Democracy practiced, learned, and experienced within the university

(Democracia praticada, aprendida e vivida na universidade)

English Transcript

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Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Hello. Professor Rui Vicente Oppermann and I, Luiz Carlos Bombassaro, would like to spend some time today discussing democracy as practiced, learned, and experienced in universities in Brazil and Latin America.
Democracy and education generally go hand in hand and are mutually dependent. In many parts of the world, worries about the decline of democracy have increasingly become a major focus of political debate, social discussion, media coverage, and public concern in recent years. Universities are important institutions within democratic structures, not only in the broader context of society, but also in their own internal organization. Questions regarding access to universities and the right to express opinions and vote on internal matters are fundamental to cooperation among everyone involved in these institutions. A significant proportion of students are first introduced to democratic ideas and opportunities for participation at university. This includes developing their own convictions and the ability to formulate and represent their own opinions and points of view. We often ask ourselves what the advantages and disadvantages are - if we can even put it that way - of the presentations and positions expressed by both professors and students in connection with democratization processes. And to what extent the administrative and ideological character of the university are closely related.

With this brief introduction, I would like to hear Professor Rui speak about his experience with university administration, as well as his work as a teacher and researcher, considering his experience in multiple activities ranging from the classroom, the research bench, and the laboratory to coordination, university management, and the coordination of all the academic exchange programs he has developed throughout his years working at the university.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Well, I really liked that introduction because it allows me to say that I myself am a product of this university experience that we encounter at the beginning of our academic lives as students. When I entered university, I was exposed to a world - the university world - which is a transformative world. It is impossible to enter a university and leave in the same way you entered it. It transforms you.
And the way this transformation happens depends exactly on what we are discussing here, namely the democratic environment that exists within the institution. The democratic environment within the institution is a determining factor in how fully one can develop the university's greatest strengths: the space for disagreement, consensus, exposure to different ideas, different experiences, contradiction, and learning to live alongside others. All of this is extremely important for individual development. Then, later on, when you become part of university management, these issues become different kinds of responsibilities. One of them is maintaining and preserving democratic environments, because although they exist, they are not guaranteed.

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Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: We know this very well, especially if we consider what we experienced after the 1980s in Brazil and if we look back on our own experiences over the last forty or even fifty years of Brazilian universities.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Exactly. I think Brazilian universities, and to some extent Latin American universities in general, although they were modeled after European universities, have developed their own unique configuration. But some things are fundamental to the university itself, and one of them is academic freedom. And academic freedom is not only for professors; it is academic freedom for the entire community and its surrounding environment as well. That is why the university attracts so much attention - because of what it does or what it builds – both, from those who value it and from those who seek to persecute it. So, limiting this space is an authoritarian attempt, because people know that by building citizenship, universities also promote personal liberation.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: As if the university were also a social laboratory for constructing democratic relationships. Those of us who experienced universities during totalitarian - or at least authoritarian - periods can clearly perceive the difference compared to what we have developed over the last few decades.
I think that was very well put. University is also a place where democracy is built, in the sense that it reflects, mirrors, and in some ways assimilates what is happening in society as a whole.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Exactly.
And when you think about university administration, especially in Brazil, we have a constitutional principle, an article in the Constitution, that guarantees university autonomy, budget management, and the integration of teaching, research, and outreach. Therefore, there is a provision in the country's highest charter that establishes this, but that is not enough.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: And we also have very different higher education experiences within Brazilian institutions. If we compare private institutions with public state institutions, we notice that the administrative and management systems of universities are influenced by different determining factors. What we can say is that the experience of the public university, which is probably what we will focus on most today, also represents a management model that cannot easily be treated as though it were a single Brazilian model. We have several ways of understanding what the university model is in this country.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: I would say that public universities funded by the state are the ones that come closest to what we understand as universities that preserve autonomy, preserve academic freedom, promote teaching, research, and outreach, and above all create spaces for democratic participation within the institution.
Other universities that are maintained by community organizations, religious groups, or investment funds do not have the same level of space for democratic participation because of their very nature. But in public universities, this has always been guaranteed. And we have the experience of having lived through periods of authoritarianism and totalitarianism in which the university preserved itself only because the internal community was organized and understood that democracy is, fundamentally, a legacy. It is something that must be maintained and protected so the university can fulfill its role. In that sense, universities also serve as a mirror for society. Society looks to universities as examples of spaces for debate and discussion.

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Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: A place where disagreement certainly exists. Agreements are always sought, but people begin from different perspectives and positions. Research groups and the units that make up the university present their demands differently and pursue different goals, but they also assume a social commitment to interact with society in ways that help develop projects aimed at overcoming differences, conflicts, and particular or individual interests.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: But look at this interesting situation: during the civic-military dictatorship we experienced, the university became a locus of resistance.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Exactly.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Where there was a unit of resistance. As I said, society itself came to the university in order to breathe the freedom and democracy that existed there. And despite all its efforts, the dictatorship was unable to silence, change, or eliminate those spaces. But now we are in a different situation. Today, authoritarianism comes from within...

