



## **Managing contradictions: the university under a radical political view**

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Abstract

## **Managing contradictions: the university under a radical political view**

This paper shows the results of empirical research trying to measure academic performance in a society undergoing changes under a radical political view of the university. The strategy has been to measure the size and impact of the academic community: in this case collecting empirical data on what type of community do the different types of universities serve. The research was conducted in Venezuelan universities. We analyze the higher education system in this society and then the political environment where a radical government is taking steps to have the whole higher educational system as well as the universities under the direct political and ideological control of the government, trying to change from capitalism to a socialist society. Our conclusion analyses the effects felt by universities in Venezuela in the transition from capitalism to socialism, including the student's rebellion that took place in Venezuela in May 2007.

# **Managing contradictions: the university under a radical political view**

## **Introduction**

No society is free from conflicts and contradictions. These organizations develop along the lines of such a structure than diverse interest and motivation cross each other with unavoidable consequences in every one of their institutions. This happens to be the case of Venezuela, a South American country, and higher education. This paper addresses such a problem: what are the consequences for higher education of the conflicts and contradictions which are visible in this society in the last decade. The fact is that in such a span of time this society has gone from democracy to autocracy and to a plural higher education system in which both the State and the market participate to one transition in which this society is entering the arduous road through which a society is changed by a revolutionary government, from a capitalist society to a socialist one, this time adopting the so far undefined version of socialism 21st Century.

The conflicts of Venezuelan society have been documented. Many have argued in Venezuela that the collapse of the traditional political party system opened the way for the current government and it is often said in Venezuela that the leaders of whatever is called nowadays a revolution is the consequence not so much of them gaining power but founding it on the floor. Whatever the explanation the fact is that in 2007 a government in power since 1999 is taking all the radical steps they judge necessary to obtain full and total control of all the institutions in this society, and driving them into a new format, socialism instead of capitalism, in both cases under the umbrella of a powerful State supported by the oil income (McCoy, 1999; Morgan, 2007).

These conflicts and contradictions are accelerated when societies are under severe stress, which is the Venezuelan case and which we are going to analyze as a case study in this paper. It has been argued that development of higher education rely upon two factors: institutional continuity and political stability. This argument might be proved wrong in the region. Cuba has long been a society that during almost half a century has lived under the operation of these concepts without having developed in higher education. On the other hand, it has been argued that development in higher education needs institutional autonomy and academic freedom and this is also a wrong argument since many systems has developed without either one of these characteristics, or to say is from another angle many system has had institutional autonomy and academic freedom and has not managed to developed a higher education system of quality.

What we are going to argue in this paper is that conflicts and contradictions common as they are to all societies, have to be managed into some normal pattern of institutional behavior because when they are allowed to work into the extremes perhaps the tensions of the system are such that the disruptions become serious obstacles for the working operation of the system. We believe that this is the case of Venezuela and the way to understand this trend is through the analysis of how these contradictions are being managed in such a fashion that they are creating conflicts that are blocking the elementary variables that affect academic quality.

Let us point out that tensions and conflicts are on the increase in 2007, in Venezuela. On May 24 2007 the government expanded higher education much beyond the possibilities and capabilities of this society, increasing the number of public institutions as to create a pressure equivalent to expansion of some thirty three per cent with a higher education system capacity to growth of

about five per cent.<sup>1</sup> Careful studies show, in fact, that the best policy would be to adjust expansion to real growth and in such a case and given the lack of educational resources found in countries like Venezuela, instead of expanding the system should be reducing its size. On the other hand on May 28, 2007 it closed down a commercial TV channel and took over their proprieties substituting the commercial one with a governmental controlled channel, another step to achieve the ultimate goal: full and absolute control of the mass media and have them at the service of the revolution.

### **Developing a homogeneity of profiles**

This is why it is so easy to understand the steps taken for this government to control higher education, searching to eliminate diversity and to apply strict homogeneity. The public policies are issued attending to a vision in which there is only one institutional profile, discarding diversity as an objective. The government follows a single line of thought and a single goal: to transform this society from capitalism to socialism. This is done not only in ideological terms but mainly supporting a moral platform involving building a *new society* and consequently a *new man*. This implies homogeneity and uniformity. The strong private sector, which operates some 30 per cent of the students' body and 21 per cent of the number of institutions, will not be an easy target but this is an ideological issue and a political problem that will still take some time to be solved.

