Conclusion

In the higher education milieu it is common to hear that it is a meta-field rather than a field for itself. There is a point of truth that, in general, we often fail to pay enough attention to the underlying structure of a debate or of a discipline; is it, for example, one in which matters of detail stand for much more fundamental differences of values, or one in which relatively small differences in starting points have somehow ballooned into what feels like a much more polarised debate than it needs to be? Most of the ground of debate comprises the arid territory of one side’s distorted portrayal of the other side’s views. A leading goal of this book is to contribute to overcome this myopia by providing chapters that are themselves reflexive in how each topic or research is presented. Maybe it is time, for higher education researchers, agree to differ, as long as important issues continue to be tackled. Imagine a world where the organised effort of policy, education and research was to make things clearer and, where possible, more consensual diverse. Not only would we waste a lot less time and probably make wiser decisions, but we could focus our arguments on stuff that are genuinely important and on which we really do profoundly disagree.

The success of most social interventions – the interventions that could help foster mass creativity – rely on what has been called ‘civic effects’ that is the public engagement, mobilisation and behaviour change. Most of the chapters included in this book relate to these three dimensions in the field of higher education, which affect many practical aspects of educational development practitioners. But those civic effects are more likely to emerge from leaders articulating a clear vision, convening new conversations and collaborations, leading by doing than through the slow, cumbersome process of developing and implementing policy. The word ‘new’ in the title of this book does not only relate to the emphasis it is given to research done by ECRs, but also to the proposal of enlarging the span of actors and of research types in that process of implementing policy and, especially, research. That said, effects and impact of educational research are most effective when they build from what already exists; honoring current efforts and engaging established organizations, rather than creating an entirely new solution from scratch.

The chapters included in this book, but also some of the ones that, for various reasons, could not be included, gave rise to the following topics that we can reflect upon not only with regard to higher education research but to social sciences in general.
Conclusion

THE CHALLENGES

Research on higher education touches global issues and, at the same time, investigates national, local and individual specificities. Nevertheless, this is a field in which there is a clear and visible will to deal with contemporary ‘burning’ issues. When research on the field does that, often the field hesitates between a more general view of the issues, with a strong theoretical weight, and the inputs of more empirical data. This leads us to a very first challenge, which is one of the leitmotifs for this book: how to better articulate more precise data and scenarios with broader visions and theories within the field?

The book also deals with the comprehension of changing phenomena in higher education, understanding its past and preparing for the future of the field. Some implied searchlights from the different chapters of this book give us cues on the debate that is taking place around those issues and for each ongoing sociocultural situation. We work outward from situations rather than impose boundaries. Contemporary higher education can make use of proposed benchmarks and guidelines. As a field, it has a formidable toolkit, numerous and varied instruments to produce rigorous knowledge and enable all stakeholders of the collective life to be helpful to raise their ability to think and, hence, to act.

ENGAGEMENTS

The deficit of sight or of thought in higher education research is not theoretical, but rather a lack of general perspective enabling it to integrate, beyond its diversity, the different visions that the field is likely to propose. It is also the relationship between higher education and collective life, politics, whether national or international, regional, global, and the great changes that are taking place. Researchers in higher education, from this standpoint, may therefore have points in common with the actors that animate the social, cultural, economic or political scene.

Researchers in higher education are willing to invest in the public space, but provided they can do so as producers of scientific knowledge. They do not want to be the ideologues of the present time, and many of them do not confuse their role with that of an expert or consultant. We recognize the obligation of the higher education field towards society, and therefore the participation of researchers towards a more reflective and active research arena.

A NEW INTELLECTUAL SPACE

Among the changes that require higher education to transform its modes of approach, the most evident ones can be summarized conveniently under two expressions: globalization, on the one hand, and on the other hand, individualism. These are two logics that mark the space inside which research is increasingly called upon to move.

