

Emerging counterhegemonic models in higher education: The Federal University of Southern Bahia (UFSB) and its contribution to a renewed geopolitics of knowledge (interview with Naomar de Almeida Filho)

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Santos, Salvador: Edufba, 2010); *A Universidade no Século XXI: Para uma Universidade Nova* (with Fernando Seabra Santos, Coimbra: Almedina, 2008); and *A Quarta Missão da Universidade* (Coimbra: Publisher of the University of Coimbra, 2012).

Dr. Naomar de Almeida Filho



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Manuel Tavares: *The institutional model of the Federal University of Southern Bahia was designed to meet "the circumstances of the new Brazil's economic and political position in the contemporary world as well as to social and economic specificities of southern Bahia State." This statement suggests that the traditional models of Federal Universities do not respond to the demands of the new Brazilian economic scenario. If this inference is true, what are the differences, from the political-pedagogical point of view, between UFSB's new institutional framework and traditional institutional matrices?*

Naomar de Almeida Filho: The assumptions of your question are correct and relevant. Indeed, the Brazilian university does not meet the demands of the current national context. Higher education in Brazil maintains the model of direct entry into professional training courses consolidated by the university reform pointed by the French Revolution. It was a time of great turbulence in the history of Western Europe, but that happened more than two centuries ago. French culture has influenced our higher education, mainly if we go back in time, in between the nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Since then, Brazilian universities have emerged roots even more distorted by the University Reform in 1968, which was promoted by the military dictatorship. Today, our universities have been operating on a rigid organizational structure, most of them fragmented in faculties, schools, and departments. As a result, many Brazilian universities have become very elitist. The most prestigious courses have given more chances to middle and upper-class youth who have had financial support for prep courses, in general very expensive, that have enabled them to pass through the competitive entrance examinations to federal universities. This has nothing to do with our project, which is to create a university of popular roots, focused on the needs and wants of our society, with strong regional roots and, at the same time, to be open to the world. We have a double source of inspiration in this endeavour: the work of Milton Santos and Anísio Teixeira's educational models.

MT: *The institutional proposal of the Federal University of Southern Bahia seems to have been influenced by two models: the Bologna Process (organization of higher education in study cycles) established in European universities and the American model of higher education (community colleges). The proposal of UFSB intended to be a synthesis between the two models?*

NAF: The Bologna Process is openly intended to adjust to the modular and progressive system that defines the American college model. The competitive advantage of the cycle-system in the international scenario of education was a threat to the university in continental Europe, fragmented in almost two dozen different national models. In addition, the difficulties of economic and political integration resulting from this fragmentation can be, and have been, overcome. But what are the main problems of the current European model? In my opinion, the creation of the European University Area is not being taken as an opportunity to promote interdisciplinarity in university education. I guess this is perhaps due to the fact that, in most European countries,

secondary education is of high quality and culturally dense. But beyond that, or perhaps because of it, in most European countries the scope of the university has been reduced to rapid and early professionalization, with fixed curriculum frameworks. The model we are implementing at UFSB – which integrates community colleges to Interdisciplinary Bachelor degree courses – can be described as a proposal to combine the best of both models, avoiding some problems or drawbacks of each of them. So, we offer a three-year bachelor's degree prior to specific professional and academic training courses. This recalls the Bologna model, with a curriculum open to the students' choices. This strong emphasis on general education refers to the undergraduate model of the United States and Canada. By adopting this interdisciplinary model, our curriculum architecture is frankly unique to ethnodiversity. In addition to promoting quality, flexibility, autonomy, mobility, and social commitment in the pedagogical practices of the Brazilian university, this model makes us better integrated into the contemporary landscape of higher education. We aim to recover the university as a house of culture – that is, the space for a dialogical and productive encounter among the arts, sciences, and humanities.

