

BOOK DETAILS:

High Participation Systems of Higher Education**Brendan Cantwell, Simon Marginson and Anna Smolentseva (editors)****Oxford University Press. 2018****ISBN: 978-0-19-882887-7**

It is sobering to remember that still the most common conceptualisation - or, more simply, label - to describe contemporary higher education systems, the tripartite division into elite, mass and universal systems, was first developed by the American sociologist Martin Trow almost half a century ago. It was in 1973 that Trow published *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Education*, originally as part of the general report of an OECD conference on future structures in post-secondary education and later as a paper for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (Trow 1974).

How can a conceptualisation developed fewer than 20 years after the end of the Second World War still be current as we enter the third decade of the 21st century? One reason is that 'mass higher education' still highlights the most striking feature of modern higher education systems, the exponential and apparently irreversible increase in the number of students - and of staff and institutions. It is (too?) easy to grasp. So the temptation to stick with the label is strong. Like many higher education researchers I have succumbed to the temptation, and still do. A second reason is that 'mass higher education' quickly became a flexible, even fluid, label. Its ubiquity produced over-use rather like the over- and misuse of Thomas Kuhn's concept of 'paradigm shift' which so dismayed Kuhn. It is now used in ways in which Trow himself, certainly in his later years, would certainly have disapproved.

As a result, what continues to be a standard analytical category for describing the development of contemporary higher education systems has become detached from its moorings, both its original context and meaning. The context is important; the meaning perhaps less so. It is not necessary to go all the way and believe that the 'authority' of the author is spurious to recognise that ideas, like books, have a life of their own and the author's original intentions are only the first in a series of continuing intellectual exchanges. In any case, Trow failed to develop some key elements in his tripartite *schema*, notably the third stage in his triptych, universal higher education - which is where contemporary higher education systems are heading, with some on or over the brink of arrival.

However, returning to the context in which the concept first developed, encoded in the DNA of 'mass higher education' are some key assumptions that reflect both the place where and the time when this concept was first articulated. First, there was an assumption that the higher education systems of the future would be predominantly public ones, with the State acting as the main (although not necessarily the exclusive) agent of change. 'Mass higher education', it must be remembered, was born, both as an idea and as a social reality, in the age of 'peak' post-war welfare state, just before the first tremors of doubts following the economic troubles of the later 1970s and then the ideological counter-

revolution of the 1980s. Second, there was an equally strong assumption that the future belonged to 'systems'. These systems need not necessarily be clones of the three-tier California master plan. They might also include the binary systems, differentiating between universities and more vocationally oriented higher education institutions, developed or codified the 1960s and 1970s of which the English polytechnics were a keystone example. But no one seriously doubted that there would be 'systems', of some kind, within which increasing efforts would be made to coordinate various types of post-secondary, or tertiary, institutions within an articulated whole.

Of course, the hegemony of the concept of 'mass higher education' was never total. In much of Europe, where rapid student growth lagged up to a generation behind the GI Bill fuelled expansion in the US, it occasionally felt an uneasy fit. In the UK, the European country alongside Sweden with which Trow was most personally engaged, the 'mass' label presented particular difficulties. The advance of the 'new universities' of the 1960s - Sussex, Warwick and the rest - and a decade later the development of the polytechnics did not really blunt deep-rooted and elitist traditions of academic - and, inevitably, social - selectivity. Radical opponents of those traditions had their own reasons for suspecting 'mass culture', which they associated with American commercialism. In the rest of the world student expansion and institutional development often took on decidedly un-American forms.

As a result, from the perspective of the 2020s, the idea of mass higher education feels dated. As I have already said, Trow had little substantive to say about universal systems. Yet that is where many higher education systems are rapidly heading, especially if the broader category of 'tertiary education' is adopted as it increasingly is. Indeed, adopting his threshold, many have arrived. Conceptually, therefore, we are entering unknown territory.

