

## **The university experience and students' narratives: a study on our times<sup>1</sup>**

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### **SUMMARY**

This paper explores the characteristic modes of the university experience as perceived by students of Buenos Aires University in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In our times, the university experience appears as a significant object of historical research in a scenario where academic traditions are undergoing a crisis, while we witness social reconfiguration and a new type of insertion both in Argentinean public universities as in those of other countries. From the narratives of students' lives, a reconstruction of daily life in a university context enables us to have an insight into the new dynamics of the cultural process taking place in the institutions and to identify factors and phenomena that point to elements of continuity and discontinuity with reference to other historical periods.

I intend to explore the changes that took place in Argentina during intergenerational processes of the transmission of culture, particular in the middle classes, since it is mostly they that have felt the impact of downward social mobility, transformations in the educational system, and changes in the distribution and access to cultural goods. The middle classes, that used to be regarded as the representatives of a social tissue characterized by interrelation of classes and cultural upgrade through education have become both witnesses to and victims of the deterioration of identity models and of horizons and expectations that, on a secondary level, affect the whole of society. The importance of education as a channel for promotion and social reproduction, its optimistic outlook, and its consumer capacity have been central to the identity of the middle classes since the 50s<sup>3</sup>. In the past decades<sup>4</sup>, the impoverishment of the middle classes and the appearance of the so-called "new poor", added to the consequences of the debacle at the end of the 90s and the ensuing crisis in 2001 arouses questions about what is expected from education in a scenario where social mobility follows a downward trend.

Several of these issues are put into play within the space of public university. As an essential factor of the educational system understood in the wider sense of a cultural system, public universities grew during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At present, they are repositories of cultural imaginaries, traditions, and ideals originated in different historical periods. Relocated in a field of higher education that has opened alternative private elite universities for the upper-middle

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of a research project entitled "Intergenerational processes for the transmission of culture in Argentina during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Education and cultural consumption". UBACYT 2004-2007 Planning. Instituto Gino Germani, School of Social Sciences.

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<sup>3</sup> Maristella Svampa. *Los que ganaron. La vida en los countries y barrios privados*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Minujin y Kessler Gabriel. *La nueva pobreza en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1995.

classes<sup>5</sup>, public universities serve mass education in a space notoriously marked by the changes undergone by the country's social tissue. Thus, they exhibit the intergenerational conviviality of the different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds of both students and lecturers. The fact that the university still gives rise to egalitarian expectations<sup>6</sup> amid a social scenario pervaded by major inequalities turns into attractive research material.

It is then necessary to carry out a historical reading of the present condition of the public university, understanding the notion of "present" from the questions posed by Michel Foucault in his reinterpretation of Kant's *Qué es la ilustración*: "What is happening today? What is happening right now? And what exactly is the "now" that contains us all and that defines the moment when I am writing?"<sup>7</sup>. Questioning the present, the current state of university experience, entails questioning ourselves, "an 'ourselves' that refers to a cultural group characteristic of its own present status" and of "the realm of possible experiences"<sup>8</sup>.

Among such experiences, I would like to question the students' experience as an opportunity to read the present, seen as "a juxtaposition or overlap of past and future times and a conjugation of temporalities on the move, filled with symbols, signs, and affects"<sup>9</sup>. Present students' experience is permeated by temporalities that respond to different historical periods and spheres of social life (concerning the family, the generation, education, politics, etc.) that put into play different and contradictory horizons, settled for the most part in the processes and collective and individual dynamics of the university as an institution. For their part, students' lives express the tensions typical of a historical period marked by instability and uncertainty.

Students' experience may be approached from a threefold perspective. One can identify the various historical representations about university students, analyze some of the data reflecting students' present situation, and explore life histories of university students. In my view, students' narratives about their own university experience gives access to unknown aspects of the present which, in turn, allow demystification of old representations as well as to embody the individuals. This implies prioritizing inquiry into subjective modes of appropriation<sup>10</sup> of the university as an institution, of education as a whole, and of the historical time. The narrative of university experience constitutes one way of problematizing the connections among education, history, and subjectivity that facilitates an understanding of the heterogeneous layers of institutional life as experienced by different generations. The possibility of reaching a narrative of experience<sup>11</sup> told by one of its paradigmatic actors fosters an approach to daily life, to ways of socialization, sensibility, affects, modes of selective tradition, and pedagogical and cultural learning processes in a context marked by forceful challenges to the effectiveness of public university and of the processes and transmission modes of culture in a broader sense. It gives access to a narrative about institutions from a different perspective.