MT: *Colégios Universitários (CUNI) [equivalent to community colleges] are an innovative proposal for promoting access to higher education for students who graduated from public schools. Admission will be by the ENEM [a national exam for high-school graduates]; but indigenous villagers, quilombolas, and rural settlers will have direct access to the stage of General Education, regardless of classification, provided they are approved in the ENEM. Is it a way to overcome the quota policy, or is it an attempt to increase a popular model of higher education? Does this model really allow access to those who have been historically excluded from the university? Have you considered that the community colleges may become in the future a kind of "discriminatory democratic institution"?*

NAF: The colleges form a network; we call it the Anísio Teixeira Network, covering all municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants in southern Bahia. Poor students have possibilities to study only in public high schools, because there are no other school in such remote areas. The municipality of Mucuri, just to give an example, is a thousand kilometers away from Salvador, the capital of the Bahia State. And throughout the region, there are almost 18,000 high-school graduates, but only 1,400 places for higher education in public institutions, mostly in careers that have no impact on regional development. Our intention with this decentralized structure is to popularize the provision of higher education, while also overcoming the territorial exclusion. We expect to open more than 9,000 slots each year. Of course, if it works out, this model will inevitably transcend the issue of quotas. But if the entire institution is structured for effective social integration, we do not actually need affirmative action programs because everything we do is affirmative action. The question of a potential "ghettoization" of the CUNI system really concerns us. We are planning several measures to reduce this risk, which is not trivial, that is the case of the implementation of an integrated system of tutoring-mentoring-monitoring, reaching to all students without discrimination on town of origin, and the production of contents

undifferentiated in both areas of university activities, both on campus and in the Anísio Teixeira Network. In addition, we anticipate intense national and international mobility programs, including integrating community outreach actions in the network of high schools.

MT: *Considering that the Federal University of Southern Bahia intends to respond to training needs and socio-economic demands of the southern Bahia region, was there some participation of social movements in building the institutional framework of the university? If so, what kind of participation?*

NAF: Since the implementation committee was formed in January 2012, we traveled to almost all municipalities and localities in the region, presenting and debating the proposed model. More than 80 meetings and public hearings were made and in two years we visited nearly 100 schools, talking to teachers, students, indigenous chiefs, community leaders, and NGOs, but also businessmen, politicians, intellectuals. When we installed the University Senate, and we made sure to do it in the three campuses, we included community representatives on an equal footing to professors. We have students, settlers, Indians, and *quilombolas*, but also executives, politicians, businessmen, farmers, environmentalists, and trade unionists, all as honorary members of the main collegiate institution – but it will still evolve into its own advice, with delegates from the community. Approved in our bylaws, currently being considered by the National Board of Education, we have one Social Strategic Council, which, among advisory functions, will be tasked to organize a bi-annual Social Regional Forum to better articulate the academic projects to the social demands of the community.

MT: *"UFSB's Institutional and Political-Pedagogical Plan is based on a conception of the University as a social and cultural institution for education and emancipation of the person and to promote profound changes in society." This statement implies that the curricular matrices of the various courses offered by UFSB should include all cultural diversity in order to promote the construction of new forms of counter-hegemonic knowledge. However, the selection process of the teachers follows the previously established rules (oriented by competition). How do you consider and promote cultural diversity and new counter-hegemonic epistemologies with teachers trained from a hegemonic and eventually colonial paradigm?*

NAF: This question is crucial. We have tried hard to solve it creatively and efficiently. We start by modifying the system of recruitment of faculty and staff. Before carrying out public tenders for all vacancies, as typically done by other federal institutions of higher education in Brazil, we have launched public calls for reassignment applications for teachers from other federal universities who identified themselves with the project. Many candidates showed up and, after selection of proposals and evaluation of curricula, they were invited to participate in what we call seminar-workshops, where we discussed scenarios, problems, and details of the proposal. This helped us also to