Let us present some empirical findings, concerning the relationships of the Venezuelan universities we have taken for our study and the level of the community they serve. What we did here was simply to collect information in Venezuela to compare it with the European results published in *Trends 2003. Progress towards the European Higher Education Area* (July, 2003). There is a difference, however. The data in Europe was collected among Heads of HEIs. This is not possible since people at the head of Venezuelan institutions would not answer questionnaires, *at all*. In our case we did mailed those to both the Rectors and to the Vice Rectors for Academic Affairs and with the exception of those who we knew in personal terms did acknowledge receiving the instruments but even so they did not answer even if the questions and objectives of the study were clearly stated and explained. As an option we took members of the faculty. That was not a problem. However, it means our data is not comparable with the European since we took different sources.

The idea was to argue that in Europe diversity of the university it also imply that the European landscape is remarkable homogeneous. That is to say those universities can have diversity as a goal and still pursue common objectives. That is not the case in Venezuela where different universities see their role as attending different communities, so that are heterogeneous. This is what the revolutionary government plans to change: to eliminate diversity and impose homogeneity, by controlling these institutions into the same format, making them to operate within the same institutional profile. The instrument to achieve that would be the ideological ideas of socialism, since this society is going through the transition between the plural capitalistic societies to the socialist homogeneous one.<sup>2</sup> The results can be seen in Table N° 1.

**Table N° 1 Primary target communities in Europe and in Venezuela, a comparison**

Community	European universities	Autonomous universities	Governmental universities	Private universities
Local	1.8%	15%	28%	48%
Regional	20.3%	28%	20%	20%

National	51.9%	32%	16%	9%
European/Latin-American	6.9%	11%	14%	5%
World-wide	15.9%	9%	1%	1%
NA	3.1%	4%	21%	17%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: the European information in *Trends 2003. Progress toward the European higher education area*. A report prepared for the European University Association by Sybille Reichert and Christian Tauch. N° 1. 2003. The Venezuelan data was collected by the authors of this paper.

This refers Parson's terms on pattern variables "polar alternatives of possible orientation selection" (Parsons, 1951: 59); the terminology selected gives the reader the impression that each pattern variable is composed of two discreet categories; perhaps it might be more useful to treat each variable as a continuum, recognizing the fact that a role may call for varying degrees of affectivity, from complete optimization of gratification to complete neutrality in this area. Then the sociologist could study a reciprocal role relationship in terms of the degree to which it approaches the ideal polar type. Parsons gives the reader the impression that he believes the "perfect" or most desirable type of interaction pattern is one in which ego's focus on a given variable is matched by its polar opposite in alter (Blau, 1962).

On the other hand, transition means in his context that the university under the socialist approach will pay more attention to the local and regional communities than to the world-wide space. To achieve this policy is to open as many university campuses all over the country under the municipalities space policy. There are 333 municipalities in Venezuela and the government under the new policy is opening universities in each one of them. This implies isolation from the international tendencies and perhaps a lowering of academic quality all over the country. This is obvious. Quality is a complex variable and opening access to students is not enough. Each one of them needs the complementary essential elements that are imperative to the most elementary level of whatever is defined as higher education. In the case of our research it is clear ha only he autonomous universities have the vocation to join the international academic arena but this universities are under two pressures: first the are not homogenous academic communities since many of their members are inclined to accept the ideological and political stands of the government –socialism- and also they are operating under pressure from the government to join the revolution and to abandon other responsibilities than the so-called social orientation of the university.

### **The academic conflicts and contradictions**

To sustain our arguments we are going to use both an analytical as well as an empirical approach. In the first case in order to show the character of these contradictions created by the government le us begin with a clear cut example. Before going into that let us describe the political situation of this society, which is undergoing a major over-haul, being this society changed from the model that came into being in 1958, when a decade long military dictatorship was overthrown and democracy restored. In nay case, this country has lived under the capitalistic umbrella since the multinational companies came to Venezuela almost a century ago, in the late tens of the XX century and transformed both economy and society, from the rural and agricultural society to the petro-State society that has since then characterized Venezuela (Karl, 1999).

