

## **THE DEMOCRATIC SPEECH WITHIN THE MOVEMENT OF NETWORKS FOR ACCREDITATION AND EVALUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

### ***O DISCURSO DEMOCRÁTICO POR DENTRO DO MOVIMENTO DE REDES DE ACREDITAÇÃO E AVALIAÇÃO DA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR***

### ***EL DISCURSO DEMOCRÁTICO DENTRO DEL MOVIMIENTO DE LAS REDES DE ACREDITACIÓN Y EVALUACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR***

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**ABSTRACT:** This study had the objective of making an interpretative analysis of the democracy perspective present in the speech of the actors from the networks of agencies for quality evaluation and accreditation of higher education in Latin America through the interlocution with members from the Latin networks RIACES – Ibero-American Network for the Accreditation of the Quality of Higher Education and of RANA Network – Network of National Accreditation Agencies of Mercosur. The study referred to theoretical matrices as inspiration sources of the democracy category according with studies by Avritzer (2003); Barber (2003); Bobbio (2015); Coutinho (1979); Sader (2012). The methodological choice was the qualitative and interpretative social investigation (ROSENTHAL, 2014). Among the findings, it stands out the understanding that to represent the possibility of emancipating processes within the movement of the networks for the accreditation and quality evaluation in Latin America implies the decolonization of the democratic concept and practice,

**KEYWORDS:** Strong democracy. Movements of the networks of accreditation and evaluation. RIACES. RANA.

**RESUMO:** Neste estudo, o objetivo é uma análise interpretativa da perspectiva de democracia presente no discurso dos atores das redes de agências de acreditação e avaliação da qualidade da educação superior na América Latina, tendo como interlocutores os membros das redes latinas RIACES – Red Iberoamericana para la Calidad de la Educación Superior e a Rede RANA – Rede de Agências Nacionais de Acreditação do Mercosul Educativo. Este estudo filiou-se a matrizes teóricas e inspiradoras da categoria democracia, dos estudos de Avritzer (2003); Barber (2003); Bobbio (2015); Coutinho (1979); Sader (2012), e a metodologia foi a social qualitativa e interpretativa (ROSENTHAL, 2014). Nos achados da pesquisa destaca-se que representar a possibilidade de processos emancipatórios no interior do movimento de redes de acreditação e avaliação da qualidade na América Latina implica descolonização do conceito e da prática democrática.

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Democracia forte. Movimentos de redes de acreditação e avaliação. RIACES. RANA.

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio tuvo el objetivo de hacer un análisis interpretativo de la perspectiva de democracia<sup>0</sup> presente en el discurso de los actores de las redes de agencias de acreditación y evaluación d<sup>0</sup>,<sup>0</sup>e, <sup>0</sup>, la calidad de la educación superior en la América Latina, a través de la interlocución con los miembros de las redes latinas RIACES – Red Iberoamericana para la Calidad de la Educación Superior y la Red RANA – Red de Agencias Nacionales de Acreditación del Mercosur Educativo. El estudio se basó en matrices teóricas, como fuentes inspiradoras de la categoría democracia, de los estudios de Avritzer (2003); Barber (2003); Bobbio (2015); Coutinho (1979); Sader (2012). La opción metodológica buscó referencias en la investigación social cualitativa e interpretativa (ROSENTHAL, 2014). Entre los hallazgos de la investigación se destaca la comprensión de que representar la posibilidad de procesos emancipatorios en el interior del movimiento de redes de acreditación y evaluación de la calidad en la América Latina conlleva la descolonización del concepto y de la práctica democrática.

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** Democracia fuerte. Movimientos de redes de acreditación y evaluación. RIACES. RANA.

## Introduction

The study presented here is the result of a research that aimed to undertake an interpretative analysis of the perspectives of Democracy present in the discourse of the actors of the Networks of Accreditation and Evaluation Agencies for Quality in Higher Education in Latin America, having as interlocutors the actors involved in the RIACES Networks - *Red Iberoamericana para la Calidad de la Educación Superior* and RANA Network - Network of National Accreditation Agencies of Mercosur.

The theme of accreditation networks and quality assessment of higher education in Latin America emerges in the context of integration and cooperation among countries, in the development of the concept of network society and as a result of the results of policies to ensure the quality of higher education.

