



Social stratification perspective. A theoretical approach on the massification of higher education

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Abstract. *This paper discusses one of the main theories that addresses the explanation of the causes of the expansion of higher education as a social phenomenon, namely the theoretical perspective of social stratification. I will thus try to introduce some elements for the beginning of what social stratification is, as well as about social status and how it is closely related to participation in higher education. This theoretical perspective sees individual opportunities for access to higher education as being capitalized in order to accumulate a certain social status and not for the per se's intention to acquire certain knowledge, and skills. Also, it is not only the individual level that targeted in this paper, but also the collective one, given that the groups of individuals in a society will tend towards social emancipation, given the possibility of obtaining a university degree in this regard.*

Keywords: *Social status, Higher education massification, Access, Social Groups.*

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1. Problems and debates

The way in which individuals relate to the education system, the labor market, but also to other individuals in society is one of the pillars on which this paper is based, thus I intend to discuss in this section how individuals relate to their direct competitors. I am referring here to the concept of “*social status*” which in turn includes multiple explanations of how an individual is viewed in a society. The discussions of social status and that of obtaining a university degree intertwine, given that in modern society obtaining such a diploma can become a status indicator (Windolf, 1997).

In this respect, there is a possibility that the educational decisions of individual actors will lead to long-term undesirable effects for the whole of society. The argument here is that educational expansion is not limited by a social need (as theorists hold the human capital perspective), but rather develops a “*status competition among individuals*” that stimulates them to overcome one another in order to achieve limited jobs (Ibid., p.12).

The demand for higher education underpins the explanations given by the individualistic perspective of the expansion of higher education, with emphasis placed on individual decisions. More specifically, according to this perspective, we can say that the educational expansion in the tertiary education sector is supported by the initiatives of individuals to obtain a university degree. In this way, they can compete with other individuals in society on a multitude of positions (Brown, 2001).

Therefore, it is the dynamics of the need for university degrees and accreditations that influence the fluctuations of registrations in a higher education system. Thus appears the concept of “*social status*”, whose roots can be identified in Max Weber’s sociology in “*Economics and Society*”, where he discusses the competition of status and membership groups, elements of interest for this chapter. By the “*social state*” I shall refer further to the prestige attached to the position of an individual in a society (Weber et al., 1978).

It can also represent the position or rank that the individual occupies in a social group, a status that he can acquire either through his own achievements (status acquired) or through the inheritance of that position in the social hierarchy (status assigned). In the case of the latter, it can be acquired by an individual at birth, by his race, sex or by his social and economic context (Ibid.).

In this way, for Weber, social status represents the confluence of property, power and prestige, which are the three main components of social stratification. By property it refers to the material possessions of an individual that influence his chances in life, while prestige here represents the reputation and self-esteem associated with the position of the individual, and power is his ability to do whatever he wants, regardless of the wishes of others. Thus, says Weber, the development of modern bureaucracy has led incrementally to the substitution of symbolic goods (such as nobility) for goods such as university degrees for access to public office (Weber et al., 1978).

Moreover, other authors consider social status as just as important as economic capital. Here I offer as an example the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who considers that the status indicators of an individual are not limited to the amount of money he holds in the bank, but rather are closely related to the cultural tastes he acquires from his youth. Indeed, however, these tastes are influenced by the class from which it originates and the groups of people in which it develops, hence the importance of individuals acquiring new cultural perspectives that give them the highest social status (Bourdieu, 1984).

As for groups of individuals, Weber argues that they are more likely to be formed on the basis of social status, rather than on the basis of the class to which they belong: *“In contrast to classes, membership groups are normally groups. However, they do not always have a regular structure. Unlike the purely economic ‘class situation’, we wish to designate as status any typical component of people’s lives determined by a specific, positive or negative social estimation of honor. This honor can be linked to any quality shared by a plurality, and of course it can be linked to a class situation: Class distinctions are most variously linked with distinctions of status”* (Weber, Roth, & Wittich, 1978, 932).

In this definition, the term *“honor”* means respect, esteem or distinction that is granted to an individual by other members of society, social recognition that can be both a formal process (obtaining a diploma, accreditation, award, distinction, etc.), but it can also have an informal aspect through social interactions in which individuals give or do not respect to others (forms of greeting, inclusion or exclusion from a social group) (Ibid., 34). For Weber, the concept of *“social honor”* underpins the formation of *“belonging groups”* in the idea that they are formed on the basis of characteristics that are socially accepted by other members of society.

Thus, social honor can recognize features such as lifestyle, cultural, musical, sports tastes, etc.