In 1998 a popular election brought to power a retired Army Colonel that had failed twice to win power via the ordinary coup but with a clever political campaign and supported by a sclerotic

political system that has lost all the strengths it had when they came to power in 1958. He did not come to power empty handed. He came with a political and ideological project based upon the vision of being a revival of ideas and thoughts of the national hero Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) and he revitalized the ideas of the political left that been their being in this society with the advent of the oil society, in the late twenties of XX Century.

There are enough sources to study the political aspects of these changes. The point to be made is that almost after a decade after the coming to power of this movement they are in total and full control of the institutions of this society and in fact they have managed to create an international impact far beyond the size and muscle of this small South American society. Many people in Venezuela believe that this has been possible only because this government has had a huge amount of income due to the increased prices of oil in the international market. This might be true, since it has allow this government to both increase current expenditures within this society increasing political support by distributing part of this income to the poor people of this society but also to become an important actor in South America and the Caribbean using oil as a geopolitical instrument to obtain ideological and political support, creating a political block of some importance defined by the close friend, Cuba and its President, and the enemy all love to hate: USA and its current President: G. W. Bush. They have as well opened new international relationship, with countries like Iran, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam and strengthened relations with Putins´ Russia –another petro-State with many political similarities to Venezuela, and China. These achievements need more than simply income from oil; it also shows a very efficient exercise in political leadership. This can be observed in a simply proved fact: the almost unknown political maverick that took clever advantages of the decadent political system he faced and defeated has become almost a decade later an international political leader. If this fact is good or bad for Venezuelan society, that is another story.

The main proposal of the ideological and political approach of this government is the transformation of this society, from the model that was installed in the country a century ago, the international capitalism that created the oil society –dependant income from oil as the almost unique source of income, to a socialist society. Having said that it is time we leave the political aspects aside and devote ourselves to the main body of our paper, the consequences to higher education of the contradictions that takes places in this society in the higher education arena and its consequences fort the working operation of such an educational system, higher education and specially the universities. However, before doing that it is to be mentioned that the government is applying the technique of what we call the dichotomy provoked by those in power and they have created parallel system, in higher education, one the existent previous to its arrival in power and the other created from the power they have to open institutions as they wish. The student´s movement is a case in point. When students proceeded to mobilize their rebellion against the government they created an artificial parallel students movement and that way they managed to neutralize the opposition leaded by the student movement which has the legitimacy of being elected in their universities, as against those appointed by the government.

### **The education approach of the new government**

The approach taken by the Venezuelan government has been called *academic populism* (Albornoz, 2003; 2005). Through this vision it was advanced a radical education policy: to increase access to higher education in order to make it universal. Quality was not an issue, at all. The issue would be ideologization, but this came later on since as a tactic the proposal to transform this society from capitalism to socialism came to be an issue only in 2006, during the national election, after the current President gained a new period in power, through that election.<sup>3</sup>

The mechanics of change followed some innovations. The government had two problems, how to increase access in all levels of the schooling process and how to overcome the autonomous universities meaning how to control them, politically speaking without having to implement the common policies used all over the region to control higher education, the procedure through out students were jailed, professor exiled and universities closed down. At his point came the Cuban connection. This meant Venezuela adopting the ideological and political approach used in Cuba but with anew and clever twist: instead of taking direct control of the universities that were outside the governmental environment they opened an alternative system achieving their goals at a very low political cost.

This has opened the doors to a very delicate conflict, between two well defined areas of concern: in one hand, the institutions controlled by the government and in the other the autonomous universities as well as the private sector of higher education. This conflict is reflected in the fact that there are two rector's association: those rector's that belong to the governmental controlled universities: ARBOL (*Asociación de Rectores Bolivarianos*) as well as those from the autonomous and private institutions: AVERU (*Asociación Venezolana de Rectores Universitarios*). We risk being repetitive at this point: the procedure through which a parallel association of rector's has been opened has been so far the predicament of the Venezuelan revolution: the dichotomization of society, opening parallel institution whenever needed with the hope to later on take over that institution. The government either control a given institution, *ergo* the Army, the National Assembly, the oil industry, the telephone and electricity companies or they open a parallel procedure through which whatever administrative or political space is in dispute the government creates a false equilibrium and give the impression of being a contestant even if they do not have the strength to be one.