### Some historical representations about university students

<sup>5</sup> It is said that there exists "a highly heterogeneous, diverse institutional weft in which there coexist traditional and new universities, public and private, Catholic and lay, elitist and massive, some focusing on the practice of the various professions and others on research activities". Marcela Mollis. *La universidad argentina en tránsito*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Lucas Rubinich. *La conformación de un clima cultural. Neoliberalismo y Universidad*. Buenos Aires, Libros del Rojas, 2001, p.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault. *¿Qué es la ilustración?* Madrid, Editorial La Piqueta, 1996, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 70 y 82.

<sup>9</sup> Josefina Ludmer. "Temporalidades del presente", in *Boletín/10*. Centro de Estudios de Teoría y Crítica Literaria. Facultad de Humanidades y Artes de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Rosario, 2002, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> I am resorting to Roger Chartier's concept of cultural appropriation: *Sociedad y escritura en la edad moderna. La cultura como apropiación*. México, Instituto Mora, 1995; and Michel De Certeau: *La invención de lo cotidiano. 1. Artes de hacer*. México, Universidad Iberoamericana, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of experience, together with the concept of appropriation (among others, see: Giorgio Agamben. *Infancia e historia*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Adriana Hidalgo, 2001) opens possibilities for an exploration into the subjective dimension of social and cultural processes.

An approach to the university experience involves broaching representations that have been laid down on the various studies published on this issue. University students have particularly been constructed as such through a large part of the social theories and research studies carried out in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, alongside with the phenomenon of the worldwide expansion of universities and surveys into their specific dynamics and processes.

In the French production, and from dissimilar standpoints, Bourdieu and Passeron, in *Los herederos. Los estudiantes y la cultura*, (1964), and Michel De Certeau in *La toma de la palabra* (whose first part takes up a writing published in France in 1968) broach the subject of the university student, whether as representing a subjective position in the social structure or as a voice in a historical event such as the incidents of May 1968, understood as a symbolic revolution. Bourdieu and Passeron constructed the figure of the “heir” in an emblematic text about the application of the laws of reproduction to the analysis of the ways in which educational institutions worked. University students were studied in their capacity of representative samples of a socially privileged condition and as a product of university teaching and, as such, the repository of diverse mechanisms of social inequality rendered invisible by an ideology grounded on gift and merit. With the French university of the sixties in the background, Michel De Certeau examined the symbolic reach of the events of May 1968, problematizing the place of university students as “offspring” of a culture and resultants of new configurations of the relationship among generations, in which the debate about the notion of authority played a major role. Students were thought as they who, from another “speech”, contests the established languages and generates a symbolic action with unpredictable consequences.

Both historiographic and essay Latin American production also constructed a set of representations on university students, including the aristocratism found in Rodó’s *Ariel*, the reformist Latin American tradition, and the politization of the 70s. Published in 1900, José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* symbolizes the juvenile beliefs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These theories posited that each generation had its own program, which was to be carried out through history, and that the juvenile spirit was essentially related to innovation. In Rodó’s discourse, “Latin American youth” sought to recover the spiritual and idealist Spanish-American tradition and criticized American utilitarianism. From this standpoint, young students’ values were intertwined with their aspiration for a generational change. Rodó maintains the following<sup>12</sup>: “Like Michelet, I think that the true notion of education does no encompass the culture of the offspring’s spirit via the parents’ experience, but rather that of the parents’ spirit via their offspring’s innovative inspiration.” In those days, educational institutions used to introduce an aristocratic element, a hierarchical order in societies that were on their way toward political democracy. In such societies, although the students felt seduced by their teachers, they were regarded as bearers of cultural authority on the face of the confusion of the masses and the immigration societies.

In the tradition of Latin American Reformism, the representation of university students is related to the modern process of the construction of universities as well as to the avatars of the political processes that swept the continent. The “Latin American youth” that received Rodó’s legacy was also shaped in the *Preliminary Manifesto* of 1918 under the classification of “heroic”: “It is disinterested, pure. It has not lived long enough to become contaminated. It does not err in its choice of teachers. One cannot earn credit with the young through flattery or bribery”<sup>13</sup>. These young people confronted politicians in order to draw their attention of the university as an institution, hounded by a crisis of authority and an anachronic regime.