identify applicants who demonstrated a critical stance to the current models, who understand the real need to break paradigms and effectively incorporate concepts and principles of the UFSB proposal. Only then we did open public contests, testing a format of recruitment totally different yet feasible within the parameters allowed by Brazilian law. On the one hand, in our job descriptions, we do not postulate disciplinary degrees, restricted to professional education and training as a prerequisite, as the conventional university usually does. Rather, the topics for selection are broad, defined inter-trans-disciplinarily, and virtually any combination of knowledge area and graduate degree are accepted. On the other hand, we have held the competition in qualifying stages. The first stage consisted of two tests, in electronic form, on the areas of competition and, more importantly, on knowledge and appreciation of the University Master Plan. The examination of the curriculum vitae is a second stage, which is a qualifying round to select the two best candidates who would finally take the last step. This third stage consists of a lecture class and, instead of defense of a Memorial [evaluative document of the teacher's past experience], there is an oral examination of a research and teaching proposal to verify the candidate's position regarding counter-hegemonic epistemologies and prospecting for the future he/she viewed in our institution. We did a thorough evaluation and consider this experience very positive; so we improved the model for the next contests. Finally, we will leave a significant proportion of the teaching positions unfilled, reserved for international visiting professors, preferably coming from regions, contexts, and institutions that are partners in projects that take higher education as a liberating and civilizing action.

MT: *Being a new model of teaching and higher education, your proposal remains faithful to the classic tripod of teaching, research, and extension. How do you establish, in operational terms, the relationship between these three dimensions, and how in that interaction will UFSB contribute to a new geopolitics of knowledge?*

NAF: We have a critical position in relation to the classic tripod, first for being classic and then for being a tripod. The University as an institution was created in the Middle Ages to form clerical cadres and later on professional and corporate staff, state leaders, and organic intellectuals of the emerging bourgeoisie. With the Humboldt Reform, very late in history, the mission to produce original knowledge was added, initially for scientific and technological base and then in the humanities and the arts. Only in the last century has the university awakened to its social mission, first by outreach actions in the community, regional, and national development initiatives and political action, using different ways of social mobilization. Following Teixeira and Freire, the distinction between teaching, research, and extension seems to me poor, superficial, and unjustified. Perhaps it is wiser to speak of hybrid acts as action-research, research-creation, research-training, research-trans-formation, learning-trans-formation, learning-creation, diffusion-learning, learning-innovation, and many others possible, and still others that we cannot even imagine. On the subject of the new geopolitics of knowledge, we still have little to say, perhaps much to do. In this sense, we will certainly

consider the theme of the oppressed cultures, subordinate and dominated. To address this set of unsettling issues, I propose we resume the notion of ethnodiversity useful in rethinking the conceptual basis of the Brazilian university, reinforcing its references in Milton Santos (epistemological) and in Paulo Freire (pedagogical). Despite the national and international importance of both, we need to be critical. The philosophical thought of Milton Santos remains restricted to the epistemological territory of techno-science, as in his work there is an almost naive respect with regard to advances in science and technology. On the other hand, Paulo Freire's pedagogy is perhaps too historicist, on grounds more ideological and less referred to the economic basis of the social formation, over an agenda perhaps too subjective. Moreover, he did not deal specifically with dilemmas and issues of higher education.

MT: *Over the past years, contemporary neoliberal policies have determined international agendas. There has been some subservience of traditional universities to the logic of financial capital and, above all, to research requirements set by denominated central countries. How is UFSB planning to go around the commercial and productivist logic? What is the UFSB position regarding the policy of rankings?*

