Higher Education in Societies
A Multi Scale Perspective

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Universities are not only economic engines but societal ones. This book interrogates the embeddedness of Higher Education (HE) systems in national social contracts, and discusses how their renegotiation is at play in the organisation of students’ access to universities.

Structured around the central concept of the social contract, the growing recognition of the role of HE in its implementation, and regulations governing both individual and collective access, Higher Education in Societies: A Multiscale Perspective, explores the shifting mission of HE over the years from one thought to produce an elite to one of distributive justice by presenting research at the macro, meso and micro levels. In bringing together researchers from different countries, continents, and disciplines to study the same issue through a multiscale analysis, this book forms the starting line for further theoretical and methodological debate on the value of weaving together different approaches to the study of HE, including historical, comparative, sociological, organisational, institutional, quantitative, and qualitative.
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This new series provides overviews about state of the art research in the field of higher education studies. It documents a selection of papers from the annual conferences of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), the world organisation of researchers in the field of higher education. This object and problem related field of studies is by nature interdisciplinary and theoretically as well as methodologically informed by disciplines such as sociology, political science, economics, history, philosophy, law and education. Each book includes an introduction by the editors explaining the thematic approach and criteria for selection as well as how the book can be used by its possible audience which might include graduate students, policy makers, researchers in the field, and practitioners in higher education administration, leadership and management.

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This book is the result of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) conference that took place at the University of Lausanne (UNIL), Switzerland, in September 2014 and brought together 140 researchers from 26 countries to discuss “the roles of higher education and research in the fabric of society.” This conference was made possible by the generous funding afforded to us by the Faculty of Political Sciences, the Institute of Social Sciences and the Observatory Science, Policy and Society (UNIL), the Swiss National Science Foundation, as well as the Region of Lausanne through SPECo, ARCAM and the Town. To all these sources of funding we express our gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Second World War, major events have structurally and substantively transformed higher education (HE) systems around the world: The Cold War which, amongst other things, ushered in a post-war race for economic supremacy; the development of the knowledge-based economy and the massification of education; the spread of a shared democracy as a model that both led to and was fostered by the opening of HE systems to more diverse student populations; and the onward-marching processes of globalisation and internationalisation that have intensified the interdependency and competition between HE systems. These seismic shifts have been accompanied during the last three decades by a complexification of higher education and research (HER) systems as they expanded both in size and the role(s) they play in societies. In the words of Mala Singh, “transformation has been used as much to denote the repositioning of higher education to serve as the more efficient “handmaiden” of the economy as to signify the drive to align higher education with the democracy and social justice agenda of a new polity […]” (Singh, 2013, p. 1). As a result, the missions of HE institutions are increasingly under the microscope today, predominantly in the area of diversity (e.g. Hurtado, 2007; Van Vught, 2008), particularly in a time of global financial crisis (Kinser & Hill, 2011).

All this change has led to a growing, albeit fragmented body of research on HER systems across disciplinary lines (e.g. sociology, history, political sciences, economics) and a range of approaches to examine HE as a “social institution” at a time when it appears to be constantly driven by economic and marketplace forces. The present volume, drawn from papers presented by international researchers at the 2013 Consortium for Higher Education and Research (CHER) conference in Lausanne, is an attempt to collate research in this field in a multiscale analysis. The overarching theme of the conference centred on how the roles of higher education and research (HER) are woven into the fabric of society along three main threads: 1) the (re)definition of institutional, organisational, professional, individual and societal identities in and by HE, including research on the issues of access, elite production, and meritocracy; 2) the sphere of scientific knowledge in the fabric of societies; and 3) a reflective examination of the link between various scales of analysis of, theory on, as well as issues related to HER institutions and systems.

The keynote presentations, theoretical contributions and empirical studies paved the way for a broad discussion of the major historical and recent changes that have profoundly transformed HER systems around the world. This proved to be an excellent starting point to grasp and analyse the processes driving this transformation. In these processes, contextual changes have played a crucial part in
shifting the mission of HE over the years from one thought to produce an elite to one of distributive justice. Structured around the central concept of the social contract, the growing recognition of the role of HE in the implementation of state policy and political platforms, and regulations governing both individual and collective access, *Higher Education in Societies: A Multiscale Perspective* explores this shift by presenting research at the macro, meso and micro levels.

Education has long been studied as a vector through which national identity is seeded (Gellner, 1983). Broad concepts such as the “social contract” and the “public good” represent valuable heuristic tools to further examine the role devolved to current HER systems within this process, and enrich analyses of the transformation of national identity through HE policy. According to Paz-Fuchs, in contemporary analysis a social contract refers to two intertwined dimensions. The first is a procedural one, and is based on defining it as “the understandings and conventions within a society that help to explain and justify its legal, political and economic structures” (Paz-Fuchs, 2011, p. 3). The second is substantive and echoes John Rawl’s seminal 1971 work *A Theory of Justice*, where the social contract based on the principle of social justice and the attainment of equality. Massification of HE, its increased role in individual social mobility and, more broadly, in offering access to positions of power and better living conditions as a whole (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013), illustrate why HE as an institution has become a pillar of the social contract in western societies, leading research to inquire how and to what extent this institution can foster equality of opportunity.

Consequently, there are at least two possible avenues available to researchers to assess how the social contract can be implemented through HE. In the first, the philosophy underpinning a social contract can serve as the standard by which the legitimacy of current policies is evaluated. The normative role of the state is thus examined, starting from policies such as those it defines on broadening access to higher education or funding education. The second positions HE as part of the welfare state, for example through the use of “welfare transfers.” In this scenario, research on equal opportunity in student trajectories can be used as a valid indicator of the congruence between the social contract in place and the real needs of individuals. This avenue can include assessing “a child against the relative advantages and disadvantages that they encountered during their school years in terms of the background institutions and opportunities available to them” (Paz-Fuchs, 2011, p. 13), and implies that “the state should compensate for different starting points by investing more resources in lower class families, schools, and neighbourhoods, so as to equalise opportunities” (ibid., p. 14). This echoes Sen’s (1992, 2009) theory of social justice focused on capabilities, and when applied to HE, implies that a fair and just distribution rests on the ability of a social mechanism such as the organisation of access to HE to expand. The second avenue contains the nascent theory that HE constitutes more than just added value for individuals, and should therefore be regarded not solely as a private good but above all a public one. As such it posits “a collective or social process that impacts more than just those directly engaged in the specific public good” (Chambers & Gopaul, 2008), or a “set of societal interests that are not reducible to the sum of
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interests of individuals or groups of individuals and that demarcate a common space within which the content of moral and political goals like democracy and social justice can be negotiated and collectively pursued” (Singh, 2013, p. 4).

Throughout the chapters that follow, several issues related to HE are examined through a multiscale analysis: the intergenerational tensions among researchers on the call to update research evaluation criteria; the progressive transformation of HE since the 11th century; the humanistic perspective of the evolution of HER institutions and the recent issue of meritocracy in the context of a supply/demand imbalance; the recognition of HE as a key policy area starting with the massification of HER in the 1970s; and the advances, reversals or the status quo in access and admission processes, particularly for some vulnerable groups.

The book begins with two papers presented by keynote speakers designed to frame the discussions that followed. Michèle Lamont surveys how universities contribute to the well-being of society, firstly by questioning research practices such as the peer review process in an age of “uber-excellence” and differences in national cultures of evaluation. Second, Lamont proposes adopting a framework she developed in studying societal well-being in the field of health care for research on HE, her analysis calling for the development of research focused on how HE as an institution can foster societal resilience at both the collective and individual level, and to what degree. Sheldon Rothblatt, in tracing the evolution of HER, discusses two components of the HE admission process that could be studied as markers of this resilience – merit and worth – which have been at issue in cross-Atlantic democracies over the last two hundred years, and adopts a humanistic perspective to study the issue of meritocracy in access to select universities.

