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Within or Beyond the University?
Experiences of alternative higher education

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ABSTRACT – Within or Beyond the University? Experiences of alternative higher education. Despite an important process of expansion and growth, higher education institutions around the world still reproduce exclusion, discrimination and inequality with regard to underrepresented and underprivileged communities and peoples, their knowledges and their languages. In this text, we briefly frame contemporary alternatives to mainstream higher education that – some within existing universities, some beyond conventional higher education structures - are working against the grain to address these failings. By introducing the case studies of alternative, intercultural, indigenous, decolonial, co-operative and/or social movement universities that make up this special issue, we identify institutional and organisational tendencies, topic issues and emerging theoretical contributions, thus aiming to develop a deeper understanding of the orientation and role of these institutions, their impacts and challenges faced.
Keywords: **Higher Education. Alternative Education. Social Movements. Pluriversities. Subversities.**

RESUMO – Dentro ou Além da Universidade? Experiências de ensino superior alternativo. Apesar de um importante processo de expansão e crescimento, as instituições de ensino superior em todo o mundo ainda enfrentam a exclusão, a discriminação e a desigualdade no que diz respeito às comunidades e povos sub-representados e desfavorecidos, seus conhecimentos e suas línguas. Neste texto, apresentamos brevemente alternativas contemporâneas ao ensino superior regular, que – algumas dentro das universidades existentes, outras além das estruturas convencionais de ensino superior – estão trabalhando contra a corrente para resolver essas falhas. Ao apresentar os estudos de caso das universidades alternativas, interculturais, indígenas, descoloniais, cooperativas e/ou de movimentos sociais que compõem esta seção temática, identificamos tendências institucionais e organizacionais, questões temáticas e contribuições teóricas emergentes, com o objetivo de aprofundar a compreensão da orientação e do papel dessas instituições, seus impactos e os desafios enfrentados.
Palavras-chave: **Ensino Superior. Educação Alternativa. Movimentos Sociais. Pluriversidades. Subversidades.**

In light of the extreme challenges facing humanity at the present moment, what response is needed from higher education institutions? Climate change and environmental degradation are threatening the delicate ecological balance that has sustained our species' existence on the planet, and despite increases in material prosperity for many, inequalities within and between nations are entrenched. The Covid pandemic has revealed the folly of the sense of human invulnerability and separateness from nature, and exacerbated the social and economic situation (Silova 2021). Does this scenario call on us to 'double down' on the existing model of higher education, to equip it more effectively to address these challenges, or is that model itself implicated in causing the problems in the first place?

Higher education systems around the world have experienced startling growth in recent decades and received renewed recognition of their role in economic and social development (Arnhold; Bassett 2021; Marginson 2016). Yet despite expansion of places, they continue to be highly inequitable, and exclude certain groups or confine them to lower quality institutions (UNESCO, 2017). Furthermore, the models of excellence promoted by international rankings have limited the ability of universities to promote inclusive development, to diversify and/or interculturalize their study programmes, to engage with local communities in respectful and reciprocal dialogue and to foster critical awareness among students (McCowan, 2019). While conventional universities are undoubtedly making positive contributions to societies in many ways, these limitations mean that at the very least we need to consider the possibility of alternative models.

This special issue explores alternatives to mainstream higher education that are working against the grain to address these failings. Incorporating case studies of alternative, intercultural, indigenous, decolonial, co-operative and/or social movement universities in different countries, cross-national analyses and theoretical treatments, it aims to develop a deeper understanding of the orientation and role of these institutions, their impacts and challenges faced.