However, Weber identifies three major categories of social honor that can underpin the acquisition of power and affect the life choices of individuals and groups: Property, lifestyles, and non-property groups. Of these, Weber is particularly interested in groups in which the opportunities offered to individuals in life are closely related to the membership group. Thus, property is a solid basis for a membership group, where those who have considerable resources and wealth have the means at their disposal to develop a certain lifestyle as they wish, which cannot be exercised by individuals who have much more limited resources (Ibid., p. 932).

Lifestyles can also lead to groups of members of the Weberian family, given the income differences between individuals, the environment in which they live, their consumption habits, or the way they dress. Therefore, while income or property held are the underlying elements of how an individual consumes, the source of income is not specifically the reason for the formation of the membership group, but rather the set of objects or services consumed by the individual. Specifically, groups can be formed around a residential district, a profession or an educational level (community, professional associations) (Ibid., 933).

“Job education requirements in industrial society are constantly increasing due to technological change, either because the proportion of jobs requiring low skills decreases and the proportion of those requiring advanced skills increases, or the same jobs increase their qualification requirements (Collins, 2019)”.

I am discussing here the first of the premises launched by Randal Collins regarding one of the functions of education today – technological function. Following the discussion in the previous section where we mentioned the role of technological progress in the development of the human capital factor, this time the perspective is one that sees the increase of university registrations as a consequence of the development of the labor market. In other words, increased educational requirements for employment create the need for as many individuals as possible to spend as much time as possible in higher education, in order to obtain the necessary qualifications and accreditations. One of the available research that Collins is discussing in this regard is that, during the twentieth century, a percentage of about 15% of the educational growth of the United States workforce was due to the changes produced in the field of occupational structures. Specifically, decreased

the number of jobs with low educational requirements (unskilled services or work sector) and increased the number of jobs requiring an increased educational level (technical, managerial professions) (Folger & Nam, 1967).

2. Questions and author hypotheses – theories of conflict and competition

The point from which I am going in this section is that of theories concerning conflict and competition both between individuals and at the level of belonging groups. In this regard, the positions in society for which higher education can facilitate access become the engine of expansion of higher education, with people eager to have the best position in society. This does not, however, lead to an expansion beneficial to all, but rather to a system in which university qualifications abound, but for which there are no available employment positions. I will discuss in this regard what credit inflation is and how over-qualification can create a problem such as the “tragedy of the common goods”, where individual success can lead to the situation being made more difficult at the collective level.

One of the ideas proposed by the theories of conflict and competition is that the more valuable education will be in building a social status, the more the groups of individuals in a society will compete much more intensively for educational success. In this way, there will be an inflation of degrees and arrears in the labor market, which goes far beyond the initial functionalist need of society (Collins, 1971; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). A conflicting theory also assumes that elite groups in a society use education to perpetuate the dominance of the culture of the “status group”, not just to ensure the success of their successors (Bourdieu et al., 1977).

However, the common argument encountered is that expansion is indeed happening faster in the case of a high status competition, but it is less functional (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). This approach, thus, has at its center the idea of competition, but this time not between individuals for social status, but between social groups in order to be able to assert themselves on the political scene, in order to access the decision-making process. From this perspective, the expansion of higher education cannot be placed on the shoulders of an economic fluctuation, as long as it is supported by the pressing need of some groups in society to be listened to at the national level, such as the working classes in front of the burgesia, women in front of men or ethnic minorities in front of *the “Anglo-Saxon white Protestants”* (Windolf, 1997)

The theoretical perspectives of competition for social status and conflict are not mutually exclusive in terms of their perspectives on expansion in higher education. However, they differ in their approach to market competition and collective action. More specifically, both take into account that the driving factor behind the expansion of higher education systems is competition for positions in the labor market that offer a high social status. The difference is made by the opposing poles as competitors, the status competition being centered on competition between individuals, where “*conflict theories*” discuss the “*collective struggle*” of social groups for equal rights and emancipation (Windolf, 1997). The consequence of the competition generated by the need to obtain diplomas creates for individuals an idea of “*the more, the better*”, given that educational certifications serve a very important condition in terms of career options and the possibility to climb the hierarchical ladder in a meritocratic society. Thus, an approach which seems to be entirely rational from the individual point of view becomes socially irrational when we consider the unlimited possibilities and aspirations of individuals for the accumulation of qualifications (Ibid., p.12).

