Analysing HEism

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I would like first of all to thank the editors for giving me this opportunity to comment on this article, which I found interesting and informative. My comments will be organised in two brief sections. In this first section I will advance a brief commentary on the Zábrodská et al. [2016] article, as an example of what I will be referring to as 'HEism'. Its focus is the quality of academic life in the Czech Republic, with a particular emphasis on how 'the global drive to marketisation' has affected academic systems and the well-being of Czech academic staff, in terms especially of job satisfaction and stress, and their perceptions of their work environment. These are elicited by means of a survey of responses to various emanations of 'marketisation', and their implications for the quality of academic worklife, which has developed under these conditions.

I do not want to go deeply into the 'technical' elements of the paper (such as an analysis of responses), but wish to focus on the nature and consequences of the central distinction made—by Shin and Jay in work already carried out in other systems—between 'market-oriented' and 'professor-oriented' responses to changes in academic conditions and experiences. The paper seeks to compare their respective impacts on the well-being of academic staff. Just how the comparison was carried out is not clear, and this represents a significant missed opportunity to enlarge and differently embed the findings. Moreover, the range of differences between these two approaches, and the distinctions between them, and especially how they might be recognised and theorised, are not clearly articulated. They both represent clusters of possibilities, but the bases of their differences, in what ways they might be recognised and experienced, are not effectively and decisively spelled out. To reach the authors' laudable goals would, to my mind, have entailed a much deeper analysis and discussion of the two ideal types presented. In particular, the bases of the clusters are not fully spelled out, and there is little attempt to distinguish between, account for, and explain the differences in the ways that they are perceived, experienced, and valued. In essence, the experiences are not formulated in ways that could enable effective, and productive, forms of comparison. While there are references to particular issues, such as the introduction of metrics, changes in university environments, these seem to represent something of a turn towards what might be called the 'new normal', which

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the article does not really problematise (which is a serious issue throughout the piece), but tends to assume as 'to be expected in the circumstances'. The focus is on the effects of market-friendly policies on academic satisfaction, professional pressures, and market pressures, but a serious issue, for me, was how little we learned about how the individual responses reflected respondents' experiences, once the blanket categories of market, etc., had been touched upon. It is difficult to believe that there would be such a high level of agreement across this population, for instance in their ability to differentiate between market, professional, and academic pressures. The overall story is one of the resilience of Czech academia in the face of the massive changes they are confronted with (which is very interesting in itself, and might have been probed more deeply). What is especially interesting is how little it was necessary to modify, or add to, existing categories of understanding and reporting on these issues.

By way of wider—and I hope, constructive—critique, I will argue that the way that the issue is set out and addressed by the authors can be seen as an example of the ethnomethodologists' distinction between examining an issue from the viewpoint of taking it as a resource to be made use of, and making it a topic to be addressed in its own right. One pre-eminent example of a 'resource' approach is the use of statistical material and argument as a basis for drawing what are claimed to be valid conclusions about a particular issue, on which policies and practices may be based. Indeed, the best contemporary example of the difference between topic and resource is to be found in the area of education statistics; the key question is, are the statistics to be taken as 'explaining' (resource) or themselves 'to be explained' (topic). The pre-eminent current example is probably the use of statistics as an unproblematised resource in the OECD's PISA tests, whose results are accepted, analysed, and deployed as accurately representing the state of play in an especially significant area of activity, to the point where they are taken as a template for national education systems globally. There are at least two problems here: first, the assumption of comparability on the basis of a common metric (rather than activities) that is used to categorise the whole range of education systems, which are known to differ from each other in fundamental and significant ways, and second, that a method of comparability based on generalisation from data generated in very different circumstances can nevertheless be of enormous value in directing the work of national education systems. And, even more important, this enables, justifies, and embeds what might be taken as currently the dominant tool of education policy-making, competitive comparison between education systems.

The point of this digression for my argument is, I hope, clear; that the article under review adopts an approach much closer to a 'resource' than to a 'topic' based argument. In this respect, it follows a rather common approach within studies of higher education, one that I have characterised as 'HE-ism'. At its core, the use of this term is intended to reflect an approach to analysis of HE where practitioners' typical approach is to make HE research itself a resource, particu-

larly one which makes it possible to identify pressing problems (for particular groups) of HE insitutions and personnel, and the means of addressing them. And this is at the expense of taking these issues as 'topic' in themselves, problematising them, and seeking to explain them—which is surely the main purpose of academic endeavour.

The main argument behind the 'isms' suffix is to suggest that they represent a significant form of the distortion and possible understandings of education—and many other—policies, through the limitations that they place on the scope and targets of investigation. Overall, the argument is that the study of education policy, and possibly HE policy in particular, does not make this a topic for analysis in itself, but continues to be analytically shaped by the tendency to see particular crucial objects of analyses as resources, whose main purpose and value is as a means of improving HE as an institution, universities as organisations, and the various kinds of activities that go on within them.