Globalization encourages us to analyze social facts taking into account their global dimensions. But it must also consider a second and more diffuse phenomenon that has changed and will increasingly change the work of social sciences and higher education research: the thrust of individualism, in all its dimensions. This boost has resulted in the search by a sustained interest in the theories of rational choice,
but also, and especially more recently, by increasingly taking into account the subjectivity of individuals. It weakens the holistic approaches, and is one of the major, if not one of the sources of the debate of the structuralist approaches from the mid-1970s.

LEVELS AND THEIR ARTICULATION

Since 1977, with the book *The actor and the system*, by Michel Crozier and Ehrard Friedberg, we have been invited to articulate, in our analysis, those two levels. Today, this articulation remains necessary, but there are more levels that ought to be considered: the global logics of the individual – and its subjectivities reflected in education systems – are much more nuanced and richer than the ones regarding the social actor, and settings such as society, state and nation. In fact, half a century after C. Wright Mills had said that “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both,” researchers have now to deal with global and individual trends and at the same time avoid the temptations of fragmentation (which lead to a relativism) and of the mix or fusion of levels of analysis, which is typical in an abstract universalist style.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Most often, research on the social sciences has set the goal of describing a phenomenon, a problem, a situation, an event, an interaction, or to bring a new contribution to the knowledge of the causes of a certain phenomenon. The majority of research proposes to improve the comprehension of a phenomenon by highlighting a new variable that will add towards the explanation to that phenomenon. In these cases, knowledge has the advantage of being cumulative, but it is restricted to a very precise question, often not linked with broader contextual concerns. And it is rare that this type of knowledge may have a social purpose or feed public debate. It will contribute to legitimate its author, to the game of “publish or perish,” maybe to be discussed among authors of similar work, or to be presented at a congress or conference. However, an effort must be made that higher education research escapes the trap of falling into a hyper specialisation that usually leads to its corollary; an ideological and metaphysical chitchat and a sterile essayism. We try to avoid this temptation in the chapters selected as well as to show general issues in the higher education field without losing the richness of empirical analysis. The chapters presented do not divide so much among different paradigms or theoretical orientations—though we can find some dominant ones, such as the institutional logics—but between families of objects of analysis.

The organization of university systems often does not encourage this struggle against the fragmentation of knowledge. Thus, it is our hope that this book may contribute to place some of the challenges that higher education is currently facing within a larger social debate. More than the scientific integration of topics and researchers in a closed professional arena, this book aims at promoting the intellectual participation of young and senior researchers in a public and social debate that research on education may benefit from. This social responsibility does not have to be imputed only to the system or to institutions; researchers themselves have their own share of responsibility in this matter and it also depends on them how they define their social role.
Conclusion

BEING A HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCHER

If higher education researchers have any legitimacy to intervene in the public sphere, it is not only because they are, most of the time, teachers disseminating knowledge to their students. This task is crucial, but it is distinct from the specific activity of doing research, which should lead to the production of knowledge. It comes close when the teacher-researcher provides for his/her students research training, especially when this training involves strong practical dimensions, for example on the field. But let us not confuse the production of knowledge with other activities. This production stresses, with its own criteria, scientific activity. On many of the issues that fall within higher education research, everyone has an opinion, a point of view, possibly certainties without any apparent need to have expertise or special knowledge. In addition, a powerful trend is at work, in many societies; promoting an anti-intellectualism that goes head-on with the social sciences, then accused of irrelevance, or worse (in populist terms), participating in the domination of the elites on the masses. Isn’t the contribution of higher education beyond its appearances of meta-discipline, due to its representations to provide informed, competent analyses being honest about its own limits?

One of the important characteristics of higher education as a field is that it is relative to the opinion, to the audiences, and to the actors who are always likely to judge its contribution. A specificity of the contributions of higher education researchers at the collective life is that it is distinguished from the mere opinion, while they are in contact with carriers of opinion. Their work is necessarily based on the results of research, even if they import rules of other disciplines. We must distinguish between the respect of strict rules and the validity or relevance of the results obtained by researchers. In the first case, it is within the professional realm that we must tell if a research, a study, an investigation satisfies the cannons of the normative and ethical discipline concerned, if it was carried out with rigour.