In the various sources that deal with the university situation in the 60s and 70s, the students’ experience is intertwined with a complex web of discourses focusing on the relation among university, society, and politics. The ideological clashes of these two decades bias representations about university students, and range from disqualifying reformist students

<sup>12</sup> José Enrique Rodó. *Ariel*. Buenos Aires, Losada, 2004, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> “La Juventud Universitaria de Córdoba a los hombres libres de Sudamérica” (Manifiesto Liminar) en Alberto Ciria y Horacio Sanguinetti. *La Reforma Universitaria/1*. Buenos Aires, Biblioteca Política Argentina, 1987, p. 51.

because of their bourgeois origin and the liberal left's rejection of the national predicament in Hernández Arregui's<sup>14</sup> interpretation to the vindication of scientific activity *par excellence* as a part of the country's modernizing process according to the evidence offered by the School of Exact Sciences, a process that was interrupted by Onganía's intervention of the University in 1966<sup>15</sup>. From the notion of "students' movement" as a collective, representative identity, the students' experience is reconstructed from the avatars, groups, political alignment, public events, and demonstrations. Other perspectives of the university experience were obliterated and ignored because of the political overdetermination typical of the times<sup>16</sup>, a trait that may be easily found in either literary works or movies about the period. It is worth noting the regional scope of the phenomenon, evidenced in the oral testimonials included by Elena Poniatowska in *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971), which insist on the idea of access to the locus of the "students' movement".

In the representations of the 60s and 70s, the students' experience remains associated to cultural change, political movements, and generational struggles<sup>17</sup>. The character of the period is the committed or militant student, and the corresponding discourse is filled with themes such as solidarity between workers and students. Interpretations of political history draw genealogies that tend to blur other possible readings that have not been contested, whether they have recovered the intellectual history of the university<sup>18</sup> or attempted to tell the history of its culture.

The representations of university students along different historical periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century enable us to identify the close bond existing among the middle classes<sup>19</sup>, political involvement, and generational confrontation. The historical period going from the military dictatorship to our days requires disassembling of the totalizing nature of such representations, which persist as identity marks in some sectors of the student population, though hybridized by forceful phenomena like the cultural genocide perpetrated by the dictatorship, the destruction of the middle class, the deindustrialization of the country (with the concomitant annihilation of the working classes), and the transformations undergone by the political culture on the face of the crisis of the ideologies, the globalization scenario and the transnationalization of the economies. In the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the students' experience was more deeply permeated by heterogeneity and fragmentation. On the other hand, while the "Latin American university became a mass university", and in Argentina alone the number of students rose from 80,000 to more than 800,000 in 1980<sup>20</sup>, the university's institutional weakness increased. This is supported by the Argentinean case, in which the rise in numbers was not accompanied by the

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<sup>14</sup> See Juan José Hernández Arregui. *La formación de la conciencia nacional*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Plus Ultra, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> See *La noche de los bastones largos. 30 años después*. Buenos Aires, Biblioteca Página/12, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> As Pedro Krotzsch has pointed out, the students' movement was epochal, and the resulting bibliography "was produced in the heat of the events and from the position of the essay, from a reflection at the moment of the conjuncture, from a perspective dominated by politics", in "Los universitarios como actores de reformas en América Latina: ¿han muerto los movimientos estudiantiles?". *Espacios en Blanco. Revista de Educación*. Serie Indagaciones. NEES-UNCPBA-Tandil-Argentina. June 2002, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Students dying as a consequence of police repression is a central issue of the 60s. We may remember cases such as those involving Daniel Horacio Grinbank, Santiago Pampillon, Juan José Cabral Cabral, Luis Blanco, Hilda Guerrero de Molina among others. The important thing to bear in mind is that, before the military dictatorship, "to kill a student" was censured by the society as a whole.

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<sup>19</sup> In the 60s, Gino Germani indicated that, particularly in Argentina, the rate of university students was related to the population's high aspirations, especially in the middle class, rather than to development figures, as was the case with other countries. See Gino Germani. "El origen social de los estudiantes y la regularidad de sus estudios". *Trabajos e Investigaciones del Instituto de Sociología. Colección Estructura*. Instituto de Sociología. School of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Juan Carlos Portantiero. "El sentido de la universidad pública" en Naishtat, Raggio y Villavicencio. *Filosofías de la universidad y conflicto de racionalidades*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Colihue, 2001, p. 85.

corresponding budgetary increase depending on the State<sup>21</sup>, and the university modernization process that had begun in the 60s at Buenos Aires University was never completed.