Following Lamont and Rothblatt, the next three chapters present theoretical foundations from which to analyse the transformation of HE. Peter Maassen argues that the HE as an institution is now in “a critical period with a potential for a major rebalancing of internal and external relations of authority, power and responsibility in higher education governance.” Behind labels such as “a Europe of knowledge” a search is underway for a new social contract or pact between institutions, political authorities, and society at large. As Maassen defines it, a social contract is a “fairly long-term cultural commitment to and from higher education, as an institution with its own foundational rules of appropriate practices, causal and normative beliefs, and resources, yet validated by the political and social system in which higher education is embedded.” As such, social contracts tend to be “different from a formal legal contract based on a continuous strategic calculation of expected value by public authorities, organised external groups, university employees, and students – all regularly monitoring and assessing the university on the basis of its usefulness for their self-interest, and acting accordingly.” In this chapter Maassen thus discusses the way in which the social contract with respect to the university is interpreted, criticised and renewed in different parts of the world.

What is the basis of “public goods” in advanced societies? How do HE institutions and systems deliver them and under what conditions? Simon
Marginson investigates these questions by considering HE institutions as prime social and economic movers: “They educate people in social skills and attributes on a large scale. They reproduce occupations, they provide structured opportunity and social mobility, they create and distribute codified knowledge, and they carry a heavy and growing traffic in cross-border relations.” While no single theoretical framework is sufficient to measure public goods in HE, many of the goods produced by HE institutions are more than just benefits for individual students or companies – they are collective in nature and consumed jointly. For example, HE institutions “contribute to government, innovation capacity, and the formation and reproduction of both knowledge and relational human society. The public outcomes of higher education include these collective outcomes. The public outcomes also include certain individual goods associated with public collective benefits, such as the formation, in individual students, of social and intellectual capabilities basic to social literacy, scientific literacy, effective citizenship and economic competence.” How, then, can we move beyond a purely economic understanding of “public goods” without losing sight of the notion of production? How can they be both inclusive and rigorously measured? Marginson proposes a conceptual framework to examine these questions through a comparative perspective and calls for incorporating the concept of global public goods within the inquiry.

For her part, Joanna Williams explores definitions of “public good” as included in a number of HE policy documents from the United Kingdom, which since 1963 has seen a shift from public good being equated to knowledge as an end in and of itself, to public goods being defined in relation to individual students’ increased employability and subsequent social mobility. Williams notes that in academic literature, the public good of higher education is linked to particular values of citizenship associated with a “good society;” this often takes the form of human flourishing, personal growth and individual empowerment. The old “public good” is thus being reconceptualised along more individualistic, private lines (private or “public goods”). Moreover, the author demonstrates that the relationship between HE and the public good has moved from knowledge as truth, to a state where “public good is to be found in the knowledge that there is no truth.”

The next two chapters cover the transformation of HE institutions by considering the role that policy along party lines may or may not play in the development of HE itself. The authors discuss a number of HE issues such as institutional autonomy and power, policy frameworks regarding access, the legacy of the church, as well as political steering models.

In examining recent changes in European HE policy, Jens Jungblut further demonstrates the trend discussed in the previous chapters of HE shifting from being an instrument of the welfare state context to one of innovation and economic competitiveness. Against this backdrop, Jungblut develops a conceptual framework to analyse the relationship between positions aligned along political party lines, social rifts and impact of electoral institutions on HE policy. To identify conflicts in HE policy in the allocation of societal values – including those related to access – his research links actor-focused and institution-focused approaches by merging
two theories: “social cleavage” and the “varieties of capitalism.” Zeroing in on the political sphere and the influence of institutions of the electoral system, Jungblut suggests that the heterogeneity of a society seen through active cleavage lines is one of the two factors that influence the space in which political parties manifest and orient themselves (the second factor being the institutional setup of the respective political system). Jungblut argues that not only do political parties matter in the positions and output of HE policy, but also that the extent to which they do matter is dependent on a number of institutional variables. These last, wide-ranging and intertwined, include the degree of massification of the HE system, the prevailing form of capitalism, and policy legacies stemming from how religious conflicts have been settled, particularly in the area of education.

Next, Rômulo Pinheiro traces the history of the development of HE in Norway by taking into account macro socioeconomic events as well as societal expectations. Access to higher education in Norway can be divided into three phases – from the 1950s to the early 1970s (“More is Better”), from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s (“More is a Problem”), and from the mid 1990s to the present (“More is Different”) – which can be interpreted as the direct outcomes of intervention by the Norwegian government to address issues and expectations in the area of access to HE. During the first phase, when regional colleges were first established, the expansion of HE was largely due to demand for a highly-skilled workforce needed during the post-WWII reconstruction as well as the coming of age of the baby-boomers. In the second phase, central authorities were caught off guard by the steep rise in university and regional college enrolment that resulted from a high level of unemployment amongst 16-24 year olds, as well as the growing aspirations of Norway’s youth. The current phase began as a result of the political willingness to steer the HE system to adapt to the knowledge-based economy, to meet the challenge of an aging population, and to address the thorny issue of unequal access to HE for some socioeconomic groups (minorities, women, students from rural areas). In discussing how Norwegian governmental agencies adopted and implemented policy responding to newly-emerging conditions and shifts in ideological and societal priorities, Pinheiro also highlights the pivotal role in HE policy territory management plays in understanding the evolution of the social contract.

How have all these changes impacted access to HE? What do policies on access to and demand for HE tells us about the evolution of the social contract in different countries? The last four chapters offer analyses of the major effects of the evolution of HER systems or policy directions on current student pathways in certain countries. The massification of HE appears to be a far from linear process: indeed, some countries have actually experienced a decline in demand (e.g. England, France, Australia and New Zealand; see Leach, 2013).

Such is the case in Portugal, where currently there are more available places than candidates in public universities and polytechnics. Madalena Fonseca, Sara Encarnação, and Elsa Justino analyse the causes and impact of this decline in demand for HE, and find that this contraction may be the result of a cluster of events and processes, some societal (e.g. demographic decline and the global
economic crisis), others specific to HE policies (e.g. more rigorous entrance exams for admission for some programmes). Using the programme of study that recorded the largest drop in the number of candidates in the first phase of 2012-2013 admission – Construction and Civil Engineering Programme – the authors posit that this decrease could have an unravelling effect on the entire Portuguese HE system: greater polarisation in some institutions, more concentration in urban areas, less mobility and access in outlying regions. As in the previous chapters, the issues of social and territorial equity once again appear to be at the centre of the national social contract.

Regardless of upward or downward trends in demand, access to HE institutions by non-traditional students continues to be either fostered or hindered in some countries, namely for immigrant students in France and Switzerland, and first-generation college students in Québec (Canada). This is the central issue woven through the final three chapters, which also examine ways to investigate the implementation of the social contract in HE by using various methodological approaches to interpret and define student diversity. Jake Murdoch, Christine Guégnard, Maarten Koomen, Christian Imdorf and Sandra Hupka-Brunner use a comparative approach to study access to HE for immigrants in France and Switzerland. The purpose of their study was to determine which educational pathways immigrant students use to access HE in those two countries, by contrasting the recent “vocationalisation of the academic route” to HE in France with the traditionally high level of enrolment in vocational programmes in Switzerland. For example, while students can access HE through the vocational path in France, such is not the case in Switzerland. Using data of two youth cohorts, the study identified some factors (country of origin, academic performance in secondary school, student aspirations and different socioeconomic variables) likely to impact access to HE for immigrant students. The authors stress that inequality in access for some immigrant students tends to have roots in early disadvantages during primary and lower secondary education as well as early tracking, underscoring the need for a longitudinal approach to study educational trajectories as well as a potentially systemic approach to understand the mechanisms at play behind these trajectories.

France Picard, Pierre Canisius Kamanzi and Julie Labrosse outline new challenges facing HE in Québec through an examination of student pathways at the college level, specifically those students at risk of failing or interrupting their studies during the crucial first semester of college. When entering CÉGEP (the first level of the higher education system), a number of these students enrol in a transition programme (Session d’accueil et d’intégration), which includes a freshman seminar course and a range of remedial measures inside and outside the classroom. This group of students appear to share several distinguishing characteristics: greater socioeconomic heterogeneity, high school education paths interspersed with hurdles and detours (e.g. failed courses, repeated academic years, interrupted studies, adult education), as well as more pronounced academic and career indecision. The empirical data reveal the strengths and weaknesses in both the system as an institution and the remedial measures implemented to reduce
inequality and promote greater access to HE. This questions how the specific needs of students entering HE are identified, and underscores the need to consider ascriptive factors and the unique characteristics of individual education paths in any analysis. Contrasting these two aspects can thus help determine needs when implementing a social contract based on the principle of equity, by developing public policy tools likely to maximise individual capabilities.

