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Reasoning Higher Education Change

Structure, Agency and Culture

1 Introduction

"Change" is not a simple concept. Nor is "higher education change." Academics and researchers have understood "change" in many ways, such as "evolution" and "adaptation," based upon Darwinism, and Marxist "revolution." We have also interpreted the process of change in various ways, including dialectic, unfolding future, and unilineal or non-lineal development. "Change" has had diverse meanings and interpretations, triggering various theoretical points of views and approaches.

There have been yet no theories of higher education change *per se* although there has been considerable effort to clarify higher education change on a case-study basis. A relatively limited number of studies have dealt with causal explanations for higher education change; few of these have taken a theoretical or conceptual perspective. Academics and researchers have analyzed higher education change either contextually or through the application of theories from other disciplines such as sociology and psychology. The lack of theoretical studies on higher education change is probably due in part to the nature of the field of higher education, which values not only scholarly but also descriptive and informative works. It is a field in which people attempt to find a good marriage between academics and practitioners. Another factor is that the context-dependent nature of higher education analysis limits de-contextualization and the degree of abstraction. Higher education is contextual because it is part of a larger society.

General theories of social change in sociology are insightful to understand "higher education change," although theoretical problems inherent in the theories themselves (for instance, see the section on "propositions" in this chapter) as well as applicability to higher education contexts impair their usefulness. These theories are based on an assumption that explanation for social change can be de-contextualized to some degree and understood at the abstract level. We can seek for a paradigm and some sort of a change mechanism although there is certainly no law of social change as such.

This common understanding among functionalists, system theorists and other theorists in social sciences has however, failed to bring about a general agreement as to how to approach social change (including higher education change). For instance, how can we identify (higher education) change and the cause(s), establishing causal relations accounting for a phenomenon or an event? What is a proper analytical scope? Can we confine our analysis to a nation-state or a boundary-fixed type of system? Have the late twentieth and twenty-first Century phenomena such as globalization and a network society challenged a nation-state-based analytical framework? How can we deal with traditional so-

ciological inquiries, for instance, social action versus structure, methodological individualism versus structural explanation, and subject versus social object? The structure-agency or society-individual dichotomies are intricate issues in the investigation of higher education change and stability because we need to deal with the relationship between higher education and a larger society; that is to say, non-higher education agents and sectors and surrounding societies.

This book deals with those concerns, challenging the existing limit in higher education studies. It offers a theoretical perspective on higher education change and stability, whose initial proposition (see later in this chapter) relies on view that it is possible to explain higher education change beyond specific case studies.

Purpose

The purpose of the book is to explain higher education change and resistance to change theoretically. To "explain" is an intellectual endeavor attempting to answer a "why" question, establishing a cause-effect relationship. It may involve theoretical complexity because of the possibility of more than one causal link (see more details in Chapter 2).

The act of explanation *per se* is not inevitably to be theoretical; we can answer "why" questions without engaging abstract generalizations, sticking to certain contexts and confining the whole project solely to specific case studies. Being aware of such a context-dependent dimension of the explanation, this book challenges and pushes the limits of existing studies in order to provide some insights on a general idea of higher education change and stability and emancipate, to some degree, its time-space contexts. This ambition is not grounded on a fantasy—a belief about the possibility of the provision of a law on higher education change and stability. The book considers that it is impossible to detach any theoretical concern and analysis from time-space contexts completely and create general theory of the change in social sciences at least in the present state of human knowledge and intellectuality, as Parsons also points out in the context of social systems:

> It is a necessary inference … that a general theory of the processes of change of social systems is not possible in the present state of knowledge. The reason is very simple that such a theory would imply complete knowledge of the laws of process of the system and the knowledge we do not possess. The theory of change in the structure of social systems must, therefore, be a theory of particular sub-processes of change within such systems, not of the over-all processes of change of the systems as systems. (1951, p. 486)

In other words, there is no universal law to govern higher education change. This is a point of difference vis-à-vis national sciences. It is essential for social scientists to manage contexts at least to some degree because theoretical analysis is more or less context-dependent in social sciences. The space for theoretical and conceptual concern probably exists not at the extremely highly abstract level, but at the lower level, which involves paradigms and patterns. The level of abstraction taken in this book is, accordingly, something between the higher abstract level and a case-specific study; that is to say, high enough to be beyond context-specific cases (except for Chapters 7 to 9, which aim to examine the proposition of the book in particular contexts) and clear and testable enough, attaching to reality.