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: ...through other means.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: ...through other means, from within the democratic spectrum itself.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Right.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Today we are witnessing the rise of the far right, which takes advantage of democratic spaces to position itself while denying all of these capacities and the very principle of contradiction and debate. It simply denies the possibility of discussion and dialectical construction.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: I think it is precisely this resistance that allows the democratic spirit of the university to be preserved as a fundamental ethical value. What you said is very important: the institution itself develops this permanent tension of debate, and even when contradictory forces appear within it, the university as a critical space is the institution which is best equipped to process differences and contradictions. In that respect, I completely agree with your analysis.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: I believe these far-right movements, which now feel bold enough to reveal themselves within universities, will also fail to destroy the university ethos or this environment that is so essential to the university. That environment is affirmed not only by structures and legislation, but also by the community's recognition that it is essential to preserve those spaces of resistance and views out forward, in the sense that we have to look to the university, to what it has to say.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Discussion is allowed. Even more than allowed. More than allowed, it is required. Or perhaps not only desired but actively practiced. This once again confirms that universities can only truly exist as spaces for democratic practice and democratic experiences.
But there is another aspect which I think is important to be highlighted, Rui, and which comes first: The issue of access to universities and higher education in Brazil. In recent years we have seen major advances in access to public universities. One important question is whether the measures recently adopted to reduce inequality and broaden access are helping create an

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even more democratic environment within institutions. Based on your experience, would you say that university quota systems and affirmative action programs fit into a broader picture that may ultimately lead to a more democratic practice inside universities?

Rui Vicente Oppermann: I would say that affirmative action policies - which are now established by law through the quota system - represent one of the most successful public policies in the history of higher education in this country. We used to live in a white, elitist university system. Today, our universities are painted in every color.
I remember former rector João Carlos Salles mentioning this in a lecture. He is from Bahia, a state where the population of African descent is extremely large.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: It is predominant.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: It is predominant. And he said something very striking: affirmative action finally brought Black people into the Federal University of Bahia. In a society where Black people are the majority, universities still had not allowed them access. And this access has been fundamental in many ways. First, it proved that affirmative action does not reduce university quality. Those who opposed affirmative action claimed universities would lose quality by admitting supposedly underprepared students who lacked the ability to succeed in higher education. That simply is not true.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Sometimes quite the opposite.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Exactly. Sometimes quite the opposite. I was always deeply moved at undergraduate research fairs when students admitted through quotas received awards as outstanding young researchers in their fields. That demonstrated very clearly that the criticism was rooted in prejudice.

There are also two additional important points. One is that affirmative action did force universities to understand what it really means for these students to be present and what challenges they face. It is one thing for a white middle-class student to enter university with family support surrounding them. It is another for someone who lives on a distant island, who has to take long bus rides, leave the family behind, and work while studying. Their challenge is not only getting into university. It is staying there. I think this taught us an important lesson: universities must create conditions for students to remain and succeed.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: And that means that beyond reducing inequality in access, universities have also learned to listen to society. From that listening process emerged a new composition within the university community itself. This challenges the idea that universities exist merely to produce labor force. It shows universities as institutions capable of understanding the aspirations of society - especially Brazilian and Latin American society - a society that still struggles against deep inequalities. In that sense, universities committed to democracy, to a democratic spirit obviously provide a response that goes far beyond simply handing out diplomas.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: After so many years of affirmative action and quotas in federal public universities, there is another aspect that aligns with what you are saying, Luiz Carlos: universities themselves have benefited enormously from the presence of these students. They showed us a world that, at best, had previously been treated as a case study rather than a