### **From the student status to the University situation: the case of students at Buenos Aires University**

A retrospective glance demands that we strip representations of the past from their epochal mystique. Looking back requires that we question the new configurations of the students' experience, leaving aside the phantasmatic aura that attaches it to the political sphere. This does not imply denying the role of the past in the long term construction of political affiliations, but I am aiming at a new historical comprehension of the present insofar as it is also sheds light on the crises of certain political forms and beliefs.

Along different lines, rather than dwelling on "the students' status", it is interesting to delve into the process that led to the social and historical construction of university students so as to construct a view of students' experience in Argentina and in Buenos Aires University in particular. If "the students' status" defined by Bourdieu and Passeron started by locating students in a place where they enjoyed some autonomy, a place where time was suspended, where cultural habits and inherited capacities were combined<sup>22</sup>, questioning the situation<sup>23</sup> of Argentinean University students implies to call into question the elements that structured their "status", and to read, *from their experience*, the complex web of transformations that constituted their identity, both as recipients and products of university teachings. A first step in this direction is to identify, in their experience, the impact of the deep transformations undergone by the Argentinean society and its institutions in recent decades. A second step will identify the diverse and contradictory imaginaries that coexist at the University and that pervade students' identities –and probably lecturers' too.

The following data show a silhouette of the typical university student that does not in the least resemble certain representations established by institutional, faculty, or political discourses. Many of the identity marks exhibited by Argentinean university students have faded after confrontation with data that show social descent, a lack of interest in politics, and the fact that a large number of students have full-time jobs.

According to data gathered in 2004, the Argentinean University system is composed of 100 university institutions, 45 of which are State-run and the remaining 55, private.

As recorded in the University Statistics Yearbooks of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology<sup>24</sup>, the number of university students doubled over the past decade. While in 1993 there were 674,878 university students, in 2003 the figure had soared to 1,493,556 in the whole system, indicating an 89% increase. In 2004, the total number of students was 1,527,310. In 2003 85.6 of university students attended public universities; the figure kept for 2004 did not change significantly: 84.9%. In 2004, 1,273,156 students attended national universities.

While there has been a remarkable increase in the number of university students and in the number of those attending State-run universities, the Yearbooks also highlighted the high levels of attrition, for they recorded that almost half of the students registered drop out in their first year of studies. The number of graduates is also low: out of the total number of registered

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<sup>21</sup> Cristian Buchbinder maintains that "the cost of the larger number of students, a consequence of unrestricted entrance, was mostly balanced by the constant reduction in the salaries of faculty and administrative staff". En *Historia de las Universidades Argentinas*. Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2005, p. 218.

<sup>22</sup> "La condición de estudiante permite borrar los marcos temporales de la vida social o invertir su orden", in Pierre Bourdieu y Jean-Claude Passeron. *Los herederos. Los estudiantes y la cultura*. Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2003, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Here, the notion of "situation" proves useful to interpret the modes of existence of subjects in a context where the basis of institutions are undergoing a crisis.

<sup>24</sup> *Anuario de Estadísticas Universitarias 1999-2003 y Anuario de Estadísticas Universitarias 2000-2004*, published by the Research and Statistics Department of the University Policies Secretariat.

students, only 20% graduate, after a course of studies whose duration exceeds by 60% the one established by the curricula<sup>25</sup>.

The Yearbooks also emphasize the gender issue. In 2003 56.2% of students in public universities were women, and their number rose to 56.9% in 2004.

A comparative glance at the Students' Census of Buenos Aires University shows that the rate of growth keeps increasing. The most significant leap in numbers occurred in 2000. By then, the number of undergraduate students had risen by 38.1% as compared to 1996, yielding 253,260 students. This was the most striking increase after the 80s, when the rise in registration was due to the restoration of democracy and the end of restrictions to entrance. While it is true that 2004 showed deceleration, Buenos Aires University still totaled 294,038 students, 16% more than in 2000.

Besides the national data about the lengthening in the duration of undergraduate studies, the 2004 UBA Census reported an increase in the students' average age. The so-called 'theoretical age of attendance' was 25 years of age. 69.1% of the students were, in fact, aged 25, but the statistics included data gathered from the CBC, where the majority of the students were under 20 years old. Then, the average student was an unmarried female aged 25 or less, living and working in the City of Buenos Aires and coming from a private High School. It should also be noted that 55% of the students are women, and that this is consistent with the national data.

