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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 Goastellec, 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

G. Goastellec and F. Picard (eds.), Higher Education in Societies, 9–16.

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*)[1] 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 Forschunggemeinschaft's *excellenzinitiative*)[2] 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*),[3] 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)[4] – 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

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 breast-feed 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

[1] Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche. (2014). *PRES : pôles de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur*. Retrieved January 27, 2014 from http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid20724/les-poles-de-recherche-et-d- enseignement-superieur-pres.html

[2] Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. (2014). *Excellence Initiative*. Retrieved January 27, 2014, fromhttp://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/excellence_initiative/index.html

[3] http://www.asanet.org/journals/editors_report_2012.cfm

[4] https://www.scholasticahq.com/sociological-science/about

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