the rule. As we have already indicated, too much was bet on a voluntarist
model without paying attention to the viable conditions that its function-
ing demanded. In my view, modernization fails for not recognizing the
reality that it wanted to transform; that is, for desiring to implement a
model that may be commendable in the abstract, but that flies apart in the
face of a reality in which it simply cannot operate. To say it in a few
words, Mexico may have the model, but not the material conditions that
guarantee its operation.

The series of unintended consequences indicates that a policy of this
type can only work to spark off a change process in the short term, since
there is no doubt that it helps to eliminate obstacles and inertia that
hinder change. However, to prolong it beyond its immediate positive
effects means to dismantle the academic groups that have promoted the
development of the university during the past 20 years. The long-term
results would be unequivocal: the ongoing social and cultural decapital-
ization of the Mexican universities, which would begin to function as
efficient bureaucratic knowledge-production corporations.

Nonetheless, the ideology of ‘the university of excellence’ is already
present among us, operating various mechanisms that begin to mould the
identities of institutions and subjects in different ways. The collective
social imagination is already playing an important role, governing the
unconscious behaviour of large contingents of individuals that are
already infected by the virus of excellence. The old forms of resistance
seem to no longer respond to new forms of university government, which
act with the advantages provided by the invisibility of a slippery and
intangible market.

The search for an effective vaccine against this new terrible illness of
modernization therefore seems to be a complex but inevitable task. Not to
face it would imply, sooner or later, the elimination of population groups
that still resist the illness, destroying the few defences that they still have
left. After that we would have no other alternative than to count the sick
and bury the dead resulting from the epidemic, and to remember the
university as an institution of the past in which knowledge was culti-
vated. ‘Knowledge’ today is sold everywhere on the market.

This modern dilemma requires us to rethink the university in entirely
new and different terms, seeking formulas that restore the substantive
value of educating and acquiring knowledge. The modern university that
we are producing amid confrontations, conflicts, and negotiations will undoubtedly lead to unknown situations that will open up new opportunities and raise dilemmas not currently visualized. This complex process of visualization needs to avoid a naive return to the past. The agents will have to design their strategies, looking at the future of a university that will never again exist. At the same time, the greatest challenge that we all face is that of recreating the institution without degenerating into an unbridled competition for the few resources, spaces, and places available. Therefore, it is necessary to work for a radically different ethic that allows us to move beyond the simple possession of goods. Only then will the autonomy of the institution and its subjects move beyond the regulations and practices that today govern and limit the running of the university.

I cannot finish these reflections without posing one essential question implicated in this problem: is the market the only way to promote independent behaviour and responsible performance? I do not think so. The great challenge that we face today is to reconstruct the university under a mode of rationality that conserves the advantages associated with individual initiative and responsible performance, and at the same time favours solidarity and social justice. This must take place through the redefinition of an ethical project that avoids the atomization resulting from opportunist utilitarianism. Only in this way will we avoid the two extremes that have characterized our social organization: the bureaucratic collectivism that encourages dependency and anonymity, and the mercantilist individualism that propitiates a savage war of ‘every man for himself’. I know that we will not return to the nostalgic past in which we were educated, but I am also convinced that the future is not that terrible scenario of postmodern disillusion. I wager on the reflexive capacity that allows us, together, to redesign an uncharted future that we are just beginning to imagine.

**Notes**

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1 For the interested reader, I have developed an integral approach to the modernization processes in the Mexican university system in Ibarra-Colado (1998, 2000).
References


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