The object of this study - Networks of Accreditation and Quality Evaluation Agencies for Higher Education in Latin America - imposes itself in a contemporary scenario of the search for quality designed internationally. In this scenario, policies for quality assurance of Higher Education in Latin America emerge and evolve, following the molds of countries like the United States, Spain, Portugal, England, France, among others, depending on the agreements established among governments. A tendency of the assurance policies in Latin America is to move away from the reality of their countries, some of them emerging and with severe growth

difficulties, intensifying the centralizing character of an Evaluation State policy.<sup>3</sup> in different countries. And faced with the internationalization of Higher Education and the heterogeneous scenario of the advance of private institutions, with serious market commitments, processes are underway to create national agencies for Accreditation and Quality Assessment of Higher Education.

The main thread of analysis proposed here is the category of democracy, with the theoretical support of the analyses of Santos (2003, p. 21-22, our emphasis), who highlights:

[...] yet, surprisingly, today the promotion of **democracy** at the international level is done in conjunction with, and indeed in dependence upon, neoliberalism. Is there an incongruity or a trap here? Could it be that the triumph of democracy, which has settled the East-West conflict, is combined with the triumph of neoliberalism, resulting in the worsening of the North-South conflict? Will these two triumphs together create new North-South conflicts, both within the North and within the South [...].

The purpose here is to reflect on the following problematic: to understand the democratic perspectives built within the REDES - Network of Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Agencies Movements in Latin America (LA) and how relations of forces are woven within them, focusing on wefts of resistance to the hegemonic model of Higher Education.

In the perspective of constructing an analytical map, based on the theoretical matrixes that emerged as inspiring sources for the definition of a democratic discourse perspective, the studies of Avritzer (2003); Barber (2003); Bobbio (2015); Coutinho (1979); Sader and Gentili (2012); and Wood (2011), provided possibilities for understanding the concept of democracy present in the discourses captured during the field research. The option for qualitative and interpretative social research occurred due to its flexibility in relation to the object of study, considering some principles with which this type of research is developed in the investigation process:

Open research questions, with the possibility of modifications; The construction of hypotheses occurs throughout the research process and the development of forms of theoretical verification accompanies the development of the research. [...] The principle of openness requires of the social scientist, first of all, willingness to discover the new, requires to let himself be involved in the empirical field; being open also means accepting changes in his approach to knowledge: 'openness means for the researcher,

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<sup>3</sup> Concept used by Neave (1988), Brunner (1990) and Elliot (2002) to generally designate state control through the establishment of quality control criteria and processes. For Afonso (2000, p.49), this expression means, in a broad sense, that the State has been adapting a competitive, neo-Darwinian ethos, admitting the logic of the market, through the importation into the public domain of private management models, with emphasis on results or products, characterized by State intervention in the conduct of the educational system.

willingness and ability to follow the process of knowledge, to transform his knowledge (and with it, himself) (ROSENTHAL, 2014, p. 61).

The proposal to study the movement of networks of accreditation agencies and evaluation of the quality of higher education in Latin America is inserted in a possible field, within the evaluation of higher education. The words of Carvalho (2008, p. 172) are encouraging, whose scientific magnifying glass, by revealing changes and redefinitions in the socio-political and cultural scenario, supports the need to cast "a critical look at Latin America in the 21st century". In fact, the author calls for the constitution of "a contemporary agenda of studies and debates to be collectively worked on in different academic and political spaces, through different discussion strategies. The study is structured around the emergence of the logic of integration, cooperation and movements in networks in the search for quality in higher education, the category of democracy and its matrices of theoretical support and perspectives in the discourses of the actors of the networks, and, finally, the "findings" of the research.

### **The logic for integration, cooperation and quality in networked movements**

In the Latin American context, movements initially arose in the area of higher education driven by the desire to recover the Latin American essence, that is, the culture of the Latin people, lost to **dominant paradigms**. Santos (2008a, p. 31) describes what he calls the **dominant paradigm**:

[...] mechanistic determinism is the certain horizon of a form of knowledge that claims to be utilitarian and functional, recognized less by its capacity to deeply understand reality than by its capacity to dominate and transform it [...].

The scenario that was established, within what the author describes as a dominant paradigm, created a gap between the potentialities of emerging countries in terms of inclusion in the benefits of globalization. For example, access to knowledge that potentially leveraged the development of peripheral countries, including, in this group, Latin American countries. This dominant paradigmatic scenario that intensified with the globalization of the economy generated environmental degradation, fragility of social rights, low democracy, with emphasis on what the author calls "[...] gap, in terms of scientific and technological development, between central countries and peripheral countries" (SANTOS, 2008a, p. 58). In relation to this theme - scientific and technological development - the discussion about the knowledge society is resumed.