This brave and bold declaration on some degree of de-contextualization does not mean that the book is without a state-free perspective. On the contrary, the book reflects previous literature, research, and observations in Anglophone and West European countries—in particular, Australia, the UK, the US, and Japan rather than developing countries. This relies on the author's previous experience and networks in those countries. Therefore, there might be theoretical limitation in its application to the South. In addition to the country-specific perspective, another limitation is the restriction of the analysis to the universities rather than the non-university sectors.

Focus

The book seeks to explain what caused higher education change and stability and why higher education change happened at a certain point of time in human history. It would not explain why they happened in this way, not another way and why they took that trajectory of change, not another. This choice relies on an assumption that the form and trajectory of change are heavily context-dependent.

The theoretical approach to the causal explanation for higher education change and stability starts from the identification of higher education change and stability; that is to say, what has exactly altered or has not altered is an initial core object of the analysis. Then, we move to examine possible causal explanations to establish causal relationship, which is, according to the author's observation, often not lineal.

The book contributes to the second task—the identification of causal relationship. The task focuses on the relationship between structural, agency, and cultural conditioning for higher education change and stability. This particular focus, notably structure and agency, is the heritage of traditional sociological

thought. Sociologists have traditionally taken two different approaches to explain social change: agency and structural approaches. The agency approach focuses on individuals and their action and interaction. Agency "concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently," according to Giddens (1984). In the structural approach, the individual is not an ultimate unit of analysis, thereby attempting to avoid subjectivist concepts such as purpose or goals in the analysis. The structural approach tends to link to a case. Literature before the 1980s had a tendency to focus on either agency or structure.

In the 1980s, there was some movement to combine those perspectives. Two best known bodies of thought concerning the link between structure and agency in order to account for social change in the late 20th Century were Giddens' "structuration" (1984) and Archer's "morphogenesis" / critical realism (Archer later started to use this term) (1995, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2010). "Structuration" rejects functionalism in respect of their subordination of individuals to society. Linguistic structuralism and hermeneutics have influenced "structuration." In contrast, "morphogenesis" and critical realism developed in general system theory. Theoretical revisionism and cybernetics have influenced them. Archer's later works are grounded in the philosophy of critical realism, inspired by Bhaskar (1975, 1998) and stressing the internal mechanisms based on human perception (see for instance, Archer's theoretical tool, the continuous inner conversation of the self in *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*, 2000).

Regardless of a different starting point and a different theoretical basis, they have commonalities (see also Clark, Modgil, Modgil 1990), as King illuminated in his article in *the British Journal of Sociology* in 2010, entitled "The odd couple: Margaret Archer, Anthony Giddens and British social theory." Both approaches are based on an assumption; structural properties are grounded in practical interaction, bearing in mind that conditioned individual action reproduces and changes social structure. They concomitantly stress the causal influences of structure on human action. Structure and action in their approaches, hence, presuppose each other. Their positions on a causal bind between structure and agency are worthwhile examining in the higher education context. Accordingly, this book takes a unique stance, applying both Giddens' and Archer's theoretical points of view.

The book concerns the following issues, which are unavoidable in a combined approach of structure and agency: (i) analytical dualism; and (ii) the concept of structure. In addition to (i) and (ii), the book highlights cultural conditioning: (iii) the dimension of culture.