Let us say that the government has enough financial resources to finance both of this two higher education sectors but it privileges its own in detriment of the other, which is being threatened in two of its most respected characteristics, institutional autonomy and academic freedom. There is in fact a new methodology being used in Venezuela in order to control the higher education system, which goes away from direct confrontation and prefers intimidation, threats and the creation of an atmosphere of fear in which people members of the divided academic community chooses silence and conform to the situation as much as they can, many of them entering the unproductive road to alienation (Shils, 1961: 15) or the way of going abroad, the brain-drain that takes place in these circumstances. Suffice to say that after many incidents in this area of concern there are currently some five thousand scientific personnel of some qualifications in the country but in the last decade they came from almost zero in 2000 to ten thousand working abroad in 2007, which means an intellectual de-capitalization that is affecting the stock of human resources available to Venezuelan higher education.

In less than a decade the Venezuelan government has develop a strategy, to increase access, using several educational procedures. At the end of the day is can bee seen in 2007 that this strategy was not an academic strategy as technically understood but a fully ideologically motivated element to facilitate the transition that the government is carrying along, the radical transformation of society, the creation of a new man/women and a new set of values, those of socialism instead of those of the opposite society they denounce as being the evil of all ills of society, from poverty to disease and moral defects.

Between 1959 and 1998 we find in Venezuela the typical plural higher education system known all over: institutional diversification, strong private sector, inequality as a trait, having more a

higher proportion of those students coming from the middle and upper strata of society and denying access to the poor segments of the society, discriminating ethnic minorities specifically those from African and native stocks. It was a successful system in as much it trained the members of the elite, in the professions, but also trained those who rebelled against the system, as it happens everywhere. In fact, the ruling elite that actually rule the country, from both the Army and the civilian environment were trained in those years during which scholarships programs financed many Venezuela going abroad to obtain advanced degrees in the most prestigious universities, mainly in USA and in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

But in 1999 the government was in a hurry to change and taking advantages of some political and ideological events that took pace in the country a reinforced government began in 2002 to change higher education and they did it where needs were more felt, attuning to the needs of those who have been without any access to higher education: the poor. So they opened with vigor a parallel system, they opened new universities and applied an instance of rapid increasing the opportunities to enter higher education, the program called the *misiones*. To begin with they opened their official university; *Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela* which from the scratch was and is an official institution devoted to train the cadres of the revolution. More than that, they took an already functioning institution, *Universidad Experimental de la Fuerza Armada* and massified it with gusto, increasing their size from 2000 to almost half a million students in only four years.

Little by little the autonomous institutions began to suffer though preserving their working operation. These universities are the blood and flesh of the academic system *per se*. They produce almost all the knowledge innovations generated in this country, which in spite of being well behind the leading countries in knowledge production in the region –Mexico, Brazil and Argentina shows a decent if below capacity academic performance and keep the links of this country to the international academic community. They have been under pressure form the government asking them to come down from the supposed Ivory Tower in which they are and come down and join the people in their revolutionary efforts.

The current phase of the government tactics are the *motores*. This step symbolizes the naked and brutal ideological approach. It means a concept of education for all with only one purpose in mind and action: to persuade through a teaching process all Venezuelans into the doctrine of the government and its final goal, to achieve a socialist society. The *motores* are simply the engine of change. According to their predicament no Venezuelan can be outside this purpose and this asks the autonomous universities their final question: are you with us or are you the enemies of the revolution? This is the real dilemma being faced by the autonomous universities. This is a replica of what is happening to several other institutions of this society, the pressure from the government to take over all the working functions of this society, trying to close down the private sector and imposing the Stat as the sole and unique instance taking decisions in this society. It should be said that the government control already the key institution of this society: the Army –it is a military government, the National Assembly –that does not have any members of the non-Honorable opposition who chose at a given time not to participate in the election to this Assembly, the economy –through control of the oil income and a tight currency control, it does not obey any transparency and corruption is rampant and checks and balances have long being abandoned with a leader willing to say in power forever. In this situation the strategy of the government is to control and to have the State to dictate how to conduct public affairs.