The 2004 Census also showed similar percentages for students who paid for their studies with their own income or salaries and financial aid from their families. The Students' Census conducted in 2000 had already shown changes in students' social provenance: the social sector attending university courses tended to shift downwards, toward the low middle class. The Census also showed that, in agreement with the preceding item, six out of ten students are employed. This is a high percentage, amounting to 58.1% of the student population. More students were engaged in full-time jobs (between 26 and 45 hours per week) and fewer students held part-time jobs. In conclusion, almost 60% of UBA students could be regarded as part-time students.

Then, taking into account the data provided by the latest census, an average UBA student is an employed, middle-aged part-time student who depends on financial aid from the family, and whose parents, for the most part, had access to higher studies. Different specialists agree that, at present, socioeconomic indicators for those who access higher studies are lower than they were in the last twenty years and that the socioeconomic profile of students is undergoing a transitional stage. Along these lines, it is worth noting that six out of ten students who enter the university come from the middle and upper classes and that 78% of those who graduate belong to the said social sectors, a fact which indicates the importance of social status in a general context of impoverishment that hinders the possibility of graduation<sup>26</sup>.

If we make a joint reading of the above with the poverty data, according to which 40.2% of the population is below the poverty line, and with other data that pinpoint an increase in youth poverty, we can hypothesize that the public university combines the increase in students' poverty, early attrition, and a lengthening in the course of studies. Unrestricted entrance –the great democratizing tradition in public universities and a characteristic that some authors have called “the plebeian tradition”, for it opens the doors to higher studies for young people from different social classes (even if we acknowledge the limitations of the process)<sup>27</sup>, would end up

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<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon was brought to attention on analysis of the data collected by the 1958 UBA Census. “One of the most serious problems confronting the Argentinean University is attrition, or the large number of students who do not pursue their studies regularly, taking much longer times than scheduled to reach graduation, when and if they manage to graduate.” Gino Germani. “El origen social de los estudiantes y la regularidad de sus estudios”. Trabajos e Investigaciones del Instituto de Sociología. Colección Estructura. Instituto de Sociología. School of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Sistema de Información de Tendencias Educativas en América Latina (SITEAL) from UNESCO. Argentina and Bolivia would seem to share high levels of access and attrition.

<sup>27</sup> In that same report written in 1962, Gino Germani spoke of the broad social basis where the Argentinean university system recruited its students. In Mario Toer. *El perfil de los estudiantes de la*

in a non-democratizing process, since half of the students seem to be unable to remain in the system and finish their studies. Regarding the students' situation, the negative incidence of the economic changes undergone by our society can be seen from phenomena like university students' malnutrition as recorded in the chronicles of 2001 and 2002<sup>28</sup>, the early age at which university students enter the labor market because their parents' income has decreased, and the fact that, owing to the impossibility of supporting themselves, students live in the family home for longer than should be expected. We can easily assume that such social conditions leave contradictory marks in the relation between students and politics. Recent studies point out that the crisis of political representation makes a dramatic impact on students<sup>29</sup> and that students' participation in university politics is fragmentary, sporadic, and conjunctural<sup>30</sup>. The close association between students and politics that occupied the first place as the key to interpreting the history of students' movements starting from the plus of politicized activity seen particularly in the history of Latin American universities<sup>31</sup> must be revisited, since the complexities involved in maintaining university activity, added to the fact that the institutional situation itself claims for more political participation, make it difficult to sustain the said association. This provides a good reason to make further attempts at understanding the students' daily lives.

In Argentina, students' lives are pervaded by the shocking socioeconomic and political discontinuity and instability of the past two decades as well as by the globalization scenario, which has greatly contributed to the rise of unemployment and to the reshaping of the professional sphere. According to the cited Yearbook, the courses of studies in the Humanities that grew the most between 1999 and 2003 were Arts, Education, Philosophy, History, Letters, and Psychology (10.3%), with a correlation in the Social Sciences of 4.3% in Law, Economics, Politics, and Psychology. The UBA Census records that, in relative terms, the School of Social Sciences experienced the most significant growth (51.6% more students than the number shown in the 2000 Census). The second growth rate was recorded in the School of Engineering, and the number of students in the School of Philosophy and Letters rose by 33.8%. The increasing interest in the Humanities and Social Sciences seems to express not only that the mentioned fields of knowledge seemed to have gained greater recognition but also the particular blend yielded by the erosion of the productive system, the lack of expectations regarding employment in the field of basic sciences in the 90s, and the greater freedom to follow individual vocational callings on the face of generalized uncertainty.