Last, Agnès van Zanten and Amélie Legavre use an original approach to examine access to HE in a qualitative study conducted in France. Focusing on the role played by HE fairs, they asked the following question: what kind of information on programmes of study and institutions can potential applicants find at these events? Their study explores how HE fairs channel information between HE institutions and these applicants, and how likely these fairs are to either perpetuate or mitigate educational inequalities in access. The authors detail the strategies used by institutions to attract students during these fairs, namely in the “packaging” of products, services and programmes of study. Their findings confirm that these fairs tend to be “middle-class affairs,” “although the proportion of students from different social classes clearly varies based on the fair’s theme, with more upper-class visitors at fairs on grandes écoles and a wider representation of lower-class students at fairs on two-years studies and apprenticeships.”

In bringing together researchers and scholars to study the same issue through a multiscale analysis, this book forms the starting line for further theoretical and methodological debate on the value of weaving together different approaches to the study of HER, including but not limited to the historical, comparative, sociological, organisational, institutional, quantitative and qualitative. We hope it sparks the “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959), characterised by the linking of biographical, historical, and structural approaches in discussing the “nominalist realism” (Lahire, 2012), or, in the words of Michel Grossetti (2012), the link between the development of theories of the social world, the scales of analysis chosen, and the type of problematisation.

REFERENCES


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1. HOW DO UNIVERSITY, HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETAL WELL-BEING?

INTRODUCTION

It has been a real pleasure for me to come to the CHER 2013 conference held in Lausanne. I first would like to thank Christine Musselin, as the CHER president, and Gaële Goaetellec, as the conference organiser, for their invitation to think more systematically about the question of the potential impact of University, Higher Education and Research on the well-being of societies. This theme is particularly important to me as over the last years, my research has converged around the issue of societal well-being on the one hand, and on peer review on the other. I am thrilled that the CHER invitation has given me the opportunity to make connections between two of my main research lines, which have been pursued largely independently of one another until today.

I take the opportunity of this invitation to reflect on my book *How Professors Think*, four years after its publication in English, and after it has made its way into various international audiences via translations (in Korean, Chinese, and Spanish). I will draw connections with a recent book titled *Social Resilience in the NEO-LIBERAL ERA* (Lamont & Hall, 2013), which I coedited with the political scientist Peter Hall. This book is a follow up on a 2009 book titled *Successful Societies: How Culture and Institution affect Health*, and both are the outcome of a collaboration between a multidisciplinary group of social scientists who have been brought together by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. We have met three times a year since 2003 to reflect together on the cultural and institutional conditions that lead to greater societal well-being.

How to articulate peer review in Higher Education and societal well-being? I will start with the assumption that meritocratic peer review is good for societal well-being and that it should be fostered given the present challenges that are created by a recurring obsession with excellence in research and teaching, as manifested for instance in the heightened importance of rankings of all sorts. I will then turn to other aspects of societal well-being that can be supported by the university and discuss how these can be maximised.

HOW PROFESSORS THINK

*How Professors Think* concerned how peer review is practiced in the United States, in a context where the reviewers I studied generally believe in the fairness of the
process – that cream rises – and where they say they behave in such a way as to maintain their own faith in the process. My book is based on in-depth interviews conducted with more than 80 panelists and funding program officers. I focused my attention on twelve interdisciplinary funding panels associated with five important funding competitions for fellowships and grants aimed at graduate students or faculty members of various ranks in the social sciences and the humanities. While I was able to observe three of these panels, interviews make up the bulk of the evidence mobilised for this study.

This book describes some of the conditions that make peer review possible in the United States. I focus on factors that make anonymous evaluation more likely, such as the significant demographic weight of the American research community and the spatial distance and decentralisation of American institutions of higher education. I also discuss the lengthy graduate education process that brings students in close contact with mentors, shapes their self-concept, and fosters a commitment and faith in peer review (as opposed to cynicism). The book suggests why it would be reasonable to expect that the very same customary rules of evaluation I described would be contested in countries where different conditions for scientific work prevail – for instance, where the conditions for the production of faith in peer review and the production of the American academic self that sustains it, are not present. I have extended this argument in my collaborative writings of evaluative cultures in Canada (Lamont, 2008), China (Lamont & Sun, 2012), Finland (Lamont & Huutoniemi, 2011), and France (Lamont & Cousin, 2009) to explore how peer review is practiced elsewhere in light of local conditions. These comparisons brought nuances to my earlier argument and allow me to contextualise my findings. To take only one example, the NORFACE peer review system adopted in Finland and widely used in Europe (Lamont & Huutoniemi, 2011) favours bringing in international reviewers to counter the localism that often prevails in small size academic communities. This system demonstrates the importance of adapting peer review processes to the features of national research communities, where anonymity as a condition for legitimate evaluation may not be as easily realised as it is in a very large field of higher education such as the one that exists in the United States.

With *How Professors Think* in the background, I will first mention a few challenges that peer review currently faces, and which are tied to the transformation of higher education. Second I will turn to how the well-being of societies may be connected to the transformation in higher education, university and research.

**UBER EXCELLENCE AND THE CHALLENGES THAT PEER REVIEW MEET**

Over the last twenty years, we have seen in Europe, China and elsewhere a ramping up of the international race toward excellence in higher education and research, sustained in part by the growing use and diffusion of rankings of all sorts, and by the fact that the allocation of resources has become increasingly tied to systematic evaluation. This affects institutional and scholarly practices in countless
ways. The Shanghai ranking has led French universities to engage in a major institutional reform. France is responding to the relatively low ranking of its institutions by creating consortiums of universities (the famous PRES or pôle de recherche et d’enseignement supérieur) so that each unit will be larger and thus have more weight in the rankings. Bigger is now better, with all kinds of unexpected consequences at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The unintended consequence of this emphasis on rankings is that excellence is becoming more concentrated in a few institutions. To illustrate, the official designation of some German universities as “excellent” (by the German Forschungsgemeinschaft’s exzellenzinitiative) may lead to a concentration of the strongest German students in such universities and a weakening of the universities that have not received this label – whereas in the previous regime such students may have decided to stay in a second rate universities in order to work with a leading scholar in their field. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer, with “l’Europe à deux vitesses” (a two-speed Europe) becoming a reality not only in the national labour markets (Emmenegger, Hausermann, Palier, & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2012), but in the world of higher education and research as well. These transformations create many challenges for the world of university, research and higher education. Below I discuss seven of these challenges, starting with generational ones.

1) There has been an intensification of the challenge of national academic status orders by the growing importance of international status markers (e.g., publishing in international journals). This transformation often put older scholars who would normally serve as gate-keepers in a paradoxical situation, as they were not required to meet such criteria at the time when they were building their reputation and coming through the ranks. Yet, their seniority, relative status, and established expertise continue to entitle them to evaluate the younger generation. This discrepancy has many implications for the functioning of national intellectual communities and in some quarters it has generated a legitimacy crisis within academic fields. Younger researchers have felt blocked, instead of empowered by the older generations, in part because their own intellectual and professional capitals are often different from those valued by their predecessors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that strong tensions build around such generational differences across a number of European research communities.

2) A related challenge is the definition of criteria of evaluation used in the allocation of prestigious fellowship and grant competitions, and in particular, whether more weight should be put on the trajectory of candidates than on their project in the evaluation process. In a recent assessment of Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research peer review which I lead (Lamont, 2008), the international blue-ribbon panel in charge of the evaluation recommended that less weight should be given to the past record of candidates as compared to their research proposal, so as to even the playing field for more junior researchers. This is a source of tension as “the scientific establishment” may be more vested in putting more weight on past achievements, while innovation and creativity are most likely to come from the younger generations.
3) From a strictly productivist perspective, unleashing the forces of intellectual globalisation should result in greater convergence of criteria of evaluation and lesser barriers to innovation across intellectual communities. This change may be resisted by established researchers in part because their own form of intellectual capital is likely to be less international in nature than it is the case for younger generations. This national focus is particularly strong in the humanities, as demonstrated in a recent study by John Bendix (2014); after all, many humanists work on national histories and literatures. Yet, senior researchers have more experience as intellectual producers, and thus are more entitled to evaluate the work of their peers, which can work at the detriment of more junior colleagues. It will not be easy to find the proper balance between national and international certification in this rapidly changing environment.