The offensive that is taking place as we write this article include control of the mass media, of the private health services, of the private school system and in general the efforts to imitate the Cuban system, a closed society. One word should be said here about the role of Cuba in Venezuelan



affairs. Without any prejudice the association between the countries looks like a marriage arranged in heaven. Cuba provide the heroic example of the small country that was able to defy the American empire –actually to defeat it in the incident of Bay of Pigs and Venezuela share her oil income and in fact deliver the country to the medical and other Cuban personnel that right now amount to some one hundred people working in different areas in the country. In the past couple of years other countries have somehow joined these two countries as to create a block which is following, apparently, the same political and ideological framework: Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. The common ideological traits are to create a socialist society, the furious attack to the American empire, the veneration of the old revolutionary icons and the belief that capitalism is a negative perspective. To achieve this strategy has been a permanent confrontation with the American government and the supposedly submissive allies in the region, any other country actually, taking advantages of the old enmity between some of the failures of the region and the successful Americans Rangel, 999). A love and hate relationship that has defined this awkward historical situation of two areas of the same Continent that some how have traveled different roads.

### **The nature of contradictions and its consequences**

We would like to point out which to us is perhaps the main contradiction visible in Venezuelan higher education. Let us first read the following paragraph:

From the academy we defend and we protected the necessary spaces for the construction of the social capital of the young and future generations of our country, in a context of critical and diverse thought, convinced that the development of knowledge depends on the freedom to examine and to question, and that the academic freedom and the university autonomy are essential for this aim<sup>5</sup>

This text belongs to a document written by the vice rectors of academic affairs of all the Venezuelan universities, both those controlled by the government and those that oppose their tactics and strategies in the area. To see how profound is the contradictions of this text we will have to come into lengths argument showing the two sides, but it is enough to realize through this paragraph that the vice rectors for academic affairs are claiming the government to obey the constitutional framework and to respect institutional autonomy and academic freedom, both of which are being neglected by a governmental approach keen on controlling every aspect of this society, including threats to the private mass media and actually creating an alternative mass media networks that is leaded into the direction of a single channel to voice only official concerns in detriment of minorities including intellectual and academic groups.

This paper shows the results of empirical research trying to measure academic performance in a society undergoing changes under a radical political view of the university. The strategy has been to measure the size and impact of the academic community. The research was conducted in Venezuelan universities. We analyze the higher education system in this society and then the political environment were a radical government is taking steps to have the whole higher educational system as well as the universities under the direct political and ideological control of the government, trying to change to a socialist society.

### **Measuring academic performance under accelerated political changes**

We report in this paper the results of empirical research trying to measure academic performance

in a society undergoing changes under a radical political view of the university. In this case we enter into the area of the consequences of the ideological and political situation being lived in Venezuelan society, going as we have said from one society to the other, from the so-called capitalistic interpretation to the socialist one, the two versions supported any way by the structure of the oil society and being Venezuela a petro-State all along. We add that measurement of educational outcome is not welcome in Venezuela. In fact, the standardized test to choose those who were to enter the universities, a technical asset created in 1980 was eliminated in 2007 under the predicament that any measurement is contrary to the principle of equity and justice. We feel that by doing so corruption and lack of transparency will be in the increasing lowering the opportunities to raise academic quality.

The methodological strategy has been to measure the size and impact of the academic community in each of these institutions, applying some questionnaires to members of the academic staff of these institutions. The research was conducted in three Venezuelan universities, each one corresponding to the three types of universities in this country: autonomous, governmental and private. We have analyzed briefly system in this society and then the political environment were a radical government is taking steps to have the whole higher educational system as well as the universities under the direct political and ideological control of the government, a constitutional government trying to change their format from that concept to another, a socialist society that would overcome the capitalist framework under which this society has developed in the last Century, until 1999 when this government came into power.

The data collected between March and June in 2006 shows results that are revealing of the not fully understood characteristics of this higher educational system: it is more a bureaucracy than an academic community. Our sample gathered information from 219 members of the faculty in the three types of higher education institution already mentioned. The main questions had to do with how academic performance was affected by the political and ideological changes that were taken place in the country. The results show little doubt in relation to the fact that most people are indifferent to these political changes as long as there personal security is provided without any negative changes. This is one of the key elements of our paper: security is praised more than any risk whatsoever.

It should be said that the academic labor market in Venezuela is close to perfection. It is employment for life with full security going well beyond the physical disappearance of the members of the faculty since salaries and compensations are fully inherited by the survivors. It is causes for amusement the fact that when a member of the faculty dies the surviving spouse receives the salaries and compensation until he or she dies or remarries, an event that apparently takes place only rarely. We must add that increases in salaries and compensation are also attributed to the survivors meaning that the earning power of the deceased member of the faculty is kept intact even after his or her death.