The above data, collected from various sources and surveys, picture university students in a different light. The new vision calls into question the issues of the limitations (age, social condition, etc.) that, in past historical periods, constituted them as a social category, differentiating from other social categories, such as workers, for example, freezing students' political protagonism.

### **Narrating students' experiences**

An examination of university life in our days as seen from the students' standpoint implies an approach to the ongoing construction of identities rather than to the outcomes of fixed, unchanging, and established positions within the institutions. Identities are constructed from representations and rise from the narrative processes of the I. In this sense, "we should view

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UNA. *El trabajo, la política, la religión, los medios*. Buenos Aires, Eudeba, 1998. The same tendency was noted for the mid-90s.

<sup>28</sup> This situation was found by surveys and studies conducted over the last few years in various national universities (Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Centro Universitario Regional de Bariloche, Universidad del Litoral, etc.).

<sup>29</sup> See Francisco Naisthat y Mario Toer. *Democracia y representación en la Universidad. El caso de la Universidad de Buenos Aires desde la visión de sus protagonistas*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Biblos, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Celia Cortés y Victoria Kandel. "Estudiantes y política", en revista *Fundamentos en Humanidades*, año IV n°2/3. Universidad de San Luis, San Luis, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Naisthat, Raggio y Villavicencio. "La universidad hoy: crisis de esa 'buena idea'". In *Filosofías de la universidad y conflicto de racionalidades*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Colihue, 2001, p. 27.

them as a product of specific historical and institutional environments inside specific discourse formations and practices achieved through specific enunciation strategies<sup>32</sup>. This entails putting into play the disaggregation of identities, and to enter in a discussion with certain general characterizations of individuals and educational institutions that are a part of political-university discourses, without losing sight of the fact that every political discourse starts from a totalizing perspective with rhetorical components.

Moreover, the crisis of certain identities that have become crystallized in the institutional discourse (student – lecturer – scholar –public university) speak of experiences that share fewer and fewer common features with those of the past. Thus, the crisis needs exploration of the present, so that the researcher may advance an enunciation, a narrative, and/or a subjective reflection about collective and individual experiences. Such a narrative should put into play the biographical and the autobiographical scope of university life<sup>33</sup> while acknowledging its fictional nature,<sup>33</sup> and its inherent expectations, ideals, and ideologies.

A history of the present takes shape starting from the narrations of students' experiences, in which one may identify the marks of the past with their corresponding present reinterpretations, the combination between old, persisting institutional mechanisms and the rise of new situations, the generation of differences in the generational chain that links students and lecturers, and the new forms of signification and appropriation of cultural goods, both from institutions and from earlier generations), etc. Such a narrative will invariably lead to the construction of a fresh look into what is already known: in our case, the university as institution. Fernand Braudel has said that "surprise, disorientation, detachment, and perspective – all of them irreplaceable approaches to knowledge –are equally necessary to understand what stands so close to us that we find it difficult to see it clearly"<sup>34</sup>.

How to narrate students' experiences? I shall now quote interpretations of the material collected during interviews to groups of students close to graduating from various courses of studies at the Schools of Philosophy and Letters and Social Sciences in Buenos Aires University. It is worth noting that registration has increased in the said Schools, while their budgets have been frozen and their fields of knowledge have undergone serious curricular changes over the past decades. During the interviews, special emphasis was made on the reconstruction of a formative cycle, and the students favored both recalling strategies as an overall reflection on the university experience.

I) Entrance to the university (which in the case of Buenos Aires University involves passing the subjects that composed the Common Basic Cycle [CBC], is viewed as a true initiation ritual. Students do not just enter an unknown world: they enter a world with no clear rules, or else they perceive that the rules are not conveyed clearly, or that the institution's communication channels do not care much to make them clear to the newcomers. The students' perception of faulty or no organization at all seems to exceed the "hazy zone" at which newcomers feel they have arrived when they step into an institution for the first time. They remember pooling strategies and collaborative techniques among peers in order to move about a world that they perceived as hostile. They note the importance of the abilities they have acquired in High School, particularly their "training in public institutions", in which individual adaptation weighs more than institutional directions. Newly arrived students, they say, are not formally received by the institution.