The culture perspective tended to stand alone without linking structural or agency conditioning in previous studies. Only recently and only a limited num-

ber of scholars now attempt to combine three perspectives of structure, agency, and culture. Archer's *Realist Social Theory* (1995) is one. This study highlights cultural conditioning as well as structural and agency conditioning because cultural analysis is integral to understanding higher education change and the resistance to change. Culture, for instance, influences agents' choice of action. Higher education studies have often found that certain cultural elements such as collegiality and university autonomy contribute to maintaining the *status quo* rather than challenging new values such as managerialism.

Analytical dualism between structure and agency

Structural and agency dichotomy is a long-run dispute in sociology (for instance, see Jackson 1999; Willmott 1999; Woods 2000). For structural Marxism, the conception of structure is independent from agency. Functionalists de-emphasize human agency, while those supporting phenomenology stress human agency and overlook structure. Giddens refuses analytical dualism of structure and agency as well as the emergent social ontology. Giddens (1990, p. 299) argues that "structure and action cannot form a dualism, save from the point of view of situated actors, because each is constituted by and in a single 'realm'— human activity." He argues that structure patterns individual action or informs individuals, which indicates conflation of structure and agency. Therefore, the social system is produced or reproduced in a sequential manner. He proposes the concept of "duality of structure," arguing that individuals affirm both the structure of rules and the system *per se* when they instantiate structure into practice. In this respect, structural properties are transmuted into agents' power. Archer, criticizing the idea of internalized rules in Giddens' structuration theory, considers that social structure and human agency have distinctive purposes rather than conflation between the two, and therefore their interaction is of significance. Thus, we must keep structure and agency separate. She emphasizes the freedom of individuals to act. Putting it differently, social reality is independent from the individuals. Action is pivotal in her approach, even more so than meaning.

The book is certainly not concerned with whose position is right or wrong. It also does not intend to rescue a whole discipline of sociology through the analysis of a very specific context, higher education. The purpose of investigation is simple—to establish whether there is a common denominator for various higher education changes and stabilities appearing in different time-space contexts in terms of structure-agency-cultural relationship. Both Giddens' and Archer's accounts are significant in higher education contexts, as the book argues later. The

differences reflect the proposal of two different causal modes in the book (Explanations I and II) (explored in Chapter 6).

Conception of structure

The definition and conception of "structure" affect analysis on the structure-agency nexus. There is, however, no unanimous definition and approach to structure in the social sciences, often entangled with the idea of "system." Structure, for functionalists, is "some kind of 'patterning' of social relations or social phenomena." (Giddens 1984, p. 16) "Structure" is, for Giddens, both medium and outcomes of the reproduction of practices. Social systems, according to him, do not have "structure," but "structural properties," which are "rules" and "resources." Higher education scholars often refer to "structure" in relation to the change in the shape and size of the higher education sector, university versus non-university sectors, the public versus private sectors of higher education, and institutional organization and governance.

The book offers a definition of "structure" in relation to the higher education context in Chapter 4 because definition is hypothetical, affecting the result of analysis on higher education change. It will seek to answer the following questions: Is structure conceptually in opposition to agent and agency? Is structure a social object that is independent from agency?

Dimension of culture

"Culture" is a diverse conception, possessing numerous meanings and implications. The development of the conception and analysis of culture is, to a great extent, aligned with the disciplinary development of anthropology.

Cultural analysis linking to structure and agency remains an uncultivated area in both higher education studies and sociology, with some exceptions such as Archer's work, *Culture and Agency* (2004) (see Willmott 1997). This is partially because functionalism and Marxism have dominated social theory for long. Existing studies have tended to treat structure and culture separately, asserting consciously and unconsciously that structure and culture are independent of each other. In addition, the relationship between culture and agent/agency has remained muddled, without offering a clear picture on the relationship. Academics and researchers have also viewed culture as mal-integration or the lack of uniformity and coherence, as Archer (2004, p. xvii) also points out.