There are a considerable number of these counterhegemonic initiatives in practice, many of which are brought together in the Ecoversities Alliance, discussed in the contribution by Mandel, Amaro and Teamey in this special issue. These autonomous initiatives, located at the margins of formal higher education systems, are unconstrained by government regulation and accreditation, and have considerable freedom for experimentation and expression of their principles. However, within the mainstream system there is also resistance and the construction of alternatives. This special issue also addresses challenges to conventional university structures (such as curriculum, qualifications, entrance requirements, the role of the lecturer and community service initiatives) and to mainstream knowledge traditions, opening up the institution to epistemic, linguistic and/or cultural diversity, including indigenous and counter-hegemonic thought. These two forms – on the one hand, pockets of innovation within large institutions, and on the

other grassroots initiatives outside the mainstream – correspond to a large degree to the distinction that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017; 2018) makes between the 'pluriversity' and 'subversity', a frame mobilised in a number of the analyses in this volume. Finally, there are those initiatives located in a liminal space, in between the mainstream and the margins, or with one foot in each (McCowan 2016). This is the case of the initiatives of the landless workers movement (MST) and other rural education initiatives in Brazil, addressed in the contribution by Schwendler and Santos in this volume.

Understanding and assessing alternatives serves a variety of purposes. From an analytical perspective it is important to document the distinctive manifestations of higher education, and gauge the impact that variations have on outcomes relating to learning, knowledge production and engagement with society. Yet there are clear normative implications of this task. As stated above, these alternatives may offer us fruitful avenues to pursue in addressing the current ecological and social crises, as laboratories of experimentation and innovation. They may currently be small, but some successful interventions can be 'scaled up' to reach greater numbers of people. Alternatively, we may see that part of the problem is our current emphasis on large-scale uniformity, and what in fact is needed is a flowering of numerous small-scale initiatives, that can address in unique ways the distinctive local interests, challenges and needs.

Above all, alternatives show us that that another way of doing things is possible, refreshing our will to experiment and giving confidence to our imagination of more sustainable and more just futures. Innovation of this form is particularly difficult given the general trends in higher education towards isomorphism, with institutional drift or mission creep evident even in systems showing diversity between technical and academic institutions, fuelled by international rankings and other incentives for mimicry (Morphew; Huisman 2002; DiMaggio; Powell 1983).

Current literature in this area is sparse. There has been significant attention in recent years to new models of higher education, particularly the emergence of online universities (such as the giants Indira Gandhi National Open University in India and Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan), the introduction of digital technologies (Goodfellow; Lea 2013; Williamson 2018), the emergence of for-profit chains with standardised franchise models (particularly in Brazil and the USA), the unbundling of the constituent elements (Czerniewicz et al. 2021; McCowan 2017) and even the emergence of a crypto-currency style blockchain university[1]. However, with a few exceptions, these are technical rather than political alternatives, providing different modes of delivery, while linking higher education in more tightly with the capitalist economic model.

The articles in this special issue draw on a range of theoretical resources. Prominent amongst these are the ideas of Santos (2017; 2018)

mentioned above, whose work on epistemologies of the South and ecology of knowledges has provided important conceptual tools for framing the knowledge project of alternative universities, and categorised different forms of counter-hegemonic higher education. The longer tradition of anarchist thought is also influential in this regard, as discussed in the contribution of Hudson-Miles in this volume.

Indigenous philosophies have also been influential in the development of these initiatives, in particular in the Latin American region, where local and regional notions of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir*, but also of *tapalewilis*, *tequio*, *minga* or reciprocity as well as of *comunalidad* provide counterpoints to the accumulative unsustainable models of contemporary global capitalism, and the educational models that support it. Based on such alternative, indigenous and/or grassroots concepts, experiences of indigenizing and interculturalizing universities are starting to reshape higher education from non-Western cosmologies and epistemologies (Mateos Cortés; Dietz 2016). This "bottom up" turn represents an academic as well as political attempt at decolonizing, challenging and thus re-inventing key functions of conventional universities such as teaching and learning, but also research and community service (Santhakumar et al., 2020).