4) There are also dysfunctional consequences associated with academics competing for a small set of very selective grant funders and space in a few highly prestigious journals. When publications or funding outlets give successive “revise and resubmit” to many applicants and accept very few articles (5 percent in 2012 for the *American Sociological Review*), an unintended consequence may be a considerable depletion in time and energy and a reduction in the pace of disciplinary innovation. This raises the question of the desirability of adopting more variegated forms and sites of evaluation (through the creation of electronic journals – see for instance the recent creation of *Sociological Science* as a reaction to long-delays in peer review) – which would encourage the development of a wider range of complementary types of excellence. From the researchers’ perspective, hedging one’s bet across a number of publications could be a more generative and productive approach. Aiming at a wider range of publication lowers the requirement of meeting the highly standardised format for articles (as described by Abend (2006), who compares major US and Mexican sociology journals), and of writing in English (an imposition for non-native English speakers). This is also likely to result in increased productivity – and perhaps innovation.

5) It may be difficult to find qualified and disinterested reviewers in small national research communities. Differences in the culture of evaluators (concerning for instance the respect of norms of confidentiality or whether researchers feel obligated to take turn and carry their weight in serving as reviewers as opposed to acting as “free loaders”) are often a problem. Respect for the rule of “cognitive contextualisation” (i.e. the norm of using criteria most appropriate for the discipline of the applicant) may favour clientelism and the use of inconsistent standards (Mallard, Lamont, & Guetzkow, 2009). Also, in a context where there are few high quality proposals, meeting basic standards such as clarity, feasibility and methodological soundness may need to be given more weight and importance than meeting criteria of evaluation such as originality. Criteria have to be adapted to the national context and the size and the demographic weight of a scientific field.

6) In a recent debate around *How Professors Think* published in a Spanish journal, the leading sociologist Juan Diez Medrano compared the conditions I described in my book not only to the Spanish context, but also to the European
higher education and societal well-being

Union’s evaluation commissions where he has gained considerable experience (Medrano, 2013). He noted a growing bifurcation within the Spanish system, between those who are embracing international norms and others. The former group, he argues, put more emphasis on criteria of evaluation such as social and policy significance and methodological rigour, as opposed to theoretical and substantive contribution. The former criteria contrast with those preferred by more traditional researchers who put weight on the use of particular theoretical paradigms (Marxism, feminism, etc.). Such differences in criteria of evaluation are also a considerable source of conflict. While tying current practices to the broader features of national and academic contexts, Diez Medrano provides a most convincing description of the factors that may explain the current state of peer review in Spain (characterised by the low autonomy of the academic field). A first remedial step may be a collective reflections among Spanish academics on the future of peer review in their country and on how to reform the system while avoiding the perils of the over-quantification of excellence measurement – often perceived and denounced as a tool of neo-liberal governmental control (as experienced in France in recent years, with the creation of the Agence d’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement scientifique (AERES), whose transformation was predictably announced by the socialist government shortly after it came to power in 2012).

The relationship between researchers and national governments is changing as well. Public administrators are redoubling efforts to manage and facilitate excellence in research, through the creation of centralised funding program and the regular evaluation of researchers for instance. Yet, the temptation to interfere and impose criteria of evaluation that do not emerge from the scientific communities themselves is often present. A tradition of state centralisation can be fundamentally at odds with the respect of academic autonomy and of the integrity of the peer review system. Administrative interference tarnishes the legitimacy of research evaluation all together, and discourages researchers from getting involved in funded research (as applicant or peer reviewer). Thus, challenges to peer review come not only from insufficiently professionalised localistic and clientelistic academics, but also from hungry public administrators who overextend the tentacles of governmental power. An obvious conclusion is that those in charge of scientific and research policy need to show the way, if they are seriously committed to fostering more universalistic academic communities. This applies to Russia, Spain, Italy, France, and numerous other countries.

societal well being, higher education and research

These transformations signal challenges for the organisation of research and more broadly of higher education. But then, what’s the link between societal well-being and higher education? How does higher education affect the level of societal success? Our research program on Successful Societies has discussed the social determinants that affect health and shows that economic resources are not the only one impinging on health but that social resources resulting from institutions and
cultural repertories constitutive of social relations are central too. To sum it up, we
defined successful societies as societies where individuals have the capabilities to
meet challenges. We view cultural and institutional resources as central to these
capabilities, as they constitute the scaffolding or buffers and resources those
individuals need to meet challenges. In other words, we view individual resilience
as supported and empowered by collective cultural and institutional resources, but
we are ultimately more interested in social resilience, i.e. the resilience of groups
and societies.

Where does higher education come into play in this context? First, higher
education supports recognition through a culture of diversity. This is what the
evaluation process analysed in “How Professors Think” underlines: the importance
of diversity (geographic, institutional, regional, and to a lesser extent, racial and
gender diversity) as a resource for evaluation – as a distinct type of excellence that
complements other types. More broadly, we now understand better the role of
higher education in fostering a context in which the widest range of individuals
possible are acknowledged cultural membership and given full recognition as
members of the polity. In the US and the UK, universities play a crucial role in
fostering cultures of diversity, ones where the perspectives and identities of
members of sexual, ethnic and racial minorities are explicitly defined as equally
valuable as those of majority group members and where a great deal of collective
work is produce to make this principle a reality (Warikoo, 2013). This is one
instance where universities contribute directly to the creation of successful
societies, by creating the cultural and institutional conditions that enable greater
social inclusion.

Second, the creation of a middle class of college educated professionals and
managers is essential to state capacity and societal success. This is why
organisations such as the Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, and other
international philanthropies have dedicated considerable resources toward enabling
individuals from a large range of societies to obtain BA and MA degrees. This is
part of their wider agenda for fostering social justice, human rights and civil
society across the globe. Social workers, urban planners, journalists, and a range of
other professionals play an essential role in organising collective life at the
institutional and cultural levels. Without them, and without the institutions of
higher education that impart them expertise, much of what we take for granted in
terms of the organisational resources and shared cultural framework that empower
our lives would simply be non-existent. These are essential in fostering collective
resilience and the role played by higher education in making such realities possible
is absolutely crucial.

Third, and more broadly, as an institution, higher education provides students
with collective resources that increase their social resilience, including when it
comes to physical and psychological health as well as material resources. As
shown for example by Baum, Ma and Payea (2010) for the US:

Beyond the economic return to individuals and to society as a whole, higher
education improves quality of life in a variety of ways, only some of which
can be easily quantified. High levels of labour force participation,
employment, and earnings increase the material well-being of individuals and the wealth of society, but also carry psychological benefits. Adults with higher levels of education are more likely to engage in organised volunteer work and to vote. They are also more likely to live healthy lifestyles. The issue is not just that they earn more and have better access to health care; college-educated adults smoke less, exercise more, are more likely to breastfeed their babies, and have lower obesity rates. These differences not only affect the lifestyles and life expectancies of individuals, but also reduce medical costs for society as a whole. Of particular significance, children of adults with higher levels of education have higher cognitive skills and engage in more educational activities than other children. In other words, participation in postsecondary education improves the quality of civil society.

This direct link between higher education and social resilience underlines the urgency to think further how higher education as an institution, nurture different levels of social resilience at collective and individual levels. This book takes this issue further.

NOTES


REFERENCES


LAMONT


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Thank you for the kind invitation to address the 26th anniversary meeting of CHER and in such an agreeable location. Many years have passed since I have been able to journey to the annual meeting of an organisation in which I once had a small role. (Would you consider changing continents?) I have been given license to speak to any matter that crosses my mind (assuming of course that it is relevant to the work of CHER), even being allowed to discuss some of my past writing. The chance to comment even briefly upon aspects of one’s own work is rare. I am grateful for that opportunity. I will say at the outset that much of what I now believe about higher education or larger issues concerning research was not necessarily present when I first started writing. A process of growth has occurred, and if “growth” is not exactly the right word, let me say that it has taken many years for me to arrive at conclusions with which I am comfortable. I did not say that they were correct, but they do comprise a sphere of ideas about life and scholarship that I believe infuse my writings and guide my research and teaching. I would like to emphasise teaching. CHER is a research society, but almost all of us are engaged in teaching. It is a noble occupation, a calling. I was fortunate in having teachers who changed my life. Although they are now departed, I try to provide my students with the interest and concern that they showed to me.