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lived reality. And it is not a reality that was simply reality, but one that challenged and transformed us. Today universities include cultural, political, and religious expressions that are direct results of this new presence.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Universities have greatly expanded their diversity and their ability to deal with their universality.
In this respect, perhaps an important issue for Brazilian universities is also the consideration, from this perspective, of quota places for Indigenous people who are now gaining access to the university, not only as students, but also, to a great extent, already in many public universities, as faculty members and researchers.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: This is one of Brazil's great challenges. First, because we effectively rediscovered Indigenous peoples in the sense that we finally granted them citizenship. During the dictatorship, what was attempted was essentially their extermination and genocide. We also recognized quilombola[1] communities, which previously did not even exist in official population records.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Exactly.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Brazil has more than 130 indigenous languages spread across the country, and possibly others still unknown to us. There is also an enormous richness of cultures and cultural expressions.
Where am I trying to get to? The Brazilian government is preparing to launch a project for an Indigenous University. This project is being built together with Indigenous communities - or rather, they are building it and we are participating alongside them. It will be a multicampus university headquartered in Brasília, by their own choice. It will be coordinated with faculty members from Indigenous communities themselves.
And this is a truly courageous initiative, because the goal is not to create a second-class university. It must be a university capable of expressing the real needs of Indigenous populations while also benefiting the whole society.
It is a tremendous challenge. We already have some examples in Latin America, in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. Some people have dedicated their lives to this work. And it is fascinating to see how transformative the university can be for these communities, especially in terms of visibility and economic and social independence.
But our expectations are even greater, because nobody wants our Indigenous people to become consumers, but rather for them to understand that, as a culture, they can position themselves within this perspective of the university. I think this is fundamental and one of our greatest challenges.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: This also seems to me to have been a highly innovative aspect from the standpoint of how knowledge is regarded: the fact that we respect—not merely in some external or superficial way, but genuinely recognize—that the symbolic productions and ways of knowing of communities themselves should be valued in such a way that a single, so to speak, uniform model of knowledge is not imposed within the university. The plurality of forms of knowledge constitutes this set of relationships that democratic universities in Brazil are now trying to develop. The great challenge, of course, is how to expand this experience so

[1] maroon

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that we are no longer merely importers of university models but can also present our own experiences to the world this Brazilian university model.
And in that regard, I would also like to discuss how this Brazilian university model—these models of administration and academic management, with their plurality of forms and ways of being—can show the world that the university space today is a highly promising one. It is a space that allows for the coexistence of political differences, ideological differences, and all the differences we can imagine. We no longer aspire to create a completely homogeneous university, as was often the case in traditional institutional culture.
Here, a very important issue emerges: the democratic management of knowledge. How must or can these different forms of knowledge be connected? How can they be administered and managed? So, in my view, the introduction, the acceptance of this plurality also implies challenges and what you say seems very present to me.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Right.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Considering this, perhaps we could think a little about how our experience has dealt with differences arising from different ways of life and worldviews—Indigenous communities, quilombola communities, traditional universities, and the important contributions of Afro-Brazilian culture.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Well, the Brazilian university system and our academic tradition were formed relatively recently. Our University is about to celebrate one hundred years. First, we have evolved tremendously. Second, we have achieved a remarkably high level of quality for institutions that are only one hundred years old. Brazil was one of the last countries in Latin America to establish universities. Our academic culture was formed largely in Europe and the United States. This caused us, at a certain moment, to reproduce European and North American—or United States—systems within Brazil. And much of what was done was done with one's gaze directed there. Of course, that also…

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: A certain dependence on models, isn't it?

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Exactly. Dependence.
But at the same time, we built a strong graduate and research system that now allows us to say: "No, wait a minute. Our relationship with you is no longer one of dependence. We want a relationship of cooperation".

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Cooperation partnership.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: One in which our own problems can and should become a fundamental part of the relationship. That is, we have situations in which you can cooperate with us toward a solution. Which is a solution of common interest, for example, the climate crisis. For example, climate change.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Of course.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Of course. Which we all know exists.

((both laugh))

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Absolutely.

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Rui Vicente Oppermann: Anyway, this is the first important point: we have reached an academic maturity that allows us, on the international stage, to stop being merely users, consumers, and importers. Today we are proposers. We propose cooperation. And this cooperation is directed both toward the Global North and the Global South.
In a certain way, especially toward the Global South, precisely because there we find many of the identities that here are calling on us for a possibility of placing some perspective for them. So, I think this is an important aspect.
As is also, Luiz Carlos, I think, the fact that within the university, beyond the classroom, the experience you have in research, in outreach, and in daily life itself is sometimes as important or even more important than the classroom itself.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: That's true.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Now, this is another aspect that our Latin American universities have, which European ones do not have as much.

Luis Carlos Bombassaro: Exactly.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: For example, outreach as a way of building relationships and knowledge together with surrounding communities. Not as a form of providing services, but rather as a way of building knowledge and relationships. Professional training too, of course, but beyond professional training, there's also this issue of developing solutions that are needed.
I think this is very, very important, and it is exactly part of what you are saying.
Today, when universities have a particular question to deal with, this question calls for international cooperation, but it also involves the democratic participation of the community in defining their goals.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: In defining their goals.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Yes.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: This is the very idea of democratic practice in university governance and in the classroom. Perhaps this is an important aspect to emphasize even more, insofar as our university models — but also, I would go further and say our actual practice within the university where we work — express more adequately the participation of those involved in the process. Let us put it this way: to what extent could a research community within the university fail to be democratic? In light of our experience, it would seem almost inappropriate to accept the idea that a democratic attitude, behavior, or relationship among the participants in a research community should not be taken seriously.
On the other hand, regarding administration and institutional management, it is evident that these cannot function without the participation of different institutes, different groups, different research communities, and different fields, and so on. Obviously, even though not all of these groups and units necessarily share the same understanding of what democracy means. What matters here is what happens in the practice of democratic management. It is how this gets resolved.
And I also think that, in the classroom, there is a very important element when one considers that student participation, for example, comes to carry decisive weight vis-à-vis a traditional

