



Academic Freedom in Latin America and the Deceptive Comfort of Autonomy

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In *IHE* issues #99 and #105 Marcelo Knobel and Fernanda Leal denounce what has been the most egregious challenge to university autonomy in Latin America since the age of dictatorships: Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's attacks on federal universities and funding agencies for science. The right-wing Bolsonaro administration (2019–2023) severely cut funding for federal universities, limited support for humanities and social sciences by the federal agencies that fund research and provide scholarships for graduate students, and interfered with the process for appointing university rectors.

Abstract

Universities in Latin America have long benefited from the explicit juridical protection of their autonomy. While overt attacks on university autonomy have been rare in recent decades, the right-wing Bolsonaro administration in Brazil, which seriously disturbed federal universities and funding agencies for science, illustrates a core weakness in the Latin American concept of autonomy: the secondary and subordinate position it gives to academic freedom.

Autonomy comprises the academic freedom to define curricula, enroll students, award degrees, appoint faculty, and set the parameters for tenure and progression in the academic career.

Challenges to Academic Freedom

While Bolsonaro was voted out of office in his bid for re-election, and the present threat from his brand of politics is gone, the severity of the challenge his government posed to university autonomy merits reflection in the interest of protecting academic freedom. While we have recently seen similar infringements on academic freedom in mainland China, Hong Kong, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Turkey, it should be noted that Latin America has the strongest possible form of juridical protection of academic freedom: the autonomy of universities is incorporated into the constitutions of almost all countries in the region. Actually, some of the most far-fetched encroachments that Bolsonaro attempted were blocked on constitutional grounds.

Should we then dismiss this episode in Brazil as a mere political fluke, an ultimately harmless show of the usual neo-conservative illiberal rhetoric and anti-science populism, a once-in-a-long-while period of turmoil interrupting an otherwise *pax romana* of universally heeded university autonomy and academic freedom in Latin America? I do not think so.

The Latin American Lopsided Concept of University Autonomy

The problem is with university autonomy itself, as it has come to be understood, regulated, and defended by the academic community in Latin America since the 1920s. It is an autonomy that is strong in corporate prerogatives for the university as an organization but weak at its core: academic freedom. I will explain.

The idea of university autonomy—a prerogative or privilege of institutions that frees them from political control—is remarkably homogeneous across Latin America. Universities understand that they are obligated to the public welfare and the service of the communities within their sphere of influence. Still, the nature of that service is to be entirely determined by universities themselves, be it individually or collectively through their national associations.

Autonomy comprises the academic freedom to define curricula, enroll students, award degrees, appoint faculty, and set the parameters for tenure and progression in the academic career. The freedoms to teach and research without restriction or coercion are also included here. Because of their independent legal status as decentralized state entities, universities have the legal authority to create their own bylaws and regulations, and choose how their authorities exercise their administrative autonomy. The right of the university to possess its own patrimony, which it is free to manage, to obtain public funding, and to complement it with additional income, is known as financial or economic autonomy.

Over the twentieth century, university autonomy in Latin America developed as a safeguard for universities against the intrusion of governments, which were sometimes autocratic or downright dictatorial, so they could carry out their objectives as they saw fit. The guiding concept is the freedom of the university, which—in the case of public universities—establishes a domain of self-determination within the framework of the state.

In Latin America, each nation's leading universities demanded autonomy from the political system in a process more akin to the conquest of union rights (those of the university as a bureaucratic entity and a social actor) rather than acknowledgment of the freedoms of the spirit. Academic freedom primarily results from institutions' structural right to autonomy.

The university is the prerogative holder and actor under the Latin American conception of university autonomy, not its academic community. Academic freedoms on campuses may be made possible by autonomy but that is not its fundamental benefit. Universities are independent so that they may "speak truth to power." Their position is very political, albeit outside the formal political realm, and autonomy acts as a corporate buffer that protects the university from external political and, nowadays, in times of academic capitalism, economic players. Knowledge appears only as the domain from whence social criticism is exercised.

Existing legislation has therefore created a vast space for university autonomy in Latin America, which is seen in the region as a corporate freedom of the university as an institution, even if one in which the academic freedom of scholars comes as a consequence.

Academic freedom is viewed as an outcome of university autonomy rather than as its primary foundation.

How Is This Relevant to Academic Freedom?

When academic freedom is understood as just another form of university independence, on an equal footing with administrative, organizational, and financial autonomy, academic freedom gets exposed. Elected officials who intend to harass universities may claim that it is the universities' finances they have a problem with, or their structure, or their governance, not the academic operation. Then, university officials are left with the problem of explaining how breaches of the external ring of independence affect the inner core of academic freedom. This is a line of argument that university communities in Latin America are unfamiliar with, as any form of infringement on any of the dimensions of autonomy has traditionally been denounced as equally grave.

When it is not the university as a whole that is under siege or a particular subsector (such as the federal universities in Brazil), but the work of an individual academic, or groups of academics, whose scholarship is annoying for some politicians (think gender studies, for instance), the problem of academic freedom becomes critical. These individualized or targeted challenges may become the most frequent over time, as social-media-wrangling politicians can readily and massively caricature research agendas. They will require a defense where, contrary to the Latin American reflex, it is not the organization that comes first, with academic freedom as a consequence, but academic freedom is instead conceptualized as the core zone of protection, which for its own sake radiates outwards, to the organizational level, creating a ring of protection we call university autonomy. ▲

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