Sobrinho (2005), when discussing the **Knowledge Society** theme, contributes with the following reflection on the subject:

[...] the 'knowledge society' is not a society of and for the majority of the population. It is primarily a society of and for those who are able to produce knowledge and/or derive benefits from it. Those who hold knowledge also have the power to create and secure the norms and rights that govern the ownership, value and uses of this capital. Thus, they also determine what kind of knowledge has value, by whom, how and when it should be produced and consumed (SOBRINHO, 2005, p. 75).

The question that arises in this regard relates to the conception of an **acceptable knowledge** - hegemonic and structured in the logic of capital, therefore, related to the dominant paradigm discussed by Santos (2008a). The knowledge that has been evidenced is at the service of the market, being in the hands of those who possess the significant financial resources to access it - knowledge economy. The knowledge economy is also translated into the **economization** of education, in which the principles and the economic logic direct the production of knowledge that is evidenced, especially that knowledge aimed at technical and productive purposes.

Under the logic of the knowledge economy, education becomes a means for the production of human capital to provide the necessary inputs for the intended productive development. In this productivist logic of market-oriented knowledge, one of the goals is the production of research applied to areas of market interest, that is, the production of inputs that supply products that meet the productive logic of the financial and other markets, aiming at the generation of profit.

This scenario influences the emergence of markets in higher education, which is now included in the list of services of the World Trade Organization <sup>4</sup>. This is a new dynamic in the supply of higher education, the inclusion of international capital companies, that is, the transnationalization of higher education. This logic of a **knowledge economy**, which incisively influences the life of societies, has produced the return of technical and productivist concepts - efficiency, quality, and accountability.

Reaching the status of Knowledge Society becomes the goal of developing countries, especially the Latin American ones, with the purpose of legitimizing themselves in the new world order of capital. However, this task will not be easy to accomplish. The exclusion of most populations imposes limits to the access to the Knowledge Society, which provokes the

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [www.wto.org/world\\_trade\\_organization](http://www.wto.org/world_trade_organization). Access on: 19 Dec. 2017.

reflection about the meaning of this knowledge, that seems to be in the hands of those who have the capacity to produce it, those who own the Information and Communication Technologies.

The constitution of integrated spaces of knowledge has reached significant dimensions in contemporary relations in the field of higher education. A transnational look has intensified in discussions of the quality of higher education, expanding to regional and inter-regional configurations, assuming compositions that cross oceans and unite continents, motivated by the search for insertion in the knowledge society as a whole. I open a reading key to include reflections, citing Santos' thesis **Ecology of Knowledge**, which reveals possibilities of Latin American Knowledge Societies for the establishment of a **convergence zone**, "equal opportunities to different forms of knowledge". This valorization of the knowledge produced in Latin American countries would enhance its power of recognition. But this recognition is far away, because it is destined for the central countries that dominate the "acceptable Capital-Knowledge" (SANTOS, 2008b, p. 108).

The globalization process expands institutional frontiers. Higher education has presented, in most continents, processes of integration of countries through scientific and technological exchanges, mobility of teachers, students and researchers, and actions motivated by the desire to achieve Knowledge Societies are becoming frequent. In these processes, movements of **cooperation and integration** in higher education are also frequent. In order to achieve this integration, Latin American authors, among them Lamarra (2004), Miranda (2008), Didriksson (2008), involved in these movements, highlight the importance of having convergences. In relation to higher education in Latin America, the issue of **quality** has occupied a prominent place.

The constitution of NETWORKS is a theme that has been consolidated in contemporary society, leveraged by digital and virtual globalization, expanding to discuss various areas of world interest: health, economy, sustainability, security, world peace, education, among others. Countries considered developed have adopted the exchange through the dynamics of NETWORKS, with the objective of establishing dialogues and exchanging experiences, aiming at the resolution of common or adverse problems. The organization of NETWORK movements to discuss relevant themes for the development of countries, especially Education issues, is not a form of organization exclusive to the 21st century. It is possible to observe, in the first half of the 20th century, movements created to discuss issues of cooperation and regional integration.

In Latin America, experiences of movements focused on the discussion of problems related to higher education, in the search for quality designed internationally, and that can intervene in its development, have been configured in the scenario since the first half of the

twentieth century. Associations of exchange, cooperation and advising have revealed themselves as significant associations and of political capital in the integration scenario, in the realm of higher education. It is possible to highlight some experiences: CSUCA - *Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano* (Mexico/1948), followed by UDUAL - *Unión de Universidades de América Latina* (Mexico/1949) and AUGM - *Asociación de Universidades del Grupo Montevideo* (Uruguay/1991).