NAF: We have not yet discussed these questions in the collective instances of our university. But I can state my personal position on the issue. I believe that it is not a matter of going around but rather facing the market forces that threaten so many teaching-learning systems that are potentially emancipatory. We cannot be naive about the role of the public university in a social context, as in Brazil, where education is a strong factor for promoting inequality and the domination of ruling classes. The biggest challenge faced by public universities in the current Brazilian situation reveals an apparent contradiction: how to make them socially responsible, at the same time reaffirming quality and competence, values that define the University as an institution. This challenge unfolds on crucial issues. How do we strengthen the scientific and artistic competence of the university and, at the same time, increase slots on a large scale, opening doors to social groups historically excluded, and thereby paying a debt of 200 years of inertia, immobility, and elitism? How do we instill political responsibility in the constant search for autonomy and creativity, and simultaneously foster the principles of efficiency and economy crucial to the duty of public administration? How do we reaffirm our social commitment and, in doing so, introduce the values of interdisciplinarity, versatility, mobility, and internationalization, which define the contemporary spirit? To actually face the market forces, the public university needs to be creative and efficient while maintaining quality and excellence, but not to the heirs, which is how Bourdieu, not without fine irony, referred to wealthy students who manage to enter elite institutions, which in Brazil are public but do not belong to the people. To accommodate the mass of excluded ones and to gain an important role in the social integration of these subjects, to produce local-regional knowledge, and to acquire relevance in national development projects, the university needs to recreate itself as a Popular University, increasingly demonstrating productivity in all dimensions of its

action. It must be productive, both in the formation of citizens as much as in the production of research, creation, and innovation. And this productivity has nothing to do with the recent fashion of the university rankings. In practice, the effect of rankings has been consolidation and restructuring of knowledge institutions, especially in Western Europe. Throughout the past century, there has been a clear dispersion of universities in Europe. In these countries, recently, programs for regrouping institutions have been promoted as aiming at building new institutional arrangements to improve the relative position of the universities of these countries in international rankings. To the extent that this is essentially a competitive classification, based on performance measures in comparable criteria, the most prestigious universities tend to reinforce the instruments thus ratifying its original position of domination. In addition, there is another opportunity element that universities of international scope draw out of the rankings fashion, which we should not underestimate. Considering the necessary precautions, they function as a device for generating institutional distinction in relation to private and non-university models of higher education. We still have much to discuss on this subject among our faculty, researchers, and other members of the university community who are just arriving.

MT: *The UFSB must adhere to the legal apparatus, applicable to all federal universities, whether in management or evaluation and selection of professors. Do you think that the absence of a specific legal juridical apparatus in relation to the listed dimensions may be an obstacle to achieving a progressive, democratic, and popular higher education project?*

NAF: Such a submission is inevitable, because we are a federal agency under the rules of the Ministry of Education, and all our funding come from the public budget. Unfortunately, the Brazilian State is still in the reconstruction process after the military dictatorship. It has not yet dealt with the question of what is the university that Brazilian society needs and deserves. We have to decide whether the university required for this 21st Century Brazil is a bureaucracy, another government agency, or a true institution of knowledge and creation. I think the core issue is principles. The public management in general is governed by constitutional principles of fairness, legality, economy, impartiality, and efficiency. Excellence, scientificity, aesthetics, creativity, and plurality can be taken as structuring principles of this peculiar institution called the University, which has the historical mission of higher education, knowledge production and original creation, respect for diversity, and the critical transformation of society. At times, there will even be contradiction between the bureaucratic spirit of public service and the university ethos: efficiency can impair excellence; impersonality may reject talent and plurality; legality can stifle creativity; economic viability can compromise the aesthetic and the scientific. Let me take the case of public tenders, on which I spoke earlier. A tender notice for university teaching is full of items to ensure the impartiality of the process, preserving rights of staff and teachers who are merely effective, but that hinder recognition and selection of the most creative and competent. The selection mode is for several reasons less academic and more managerial, allowing

endless law suits and legal proceedings. On top of that, to make public procurement for technical and administrative staff, we have to follow the list of functions of the Ministry of Planning, Budget, and Management. This submission of the university to the standards of the general public service hampers even the management oriented for academic productivity and social efficiency, which would entail greater flexibility to admit, to evaluate, and, where appropriate, to fire inefficient personnel. And most of all, this set of constraints and disagreements among the public character and the social mission can become a glaring contradiction, actually setting obstacles to the viability of the concrete project of a People's University, as it is our intention in Southern Bahia. I argue that the mythical autonomy of the 19th century university is no longer justified. Previously, the university presented itself as the vanguard of an elite, as critical conscience of society, and for that reason was little questioned. The world has changed since then. Today the university must persistently demonstrate its political and social value as a tool necessary for economic and human development of the nation. We need to regain our autonomy, paradoxically, by engaging the community in a participatory manner, so that society starts not to charge us for standards and well-enforced rules, but rather for socially relevant goals effectively achieved.