The basis of the way we understand and seek to use the term 'isms' comes from the coiner of the term 'methodological nationalism', Herminio Martins. He sees it as 'a general presumption (in sociological analysis) … that, in the case he was addressing, the "total" or "inclusive" society, in effect the nation-state, be deemed to be the standard, optimal or even maximal "isolate" for social analysis' [Martins 1974: 276]. The idea of a 'general presumption' about the nature of the field captures the essence of what we mean by 'isms'.

They can be seen as 'pre-theoretical', too obvious in their (assumed unchanging and unchanged) form and importance to require explicit theorising or being addressed as objects of inquiry, to the point where they become 'ossified' in current analyses of education policy, which tend to retain the same methodological and theoretical assumptions in massively changed circumstances. It is this that we refer to as 'isms'—fixed, frozen, and taken for granted, representing and embodying significant forms of the distortion and possible understandings of education policies, through the restrictions they place on the scope and targets of investigation. Consequently, our aim is to expose the bases of the theoretical assumptions and consequent methodologies and methods, and the limits these place on our understanding of the nature and significance of the transformations at work in higher education.

'Isms', then, represent taken for granted, and unproblematised, assumptions about the nature and significance of key elements of social worlds. They can be seen in a sense as 'pre-theoretical', sufficiently obvious in their form and importance not to require explicit theorising or addressing as objects of inquiry.

It is useful to compare these methodological 'isms' with theoretical isms, which refer to 'families' of mutually linked concepts and propositions. They can, in principle, unlike methodological isms, be justified in their own terms, as a coherent set of concepts for understanding a part of the (social) world (but not only social—cf. Darwinism, Marxism, etc). There is also the danger that they may be 'caricatured' by opponents—for instance, through (deliberate) emphases on

some components rather than others, for instance, determinism in Marxism—and 'dogmatised', or made into doctrine, by unreflexive adherents.

The consequences of this have been very well put by Dominic Boyer [2010: 75]. Perhaps the worst injustice critical scholarship does to itself these days is to begin with categories like 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' which, however useful and necessary glosses they are for narrative purposes, are analytically dangerous in that they bestow an undeserved systematicity upon current trends and relations. Once invoked, such 'isms' also make it very difficult to imagine that the individual critic or even a network of critics can do much to intervene in, let alone disrupt, them.

More broadly, then, this is a rather different but equally relevant conception of isms from that I've tried to advance through the argument about HEism. First, it is '(pro)claimed' by analysts to advance analytic tools based on the delineation of a category taken to be sufficiently coherent in its structure and composition to enable the concept to be used as a general, even generic, term. My aim in the case of HEism was to identify the tendency to base analyses on implicit or unrecognised sets of assumptions that require no discussion and hold almost a pretheoretical status. So, while 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' may 'bestow an undeserved systematicity' on their objects of study, this is different from 'isms' as used here, because (a) it is based on witting analysis, not implicit assumptions, so that (b) it is always available/open to/encourages further analysis—'what do you mean by … how do you understand?', which is not the case with the 'isms', because they are themselves analytic terms, bestowed 'metatheoretically', to enable a rethinking of the tools for analysis of the objects

And this leads us to recognise that capitalism and neoliberalism have to do with methods of analysis rather than objects of analysis; they construct analytic categories rather than objects of analysis. Their problems can be overcome by refining the analysis rather than the object of the analysis.

By contrast, and more specifically, what we might refer to as Educationism reflects the tendency to regard "education" as a single category for purposes of analysis, with unproblematically accepted common objectives and a set of implicitly shared knowledges, practices, assumptions, and outcomes. This may result from the fact that education has been possibly the central project in modernising societies. Since the early 19th century, mass education has been a crucial element of the modern nation-state in the interests of collective progress and in the interests of equality and justice. Educational systems are almost invariably seen as rationalising social projects whose universal expansion necessarily brings improvement and emancipation, and the more education the better. This results in education being treated as fixed, absolute, ahistorical, and universal, when no distinctions are made between its use to describe purpose, process, practice, and outcomes. This 'flattening' of education and the reluctance to recognise that there are crucial relationships between different representations of education that are being occluded or disguised by the failure to distinguish between them makes it

important to identify and seek to go beyond Educationism. The point I am making is, I hope, clear. It is that Zábrodská et al.'s analysis tends to take a particular form of academic purpose and organisation as a norm, and consequently focuses on the nature and consequences of possible changes to that norm, rather than 'making' or problematising it.