The theme of organizing into NETWORKS became a recurrent item on the agendas of discussions about the quality of higher education, expanded, and, in 1991, in Dublin, Ireland, the INQAAHE - International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education<sup>5</sup>, has become an association network of 200 members focused on discussing quality assurance processes in higher education. This International Network aims to assist Networks of Higher Education Quality Accreditation and Evaluation Agencies that are growing in various locations around the world. INQAAHE is given a prominent role for the expansion it has taken on by incorporating other regional network and agency movements. The search for establishing cooperative relations regarding Higher Education Accreditation and Quality Assessment, through an international NETWORK located in Europe, had the purpose of establishing a type of Accreditation of the Higher Education Model that would be recognized by several other member Networks or Agencies.

Networks of agencies for accreditation and evaluation of the quality of higher education are emerging in various parts of Latin America with strong purposes of achieving, through these processes, integration, cooperation and convergence in higher education, aiming at the development of Knowledge Societies in the Latin American space. Based on this phenomenon of expansion, Lemaitre (2004) points out that, in Latin America, networks have emerged that have acquired importance in the region regarding the quality of higher education, among which two are present in this study: RIACES and RANA (*Mercosul Educativo*).

The RIACES Network was established in Buenos Aires in 2003, initially hosted by the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU), under the presidency of Dr. Ernesto Villanueva. Currently, the network is headquartered in Asunción, Paraguay, and its president is Dr. Raúl Aguilera Méndez, from the *Agencia Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación de la Educación Superior* (ANEAES) - Paraguay. According to the RIACES Statute<sup>6</sup>, dated the last amendment in 2016, RIACES has the proposal of being an association of agencies and bodies of evaluation and accreditation of the quality of higher

<sup>5</sup> Available at: [www.enqahe.org](http://www.enqahe.org). Access on: 29 Mar. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: [www.riaces.org/](http://www.riaces.org/). Access on: 29 Jul. 2017.

education without aiming at profit, intending to be independent from any government of the member countries. The bodies of RIACES are the General Assembly, the Steering Committee, the Presidency and the Secretariat, with emphasis on the management role of the Steering Committee in the conduct of RIACES activities.

The focus of the RIACES Network is the support to assure the quality of the agencies and systems in the member countries, with the socialization of information about the accreditation and evaluation processes, the encouragement of new agencies or systems, instituting, in their work plans, the self-evaluation and the external evaluation of these national agencies. This goal accompanies the discussions in terms of credibility of the agencies themselves, recognized internationally.

The Network of National Accreditation Agencies (RANA) belongs to the Mercosur education sector and is linked to the regional commission of the Coordinator of Higher Education (CRCES). The RANA Network arose from the need to implement the cooperation protocols in the ambit of Mercosur Education, and for this it was necessary to recognize the quality of the courses and degrees of the higher education institutions. RANA was constituted from the national accreditation agencies of the Mercosur member countries, having as reference the Accreditation System of courses for the recognition of university degrees (ARCU-SUL).

The RANA Network has the task of training, defining guidelines for participation in the selection and permanence of peer evaluators in the ARCU-SUR system bank, as well as creating procedural manuals for the system. In order to understand the management structure of RANA it is essential to approach the functioning structure of the educational sector of MERCOSUR-SEM, because RANA Network is part of the sector and does not have a specific regulation, attending to the norms of the SEM in its operation.

In the functioning structure of the SEM, the meeting of Ministers of Education of *Mercosul Educativo* (RME) is the highest discussion forum of this sector, and is responsible for making decisions on issues related to development, educational management and policy application for *Mercosul Educativo*.

### **On the other side of the networks: the voices of experts and managers who work on the networks**

In order to understand the methodology applied to the research, it is necessary to make it clear, in this space, that no a priori conception was given to the interviewee, leaving him/her at ease to write his/her narrative, whose focus was the report of his/her experience in the



dynamics of the Networks. However, with the purpose of leaving an analytical path for the analysis of the data, tightening links with the guiding questions proposed in this study, a Guide Script was prepared for the Narratives of the interviewees.

It is important to emphasize that, in order to protect the identity of each of the narrators, it was decided to characterize them by letters referring to the initial of the profile: G = manager; E = specialists and/or teachers of higher education institutions in the area of quality assessment of higher education. It should be noted that, at the beginning of the research, 22 members were invited who worked, or work, in the regional networks that are the object of this research, but not all requests were returned; only 12 members responded and participated with their narratives about their experience in the dynamics of the Networks.