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<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall. "¿Quién necesita 'identidad'?", in Stuart Hall y Paul du Gay (comp.). *Cuestiones de identidad cultural*. Buenos Aires, Amorrortu Editores, 2003, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Leonor Arfuch. *El espacio biográfico. Dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> "(identities) stem from the narrative processes of the self, but such processes, which are necessarily fictional, do not undermine their material, political, or discourse effectiveness, even when the pertinance –"the stitches that keep the narrative together" –through which the identities appear may greatly reside in the imaginary (as well as in the symbolic), a fact that, to a large extent, places the construction of the process in the realm of phantasy or, at least, in the realm of the phantasmatic". In Stuart Hall. *Op cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Fernand Braudel. *La historia y las ciencias sociales*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1999, p. 80.



The first year is also perceived as bearing a public logic that differs from the logic upheld by the private schools from where most of the interviewees had obtained their High School Certificates<sup>35</sup>. Public logic would lie in the fact that the university gathers students from different provenances; it is a heterogeneous environment in spite of the social elitism that is believed to be at the base. They recognize the construction of a social peer collective in which family decisions are either blurred or opaque, and in which the students' vocational decisions, whether shy or determined, are uppermost. In the passage from High School as an offshoot of an endogamic organization to the university as the place where State exogamy rules, the students acknowledge the positive impact of bringing together different social backgrounds in the university experience.

II) Students narrate their subjective experience of the massive nature of public university as a historical construction which, in the first years of studies, entails impersonal or depersonalization modes, impossibility to gain access to the other (the lecturer), or to play an active role in the classrooms. At the beginning, massivity arouses bewilderment, but with the passing of time it becomes a natural state of things, and generates a resistance translated in the students' individuation processes<sup>36</sup>. It would seem as if the institution did not attempt recognition of the other-as-student, and this lack of recognition brings about individual solutions in which Bourdieu's "inherited dispositions" come into play.

III) Peer relationships takes on remarkable significance. This sociability process begins in the first years, triggered by random events that establish lasting fraternal bonds that slowly turn into modes of friendship<sup>37</sup>. In many cases, these bonds replace bonds that were previous to university life. The productivity of peer relationships is not only based on affection but also encourages the construction of collective identities that mitigate the consequences of the detachment, absence, or indifference exhibited by the institution (the lecturers) while allowing the appearance of adaptative strategies as a response to the conservative nature of the university as institution.

IV) During their course of studies, university students get to know the city and its surroundings<sup>38</sup>. Peer and team work relationships foster commuting, meetings in places and neighborhoods that students have not visited before, all of which generates social learning<sup>39</sup>. The experience of Buenos Aires University students extends to learning about the city and its surroundings, urban neighborhoods, and Greater Buenos Aires<sup>40</sup>. A day in a student's ordinary life shows not only long hours of work and study but also urban itineraries in a combination of studies, work, public activities, consumption, etc.

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<sup>35</sup> The 2004 UBA Students' Census published by the Research and Statistics Department of the University Policies Secretariat. showed that 55% of the students (more than half of the student population) comes from private High Schools, 40% from public schools, 3.6% from UBA- run secondary schools, and 0.6% from foreign High Schools.

<sup>36</sup> I have taken Norbert Elías's conceptual differentiations in *La sociedad de los individuos*. Barcelona, Península, 1990. While massivity may be regarded as the process of state integration into a public institution, thus deleting differences among individuals, students' individuation appears largely as detachment, or personal self-regulation, when confronted with the precariousness or insufficiency of state integration.

<sup>37</sup> This issue was expounded on in "Figuras de la amistad en tiempos de crisis. La universidad pública y la sociabilidad estudiantil", in Graciela Frigerio y Gabriela Diker (comps). *Educación: figuras y efectos del amor*. Buenos Aires, Del Estante Editorial. 2006. In my article, I posited that friendship at the university fluctuates between a relationship of equals (whether because the friends are students or because they share a political stance) and a relationship between differences, or "asymmetric friendship" in the sense developed by Friedrich Nietzsche.

<sup>38</sup> The 2004 UBA Students' Census states that 52.4% of the students reside in Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and that 45.4% live in Greater Buenos Aires.

<sup>39</sup> Cultural and educational meanings of travelling are a classic in the history of culture; it is reasonable to think that commuting in the city and its surroundings give students the opportunity to learn different things at an age range that starts in adolescence and finishes in early adulthood.

<sup>40</sup> Pedro Krotz asks an interesting question in terms of this study: "What bonds are established among the new youth culture, popular urban culture, and institutional culture in crisis?". In *Op. cit.*, 2002, p. 40.

