Editorial

The Vision of Reform — The Form of resistance

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In the history of a nation's politics, irrespective of which country one cares to light upon as illustrating the example, the times when political radicals uphold the status quo or the order established are rare. However, they are by no means so rare as one might think. Indeed, the point could be easily argued in the context of a higher education policy, the interests of which ought to be radical, turn out in certain situations to be conservative in the extreme. Thus, for instance, that most volatile of student bodies, the French, has regularly demonstrated — in the exact meaning of that term — its attachment to state-accredited diplomas as opposed to those awarded by individual universities. No later than November 2003, there was some trumpeting and a little marching against the Bologna Process, that slowly advancing construction of a 'European' higher education system. True, not much came of it. That, however, is not the point. The point is, of course, that policies presented as progressive, necessary and radical by some, are not always viewed in the same light by those who have either to carry them out or to put up with their consequences.

Now the defence of established practice is often presented as being little more than the privileged and selfish acting to defend their privileges or to preserve their ill-gotten gains that other regimes, governments or parties, have been so weak or heedless to grant a particular interest — in this case, academia. The assumption that governments make when introducing a new policy is of course, that it constitutes an advance, an improvement and a move forward. And by the same token, those whose obduracy results in their not falling in with this interpretation are, within the same scale of values, backwoodsmen of the most primitive species, individuals (never groups or rarely so) who dwell in the past and for whom any move away from the established order — irrespective of what is involved — is as a matter of principle, anathema.

Change and Progress

Yet, to accept that change is always progressive is itself an article of faith. It is also the art, which in Anglo-Saxon politics, comes into the ambit of the spin-doctor. Just as all that glistens is not always gold, neither is all that is new necessarily an essential advance. Still, those who present policy will, not surprisingly, argue that novelty and change are not merely progressive,

ameliorative and moving forward beyond the *status quo ante*. Such initiatives, they will argue, are also necessary and, more to the point, they are so urgent that there is not time sufficient to discuss alternatives. The pace of change is accelerating and we must keep up with it, or become uncompetitive, which presumes we were competitive before or find ourselves facing decline, or perhaps even face a host of competitors profiting from the fact that they have moved while we have not. Such are the more tattered scarecrows that lie in the political armoury to ‘leverage’ (sic) change.

Since much of the democratic process is precisely about the weighing up of alternatives, to have them banished from our sight, excluded from debate because experts or their masters are not willing to concede the existence of alternatives or admitted to a less stringent schedule for debate and reform, it seems slightly at odds with precisely those notions that policy is itself apparently designed to enhance — transparency, accountability and openness. However, such appears to be the way of the globalizing world, as social institutions see their budgets cut and individuals amass amazing fortunes at the hit of a computer key. At this point, the cautious will hedge their bets or suspend their credulity. They will stand aside from the shouting and the glowing prophecies of improvement that is yet to come and seek to ascertain what the real consequences are or where they are likely to fall.

Back-Sliding

Still, what if change does not involve a glorious advance so much as an ignominious rolling back, deftly disguised as the onward march of reason, of the ‘market’ or indeed of that curious hybrid ‘market democracy’ which, when one thinks about it, is little more than a self-cancelling construct? In such a pass, the stance of academia may be construed very differently — not so much as the bolstering of corporate interests and its own vile and restrictive practices but rather as the protection of what in French would be termed the ‘*acquis social*’ — the rights acquired earlier by the general interest — for instance, terms of access for students, conditions of study and conditions of employment. In short, the same action may just as well involve preventing the rolling back and deliberate restriction of precisely those acquired rights. This indeed is far from being a matter of an over-bloated academia seeking to avoid rigour and financial accountability. It is on the contrary, a stance of high social responsibility, different to be sure from the way parties or governments would have it and would have us believe it. However, it is nevertheless a form of social responsibility to the extent that such postures seek to uphold society’s acquired rights in this particular domain, namely, access to learning and the terms on which certified learning is acquired.

Different Views on Resource Decline

This second perspective is worth bearing in mind, not simply to preserve the spirit of contradiction, an organic quality that, to use the fashionable idea, 'ensures the sustainability of academia'. It is also a perspective worth retaining when we turn our attention to the contributions in this issue. In their various ways, many of the articles are seated against this broader backdrop, although their points of focus vary, as too do their methods and thus their critique. Seen from this broader and more relativistic standpoint, resource decline — the angle of attack that Morgan, Knaizev and Kulikova employ in their case studies of three institutions of higher education in Central Russia — may be seen as a technocratic analysis of the consequences following from decisions made at the political level, although in this particular instance, resource squeeze appears less the outcome of deliberate decisions so much as a more general collapse in both government and regional administration.

There are then many forms of response to resource decline, some intended, for instance, the policy of financial diversification, generating new sources of income, much caressed by the World Bank and by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Still, there are others that flow from circumstances, both unforeseen and most assuredly unplanned. This latter situation is of very special importance in East and Central Europe. Indeed, it is certainly correct to see many of the systems of higher education in that region in such a pass, because they are utterly unforeseen. There is even a third perspective one may entertain of 'resource decline'. It confers a further slant, namely, the particular vision of reform or 'coping strategy' that the individual institution of higher education seeks to develop precisely to cope with both the political and administrative vacuum. Resource decline is then just a starting point and while it certainly brings with it a range of theories that have found their place in both the West and in developing countries, the concept of 'resource dependency' is perhaps less fruitful in itself than in the light it sheds on how particular establishments come to grips with the reality of what is, in effect, *de facto* institutional autonomy which comes as one of the perverse outcomes of administrative collapse or inability to provide the resources on which policy, its oversight, enforcement and steering depend.

Reflecting Usefully on One's Condition

A different line of argument is pursued by Slantcheva in her examination of developments in Bulgarian higher education. Knowledge about self, whether that self is individual, organizational or in this instance the Bulgarian university, is a prior condition for adapting to that well-known but rarely

operationalized object 'the complex environment'. The absence of self-awareness, she argues following Claus Offe, is not a condition encouraged by state socialism. Yet, she suggests that without reflexivity the Bulgarian university was simply the 'object of policy', and because of its spectacular absence, the university in Bulgaria was about to lose its essential role as the instrument for modernizing society. A single solution to problems confronting universities, which are themselves highly complex organizations, has the appeal of clarity and a certain explanative weight. However, single solutions in higher education policy, like single variable explanations of social phenomena, are not particularly robust. Moreover, they beg the fundamental question 'what type of reflexivity for what type of system?'

Changes in Assumptions and Their Consequences

Changes in the assumptions underlying higher education policy, the choice of policy and the instruments to advance it, as Huisman and de Witte argue, in their analysis of change in study programmes in Flanders and the Netherlands, are not easy to tease out. Views on what is required as perceived by central government and what was needed in the view of those called upon to implement it, do not always coincide. And it may well be that the type of 'reflexivity' each expects from the other are subject to similar disagreement. Thus, reflexivity becomes a matter of importance within the frame, terms of reference or broad thrust of policy that surround higher education. Even then, as Vakkuri's article on the way Finnish universities have responded to 'the third mission', community or regional outreach' that even when surrounded by mechanisms of performance-based funding are not always predictable, and very specially so in the cultural domain.

In the Forum section, this issue includes two articles on topics that continue to elicit concern. Ray Toakley examines the interplay between globalization and sustainable development. Elgar and Klein give us an international perspective on doctoral completion rates — an indicator increasingly used by governments and research councils to weigh the performance of different schools and faculties in the balance. The findings should certainly be of very particular interest to Deans, as well as to their colleagues.

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