In the following moment, the conception chosen from the studies of the category Democracy is reaffirmed, aiming at conducting the interpretative analyses of the interviewees' narratives, which outline their conceptions present in the dynamics of the functioning of the Networks. In this sense, the analyses are presented from the concept of Democracy, thought within an epistemological line that has as its foundation a concept of strong Democracy (BARBER, 2003). Considering the bases of epistemologies appropriate to the studies, the categories present in a conception of strong democracy are indicated, which are, a priori: Participation, Autonomy and Freedom of expression.

It was considered relevant to the understanding of the context of the Networks and the data collected in the research to survey the profile of the members of the Networks surveyed. The profile of the members of the Networks was tabulated from the function cataloged based on the information available on the websites of the Networks and presented in the item identification of the interviewed narrators. The RIACES Network has the profile of the members representing the member agencies in the following disposition: 80% of the members of the RIACES Network act in the condition of agency managers; 70% of the members have the profile of experts in the evaluation area; and 30% are professors linked to higher education institutions and occupy the position of members because they are linked to national accreditation agencies.

As far as the RANA Network is concerned, 100% of the members are managers of the National Evaluation Agencies and, of these, 80% are specialists in the area of accreditation and evaluation and less than 20% work as professors in the higher education institutions of the associated countries. It can be observed that both the RIACES Network and the RANA Network have, in the profile of their members, the majority of managers of national or regional Accreditation and Evaluation agencies, with almost no teaching experience in higher education.

Thus, it is considered that this data highlights the concern with the making of evaluation, since almost no experience is evidenced in the field of higher education; it reflects a concern with the meaning of the Accreditation and Evaluation processes for those who are at the end of the process, living higher education and its effects, that is, for the university community, for society in general.

In this research, narratives of members chosen to participate in both networks were registered, either in alternating periods or in the same period. From the twelve narratives elected to participate in the research, the profile of the participants was configured at the end. Of the twelve participants who finished the narratives, participating in the RIACES or/and RANA Networks, 42.86% represent the management of national or international agencies; 28.57% participate because they are specialists in the area of evaluation and indicated or invited to compose committees or councils in the Networks; the other 28.57% have the profile of higher education teachers and are in the discussion of evaluation, composing the Networks in Commissions or evaluators bank.

Regarding the length of stay of the interviewees, 100% of them have more than ten years of permanence. Of these, 80% have participated since the creation of the Networks, which becomes an important variable in the collection of narrated experiences, because some of the informants were able to make comparisons between the moment that marked the creation and the current context, which contributes to more refined analyses of the Network.

*I have always believed that working in networks contributes to the growth of each country that participates, especially I think in Latin America. I started my experiences in the CINDA Network. I have been in the Networks Dynamics for 15 years. (Interviewee G2 - OUR TRANSLATION).*

*I was a member of the Riaces pro-tempore Commission that gave life to the Agency, I represent Guatemala by the Accreditation Council and I have been president of the Council for the last few years (Interviewee G3, OUR TRANSLATION).*

## The category democracy in the voices of network actors

From the perspective of democracy, the category of participation was considered as one of the elements to characterize a strong democracy. In participation, the protagonism is in the voice of those who make up the group, having the right and the voice to make decisions. The Networks researched here present, in their proposed operation, the principle of collective participation of all members representing the countries. Through associated agencies, the representatives would exercise the right to decide on the matters discussed in Assembly, meetings, forums, in moments of collective discussion of decisions that need to be forwarded or work plans to be established.

For the analysis of the interviewees' narratives, regarding the categories **Participation and Autonomy**, they were translated into conceptual notes that support the perspective of a strong democracy. In a **strong democracy**, participation reflects the decisions that are made by all the participants of the movement, the group, association, network, in short, any expression of the will to discuss an issue that is directly linked to the participants' interests. It is an element of strong democratic inclination, and its effectiveness reflects a strong democracy. In relation to autonomy, this element is circumscribed in a democratic perspective when it allows decision making, without the concern of following an already referenced path, being then able to change the route, the path, the guidelines, in respect to its technical, political, or cultural nature. Autonomy is a condition for the free exercise of democracy.