An agency perspective may offer a direct cause for higher education change and resistance to change. However, it is sometimes difficult to capture the his-

torical significance and meaning behind change and stability if the analysis does not incorporate a cultural dimension. The incorporation of the cultural dimension into the analysis is indispensable for studies on higher education change. For instance, it is useful to answer why higher education change happened in certain time-spaces, not other time-spaces. An analysis on the rise and erosion of shared values and attitudes of a certain group or an institution and the interaction between the established value system and emergent values, which involves in the cultural dimension, is useful to identify the ground for the change.

By giving due consideration to cultural factors, this book gives attention to the cultural dimension in addition to structure and agency. In so doing, it hopes to contribute to higher education studies and sociology in this respect.

Proposition

The book proposes a causality mode of higher education change and stability in order to make possible a causal explanation. The mode is based on the relationship between structural, agency, and cultural conditioning, which allows some degree of de-contextualization. The initial premise of the mode is that structural, agency, and cultural conditions interact with one another for higher education production and reproduction, showing the reciprocity of practices. In the mode, structural and cultural elements influence agency dimension, shaping dominant agents and their choice of action. Agency enables structure and culture to reproduce them or alter existing structural and cultural properties. The relationship between structure and culture is not direct.

This theoretical framework does not indicate that the book seeks for a theory or a "system of a law" in Parsons' terminology (1951, p. 485) as such, but rather a theoretical device. The device is useful to understand the causal mechanism for higher education change and resistance to change, but not to predict them. The author of this book believes that prediction is hardly feasible because of the heavily contextually dependent and unpredictable nature for the future events (see for instance, an economist's attempt on the prediction in the market and his/her repeated failure). She also considers that the prediction is not a social scientist's primary task.

The proposed mode rejects evolutionary thought, which had a powerful impact on sociology and higher education studies up until the 1980s. It has become clear that biological thinking cannot explain higher education change and maintenance because the higher education sector is not endogenous, but part of the larger societal system. The mode is flexible enough to deal with external environments—other sectors and the wider society—as a cause(s). In addition,

higher education change does not often follow a lineal evolutionary process; it occurs in a more complex fashion, in which different higher education systems often take different pathways, zigzag / forth-back shifts, and in terms of the different levels and different disciplines within the higher education system, a different pace and direction of change. We can find a range of evidence for non-evolutionary changes cross-nationally. The different system, institutional, and unit responses to internationalization and regionalism such as the Bologna Process, and the different patterns of higher education expansion and marketization at the system, institutional, and unit levels are self-evident. The mode proposed in this book is an alternative to biological thinking.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into two parts and ten chapters altogether. Part I consists of Chapters 2 to 6. It concerns the theoretical abstraction on higher education change and stability. Chapter 2 defines higher education change and offers an analytical approach to higher education change and resistance to change.

Chapters 3 to 6 consider structural, agency, and cultural approaches respectively to explain higher education change and maintenance. These chapters concern constraint and enabling aspects of structure, agency and culture, and give attention to the relationship between higher education and other parts of society.

Chapter 3 deals with a structural perspective on the issue, defining the nature of structure and structural conditioning. The chapter argues that the structural properties of "resources," "rules," and "governance mechanism" may exercise "conditioning power" as constraining and enabling factors for the production and reproduction of higher education. Existing structural properties may disrupt internal and external demands for higher education change, causing "structural frustration"—a situation in which the structure no longer responds to external and internal demands. As to enabling aspects, the given structure may be flexible enough to allow for "structural flexibility"—a situation in which agents can adapt to shifting internal and external environments without structural change. On the other hand, structure *per se* can change as a result of agent action, which may bring about dynamic higher education change incorporated in larger societal transformation.

Chapter 4 highlights an agency perspective. "Knowledgeability," "reflexivity," "power," and "interaction" are central concepts in agency conditioning in the chapter. This chapter defines "agent(s)" and "agency." It differentiates higher education agents from non-higher education agents, with their differing implications for higher education production and reproduction.