V) Students' relationship with lecturers is shaped within the experience of massivity, with the correlated risk of losing the intersubjective nature of pedagogic bonds. When lecturers greet their students, the acknowledgement of the latter's status is duly valued as a gesture that marks a difference with anonymity. In turn, lecturers –models to identify with or to reject –are viewed as an enigma that can be explored through new technologies (web search). The bonds between students and lecturers develop in the space set by a hierarchical distance marked by mutual estrangement and contingency. The different appreciations about tutorials [theoretical lectures] (even when there is consensus that this pedagogic resource is in crisis and rather looks like a theatrical staging) fluctuate between agreement that they are “master classes”<sup>41</sup> and a feeling of boredom.

Those lecturers whose knowledge is respected, partly because of their social condition and partly for their detachment, which students relate with what they themselves lack, are invested and acknowledged as ‘close’. The distance between such lecturers and students vanishes as soon as the crisis politicizes the actors, placing them at an equal level. At this point, politics ceases to be a distinctive characteristic of the young and is envisaged, according to the narratives, as a correlative factor of public university teaching.

VI) As a social and subjective construction<sup>42</sup>, in the students' experience the time factor is often disorganized as a consequence of the institutional logic. It is, in fact, an ‘institutional’ time that seems to know nothing of students' time possibilities that rarely involve free time, is deprived of the idle moments typical of the first years, and is regulated by the combination between employment and hours of attendance. The narratives present the family as a presence that often supports that crowded time by accompanying the student in traditional ways (with a ready-to-eat meal when the student arrives home late, for example). This time is not only devoted to work and study, but also to social and/or political activities; in other words, this time is marked by different rhythms (family life, life at work, studies, etc.)

VII) The first years at university are lived as a crucial time of initiation, while the last years turn the university into a kind of stopover, less close and more alien. Thus, at the beginning it is a number of spaces where new experiences are lived, in the cafeteria, the corridors, classrooms, nearby sidewalks, and surroundings. As time passes, and as the lengthening of the course of studies brings about maladjustment to ordinary regularity, students attend university from experiences that have lost their collective quality to become more attached to individual needs or interests and stripped of affects, since peers are no longer at hand and the other students are strangers<sup>43</sup>. This situation is due to the lengthening of the courses of studies, the impact of student labor, and by “students' aging” as a characteristic of the times.

VIII) The students in this survey entered the university in 1997 and 1998 approximately. By 2001, they were quite advanced in their studies. The events of 2001 are very fresh in their memories either because of their direct effects on the individuals or because they catalyzed family or personal crises. In some cases, these events moved students or peers to direct action; in others, they became objects of interpretation through the meanings of the phenomenon as established by the university, and yet in others they became symbolic of a change in the family situation or of an interruption of university studies. At the same time, students feel that 2001 marked a change in the vision of the country and a crisis in the university itself, without a separation between the inside and the outside: the university as another observatory from where to watch the Argentinean crisis. Relativization of democratic values, a certain loss of innocence or hope and, in some cases, the beginning of adulthood with personal and family responsibilities are highlighted. In some cases, too, the crisis is responsible for students having to lengthen the

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<sup>41</sup> "There is no denying that the charisma of the inspired professor, the romance of the character in the pedagogic act, will persist for ever," maintains George Steiner in his examination of how lecturers handle their classes. In *Lecciones de maestros*. Madrid, Editorial Siruela, 2004, p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> I explored this issue in Sandra Carli. "Educación y temporalidad. Hacia una historia del presente". *Zigurat* magazine # 5. Sciences of Communication, School of Social Sciences. Buenos Aires, December 2004.

<sup>43</sup> It is to be noted that the individual component in the sociability among equals weighs more heavily in the first few years. I have taken the notion of “sociability” from Georg Simmel. *Sobre la individualidad y las formas sociales*. Buenos Aires, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2002.

duration of their studies to support their families. On the face of the need to work, the degree is relatively unimportant.

IX) The value or the need of work appears as inevitable, added to the fact that often labor plans are conceived in terms of self-engenderment. Degrees do not seem to be highly appreciated, whether because they are useless for certain kinds of jobs, or because they are an obstacle to obtain other kinds of jobs. These reasons contribute to a longer stay at university, which is also due to the perception that it is necessary for students to “generate” other places before graduating.

X) Students’ global look into the university experience is ambivalent. Some value it and others demystify it; some remember it with joy and others with sorrow, but all of them view it as the first step in a new personal trajectory, called into question because of its present traits, and because, in spite of everything, leaving university does not provide satisfaction.

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