Next, some of what I call the foundational assumptions of Trow's typology, unspoken as well as articulated, appear to have been significantly modified. Although States maintain a lively interest in shaping higher education, it is more often in the context of the role higher education plays, and enhanced role it can play, in developing skills and - impactful - research in the service of a globalised knowledge economy (or offering satisfactory rates-of-return for individual graduates in terms of higher lifetime earnings). That interest is no longer grounded in the contribution of higher education to the development of the welfare state as a social, and maybe even social democratic, project.

At the same time the quality of the 'publicness' in the university has changed, shifting from being State funded and even State owned (if collegially, or at any rate professorially, steered) institutions at the apex of public systems of education to new kinds of organisation focused on delivering politically mandated or entrepreneurial agendas. The nature of 'systems' too has also undergone a shift - from organised systems largely funded and even planned by the State to looser systems of more heterogeneous institutions regulated by the State. 'Systems' certainly still exist, and may even be more controlling. But in the 2020s they are rather different from the planned and coordinated systems assumed by Trow and his contemporaries half a century ago.

In short, the time is ripe for a new overarching conceptualisation of higher education that reflects these contemporary realities. Indeed the time is over-ripe. In part 'mass higher education' has maintained its currency because of the absence of credible alternatives. Although there have been several attempts since Trow to offer theoretical frameworks which capture the essence of the university - the entrepreneurial university (Clark 1998, Scott 2010), the ecological university, (Barnett 2017), the neoliberal university (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000, Ball 2012) and so on - all have been in different registers. None has focused primarily on the character of universities as organisations or the structure of higher education systems within the wider sociological framework that Trow attempted. Until now, at any rate. This book, and earlier work in particular by Simon Marginson, centred on the idea of 'high participation' higher education is perhaps the first to attempt to match Trow's ambition - and, potentially, supersede his elite-mass-universal triptych. At a minimum it fleshes out the mere sketch of universal higher education attempted by Trow.

On reflection, 'supersede' is the wrong word; 'complete' would be a better description. The problem with Trow's three-stage typology of systems is that it has reached the limits of its explanatory usefulness. Elite higher education systems no longer really exist, although elite universities certainly flourish. With a very few exceptions all higher education systems are now mass systems, although their forms and structures are often very different. Most systems in the developed world are on the threshold of becoming universal systems according to Trow's typology. A growing number of countries now have, as a minimum, post-mass systems. Cantwell, Marginson and Smolentseva, and the other authors of individual chapters, have completed Trow's *schema* by redefining universal systems as high-participation systems. The dialogue with Trow suffuses this book. The final chapter even name-checks Trow in its title by referring to 'the post-Trow era'. References to Trow's work, and ideas, are scattered through many of the individual chapters.

The book is divided into two unequal sections. The first, longer and more weighty, section sets out a series of propositions about the core characteristics of high participation higher education and then proceeds to discuss them in detail - initially a general review, followed by a discussion of the underlying data and then chapters on governance (in a very broad sense), horizontal diversity and vertical stratification, equity and finally a sketch of high participation society, in effect the social changes that continue to power the expansion of higher education across the world. The second section consists of eight national case studies. North America is well represented, with chapters on both Canada and the United States, but Europe less so because the big higher education players - France, Germany and the UK - are missing, plus Japan (but not China). Although individually impressive, the country chapters do not always relate directly to the core propositions set out and explored so impressively in the first section.

The core argument in the book is that high participation systems embody a drive to universality on which no limits can reasonably be set because its motive power is the aspirations of individuals and families. The longer-term growth of these systems is now independent of, or certainly less constrained by, other elements of political economy such as economic growth, labour market demand, the availability of public (and private) funding, the organisation of systems, institutional roles and particular

forms of systemic and institutional governance. This is a bold claim, because it comes close to treating higher education as a core system in its own right rather than being a subordinate and contingent element within the overarching political economy of contemporary societies. In other words, high participation higher education now makes their own weather. The editors in their concluding chapter even use the challenging phrase 'reflexive self-formation'.