As for the competition for individual status, it is such an intense one that it is very unlikely to be affected by natural limits such as times of crisis or recessions. The argument here held is that individual status becomes all the more desired by individuals in the context of difficult times because of the limited positions that the labor market can offer, in contrast to the human capital theory that supports the opposite (the fact that a poor social situation would lead to low competition in the labor market). More specifically, the more people are looking for a job, the more rational it is for them to attempt to increase their own level of education in order to compete with other members of society and thus to have an advantage over those who have given up their educational path (Windolf, 1997). This discussion inevitably leads to one of the problems highlighted in the previous paragraphs, namely the inflation of university degrees, thus an oversaturation of qualifications in areas that are not sufficiently comprehensive on the labor market. In this regard, Weber says, the development of modern bureaucracy and the transition to democratic governance systems have contributed to the creation and spread of the practice of obtaining credentials. In this regard, obtaining a university degree by completing a course of study and taking an exam has become a way of monopolizing advantageous positions for the individual who has gone through these stages (Weber et al., 1978).

Therefore, the discussion goes to the significance and importance of obtaining a university degree, what it represents and what their role in a society is. As regards educational qualifications typologies, they can be divided at the highest level between diplomas and accreditations generated by public or private institutions. There are also prestigious hierarchies within each of the two categories. From this perspective, diplomas are seen as “*formal abstractions from material realities*” that individuals create in a society in order to transfer legitimacy (Brown & Bills, 2011). Diplomas thus function as sources of power that individuals possess and with which they effectively limit substantive judgments about their true abilities. In other words, having a diploma by the individual can represent a lower cost associated with the thorough examination of his qualifications by using standardization and equivalence procedures. Moreover, having diplomas can reduce the risk of failure in real situations due to the practical element included in the educational process, and coded information can be communicated much more easily to other organizations (Ibid., 135).

The need for formal training to be able to work in the public sector has become one of the engines of the evolution of the systems of diplomas and university accreditations in the modern period. In addition to the impact that the development and expansion of tertiary education has had on university structures, they have also accelerated a process of modernization that Max Weber calls “*the bureaucratization and rationalization of Western nations*” (Schluchter, 1989). The new institutional arrangements aimed to replace aristocratic privileges from birth and patronage of political parties with meritocratic principles and values. In 1883, Japan introduced a system of examination for public service employees aimed at preparing candidates in legal and economic areas (Windolf, 1997). Also, before World War I, France introduced the exam as a mandatory stage for public sector work, which led to a very high schooling of a single private organization that trained civil servants. Thus a monopoly was created in 1900-1930 and thus the positions of high civil servants in France were occupied by the graduates of the *Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques* in proportions ranging from 88% in the Foreign Ministry and up to 96.6% in the State Council (Windolf, 1997).

However, when university expansion is accelerating, there is a risk that the value of university degrees in the labor market will decrease with the increase in the number of diploma holders (Weber et al., 1978). Therefore, we are talking here about an inflation of diplomas/accreditations, a term that currently has a rather

economic connotation when we talk about rising prices and decreasing monetary value. For this paper, however, diploma inflation represents the increased number of degrees and qualifications individuals obtain in order to compete on a limited number of positions in society (Windolf, 1997). In this way, Windolf points out that educational expansion, the structure of universities, the meritocratic selection of bureaucrats, and the political struggle of social classes for access to higher education are mutually reinforcing processes. Thus, the more important a university degree is for a higher office, the more the political conflict will intensify between those who have had access to higher education and individuals who have been excluded from this educational process (Windolf, 1997). What is happening in practice is that the increased flow of university degrees in the labor market is greater than the absorption capacity of the economy, which causes the real value of diplomas to decrease in relation to employers (Brown & Bills, 2011).

3. Statistics and conclusions

The third and last section of this paper aims to fix the previous theoretical notions with the help of statistical data that take into account both the global access of individuals to higher education and the world thresholds that determine from which moment we can discuss higher education systems with high participation. The intention of individuals to take part in higher education comes from the desire of their predecessors to facilitate them with the greatest possible opportunities for the future through their long participation in formal tertiary education. Also, the individual desire for personal affirmation and achievement is one of the factors that support this expansion which, given the inequalities already existing in society (income, ethnic affiliation, etc.), will inevitably lead to a strained system on all levels.

Given the data made available by UNESCO through the Gross tertiary Enrollment rate (GTER), global participation in higher education is increasing (up to 1%) year-on-year. Worldwide participation of individuals aged 18 to 22 in higher education is one third of the cohort of this age range (Marginson, 2016). The trend toward high-participation higher education systems (i.e. where the number of people in the above-mentioned age range exceeds 50%) has expanded from countries in rich areas to countries in middle-income or even poor areas. Thus, the exaption of higher education systems has become both a normality in modern societies, as well

as an indicator for social differentiation between individuals and for their allocation on the labor market through the obtained diplomas (Baker, 2011). Between 1970 and 2013, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased at a rate of 6.12, while the population of the world grew at a rate of only 1.93. Also, since 2000, the expansion has been accelerated and, as we mentioned earlier, the growth of 1% in a year represents 20% in 20 years. This will lead to a gross global tertiary enrollment rate of 50%, i.e. during the next generation (World Bank, 2022).