Based on these conceptual notes we started to relate the transcripts of the narratives, fragments of the interviewees' voices:

*The intention has always been to function as a de facto network. That is, with equal participation of the components and processes that interpenetrate each other. This was the initial idea when we started in the network, but today I see the participation very concentrated in the decisions of the members of the steering committees. This has worried me, because we end up representing our agencies and we do not share decisions (Interviewee E1, OUR TRANSLATION).*

This interviewee, an expert in the field of evaluation, has participated in the Network movement since 2001, and in the first discussions about the evaluation processes of the agencies, he reveals in his narrative that, in those early moments of the discussions, the concern with equal participation was a priority. And he pointed out that the initial concern of the RIACES NETWORK was with the development of the Latin region, they wanted to share and exchange experiences with more developed regions in the area, but with the intention of making

the idea of building a policy for the region in the field of evaluation and accreditation prevail. One can perceive, in his narrative, that the Network movement was a strategy to develop the region together, aiming at developing the quality of higher education, thus contributing to the growth of Latin American society. The interviewee highlights that, in the current context, the dynamics of the Networks is very much impregnated by the decisions of regulatory bodies, the States and their policies.

Collective participation is very distant, since it is the agency representatives who decide, and it is not clear from the minutes or the narratives how decisions are made or appreciated in the representative countries. The narratives of the research interlocutors reveal that the agencies make their decisions in isolation, without the participation of society. In contrast to this interviewee's statement, the updated statute of the RIACES network (RIACES, 2016) highlights that it carries out its functions with autonomy and independently from the policies of the member countries. In this updated version, the RIACES Network statute, through its steering committee, reveals its concern for the Ibero-American region, highlighting the function of certifying national accrediting agencies, training its members and external evaluators in evaluation processes, aiming at the quality of higher education in the region.

Regarding the RANA Network, with respect to the theme of participation, we transcribe two narratives from interviewees who are part of the Network:

*Each country participates through its representative on the Board of Directors, the representative is appointed by the Minister of Education of the country to the Rana Network. Our national activity. So we were in the same environment, the same concerns (Interviewee G2, OUR TRANSLATION)*  
*One always has to consider the aspects of national policy and foreign policy. As it is a Mercosur Network, it follows the Block's procedures. That is, all decisions must be taken unanimously. When there are conflicts of interest, decisions are postponed until a position can be taken. Our participation as specialists is put in second place before the interests of the member countries (Interviewee G4, OUR TRANSLATION).*

The two narratives above, from Manager 2 and Manager 4, both associate members of the RANA network, highlight participation through representation and do not fail to highlight the concern with external policies, and one of them emphasizes that the role of the manager stands out in relation to that of the specialist, in which the concern with internal and external policies has referential value for decision making, while specialized knowledge has secondary value or even put in the last plan, even showing a certain frustration for this indication. The RANA Network belongs to *Mercosul Educativo*, and Iris Laredo (1998) already cited some of the weak points of this treaty, which give meaning to the current concern of the interviewees,

among which "[...] 5. The lack of social participation in the process, aimed basically at government and business actors" (LAREDO, 1998 p. 66).

In relation to the RANA Network, the participation is linked to the government representatives, to the specialists - who act as evaluators - who highlight the interests focused on the direction of the Mercosur Commercial Treaty, and in the interviewee's perception, the participation of the specialist - (the evaluator) - remains in the background. In this sense, there may be a direct implication of this picture in the perception that higher education will have - that is - part of it focused on social development, through the exchange and cooperation of knowledge, materializing the conception of Knowledge Society for the South American countries - *Mercosul Educativo*.

These narratives reveal different traces of the perspective of participation, as well as evidence of a certain frustration on the part of those who wish to participate beyond governmental decisions, beyond alliances. In the narrative offered by interviewee G1, participation is guaranteed to those who represent or are in tune with the interests of the policies outlined by the Steering Committee, which today has a concentration of members linked to the agencies or government bodies of the associated countries. From this interviewee's point of view, what he makes clear is that representation is left to bureaucrats:

*Here in the RIACES Network everything that happens must be in agreement with the national agencies. All discussions go through the representatives of the agencies, we value the experts in the area that are appointed by the national agencies. Today, the Steering Committee is represented by members coming from the agencies, we have had more conditions for managing the Network. In the past it was not like this, the RIACES Network went through many problems in 2010, it was necessary to empty the Presidency of the Committee. An example of the lack of representativeness, many countries had seats, but did not participate. Brazil was this example, it did not recognize our representation, because it was in the hands of the experts, and these experts did not have the official recognition of their countries (Interviewee G1, OUR TRANSLATION).*

These narratives indicate weaknesses in the process of participation and autonomy of the Networks, compromising the democratic inclination present in the philosophical conception of the Network movement, considering that it is possible to highlight that the technocratic knowledge, dominated by managers, holds supremacy over the power to decide and guide the policies of the Network movements, object of this study. Norbert Bobbio (2015, p. 60) contributes to this reflection when he alerts: "[...] democracy is based on the assumption that everyone can decide about everything. Technocracy, on the other hand, claims that only those few who have specific knowledge should be called upon to decide. In this perspective, the apex

of bureaucratic society starts from the power at the base, in a position contrary to democratic society, where the apex is at the social base.