Or, on second thoughts, not such a bold claim, because education - and higher education - systems have been on a long journey since at least the 19th century of which an enhanced role, and status, as one of the major structuring systems of the modern world was always a likely destination. Mass higher education was always pregnant with this possibility of, once a favourite adjective, endogenous self-formation. Despite the fact expansion was often publicly justified in terms of economic rationality, especially what in a less gender sensitive age was called 'manpower planning', its true driver was also deep-rooted social change, a rising tide of aspirations that reflected the best hopes of the 20th century - the New Deal and later the Great Society in the US, the UK's welfare state, Germany's social market, France's *trente années glorieuses* and the like. In Trow's account the driver of mass expansion was a social much more than an economic logic. In the case of high participation higher education the social logic is even more dominant.

But it is still a surprising claim - at any rate, to many policy makers who now more than ever attempt to lock the development of higher education into economic growth agendas and, in particular, to the 'graduate' labour market (a category of diminishing relevance if this essentially social definition of high participation higher education is accepted). The historical role played by university in forming and bolstering national(ist?) identities has also been resurrected in some countries in furious - if often spurious - 'culture wars'. Institutional leaders sing the same tunes of economic rationality - utility, relevance and impact - aside from the idealistic rhetoric they deploy on solemn occasions such as commencement and graduation ceremonies.

This raises an extremely important question, which the authors recognise when they consider the relationship between high participation higher education and neoliberalism (although the left also emphasises the social construction of the university rather than its ideal forms). Clearly there can be no doubt about the massive weight of higher education systems in contemporary society - thousands of institutions, millions of students, billion dollar / Euro / pound / yen budgets. But the claim made in this book that these systems are now capable of self-formation, that a kind of self sustaining social logic is now the dominant driver of high participation higher education systems, will inevitably be contested.

However intellectually convincing and satisfying that claim may be, as it is eloquently expressed in this book, the policy world appears to assume a contrary principle, the ever more intricate inter-weaving of higher education systems with other systems, particularly the economy. In their eyes higher education is more than ever a service industry, generating individual benefits for graduates and producing skilled labour and commodifiable knowledge for the economy. There is clearly a tension between seeing higher education as capable of 'self-formation', in the sense that it is now shaped by an overwhelmingly social

logic, and the view that higher education systems are interwoven within the wider political economy, and subject instead to political and economic logics.

Either way it may be bad news at a time when democratic culture is under populist-authoritarian attack and open societies are on the defensive. Both politicisation, in the form of subordination to short-term political agendas, and exaggerated instrumentality - rates-of-return, graduate jobs and other baggage - are clearly difficult to reconcile with the university's traditions of critical enquiry and independent thought. But so too may be an overwhelming social logic that aligns universities more closely with the deformations and inequalities of contemporary societies. They may now, indeed, be 'people's universities', but in a very different sense from that intended by radicals of the 1960s and 1970s.

Two other key issues are raised in the core propositions of high participation systems set out in this book. The first concerns equity. The argument here, convincing in my view, is that the drive to universality means that high participation systems have no choice but increasingly to mirror social and economic inequalities in society at large, which have been increasing since the 1980s in most countries. The presence of the French economist Thomas Picketty, like that of Trow, hovers over this book (Picketty 2014, 2019). As a result, it may have become even more difficult to regard higher education as an agent of social reform and radical change - in the absence of decisive political interventions to promote wider social justice for which there generally appears to be limited appetite as opposed to window dressing about widening participation.

Once again, the continuity with mass higher education is strong. The hope that the expansion of higher education and the establishment of new, and potentially more radical, institutions, would promote greater social equity, which was strong in the 1960s and 1970s, has tended to wither in more recent decades. Mass higher education has come to be seen more as an instrument for the consolidation of existing social class structures, both in terms of who is able to participate at all and, crucially, in terms of access to different levels of institution within these expanding systems. In short, the new graduate class has come to look like the middle class reformed.