Thus, according to statistics, all high-income countries and most middle-income countries tend to or have already exceeded the 50% higher education enrollment threshold for young people aged 18-22 years (Marginson, 2016). The world designed through the development of higher education requires a developed public infrastructure, properly managed resources, viable banking systems, all of them distributed as evenly as possible in society. From this point of view, high-participation higher education systems are initiated and regulated at state level, and graduates are inserted, in greater or lesser proportions, into national and global economy (Marginson, 2016). The moment when society and higher education intersect and when expansion is triggered is not represented by state regulations or by the demand of employers. More specifically, even though the social demand for higher education continues to grow, the real need for bureaucrats and employers is a “*partial and episodic*” one and their intersection with higher education institutions is not a daily one (Marginson, 2016). Also, according to Marginson, it is not research that facilitates university expansion, even though it leads to increased global knowledge and supports the social status and culture developed by elite universities (Ibidem).

What, however, influences the dynamism of higher education in systems that have gone from higher education for the elite to mainstream education is, in Trow's view, the ambition of individuals to occupy social positions and of students to realize themselves personally (Trow, 1973). In today's societies, the path to a better or even privileged job is paved with years spent in higher education, with parents' desire for their children being that formal education (especially tertiary education) is the path to success. This leads, according to Trow, to universal education systems, where access is very high and individuals can participate in as many as possible (Trow, 1972). On the other hand, Marginson argues, the opportunities that education should generate are not universal in capitalist societies. In other words, even if society is backed by a strong economy, or a weaker economy, it will

inevitably be stratified on income levels and hierarchical scales. Therefore, at any time in any society there is a limited number of advantageous positions that individuals can occupy, no matter how many have gone through a tertiary education cycle (Marginson, 2016).

One of the reasons I opted here for a discussion on university expansion viewed from the perspective of social stratification is that, with the completion of the studies, the path of the students does not become as clear as they expect. While graduates enjoy advantages over non-graduate individuals, students often create unreasonable optimistic expectations about their future prospects (Arum & Roksa, 2014, pp. 84-85). Also, the relationship between higher education and the labor market is fragmented (Robst, 2007) and thus the gains that mass education brings are unclear. From this point of view, human capital theory does not provide sufficient empirical data to support the argument that individuals invest in their own education to increase their future return. In the present case, the occupational status behaves as a motivational factor at least as strong as the economic factor, namely the expected income after graduation (Triventi, 2013, p. 57). The majority practice with regard to higher education systems is that states, through governments, regulate tuition levels, and the educational dimension is determined by factors such as regulations, policies, and funding. In this way, states play the most important role in creating demands for mass higher education by budgeting the costs of schooling and living (Marginson, 2016).

Although graduation does not guarantee a certain way forward for individuals, states find themselves in a position to support the development and expansion of higher education, given the pressure that is being brought about at the societal level. Both the social elites, middle classes in ascendancy have created pressure on governments to invest in tertiary education, with families wanting a better future for their children, rich in opportunities and perspectives (Marginson, 2016). The response of states to this is to invest resources in the creation and development of mass education, the main impetus being the social pressure that is formed from the bottom up. Middle- and low-income countries are only able to begin the process of massification of higher education when the pressure from individuals becomes very stringent. This phenomenon occurs both in states with consolidated democracies and in those where democracy is defective or even non-existent because of the governance of a single party. In other words, university expansion is taking place directly in connection with the development of national political agendas. More

specifically, it is much easier to create educational opportunities than jobs, which contributes to the transfer of social responsibility of results from the state to individuals and higher education institutions (Kemp & Norton, 2014).

In terms of social stratification and degree of inclusion, high-participation higher education systems are more socially inclusive compared to elite education systems. This trend toward widening access to higher education leads to an increase in the ability of individuals to discern, but also in the transversal capabilities they learn. The only condition for this process to be successful is that the higher education system is effective in training and improving the skills and future trajectories of graduates (Sen, 2000). From this point of view, individuals in a society where participation in higher education is high learn a set of skills specific to the academic environment. Therefore, on average, individuals are more accustomed to assimilating new information, more reflexive, more likely to understand how government or the private environment works, but also have the potential to be more productive at work (Marginson, 2016, p.422). However, higher education leads to stratification of the structure of opportunities, since not all higher education participations have attributed the same value to the labor market. In this manner, populations of individuals are stratified, higher education is stratified, but the results generated by universities are stratified (Ibid., p. 422).

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