My talk today is roughly divided into two parts. The first involves some recollection of the CHER that I knew years ago, leading to reflections on the uses of higher education research activity. These reflections have been aided (and in part confirmed) by accounts of the early years of CHER collected by Barbara Kehm and Christine Musselin. Both of them have been signal players in the evolution of the Consortium (Kehm & Musselin, 2013). I will touch upon humanistic concerns that weave in and out of this keynote address. In the second part I revisit a book that I published in 2007 called Education’s Abiding Moral Dilemma: Merit and Worth in the Cross-Atlantic Democracies, 1800-2006. That book amongst my other books best captures some of the concerns arising from my past association with CHER. The organisers of our meetings suggested this possibility, probably because it connects to the work of yesterday’s keynoter, Michèle Lamont. We clearly have overlapping interests.

CHER MEMORIES: CHANGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION, CHANGES IN RESEARCH

Reviewing the topic of the conference – “The Roles of Higher Education and Research in the Fabric of Societies” – and the list of participants in this week’s
events, I marvel at the range and variety of the presentations. I am simply stunned by the number of countries represented and the places of origins of the participants. CHER was a small society when it first began, mainly focused on European developments but allowing for some cross-Atlantic perspectives. The American scholar, Burton Robert Clark, the “Nestor” of higher education studies as Ulrich Teichler perfectly calls him, supported the decision of the founders to base the society in Europe but with an outward reference (Kehm & Musselin, 2013, p. 13). I was perfectly at home in all of this. Although an offshore representative, my writings were on the history of British universities from the Enlightenment forward, broadening later under the influence of Continental and American colleagues into more comparative dimensions.

As our numbers were small, a certain intimacy prevailed. One might say that we were perhaps clubbish, a “loose organisation” as Teichler confirms, and certainly, compared to the present, more parochial in our national reach. Naturally we could not predict the future, but it does appear as if CHER has been able to follow a familiar pattern of growth and expansion; and as professional societies grow, they invariably splinter and network differently. New territories appear, new emphases, and new debates about purpose and resources.

The field of higher education studies has grown well beyond anything I knew in my younger years, but in growing as a set of academic sub-disciplines, some might say knowledge domains if that is not too archaic, the inevitable has happened. Scholarship is imperial. It cannot be contained within tidy borders. Let us indeed be grateful for the kind of human curiosity that drives us into adjacent and foreign lands to investigate. Yet one consequence of this desirable condition is that a particular area of academic inquiry loses general coherence. The connecting ligaments weaken. Specialisation increases, and detail proliferates. Scanning through the large number of presentations at the conference, I perceive a willingness of obvious connection, or perhaps it is better to say that there do not appear to be governing paradigms or conceptual frameworks that tie the innumerable topics and research results together.

While from the beginning CHER defined for itself a full agenda of higher education interests, and its members came from different disciplines, the personal connections of the founders and allies provided a kind of unity. Although an air of exclusion was certainly not intended, such intimate groupings do eventually invite criticism (Teichler, 2013, p. 18). But a half century ago higher education researchers could also summon up over-arching conceptions or paradigms that, however received or used, supplied a basis for discussion. Scholars such as Clark Kerr, Burton Robert Clark, Martin Trow, Neil Smelser, David Riesman, and A.H. Halsey – to cite those whose names come first to my mind because I knew them – provided matrices and governing formulae that allowed us to see the evolution of higher education systems in terms of critical organisational features and historical change. Bob (to use his nickname) Clark especially, remaining extraordinarily creative and prolific even unto his last years, also stressed the filaments between lower and higher education. I don’t think there are many such presentations on this topic in our conference this year, although Peter Maassen for one captures some of
the spirit of the earlier generations in his call for a new social contract for higher education. Perhaps it is useful to emphasise along with Clark that unless we also concern ourselves with schooling, we will not be able to grasp the ways in which the earlier forms of education influence the later ones and present higher education institutions with thorny problems, especially with regard to access, curricula and remediation. And remediation in turn has an effect on resources, diverting funds from tasks more properly associated with higher education. Along with these names I would once again mention Ulrich Teichler, here today and the spiritual founder and actual founder or one of them of CHER, and Guy Neave, not present today but also a founder, a fixture and an inspiration.

The paragons of yore seized upon and explained the importance of market discipline in the functioning of higher education systems, the role of the state and civil servants, the very nature of the university as a collection of diverse units and values somehow struggling to maintain a scintilla of coherence. We learned about the importance of differentiation in modern societies, the necessity, corresponding to the reality of markets (notice the plural), of offering different kinds of educational experiences for different kinds of student aspirations and abilities. We heard about the characteristics of elite and mass access to higher education systems. Varied funding streams, we were told, were necessary for institutional survival wherever states were coming to play a much larger role in the governance of universities and in quality assurance than had ever been the case before (or at least since universities ceased to be instruments of church and state). Clark used to warn that state governments “can turn nasty.” If these themes are familiar today, let us remember that they were relatively new in the two decades after the Second World War. Of Clark’s numerous works, my favourite is his study of liberal arts colleges in the United States, a superb portrait of the culture and strategies of survival of a special type of American higher education institution. But certainly all of his work is distinctive. I once heard from colleagues in Italy that his book on the structure of Italian universities, now decades old, has never been superseded.

I suppose that a driving force behind the scholarship of this earlier generation was to explain how higher education institutions actually function as opposed to writings that are basically hortatory: normative as distinguished from prescriptive, higher education as it is rather than as it ought to be. Alas, most of the great names are now departed, certainly the American School. Clark Kerr, Bob Clark, Martin Trow, David Riesman are no longer with us. Despite their years, Neil Smelser and Chelly Halsey are still around in good mental health, Halsey reaching 90.

Amongst the contributions of the individuals I have named was the idea of higher education as a system, usually a national system, meaning that higher education institutions could be discussed as a congress of linkages, an alteration in one link producing an alteration in another. I recall debates (not necessarily at CHER) about the very meaning of a system and whether such a notion was merely a heuristic device, convenient for analysis, or a reality, or perhaps just a metaphor. Could an institution or an entire system serving human needs actually be described in mechanical language? Skeptics did not see the parts gearing together as in machines, and historians, accustomed to discrete inquiry and heavily empirical
work, were amongst the doubters. Historians often resisted because historians tend to view human affairs as messy, contingent, accidental, the best-laid plans going awry. The logic that the sociologists found in organisational structures, and in systems, was not the logic that historians recognised. I once thought that if the object of sociology was an essential simplicity, the object of history was complexity, interesting intellectually but not immediately functional.

In those early years of CHER there were several interesting differences between the outlook of Americans and Europeans, most notably on issues regarding supply and demand in higher education, private and public initiatives, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, quality control and assurance. The fact that the Gelehrten in Continental Europe officially had civil service status, and American academics in general shared the nation’s distrust of meddling officeholders created interesting fault lines. One had a sense of sides that did not always grasp the perspectives of others. Americans insisted on the differentiation of missions. Some institutions were select, others featured open admissions, and in between lay any number of private and public options oriented towards different student markets. Quality varied according to mission. This was one important point that separated the earlier generation of higher education researchers. Europeans could not tolerate the idea of an array of institutions of inferior academic quality, at least with respect to undergraduates. Another key point was that connections existed between select and non-select institutions, particularly public colleges and universities, through student transfer, an essential ingredient in the American opportunity structure. Student transfer in Europe at that time was hardly known, although a number of European programs existed with student mobility as a goal. And because Europeans disagreed with Americans in the matter of quality as measured by mission, another important point was not grasped, namely, how the existence of lower quality institutions actually protected the higher quality colleges and universities. They did so in two ways: first, by allowing for student transfer; and second, by absorbing the demand for admission to brand-name institutions by less competitive students. This was especially important for public institutions such as my own, since private foundations did not face the political pressures encountered by state universities. In the beginning our European colleagues mainly thought in terms of elite models and believed (or some did) that widening access would threaten an inherited and cherished view of the superior nature of the university. I will return to this theme in the second part of this keynote address.