If the authors' analysis is accepted, this reflection - even reinforcement - of inequalities will be even more marked in high participation systems with their drive to universality. The expanding middle class, as much in developing countries as higher education's Euro-American heartland, will not be denied its right to access ('consume'?) higher education. High participation systems undoubtedly can deliver equity in aggregate, in the limited sense of offering social inclusion. But they are poorly placed to promote equity in more active or redistributive terms. And political intervention, to level the playing field by resisting the insistent clamour of the middle class and assist the more socially deprived, is more difficult than ever because the ability of the political system to shape and steer the development of higher education systems has been constrained - whatever politicians and ideologues may imagine.

The second issue is the predominant institutional and organisational forms that high participation systems will take. Here the authors are less clear. In the first place they emphasise that a generic multiversity form appears to be replacing the previous array of more special-purpose institutions. Again,

this is not a surprise. A decade before Trow's key paper the development of the multiversity had been anticipated by Clark Kerr, the former President of the University of California (and Trow's boss), in the Godkin lectures at Harvard (Kerr 1966). But then they appear to retreat and emphasise instead the effect of competition within a neoliberal quasi-markets evident in many national higher education systems. As a result, the balance between these comprehensive universities, characterised by growing heterogeneity of mission, and the increasing stratification of systems, by reputation and mission, which was unclear in the 1960s, remains unclear in the 2020s.

Of course, in empirical terms the development of these systems clearly produces both effects, increased heterogeneity of institutional missions but also greater stratification. The individual authors of the chapters illustrate the messy reality by offering national case-studies that highlight different balances in different countries. However, if the ambition is to offer an overall theoretical account of the basic characteristics of 21st-century higher education this having-your-cake-and-eating-it-too is less satisfactory. Is the future to be one of increasing isomorphism, as institutions become more alike (if only in their heterogeneity), or higher education be like an exploding universe as separate constellations of institutions - elite universities ('artisanal' in a nice turn of phrase), mass universities ('demand absorbing' - and closest perhaps to the original concept of the multiversity), alternative providers, learning platforms - fly apart? How can the proposition that 'the multiversity is increasingly dominant as the paradigmatic form of higher education' be reconciled with the proposition that 'the expansion of participation towards and beyond HPS is associated with a tendency to bifurcation and stratification', unless it is simply to say that there will be hierarchy of multiversities, surely a banal conclusion?

These thoughts bring me back to my earlier comment about how the notion of 'systems' has changed between the 1970s and the 2020s. The act of creating more organised and coordinated systems half a century ago, a key assumption underpinning the idea of mass higher education, tended to encourage convergence and isomorphism. Perhaps the much more loosely coupled 'systems' of the 21st century allow greater divergence to take place - whether a class-driven hierarchy of universities, a competitive market of entrepreneurial learning organisations, or the emergence of community learning networks with minimalist organisational structures. In any case the institutional shape of high participation higher education, at a conceptual as well as empirical level, remains obscure. In an intellectual age that celebrates fluidity and ambiguity, maybe this is inevitable.

This book, by a long stretch, is the most important addition to our understanding of how higher education systems develop within the wider political economy since Trow's intervention half a century ago. It is massively impressive and intellectually focused, to an extent that Trow's own work, spread across an eclectic series of reports, papers and book chapters, perhaps was not (Burrage 2010, Scott 2019). Of course, that proved to be a strength. In a very real sense Trow's writing was always 'work in progress', which gave the concept of mass higher education a malleability that may have been one of the reasons for its ubiquity and longevity. There are perhaps risks in attempting too definitive a statement, or unintentionally and prematurely setting in stone a series of propositions. The concept of high participation higher education will be even more fertile if it too becomes, in a sense, 'work in progress' too, ripe for development and with the potential to trigger further and frequent intellectual exchanges.

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