### **Conclusion: academic strategies in turbulent times**

It is time to end our paper, with a question: will the market society be substituted by the State closed society without any other big bang and in such a case, what will be the role of Venezuela higher education and its universities? In *Managing conflicts and contradictions: changes in higher education in the transition from capitalism to socialism* we have tried to be as objective as we can, being both of us part of the problem we are trying to analyze. Whatever the outcome our empirical findings show the weak development of the Venezuela academic community and how easy would be for the government to take over, whenever they chose to do so. Courageous intellectual opposition does nothing to stop those in national power to take control of the higher

education public and private system and to eliminate institutional autonomy and academic freedom. On this matter we could emphasize that this academic community cares very little about these concepts that are seen as rhetorical aspects of the working operation of higher education, as we already discussed in this paper.

Perhaps we could take solace in the proven fact that societies work out their changes in cycles. The transition from socialism and the closed society to capitalism and the open society is actually quite recent in the European historical experience. It has been a change for the better, could be said, though there are those nostalgic of the past and willing to keep that they should go back to their ominous past. The dynamics of societies does allow going back; they go forward whatever the circumstances.

But one is true: this government may be able to change this society as they propose to do and to change the higher educational system but they will be unable to work out the social routines and culture that characterized this society and its higher educational system. So far however the pressure from the government has not helped very much in improving academic quality –quite the contrary academic productivity might be slowing down, academic corruption is on the rise due to lack of controls and regulations, being stability the order of the day, ideological indoctrination will not narrow the gap which is being installed between this small South American society and their counterparts in the developed academic area of the world.

In the very end of the analysis we may reaffirm the confirmed known historical fact: those who are willing to change it all are known to fail, though at a very high cost to their societies. Revolutions can be costly affairs, indeed. Perhaps evolutionary changes are more feasible and profitable. But fanaticism and fundamentalism are very attractive paths and it is easy to understand the almost religious fervor of many Venezuelans that follows the steps of the leadership that is trying to change this society and its institutions.

For the time being we can say that the Venezuelan case might demonstrate how instability and the lack of continuity do not help to raise the standard of academic quality needed by modern societies to be able to achieve the necessary links between academic knowledge and practical life. Insofar as international tendencies in higher education go the issues to be solved are raising academic quality, creating the environment for equity in access and participation in higher education with no restrictions of any kind except those elements which are essential to guarantee academic and intellectual success, provide libraries and learning facilities attuned to the knowledge society and keep a research agenda that favors creativity and innovation.

It looks like Venezuela is taking the road less profitable for society. Is taking ideologization as the primary engine of this educational system, full State control and in fact ending ideological and political pluralism as well as institutional diversity. Will this work for the needs of this society? We do not know but we are among the most interested to see the outcome.

In any case, the ideas that have inspired the European trends find their opposite in places like Venezuela. It has been maintained in Europe that "Minister's agreed that more attention should be paid to the benefit of a European Higher Education Area with institutions and programmes with different profiles." (Prague, 2001). If such an idea were to be expressed in Venezuela right now, June 2007, the sentence would read with emphasis in *the same profile*. This is simply the goal of the Venezuelan government: the same ideas behind all institutions of this society under the glorious flags of socialism. Many people in this country feel that these steps mark the end of the university as we know it in the liberal tradition, showing *the dark side of socialism*, the same way

as Hollinger (1996) reported in relation to *the dark side of liberalism*.

In the meantime, the contradictions in Venezuelan society can be seen in the independent student's rebellion and the bureaucratic answer from the government, which took place in May 2007. At this date, the government decided to take steps to close down the most popular commercial TV channel supported by legal procedure, but without listening to public opinion. Students aligned in the opposition rebelled and made demonstration all over the country—students from both public and private universities. The answer from the government was typical of the dichotomy that is being applied as a strategy by the government: they quickly organised their own student's movement and by doing so managed to neutralize the opposition, creating the fiction of equilibrium between those who opposed the government and its supporters.

This is not the place to make this analysis, but it shows as we have argued, the contradictions which are the order of the day in such a transition in Venezuela, from capitalism to socialism. A most difficult transition because the revolution is trying to reach this extraordinary historical achievement by doing so within a constitutional framework. These are the contradictions that are being managed in Venezuela. To what extent they are going to succeed is a matter of the future, of course, but here is no way to deny that this experiment is an innovation in a country that have kept political stability in spite of all the radical changes initiated in the last two decades, in this case from the neoliberal policies of adjustment implemented in the seventies to the socialist approach taken in the first decade of the 21st Century.