While we use the term 'alternative' in this special issue, we are fully aware of its limitations. Calling something alternative can belittle it, entrenching its marginal nature in relation to the established and powerful mainstream, or signal that it is only of interest to those of divergent tastes or quirky lifestyles. On the contrary, the position taken in this special issue is that these initiatives, while of small scale, represent crucial experiences for the whole of humanity. Nevertheless, for want of an alternative (!), the word alternative has been used here, along with a range of other terms such as autonomous, innovative, experimental and counter-hegemonic, and in some cases more specifically indigenous or environmentalist. Paralleling the debates in development studies about alternative development and alternatives *to* development – we might ask whether these initiatives are alternative higher education or alternatives to higher education? Some of the cases covered in this special issue lean more towards the former and some to latter.

We open the special issue with a broad-ranging conceptual paper by Tristan McCowan on *Deinstitutionalisation of the university and the possibilities of renewal in higher education*. Starting with a problematization of the core structures that higher education institutions share in different parts of the world, the author identifies key features of these structures by distinguishing between "gates" – the controls on admissions to the university –, "roles" – the distinctions drawn between students, lecturers and other actors - and "badges" – the processes and artefacts of validation of student learning and scholarship. The article draws out implications for the future of the university and for current initiatives that are attempting to subvert these structures and create alternative models.

In their contribution on *Ecoversities Alliance - A five-year experiment in cosmopolitical learning*, Udi Mandel, Gerardo Lopez Amaro and Kelly Teamey ask how we can re-imagine higher education in order to include multiple knowledges. As a possible answer, they present Ecoversities Alliance, a planetary alliance of learning places and practitioners reimagining higher education, often based in social and ecological movements and in indigenous communities. Their paper analyses several experiences of "cosmopolitical learning", of learning how to learn in and between cultures, epistemologies and ontologies.

In *Towards a higher education system for indigenous students? Intercultural universities in Mexico*, Gunther Dietz and Laura Selene Mateos Cortés contribute a critical analysis of the "intercultural universities", a new kind of higher education institution created by governmental as well as non-governmental initiatives in different indigenous regions of Mexico. The authors pinpoint shared tensions and contradictions of these institutions, but also identify different types of intercultural universities with regard to their range of autonomy, their top down or bottom up orientation and their steps towards plurilingualizing and interculturalizing their teaching and learning praxis.

A second paper on Mexico is provided by Germán Ortiz Palomeque. In *Trying to Make Cracks in the Mexican Educational System: the counterpoints in the learning of the students of the Degree in Rural Development Planning of the Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CESDER) in the North Mountain of Puebla*, he analyses CESDER's alternative higher education model through the experiences of their students and academics. Particularly the emphasis on the student's own peasant knowledges enables a learning process which is closely linked to local and regional problems and which turns the students into agents of transformation in their communities' struggles against extractivist "projects of death" carried out by transnational enterprises throughout the region.

Turning from Mexico to Brazil, Diana Pellegrini, Elie Ghanem and Antônio Góes Neto analyse in their paper *Does Brazil observe indigenous peoples' right to higher education? Demand, supply and alternative initiatives in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Amazonas* how indigenous demands for higher education are officially denied, but are alternatively advanced through regional initiatives. Tracing a panorama of education opportunities for indigenous populations in the northwest Brazilian Amazon, they describe two teacher training courses that implement alternative practices, but which still do not reflect the demands claimed by the region's indigenous peoples.

In their paper *Teacher Training in the Context of Rural Socioterritorial Diversity*, Sônia Schwendler and Aline Nunes dos Santos focus on teacher training initiatives which aim at including in official study programmes a decolonial shift towards the recognition of diversity. Choosing the Licenciatura em Educação do Campo (LECAMPO), offered by the Universidade Federal de Paraná in a decentralized approach to

reach peasant, indigenous and *quilombola²* communities in their regions of origin, the authors empirically study the teachers' and teacher trainers' experiences with an itinerant and territorializing programme that is transforming key notions of teacher training.