After decades of the restructuring of higher education in Europe, the numerical expansion of institutions and students, the use of markets by states to force some institutions into charging tuition, the growth of ideas of privatisation and the global rankings systems that have arisen, the differences for which the Atlantic was once a barrier have diminished.

Funding, quality and access problems in American higher education have now reduced the optimism quotient. Whereas implicitly if not explicitly American higher education specialists once regarded American solutions as more or less ideal (Clark Kerr was an exception), worthy of emulation abroad, grumblings have become more common. As Teichler perceptively observes, American scholars
tended to seek optimal and universal solutions to higher education issues based on the American experience (Kehm & Musselin, 2013, p. 3). I think that CHER and other societies helped restore a sense of perspective by promoting the comparative method, which is really the only way to measure the nature and success of any institution or nation.

One purpose, certainly discussed at the outset, and revisited ever since, was whether CHER should concern itself with problem-solving and invite policymakers and practitioners into its ranks. The practical argument for higher education research was met by the counter-argument that the disinterested character of research would be compromised if primary attention were paid to “relevance.” The dangers were that researchers, eager to obtain the support and attention of policymakers, would succumb to political and ideological pressures and shed their scholarly independence. Furthermore, immediate solutions might prove inadequate in the long run. I gather that there is some feeling within the Consortium that the conventional boundaries between scholars and practitioners may be eroding, although apparently communication between the two communities remains awkward (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2013).

Whatever the current state of the long-standing debate between scholarly and practitioner cultures, my view is that the primary work of the Consortium members remains present-minded, possibly suggesting a utilitarian urge. Current problems are customarily addressed as if historical antecedents are largely irrelevant. There is little recognition of inherited mischief. The impression is given that dilemmas can be overcome by steady and well-conceptualised research, especially research employing quantitative materials. I notice in the listing of the conference sessions that there is a greater use of data sets in achieving a possible correspondence between researchers and practitioners than was our previous inclination, with notable exceptions. Ulrich Teichler and his colleagues in their work on student markets made plentiful use of statistical data, and Halsey certainly did, in an easy way and with a special literary style. Memory may fail me, but I think that we were more qualitative than quantitative, only some of us technically competent in the use of statistical data. Run through the listing of the panels of the conference and see if I am right.

Where are we today in relation to the task of using higher education research to further public policy decisions? Despite the staggering number of topics represented at this conference, I am not confident that we have a very solid understanding of whether ideas and recommendations generated by higher education research make much difference when politicians, bureaucrats and their staffs gather to announce new guidelines and laws. That is my impression, reinforced by my earlier remarks on the existence of two cultures. My impression may be weak, however, and contrary instances may possibly be found in countries with which I have limited acquaintance.

The clearest example of travel between scholarship and policy that I know, and for obvious reasons, is Clark Kerr’s influence on the State of California Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960, the world’s first higher education planning document. Kerr came out of a tradition of social science and industrial economics
that developed between the two world wars. That tradition was heavily weighted
towards planning as the most intelligent way to muster and concentrate resources
and reconcile competing interests. Fervently anti-Marxist, but ironically intrigued
by Marxist efforts to articulate big themes and great historical transformations,
Kerr saw democracy and demography as the drivers of higher education policy. His
younger colleague, Martin Trow, created a template for explaining how institutions
differentiate under the twin pressures. When the student cohort available for post-
secondary instruction rises above 15%, higher education can be described as “mass
higher education” whereas before (and throughout history) it was “elite,” recruiting
no more than about 1-2% of the available cohort depending upon period and
nation. Trow explained how profoundly mass-access institutions differed from elite
colleges and universities. Intake, selection, curricula, teaching and prestige were
markedly dissimilar (see Trow & Burrage, 2010). Kerr saw the phenomenon of
mass access higher education as a potential tidal wave threatening disaster if
California’s colleges and universities did not meet the demands of a greatly-
expanding student market. If student demand was thwarted, parents and voters
would be angry, and their discontent would inevitably affect the higher education
policies of the political classes. That was one potential calamity. The other was the
threat to the quality of Kerr’s multi-campus University of California if higher
education alternatives at tax-payer expense were not fully supported. The Master
Plan dealt with these issues brilliantly. There are those today such as Patrick Callan
who argue that the Plan is now inoperative, a victim of funding shortfalls,
bureaucratic mishandling of resources on the part of university leaders and social
problems inherent in the maldistribution of life chances throughout society (Callan,
2012, see also Douglass, 2000).

Kerr is usually regarded as the principal architect of the California Master Plan
– one of his colleagues once called him the “father of the modern university”
because of his idea of a “multiversity.” Multiversities, because they must be
responsive to a great range of exterior demands, differentiate internally. They do
not possess the internal coherence celebrated by past moralists such as Cardinal
Newman. Halsey’s association with the British Cabinet minister Tony Crosland, as
one of his advisers on matters concerning the sociology of education, is a different
eexample of the relationship of academic research on education to policy-making.
California is not Britain, and California’s politicians (by choice) did not play as
central a role in the formulation of the Master Plan as would a powerful Cabinet
Minister in Britain. Halsey’s role was significant, but Crosland was his own man
with his own views, so advisers only provided views and data that could easily be
disregarded. Yet the fact that Crosland gathered viewpoints based on academic
research concerning the conversion of most historic grammar (secondary) schools
into American-style comprehensive high schools to support a greater amount of
upward educational mobility and promoted technical education, if not in ways
congenial to Halsey, does indicate a place for accomplished researchers. Those
interested in such important relationships are invited to read Halsey’s account of
You may be able to provide other and even better examples from your own national experiences or studies. But at least for the moment I will repeat that the disconnection between academic empirical research and the formulation of policy is very wide. It is easier for us to discuss the “role” or “roles” of higher education research than to follow the possible trail of research vertically or horizontally towards government leaders, officials and staff. It is harder for us to take a multi-variable approach and include in our analyses the media, the twists and turns of public opinion, the ideological perspectives of politicians, the trade unions and the various groups and organisations that we recognise as decision-making factors in any complex, plural and free society.

But the opportunity is certainly there. Would it be possible for CHER to organise an annual conference on precisely how higher education research reaches or fails to reach players, politicians and practitioners who define higher education issues, decide on policies and drum up the resources that affect the functioning and evolution of colleges and universities? Case studies, paying close attention to the many strands of decision-making, would be a sophisticated contribution to the long-standing conundrum of the relationship of scholarship to active problem-solving. What are the policy networks, who is in them, what is their reach? How have past studies found their way into the hands of those able to implement them? I am not aware that this kind of work is being done. Instead of merely remarking about the two cultures, we would actually understand the real reasons for the separation. We would be able to plot the story of the actual role of research in higher education in what is so often termed a “knowledge society” or a “knowledge economy.”

Case studies would enable us to pick up the trail. Nevertheless, we would still find the entire process bewildering, a mix of direct, indirect, accidental and contingent variables, always befuddled by the unpredictable movements of politics and history. We might end up greatly saddened, as did the Persian grandee in Herodotus’s history of the Persian Wars. Living long and seeing much, he confessed to his guest Solon, the legendary lawgiver of Athens, that he felt powerless to influence the direction of events.