Universities are remarkable flexible and resilient organizations, though. They are facing new stresses within them, in Venezuela. But they will survive and whatever the course of action that the current government impose upon this system of higher education they will bounce back to whatever is called the international flow of knowledge. Universities can grow and develop taking different directions and for this reason diversity is a welcome pattern of institutional behaviour. Having them walking a single and only road towards its objectives is to deny them the opportunities to produce and disseminate knowledge, under the understanding that to pursue knowledge is a universal obligation to all institutions that are called universities, whatever their political and ideological stand.

As we finalize this paper protest and complaints from the students have increased the tensions between the government and society in Venezuela. These events took place in May and June 2007 and they shows a new actor in the ongoing struggle for power in this society, this time the students and the autonomous universities, as well as some private institutions, at the front line of civic resistance to what they believe are the signs of a totalitarian and dictatorial society. As said, this is an ongoing process and it is too early to offer a definitive conclusion on the questions examined on this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an estimate. We have calculate that the Venezuelan higher education system could grow in about five per cent every year considering a number of variables like: teachers trained at a good level, libraries to support the increase in the number of students, laboratories, class room and services like health, sport and cafeterias. The universities created in 2007 have not gone through the ordinary bodies that certify opening new universities. In fact, they were not planned nor discussed in the national academic community. They were simply created by the President using his discretionary power. The pressure we have mentioned of thirty three per cent will make the system unmanageable and inefficient in terms of academic quality

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<sup>2</sup> We took a sample of those members of the faculty at the top level of their institutions. A questionnaire was mailed via e-mail. We followed all the standards requirements in applying this survey. We checked our results with a control group of members of the faculty belonging to middle and low levels of the academic hierarchy. Interesting to mention that in the European case the response rate was representative: 45 % of the HEIs returned the questionnaires, all but one of the ministries, 90 % of the rector's conferences, 80 % of the student association and 50 per cent of the employers associations. We had close to 55 % of returned questionnaires (members of the faculty) and in 83 % in the cases we had to mail them several times requesting an answer. Such is the situation in Venezuela that the academic community is being divided along the lines of political and ideological and in certain institutions is not possible to conduct any empirical research.

<sup>3</sup> This and other Venezuelan elections have been contested by some critics of Venezuela political life. Statistical data have been presented as evidence of an electoral fraud. See: *Realidades del Sistema Electoral Venezolano*, 2006. Caracas: Publicación del Frente Patriótico. These evidences have been presented in several occasions at Venezuelan universities. The data is very impressive. Any person living in Venezuela could testify of the abuses of power by the current government in such a way that many have called this government a *communicational monarchy*, in as much as the leader of the revolution is a permanent fixture on the electronic mass-media, through the clever methodology of the *cadena*, meaning that the President can speak for hours, whenever he chooses to do so, through all the Venezuelan radio and TV channels. This is one of the issues protested during the student's rebellion of May 2007 since it offends the democratic standing of the society, according to the opponents to the government. The current government has won all the elections that have taken place since the first one, December 1988 and there is no way to deny that its leader is highly popular and have an emotional connection with the poor and destitute of this society, which explains his winning elections in spite of above mentioned the irregularities. This sector of society makes for a majority and the political system has been organized in such a way that the majorities control power and the minorities have become simple spectators of the whole affair.

<sup>4</sup> Just as an example we could mention the fact that the three minister of higher education that have been in office during the years of the revolution were trained in Manchester, Oxford and Western Ontario, all the three of them having obtained PhD's degrees. The three of them did their studies, both inside and outside the country, with generous subsidies from top to bottom of their professional careers.

<sup>5</sup> Desafíos y debates de la universidad venezolana en la actualidad. Consejo Nacional de Universidades y Núcleo de Vicerrectores Académicos. Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, March 01, 2007. "Desde la academia defendemos y amparamos los espacios necesarios para la construcción del capital social de las generaciones jóvenes y futuras del país, en un marco de pensamiento crítico y diverso, convencidos de que el desarrollo del conocimiento depende de la libertad para examinar y cuestionar, y que la libertad académica y la autonomía universitaria son esenciales para este fin"

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