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model of teaching that showed no intention whatsoever of recognizing the aspirations of the students themselves as legitimate.
So, I think there are very interesting elements here that can be considered in relation to democracy and research communities, democracy and academic management structures, and democracy as the space in which teaching and learning processes develop in classrooms and laboratories, etc. That is, we must admit that there is never complete symmetry in the classroom between those who teach and those who learn. But we can certainly think of a significant reduction in inequality and asymmetry as collective processes of constructing knowledge, science, and learning evolve. So, this is, in my opinion, an important aspect of how democracy permeates the everyday life of the university.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: I think the access to information that the internet gives us today has called the university teacher's authority into question. The teachers, more than anyone else.
Teachers used to be transmitters of knowledge, and they exercised authority based on that role. Today, that has become relative. I would even dare to say that teachers do not necessarily enter the classroom knowing more than their students. What the teacher must know is not simply knowledge, but rather how knowledge is constructed. So, the teacher's task is no longer the transmission of information but understanding how knowledge is built and how one moves beyond the frontiers of knowledge. That is the teacher's biggest challenge in the classroom.
If teachers fail to do that, students can simply go online and find more up-to-date information than the teacher has. I find this challenge fascinating because it places those of us who have spent many years teaching in a situation we never imagined. You can no longer assume that you are the ultimate authority in the classroom simply because you possess information. You have to be the ultimate authority because you are capable of guiding people through a transformation of their knowledge.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Right.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: That's what it's all about in the classroom.
In society, the situation is much more complex. I do not know whether we can take the university as a mirror for local communities or for a city, for example, where the democratic process functions through structures and elections. Let's embrace a true democracy, one based on equal opportunity, rather than the prevailing economic interests that, in some countries, distort democracy because the wealthiest end up getting elected. So, one has to also be careful about this.
But I do not know whether that happens within the university. Why? Because the university also operates according to the principle of merit. In other words, a researcher is someone who produces knowledge. Therefore, they are different from a student in terms of what each person is doing within the university. And the technical staff member is also different from those two, because they are the people who provide the infrastructure and carry out the operational work.
So, with these distinctions in mind and having served as a university president, I fully understand that in the context of formulating university development policies, in its institutional development plan, in determining budget allocations, in short, the community as a whole must engage in the democratic process.
Something Brazil still does not fully have, because the higher university councils are composed of seventy percent faculty, fifteen percent students, and fifteen percent staff. Now that's representation! In many Latin American universities, for example, staff members have no voice at all.

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Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: No participation.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: In others, students have no voice, right?

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: How should we interpret, recently in Brazil, this important experience of participatory decision-making within institutions? It seems to me that this issue is still under development and very much in process. Therefore, I would say that this represents an important element of the democratic process itself. Those institutions that have implemented parity already have their own experiences and have begun to perceive both the advantages and disadvantages of universal parity in representation, so to speak.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: That's true. Parity in the election of university leaders often clashes with the structure of governing councils, which are not parity-based. So, when the rector elected through a parity process has to work with a non-parity council, tensions arise.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Of course. That creates tensions.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Yes. At our university, what we did was create parity-based committees that worked alongside the governing councils defining the quota policy. I was in the committee that proposed affirmative action policies to the higher council. This committee was parity-based. So, although the governing council was not parity-based, the proposals and policies presented to it emerged from this setting.
So today, if you formally transform the governing council into a parity-based body, it will not make much difference because many decisions are already being developed through parity-based mechanisms.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Right.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Wouldn't it? I think that is extremely important.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Right.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: It is not like this at all universities, but at our university this shortcut was created to ensure equal representation in decision-making as well. And I think that's very good for these issues. Always remembering that university is a locus of meritocracy, of merit. We are an educational, research, and outreach institution. And this must always be taken into account when reflecting on university policies.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: But perhaps what most strongly highlights the relationship between democratic spirit and the university is based on the fundamental assumption that decisions do not emerge from a top-down structure, but rather from a bottom-up one.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Exactly.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: This means that Brazilian public universities cannot be viewed from a single perspective either, given their plural experience, right?
It is, in a way, an awareness that has already been developed through lived experience, through experience put into practice.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Yes.

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Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Thanks Rui. And with that, we would like to thank everyone for the opportunity to participate in this podcast.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Absolutely. It has been a great pleasure.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: And we hope we have contributed to strengthening our bonds of international cooperation even further.

Rui Vicente Oppermann: Certainly. Thank you.

Luiz Carlos Bombassaro: Thank you, Rui.

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