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The Collegial Tradition in Higher Education (0208)

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This presentation moves from a descriptive approach to collegiality (listing the key ingredients) to interpreting it as a mode of decision-making designed to confer legitimacy upon policy outcomes. As such it can be seen as an authoritative structure of decision-making akin to Weber's ideal types (kinship, bureaucracy and charisma). It then considers why a particular policy-making process comes under pressure and a process of change is instigated. The proposition is that the surrounding political conflict is best understood as a neo-pluralist struggle between the dominant higher education stakeholders marked by the interaction between internal institutional and external state/societal interests. The conclusion reflects on the idea that if concepts are to retain a measure of integrity it is important not to stretch their meaning indefinitely to fit new contexts.

The Collegial Tradition in Higher Education

Introduction

I have been undertaking research on 'the collegial tradition in higher education' in various settings for many years (and so there is a strong retrospective dimension to what I am going to write). From the outset it was a topic that readily lent itself to conceptual analysis. Initially, I dived into the literature on colleges, collegiate universities, collegiality and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (to name some of the more visible targets), but the obvious question was staring me in the face - what is meant by the collegial tradition?

To approach collegiality in this way led me down an essentially descriptive path (albeit one that I found interesting, and which others also find interesting as demonstrated by the reasonably large body of work on forms of university administration and governance). As my research has progressed I have attempted to transcend this descriptive trajectory – that is defining the concept of collegiality - in two different ways. Firstly, by relating the concept of collegiality to Weber's classic research on forms of authority – charismatic, rational/legal and kinship. Secondly, by perceiving collegiality as a threatened mode of authority, which immediately brings into play the idea of political conflict. These two themes are the threads that run through what follows.

Collegiality as a form of authority

In view of my previous work on 'the state and higher education' no great leap of imagination was required to translate the idea of 'system rationality' to 'institutional rationality'. With respect to 'system rationality' the dominant force for change in the UK was the state, in which both political and bureaucratic elements (using mainly financial leverage) were used to reshape how the system of higher education functioned in terms of its governance, its financing, and its purposes.

Obviously, over time institutional governance has had to respond to this new context. This is the major pressure on those manifestations of authority that are based on a collegial mode of governance with the charge that its mode of decision-making is inappropriate (slow, reactive rather than proactive, conservative and too inclusive). The consequence is that this generates internal institutional conflict, as well conflict between the state and certain institutions – those that are deemed to be changing their modes of governance too slowly and, in this respect, note the sustained pressure on Oxford and Cambridge from (for example) HEFCE and the Treasury.

Collegiality as political struggle

The focus shifts from defining collegiality as a 'Weberian ideal type' to the perception of it as an idea that is central to the process of institutional change. In this sense collegiality is seen as integral to a particular understanding of the idea of the university, which is critical in the struggle to change what is meant by higher education and how universities are governed. Obviously, the analysis can then centre on alternative models of the university, the interaction between internal and external pressures in the process of change (or resistance to change), and the internal institutional divisions – how they line up, and how to account for the positioning of the different battalions.

It is also possible to interpret theoretically this struggle to reform institutional structures and procedures. In doing so, I am guided by middle-range political science theory based on decision-making and a neo-pluralist interpretation of the distribution of power. It has to be noted that there have been protracted debates in political science about this approach, which is now considered somewhat passé (policy network analysis is now in vogue).

Key issues

I have decided to list these in the form of what I consider to be 'the important questions'.

1. Is immersion in the topic a necessary prerequisite to thinking conceptually and theoretically? In other words, one should not be too condescending about good descriptive work because it provides a solid basis for thinking conceptually and theoretically. Surely not everyone has to be at the research cutting edge?
2. Do we inevitably fall back upon our own disciplinary training to guide us (almost intuitively) when we come to think conceptually and theoretically?
The implication of the question is that we will behave conservatively because we turn to what we already know. We take refuge in the familiar with all the dangers that can entail (although it also has its advantages!).
3. Does the idea of trying to combine macro- and micro (or should it be, meso) theoretical frameworks to provide direction for different segments of the research make sense? I am confident that you can move from Weber to middle-range political science theory in relative comfort but I think it would be impossible to do so if you took Marx as your grand theorist (thus higher education as a form of class and/or elite social reproduction). You would need more sympathetic theoretical adaptation in your approach to the empirical dimensions of your research (perhaps turn to Gramsci with a focus upon ideological themes and, in particular, a reification of the idea of 'good governance' in the critical 'documents'.

Conclusion

I believe the process of theoretical/conceptual development needs to respond to changing realities. For example, the new public management model of system governance means that universities are now relating to the state through a different pattern of institutional structures. Moreover, and very significantly, successive governments (again in England) have attempted to increase market pressures upon higher education institutions, to create what I have called 'a managed market'. This is a very significant development in terms of the viability of collegiality as a mode of authority. Put simply, can collegiality sustain its credibility in the new context? In conceptual terms collegiality may assume a somewhat different form and, as such, it may be possible to demonstrate its ability 'to deliver the goods' very effectively within the context of a 'managed market'. This is the line taken by Michael Shattock, although others are somewhat more sceptical.