EDUCATION’S ABIDING MORAL DILEMMA: MERIT AND WORTH IN THE CROSS-ATLANTIC DEMOCRACIES, 1800-2006

I will return to this ancient existential difficulty later in this presentation because it introduces a humanistic element into discussions and research so focused on social science and statistical methods that other aspects of higher education are overlooked. But for now I want to use the occasion allowed to me today to enter upon the second part of my presentation. I want to reflect upon where I might situate myself with respect to the question of the utility of higher education research. I am an historian. I am interested in the policy sciences insofar as I am interested in a large number of subjects in which I might situate myself with respect to the question of the utility of higher education research. I am an historian. I am interested in the policy sciences insofar as I am interested in a large number of subjects in which I might have a keen but passing acquaintance. But I would not place myself amongst those whose work is aimed at public policy decision-making, even obliquely. For some years I was actually
uncertain how to label myself. My first book was on the great Victorian reform period of the mid-19th century when Oxford and Cambridge commenced on a new trajectory that restored, or refashioned, the eminence once enjoyed and might be lost. Just as Kerr was intrigued by the Marxist emphasis on historical determinism, I too wondered (and I was writing before Kerr’s famous lectures were published) if there was a kind of ironic logic to history, the outcomes that might be predicted except that human actors are always looking in the wrong places. I called my book *The Revolution of the Dons*, and challenged readers to figure out that if dons could make a revolution, what kind of a revolution would it be? Probably I should have been more direct and revealed the answer to the puzzle at the outset, but as an historian interested in recreating the past with all of its confusion, I wanted to show that even the participants to change were not fully aware of their ultimate destinations until they actually got there. A well-known and greatly respected left-wing literary critic, Raymond Williams, reviewing the book, agreed that a major transformation of Cambridge had indeed occurred, but he understandably objected to my use of the word “revolution” since I had used it ironically.

I dealt with issues of social composition. Who actually attended these institutions before and after the reforms? I examined the Marxist thesis that the bourgeoisie had taken over from the aristocracy (not true). I fussed over the entire process of change, the pressures from below and outside, the pressures from government, the subtle transformations almost unperceived but decisive from within. Was I a social historian, an institutional historian, or, since I wrote about intellectual debates, maybe an historian of ideas; or perhaps, since the ideas were also about cultural values, should I conclude that I was a cultural historian? But as I was drawn to the personalities involved in my narrative, I was also constructing potted biographies. In the academic world we define ourselves by specialties and sub-specialties. I was therefore at some pains to define my work so that it would fit in with the scholarship of others. Then one day I realised that I could to some large degree avoid classification. I was living in a mentally picaresque world, but essentially I was simply an historian, and history is first and foremost about change and simultaneous activity. It illustrates the palimpsest of human conduct. Our method of explication is linear – the narrative, and even analysis can be narrative. Probably film is a better medium for capturing the past because images can be immediately juxtaposed.

One day, purely by accident, by the drift of circumstances within especially stimulating university environments, by friends whom chance brought into my life, I found myself hunting in the pack of educational sociologists and political policy analysts. My book on Cambridge was another entrée because it dealt with university history. In the beginning I may even have envied those who seemed to have opinions about contemporary higher education issues when I had none. They exuded a certain confidence.

From the perspective of the policy sciences, an historical outlook – at least then – was virtually useless. The number of historians or historically-minded sociologists inhabiting CHER in the other earliest years were only a handful. I am not aware that there are many at present. I remember sitting in on discussions held
by postgraduates in the Graduate School of Public Policy at Berkeley as they debated standing issues, learning how to find data, discussing methodologies, formulating conclusions, recommendations and options. I admired the rigour that the students were expected to demonstrate, but it all seemed so odd, rather hothouse. The historian in me said that the logic was unrealistic. There was that issue again about simplicity versus complexity. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that the policy discussions were simplistic. I mean that too much complexity interferes with the possibility of a clear diagnosis. I was then asked by the class to add an historical perspective. I do not remember what I said, but I imagine that it must have been in the way of a plea for greater insight into human motive, institutional confusion, partisan issues and the broader, wider themes that gather in the past, rush forward to the present and persist into the future. My world may have been a truer version of what actually existed, but it was still a world without the instrumentalism of the policy sciences.

The historian in me was interested in those great humanistic concepts of meaning and understanding. I have used the following example many times, and I suppose that I do so because no one ever put the necessary contrasts as well as the English logician John Stuart Mill when he was a young man in the 1830s. He compared the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, a sort of mentor since he knew him so well, with the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The first, said Mill, tested any value or institution according to a principle of expediency: did it give pleasure, was it conducive to happiness, or, because Bentham meant this, was the solution utilitarian? If so, it was good. If not, change it. But Coleridge, Mill concluded, had a far different view of utility. An institution may appear useless, but it can still possess meaning if we look beneath the obvious. That meaning could lead to something more precious than utility, something related to our understanding of what it means to be human. Surely can we grasp such Romantic themes? For example, once we get students into higher education through whatever policies are in place, what then? We want I hope to give them some sense of their worth beyond the quantitative and other measures that so occupy mass society.

Understandably, the policy sciences do not take well to the more humanistic aspects of scholarship. Ambiguity, uncertainty, irony, the search for personal integrity, philosophical conceptions of a good life or just a life of meaning – these do not commonly inform policy studies. To be sure: intimations sometimes appear in national reports or publications about the purpose and goals of higher education, but they are not central. They certainly are not easily arranged into a list of policy recommendations. It is not even clear for whom a humanistic message is intended, although for me as a committed university teacher the proper audience is composed of students. For them, or for anyone else willing to listen, the object of intellectual inquiry may be something vague and less tangible, more a matter of explaining, of understanding, of situating the human experience in some kind of pattern of self or social location. Our Persian grandee was saddened because he could not affect change, but merely to understand is in itself a profound existential value.

Because the language of humanistic inquiry seems to me to be absent from the topics being presented at our CHER meeting, at least not apparent to me from the
titles of the sessions, I want to stress its importance, the importance of language that speaks to human needs and has always been considered to be as much a part of education as anything that is labelled professional, vocational or specialised. I do not disparage any of these other educational possibilities. I am not speaking about an alternative. I am speaking about infusing our specialties with considerations and values that must be present if we are true to the human experience. The policy sciences define and establish the venues in which multiple human experiences take place. Nevertheless, we will always be left with some degree of moral and social ambiguity, and it should be one of our goals to explain why that is natural to the human condition, why such a goal would deepen our higher education research, and why it would provide needed perspective on a world desperate for relief from a record of vulgarity, brutality and misplaced values.

Coping with ambiguity might well be one of the most important aims of a higher education. Illustrating the moral dilemmas that arise from contradictions might well be an object that research into higher education problems should embrace and should embrace, I repeat, because our research has to be about reality if it is to be accurate. Therefore at this point in my talk let me address some issues of ambiguity or mixed messages that I encountered and examined in the 2007 book referred to at the outset. It is on the current much-discussed problem of access and democratic opportunity in education.

Some years back, but in the present century, I was asked to deliver the Bishop Waynflete Lectures at Magdalen College Oxford. The College, and the University, had been embroiled in a controversy regarding access. A leading politician, subsequently prime minister, levelled charges of social and gender discrimination against Magdalen for not admitting a prospective medical student who eventually was offered and accepted full tuition to Harvard University. The Minister’s facts were wrong, but media attention was virtually global. The whole affair was wrenching for the Fellows of Magdalen, who had tried their best to assure fair access, fair access still being competitive. The rejected candidate was qualified, but where competitive entry exists, the numbers of qualified applicants exceed the availability of places. Some kind of sorting must therefore take place, and there were superior candidates reading medicine who were in fact women. The rejected candidate had gone to a state school in the north of England, and charges were levelled that Oxford favoured independent (private) schools over state schools and privileged students over disadvantaged students. These were conventional canards, but the state school was a good one, and the rejected candidate was not from the working classes. Furthermore, with respect to admissions, Oxford was, as one historian has demonstrated, a meritocratic institution (Soares, 1999). Magdalen College thought that perhaps an historian of universities might shed some light on the driving issues and problems. I stumbled about these for a time, delivered three lectures, was not satisfied, and sat down to rethink the issue of access again from a different interpretive angle.

Why was it that outsiders to a university’s admission process were convinced that the failure of a qualified candidate to gain entrance to a select institution such as Magdalen College Oxford was attributable to social prejudice of some kind, or
even structural exclusion as we might now say? To start with, that was the convenient response. It was also historically true when universities were select but not meritocratic. It had taken a long time in the 20th century for select institutions, both in Britain and America, to become meritocratic; and as for America, there remains a strong suspicion amongst parents that private select institutions still favour “legacy” admits, the children of alumni. By the beginning of the 21st century there was evidently leftover ammunition to fire at Oxbridge, to continue the accusation that the universities were repositories of social snobbery despite evidence to the contrary. Possibly in England meritocracy itself was an issue? The word is generally held to have been invented by Michael Young and used in a somewhat satirical book of 1958 entitled The Rise of the Meritocracy. The question of meritocratic entry was certainly a hotly-debated issue in the United States in the decades from about the 1960s or 1970s onwards, leading to important high-level legal cases involving university admissions policies called by the euphemism “affirmative action.” Legal challenges are still going on. The United States Supreme Court is expected to rule on the issue shortly enough.