MT: *The institutional design of UFSB provides networking, both at intra-institutional level (the relationship of CUNIs with campuses) and as inter-institutional (at municipal, state, and federal level). This conception is based on the construction of a counter-hegemonic logic. How is UFSB dealing, in technological terms, with the challenge of building a network with public institutions that have concepts and values so averse to a democratic and emancipatory conception of higher education and collaborative work with other institutions? What are the main obstacles found in the implementation process?*

NAF: This really is another challenge to be faced. But every day has surprised us positively. Political bodies, government agencies, community organizations, and social movements have collaborated in every way, often embracing and promoting collective forms of support. In technological terms, we are trying to solve a huge gap in access to educational resources by deploying a high-speed digital network that will reach small towns and villages of the Anísio Teixeira Network, which also will provide greater access of isolated populations to the outside world. And there we have seen that social agents of the Bahia hinterland, and much of the population of Southern Bahia, are already feeling the integrative potential in the arrival of the University. However, several of the actors in this process are not aware that more political action, social control, and participatory effects will be generated and promoted by our pedagogical action and transformative education. Maybe that's why we have not yet faced major obstacles in the process; we have found, in fact, much convergence and enthusiasm from teachers, leaders, students, and representatives of different segments of the *Grapiúna* (Tupi word that designates people born in Southern Bahia) society.

MT: *In the introduction of your book *The University of the XXI Century – For a New**

University (2008), you describe your encounter with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who, despite being European, has a Southern perspective. His idea of a People's University of Social Movements is another strategy for building a counter-hegemonic globalization. It is a kind of academic branch of social movements. What influence did Boaventura's thought have in the construction of the UFSB teaching and education model? Do you think that the UFSB may be an academic arm of the social policies of Lula and Dilma popular governments?

NAF: Considering the process of globalization, with time-space increasingly compressed, and the world's cultural diversity, the renewal of the University needs a critical theory of society and culture for sustainable political-pedagogical projects. In this regard, we have used the "sociology of emergencies" and the "ecology of knowledge", both concepts proposed by Boaventura. For a reflection on the phenomenon of multiculturalism in building a counter-hegemonic globalization, we have derived from there more expanded concepts like, for example, the Ethnodiversity and Epistemodiversity. We intend to get involved in simultaneous movements of incorporation of global and regional peculiarities as a strategy for a counter-hegemonic globalization, producing knowledge appropriate to the context and forming people able to cope with the task of understanding and intervening in this complex, changing reality. But we know we are fighting against the current because the Brazilian university has failed as an instrument or device of social integration. As part of our country's social reproduction system, it acts more as a keeper, if not a promoter, of inequality. Slots in better-quality public universities and in courses of greater social prestige were (and still to a great extent, are, despite compensatory affirmative action policies) aimed almost exclusively to a privileged minority. So, when I started to elaborate this argument, I thought – it is unfair for someone, because they are better off, to buy their children access to public higher education, excluding those who are poor. I already found that terrible, but after I learned from IPEA studies, with official data showing that part of the elite's educational expenses were reimbursed by the regressive tax system, I found that actually poor Brazilians pay the education of the rich. Injustice becomes perversion, a triple really absurd perversion. As a result, in Brazil, people are trained in public universities disregarding the public character of the State, engaged in individualistic designs, in a relationship with the public institution of education, often predatory. They relate to the public university as the place where they will guarantee a professional future as a personal or family project, with no construction of solidarity or feelings of belonging to the university supported by the State. To challenge this perversion, it means to break down the culture of omission, producing forms of resistance. Our goal is to overcome such reactions and to model dilemmas and barriers faced by this old Bonapartist institution, in our mission as the newest Brazilian University, established in dialogue with the needs and deserves of the society who host us.