Shifting from Brazil to Chile, the paper *Toward a Decolonial University-School Link: problematizing our colonial micro-practices through epistemic care*, by Paulina Bravo González, Felipe Acuña Ruz, Corina González Weil, Nina Ibaceta Guerra, Roberto Morales Aguilar y Bárbara González Urzua, problematizes the ongoing colonial relationship between schools and universities, between academic knowledge and the school actors and educational processes. Through the example of a centre for science education at the Pontificie Unviersidad Católica de Valparaíso, they identify first steps towards a decolonial type of science education which recognizes and interrelates the existing plurality of knowledges.

A second contribution from Chile is Francisco Durán del Fierro's and Roxana Pey Tumanoff's paper *Territoriality and Neoliberalism: the case of the Universidad Estatal de Aysén in Chile*. The authors reflect on the Universidad de Aysén in its attempt to become a "subversity" by translating both national and local expectations into institutional practices which root the university to the territory. Despite certain failures related to the dominance of a neoliberal market model of university, particularly the creation of a social council co-governing the university means a step forward in the process of subverting conventional university functions.

Turning from Latin America to Europe, Richard Hudson-Miles provides in his paper *Experiments in Autonomous Art Education in the UK, 2010-Present* a critical survey of autonomous art schools established in the UK in the context of neoliberal processes of higher education financialisation, marketisation, and commodification. Inspired by critical pedagogy and anarchist educational theory, the author carries out activist co-research together with two UK anti-art schools - the School of the Damned in London and the Feral Art School in Hull - that shows how experiments in arts higher education can be pedagogically repoliticised.

Shifting from the UK to India, the comparative paper *One amongst many. Exploring the 'urban turn' in critical pedagogy and its potential to re-frame the role of higher education institutions*, contributed by Adriana Allen, Geetika Anand, Ruchika Lall and Julia Wesely, analyses how, in the field of urban planning education, institutional arrangements of teaching, practice and research inspired by southern urban theory are able to contribute to an urban turn in critical pedagogy. A comparison of two innovative learning experiences, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements and the School of Popular Urbanism of the network of the Habitat International Coalition-Latin America, offers insights to unsettle the hegemonic idea of the university, thereby re-framing higher education institutions as "one amongst many" actors and institutions shaping urban learning and practice.

Finally, the special issue concludes with the dialogue *Experiences in Alternative Higher Education: a conversation with Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Luis Fernando Cují Llugna*. This discussion picks up the main topics dealt with in the papers, emphasizing the tensions inherent both in pluriversity and in subversity projects to transform power relations as well as linguistic, cultural and epistemic asymmetries through higher education initiatives started either inside, at the margins or completely outside existing universities.

The contributions to the special issue cover a range of contexts – India, Chile, Brazil, Mexico and the UK – in addition to global and theoretical analyses. The clustering in Latin America is in part due to the location and interests of the journal and editors, but is also testament to the richness of this region in political and educational movements and innovations. It is a multilingual special issue, with articles appearing in English, Spanish and Portuguese: multilingualism is an important part of the epistemic pluralism that underpins this work, including not only large global (and former colonial) languages such as these three, but other national, local and indigenous languages which are rarely represented in academia.

The contributors to this special issue are academic researchers, but in many cases are personally involved in the initiatives in question – mediating between their roles as narrators and social scientists, and on the other hand as participants, practitioners and activists.

The ruins of Nalanda University in India, with its 700 year history, provide a glimpse of the wealth of different higher education traditions around the world – one that has given way to a creeping homogenisation, despite some superficial differentiation (McCowan 2019). This diversity needs to be rekindled. The mainstream research university, and the Western scientific paradigm in which it is based, still has much to offer, but should be set in dialogue with the many other knowledge traditions in the world, rather than riding roughshod over them (UNESCO, 2021). If we are to 'embrace the pluriverse' rather than 'save the world' (Arora & Sterling 2020), then we need national and global higher education systems that represent a multiplicity of knowledge traditions, ideas, languages and actors, and space for the emergence of new, and previously unrecognized, forms of institution.

Notes

1   https://blockchain.open.ac.uk/

2   Communities comprised of the descendants of escaped slaves.

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