Bobbio (2015) also reveals the need for a power without masks, a power that reveals itself as a double State, in which an invisible power would be eliminated. In the context of the studied Networks, the invisible power is represented by the financial market, by large corporations in search of new markets, by countries in search of new frontiers for the consumption of their technologies, under the discourse of building a foundation for the Knowledge Society in the countries of the South. And, within this logic, the promise of democracy in the natural perspective of the movements that have constituted themselves into Networks of Accreditation and Evaluation Agencies for Quality in Higher Education. The discourse of the Networks reveals itself, then, oppressed by the logic of capital, of a social model based on the market, in which knowledge turns to the development of the capitalist industrial park, forgetting society.

*Regarding the positive points of the Network, I point out the synergy, complementarity, and the amplification of results with each evaluation. What I see as negative is the issue of Autonomy that is very much linked to the relationships that the members of the Steering Committee establish, which can lead to difficulties in making decisions and developing effective activities. You see, here, it bothers me a lot the presence of super-networks, they keep supervising us around a logic that is theirs and not ours (Interviewee E-2, OUR TRANSLATION).*

The excerpt above was taken from the narrative of interviewee E-2, who stressed the concern with Autonomy, and this category was highlighted here in a conception of strong democracy. The Autonomy thought in the official documents of the Networks, object of this study, advocated making decisions aimed at the development of the region, considering its peculiarities. However, autonomy seems to be elevated to the condition of a legitimate movement, but when it comes to the guidelines of the work of the Networks, it is observed, in the narratives of the interviewees, that autonomy is very much linked to the guidelines of the large international Networks that, contrary to regionality, impose a standardized higher education quality standard, in which the Eurocentric epistemology is the central focus.

The current global reorganization of the capitalist economy is based, among other things, on the continuous and persistent production of an epistemological difference, which does not recognize the existence, on an equal footing, of other knowledges, and which therefore constitutes, in fact, an epistemological hierarchy, generated by marginalizations, silencing, exclusions or liquidations of other knowledges [...]. (SANTOS, 2008b, p. 153).

This analysis by Santos (2008b) circumscribes the relationship of breaking autonomy to which the interviewees refer, considering what the author calls epistemological hierarchy, i.e., despite the fact that the Networks, object of this study, present a discourse of regionality, of valuing the local, there is indeed a predominance of external policies in the decisions and routings within the movements of these Networks. The perspective of autonomy outlined within the Networks collides with the tendency to be regulated, according to the Networks' guidelines, such as INQAAHE or ENQA. Leite and Genro (2012 p. 85) corroborate this analysis by adding: "the benchmarks, transformed into neolanguage, indicate that the word 'Quality' would be the characteristic of status HEIs and that the one who confers 'Quality' is the accredited external evaluation agency associated with international networks".

The following statement from interviewee G1 reflects, to some extent, the dependence between regional and international networks:

*I understand Network as a free association of organizations that share common interests. We enjoy a certain autonomy. I am clear that the relationship with the other Networks aims to improve, to be accredited by them, it means to recognize our quality, our dynamics has to be similar to those Networks, being important the recommendations and to adopt the guidelines of these same Networks, because they are already recognized and ensure our survival (Interviewee G1, OUR TRANSLATION)*

Interviewee G1 refers to a relative autonomy, attributing this relativity to the necessary accreditation and appropriation of quality guidelines by the regional Networks, considering this positive fact for the survival and recognition of the Network of which he is part. On the other hand, interviewee E3 makes another reference, showing concern with autonomy:

*I don't think that it is justified to accredit the Networks, we could develop the evaluation processes starting from their members, collectively. Sometimes, in the trainings I disagree with the method, we are called to discuss and participate, but everything is already very well directed, the discourse that it is better to do what is recognized, even with the excuse of having visibility is very present in these moments. On one occasion in an event I questioned the President about this dependence that implied diminished autonomy, but I was silenced, my microphone failed (lol) (Interviewee E3, OUR TRANSLATION).*

In this narrative, besides autonomy, the interviewee mentioned another category that was already listed in the analysis categories of this study - **freedom of speech**. Freedom of speech was not a category that appeared in the speeches exclusively, it was always associated with the processes of autonomy. In this sense, freedom of speech characterizes the term

autonomy, the democratic process of doing justice to autonomy, it guarantees citizens or members of the Networks the right to express their opinion and the possibility to discuss it.