Affirmative action policies were designed to advance the admission of members of under-represented minority groups, most notably African-Americans to begin with, a group that was in the process of emancipating itself from a bitter history that still remains an American tragedy. Let us now recall the Magdalen dilemma and broaden it: where places in a university are limited, increasing the numbers from one group means that the numbers from other groups will be diminished. This in itself promotes controversy especially if the members whose numbers are affected belong to another minority group but one that has been successful in moving through the admissions process. The fundamental issue in a meritocratic, competitive system of admissions is defining merit. Can this be objectively measured? And what does “objective” mean in any event? The effort to define “objective” has endured for about a century, its origins in the U.S. lying in numerous movements for testing intelligence and constructing entrance examinations, the “Big Tests,” that grew in importance in the final decades of the last century. Psychometrists have not been without employment.

From the standpoint of admissions policies, affirmative action can and did take many forms, any number of which are not controversial. No one, for example, objects to high school recruitment efforts, summer bridging programs, special remedial tutorials or publicity aimed at potential students who, owing to location or circumstances or limited access to information, are unaware of available opportunities to improve educational chances. But objections arise when quotas and ethnic set-asides are in place, for these also have a history of discrimination, especially against Jewish students who were subject to quotas between the two world wars. Richard Atkinson, a cognitive psychologist and president of the University of California, initiated a furious national debate not long ago when he argued that one of the major national admissions tests (not used in every institution, however) was seriously flawed. Time does not permit me to discuss this matter today, but aspects of it are covered in my book (Rothblatt, 2007) on merit and in the excellent account of Atkinson provided by Patricia Pelfrey (2012). A
large point, and one that underscores the ambiguities in the issues over affirmative action, is that both sides to the controversy are correct. Those who argue for measurable meritocratic criteria as being fair, and those who object to criteria based on testing without reference to personal qualities that are not testable but provide evidence of future success are also correct. Much historical baggage lies behind these arguments, since objective tests were not really objective. They had once been designed to exclude even if the designers were unaware of their inherent prejudices. But of course admissions officers do not require a test or examination to exclude students who are not desired. A test of “character” will also achieve that end, but bias is easier to disguise when the criteria for entrance are represented as “scientific.” To the supporters of affirmative action the issues were incontrovertible. Large numbers of potential students had not been admitted to select institutions; and even if they did not possess the necessary qualifications, it was in their interest, the interest of the institution and the interest of the nation that room be found for them. For if they did not possess “merit,” they nevertheless possessed “worth,” or so I said.

I came up with the idea of “worth” because I needed to explain a democratic dilemma. In a democracy, opportunity is the key to advancement because, in theory, all who are willing to work hard and steadily are worthy of consideration where education is deemed essential to having a good life. Was selection in and of itself therefore compatible with professed democratic values? Furthermore, the idea of “worth” was embedded in western civilisation. So now we had reached a point where two contradictory but equally legitimate ways of assessing human value existed. There was merit – measurable by various kinds of tests and examinations. But the other, “worth,” was older and deeper, derived from history, from religious monotheism, from ethical and philosophical treatises, from humanistic strains and from clumsily-addressed elements of liberal or social democracy.

We in the west are committed to the values dating from long ago that all human beings are in some sense worthy, and that their worth must be respected and taken into account when sorting takes place for entry into select higher education institutions. There were ironies. I explained that before the meritocratic ideal was established in Britain, the students and their parents who most resisted the measurement of merit did so because they feared that their children would not be otherwise competitive. But unlike members of disadvantaged populations in America who do not achieve well on high stakes examinations, these were not disadvantaged but advantaged groups hoping to hold onto their advantages. Despite their obvious self-interest, those who resisted in Britain exemplified the principle of worth and carried it forward. Things of human value can never be mechanically and bureaucratically measured. The next step was to return “worth” to a more democratic foundation and to rescue it from the acquired argument that some people are “naturally superior” to others. At the same time, “worth” remained characterological, subject to assessment but not to measurement.

I found an interesting contrast between America and England. Americans were far more aggressive in using I.Q. tests and other forms of testing as merit
determinants than were the English. The reason was that English schoolmasters and others involved in identifying talented students had faith in their ability to recognise and assess worth. Of course they examined, but they did not readily adopt objective or allegedly scientific assessment. They tested for academic content. I.Q. testing was superfluous. But Americans embraced “objective” merit testing because, professing to be part of a democracy, they had abandoned gentlemanly traditions. Egalitarian aims seemed to suggest that objective testing was superior to character assessments which, from this perspective, were inherently biased or suggested class, gender, religious and ethnic preferences. America was also an avowedly plural and immigrant society, which added to the belief that merit determination should be scientifically based. Of course plenty of prejudices remained nonetheless and had to be bled from the methods of selection existing after 1945.

If every party to a debate is correct – merit and worth both have critical strengths and weaknesses – how do we arrive at policies that can be uniformly regarded as essential to promoting the goals of a culture of democratic opportunity? I cannot provide that answer, but I can suggest that unless we, as higher education researchers, take into account the double messages, ironies and contradictions arising from historical circumstances, we cannot possibly arrive at sensible conclusions regarding difficult options. To believe solely in merit is to ignore vital human dimensions. To advocate “worth” as a more just policy is to overlook the ways in which it can be corrupted. The lesson – we might say the moral – is to recognise the ambiguities of history. The Fellows of Magdalen College were caught in a profound and abiding moral dilemma. But there was a policy solution. The candidate had been admitted to another fine British university although she chose to go to an American one. The policy is to make certain that in the case of access to select institutions, a just society will provide significant alternatives: alternative educational opportunities, alternative chances, a variety of possibilities. Or to refer to my earlier remarks, a fair and just system requires a “system” of flexible opportunities for the many different cultures within a modern democratic polity. This was the California Master Plan as originally envisioned by Kerr.

CONCLUSION

I started my analysis of merit and worth in England, Scotland and America by going back to the year 1800, and I stopped when I finished writing, which was 2006. Apart from a possibly smug belief that I had identified cultural strains that were not featured in arguments over widening access, I was annoyed at what I thought was a certain failure of honesty. I suppose that I wanted more than partisan rancour, more understanding of the inherent conflict between merit and worth, more history. I wanted complexity, a recognition that human affairs were messy. I wanted a confession that even within the arena of policy studies there exist intangibles, asymmetries, imperfectly-grasped entanglements that, if carefully introduced into policy analysis, considerably advance the cause of social
understanding. We would have policies that were not only more useful but had more meaning. The issues would be better understood. Public policies affect people emotionally. That should be taken into consideration from every possible perspective. Our Persian grandee, were he alive, might at last feel that his long life had been worthwhile.

But then again, he lived in a world governed by Fate, by the Heraclitean Law of Compensation, by the cosmic forces of history where irony was master. Do we? That is a subject for another kind of discussion. But assuming that we still retain a belief that through careful analysis of facts and sophisticated methodologies we can arrive at good public policies with respect to critical issues, we must marry a humanistic outlook to academic research in higher education. As scholars, we value accuracy. But we can never be accurate if we leave out of our calculations and research ways of viewing institutions, structures and systems that touch upon the deepest problems of the human experience.

NOTES

1 A written and longer version of an oral keynote presentation delivered 10 September 2013 at the CHER Annual Conference held at the University of Lausanne.

2 In some parts of the world now represented in our community the meaning of “dons” may not be evident. “Don” is a corruption of the Latin “dominus” or master and refers to the college tutors and Fellows of Oxford and Cambridge University. Similarly, “dominie” from the same root is a Scottish schoolteacher.

3 A famous university president told me the following story. When he was in office, representatives of an under-represented minority group in his university requested that he use his influence to eliminate admissions tests and entry examinations since their students did not score well on them. Representatives of another and very successful achieving minority group in the same university asked him to retain high stakes testing because of the opposite. Their students scored very well indeed. He asked that the two groups meet, arrive at a recommendation, and inform him accordingly. Of course nothing happened.

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