It is also necessary that this field is not fragmented into chapels mutually excluding each other; that it is able to ensure the unity of the disciplines considered while recognizing the diversity of theoretical orientations, approaches, methods, objects, and about being able to take their path to innovation and originality.

The validity or relevance of a research project poses even more delicate problems. It is not enough that a study, a survey, a participant observation, etc. is conducted with all the desirable rigour so we can say that it is relevant. The method applied in a research does not only determine its quality or its social usefulness. Those who fetish the method, the selection of techniques, the seriousness of their application are likely to miss the point, which is the intellectual content of his contribution, the interests of its assumptions and its assertions, as indeed of its doubts. The text, here, cannot come from the professional research community, at least not exclusively. If one accepts that the production of knowledge on higher education must have a social utility, based on its scientific contribution, then one must recognize that its relevance lies in what will be done for this contribution in other areas than theirs.

This poses very directly the question of the evaluation. Higher education research has its cost, provided by the public power, by international organizations, by private institutions, and by foundations. In all cases, it is legitimate that researchers are accountable, and it is one of the functions of the assessment to enable it. But there are other functions. Evaluation ought to help organize careers, to ensure the proper functioning of universities and other higher education and research organizations. Higher education professionals rise frequently not so much against the principle of an assessment but against its terms. For instance, they criticise its normative character, which might constitute an encouragement to the conformism.
Conclusion

Sometimes, higher education scholars also fear to be judged by powers that may subordinate the research to interests of specific actors - large businesses for example. How to combine the necessary freedom of researchers, the recognition of the fundamental nature of the critical dimensions of research with the idea that it must be at the service of all of the common good, of the companies, and for that, assessment procedures are necessary?

INSTITUTIONS

There is a danger that this input from higher education research functions to only advantage of the field and institution leaders. But research may also, and above all, help transform a crisis, a problem, a blockage in exchange, discussion, negotiation and positive conflicts. It can prevent a higher education institution from being locked in the logic of management and devastating organizational practices. The most critical of the researchers, those who developed supercritical approaches, will argue against the idea of participating in the study of problems of this type, internal to an organisation. They will see in it a support to practices of pacification which ultimately allow the dominant to ensure the reproduction of their domination. This type of argumentation is still well alive in the so called post-modernist times.

Higher education is not necessarily intended to be boxed in the relatively confined space of university life. Moreover, this is not where it was born; rather in social reform movements, or in the establishment of welfare institutions. It is not void for young minds, for doctoral candidates seeking to strive in the labour market to bring their skills, including as researchers, in other worlds than that which they have been trained. However, there is the risk that their skills are deteriorating, that they become mediocre consultants, that they follow directions of institutions or companies in political manipulation or suppression.

LIMITS AND TABOOS

As in all fields, research in higher education needs freedom. Researchers must be able to choose the issues they intend to tackle, make their hypotheses, determine their chosen method, etc. But this principle is facing two types of limits, which come from what might be called social demand, possibly even driven by public or private instances. To access the necessary resources, the researcher must pass through the turbulent quests for funding, scholarships, programs, etc. Research institutions have also increasingly tend to establish codes or charters that can go very far in defining what is acceptable and what is not for the practice of research.

If such rules had been used in the past, we would be certainly deprived the bulk of anthropological or sociological production related to studies and field surveys. But it is also true that this production of knowledge was claimed to be universal and blind to the relations of domination, which conditioned such production of knowledge. The problem is therefore not to seek for the absence of rules, but rather to verify that the establishment of codes, charters, standards is done with active participation of those who are the first affected, researchers, and not managers and administrative staff of the universities.

Higher education, as other fields of social sciences, reproduces in its own way (which varies from one country to another) a professional pattern that focuses on the teaching and research methodological canons or theoretical boundaries within which knowledge can be produced. Suddenly, certain steps,
Conclusion

certain questions are becoming difficult to consider, except to adopt a non-conformist attitude that may prove to be costly in professional and career terms. Researchers, on the other hand, internalize more diffuse moral and political standards, which proscribe certain questions, or make it impossible to use certain categories, as if they did not have their place in society considered.

May the quest continue.

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