The interests that overlap inside the Networks somehow interfere in the power relations inside them. The issues of participation, autonomy, freedom of expression and respect for identity form the set of elements that deserve centrality in the dynamics of the Networks. The movement of the Networks of Accreditation and Evaluation Agencies for Quality in Higher Education promotes itself as an alternative field of discussion, not only of the processes of assuring the quality of higher education, but as a legitimate movement of representation of the Latin region, making its mark in the circuits of discussion of the issue of quality in higher education.

However, in the empirical field, in the reality configured by the narratives of the interviewees, members of the Networks, a mirror of reflections was configured that converge to the following perception: there is much to discuss about the movements in Networks, especially those that deal with issues that have assumed repercussions beyond geographical borders, cooperation, or integration, but that reveal new power relations, called by Bobbio (2015) **invisible power**.

In the context of the narratives it was not perceived any movement towards the discussion of the dynamics of the networks, not even in the consulted minutes. There is an improvement in the functioning dynamics of the Networks, but it comes from external factors, as already mentioned here, the need to insert the Latin American and Caribbean region in the context of the Knowledge Societies. In this sense, the improvements that arise in the dynamics of the Networks, in the great majority of the cases, aim at meeting the scenario that is installed of discussing assurance processes. There is no concern in discussing the democratic process within the networks, not even their relationship with large international networks.

In the great majority of the narratives, the justification for the organization of Accreditation and Evaluation processes in agency network movements presented, as a strong point, the democratic process of participation through representation, and also values the promotion of quality in the region from the relations with these Networks. It was not possible to see any criticism of these Networks or the concern with the representation of an invisible power behind them. Another interesting point to highlight was to observe, in the great majority of the narratives, a certain convergence of interests around the relationships that are established or will be established among the associates or with other Networks of larger size. However, these relationships, object of the intensification of hegemonic forces, have been intensified from the logic of the "new hegemonic imperialism" (LEITE *et al.*, 2012), which has been spreading



its forces in the Latin American region, through movements of evaluations, accreditations and rankings, producing a concept of educational quality standardized for higher education, having as a reference the indicators established for the formation of a knowledge under the logic of commodification.

### Among the "findings" of the research

It was possible to understand, from the studies engendered in this research, the role of the Accreditation and Evaluation Networks within power relations, in which the neolanguage of Accreditation and Evaluation starts to determine the relations between countries, between continents. Networks come to represent the concentration of power in the legitimation of quality models, thus legitimizing valid knowledge and what should be followed. In this structure, democratic representativeness is in the guarantee of participation through representation, in which the right to voice is closely related to the condition that each member assumes within the Network. Thus, going back to what the interviewees said, **participation is very much concentrated in the decisions made by the members of the steering committees.**

Other "findings" were creating a cast of questions, thus, the research revealed reflections about the processes of cooperation, integration and socialization that may, yes, represent "bets" of possibilities of ruptures with hegemonic models of knowledge production, but this path will only be possible if network movements rediscuss the limits of democracy within, rediscussing the alignments with exogenous practices of domination and power. The power and knowledge relations distance themselves from concepts of equity and approach neoconservative relations, in which the subtle control of large international networks approaches regional or local networks, under the banner of the process of growth through cooperation, in search of recognition of the quality of a knowledge, of an education aimed at the logic of Capital, but subtle and benevolent, as described by Leite *et al.* (2012).

From this perspective, democratic thinking distances itself from a strong democracy of social inclusion, in which participation, autonomy and freedom of expression represent a break with the logic of capital and allow the incorporation of local knowledge aligned with social development in *Nuestra América*.

To represent the possibility of emancipatory processes inside the movement of accreditation networks and evaluation of the quality of higher education in Latin America implies the decolonization of the concept and the democratic practice in the relations among the countries that compose them, emphasizing a conception of strong democracy (BARBER,

2003), with effective participation, recognizing social heterogeneity and freedom of expression as essential conditions for the necessary autonomy, in which the discussion of the concept of quality approaches the production of a counter-hegemonic knowledge of struggle against all forms of oppression and domination. That said, it is to recognize that movements of accreditation networks and evaluation of the quality of higher education will only represent stakes when they break with the logic of capital.

The "findings" of this research led to the consideration of strong and participatory democracy as a strategy of counter-hegemonic position to the capital's logic, perverse, oppressive and excluding. They also made it possible to think of resistance movements as new possibilities of "rupture" with hegemonic models.

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