The second section of my comments aims to provide an alternative basis for the assessment of the impact of recent changes in the governance of HE from that provided in the paper. I set out the basis of the argument in the first half of my comments, and here I want to elaborate on some of the rather more implicit points I made above. In essence, what I have hinted above is that assuming, and leaving unproblematic, the two main alternative explanations of the differences found in the responses to the investigation of academics' responses about their satisfaction, etc., that is, market-based and professors-based explanations of those responses, limits both the scope and the potential depth of the changes, and the conclusions made.

In particular, I want to briefly articulate a rather different set of bases on which to analyse their sample's responses. As I have noted above, one reason that HE is a useful field in which to elaborate these arguments is that it may be seen in some relevant respects as an extreme case, chiefly on the basis that the relationship between the occupational interests of the practitioners in the field, and of the academic study of the field, appears to overlap to a much larger degree than is usually the case. 'HEists' are more concerned with improving their immediate experience and the value to their institutions and the sector as a whole than problematising those issues more thoroughly.

The main methodological approach I will employ is what we may refer to as 'critical comparison' (which is not at all to be confused with 'competitive comparison' advanced by the OECD as a tool of educational governance). Rather, critical comparison involves the problematisation, via levels of abstraction of the categories applied to the framing and analysis of the responses, taking them as explananda rather than as explanans.

The means I will attempt, very briefly, to elaborate a comparative sociology and politics of knowledge production in and of the field of HE, which is where I suggest we will find a basis for a deeper understanding of responses to recent changes. The reason that HE represents a useful basis for this purpose is that it may be seen in some respects as an extreme case, chiefly, as noted above, that the relationship between the occupational interests of the practitioners in the field, and of the academic study of the field, appear to overlap to a much larger degree than is usually the case. By contrast, in the case of education more broadly, the distance between the fields of practitioners and of the analysts, of say, the sociology of education, are rather greater and more critical.

Such problematisation is based on the assumption that the nature of academic fields and the parameters and constructions of the kinds of knowledge they produce are framed at least as much by conditions 'external' to the field as

those internal to it. The essence and scope of the sociology and politics of knowledge production, then, is not confined to the (type) of knowledge produced, the theories and methodologies on which it draws, or the explicit processes on which it is based, but must include the wider 'conditions' under which these are themselves produced.

These 'wider conditions', or sets of 'selection principles', are based on what I will refer to as the project, location, and context within which the field operates, and which shape the directions and emphases that come to characterise it. Moreover, the ways that the selection principle works is through its framing of distinct—discursive, theoretical, methodological, etc.—'opportunity structures' which selectively contain, identify, and appropriate what were the most and least appropriate, or possible, paths for the field and its practitioners.

In the case of HE we find a significant twist, arising from the fact, again noted above, that, unusually, in HE the great majority of the knowledge producers are themselves largely inhabitants of and practitioners in the field into which they are enquiring. In making this point, I am not referring to the practice of 'insider research', involving academics researching elements of their own or their colleagues' practice, which is not uncommon in HE, so much as to the whole institution of HE, including projects where individual organisations' 'representativeness' of the field as a whole is the focus of study.

If we turn to look at how the 'selection principle' works in the case of HEism, we see that its conditions of knowledge production are shaped through the following:

• Context: rapidly changing, qualitatively and quantitatively; new demands, new roles, new expectations, new opportunities;

• Location: a shift to HE as specialism, but more likely to be found in new specialist 'centres', with an emphasis on expertise, with multiple challenges, forms, purposes, expectations, profiles, and audiences;

• Project: to defend and improve HE as it has traditionally been organised and experienced.

To put it in somewhat different terms, it is useful and interesting to compare the relationship between two different Bourdieusian 'fields', fields made up of topics such as work, religion, or HE, and the fields of research into those topics, such as sociology of religion as a field in its own right, with different membership; and it is the relationship between these two fields that makes up a major element and condition of knowledge production.

In the case of HE, research in and research on, are rarely considered as completely separate from each other, and they are usually recognised as to some extent mutually constitutive.

In terms of the selection principle that I have just outlined, the project of HE research can be seen as seeking to maintain, as far as possible, the 'myth' of the institution as traditionally conceived, within contexts of rapid change in, of and to, the sector, which may be represented as threats to that myth. And this can lead

to weak relations between HE and the main disciplines, with few papers on HE published in disciplinary journals.

I want now briefly to set out the nature and importance in this context of what I have been referring to as sets of 'Opportunity Structures'. In Colin Hay's words, these structures are

> selective of strategy, in the sense that, given a specific context, only certain courses of action are likely to see actors realise their intentions. Social, political and economic contexts are densely structured and highly contoured. As such they present an unevenly distributed configuration of opportunity and constraint to actors. They are, in short, strategically selective, for whilst they may well facilitate the ability of resource- and knowledge-rich actors to further their strategic interests, they are equally likely to present significant obstacles to the realisation of the strategic intentions of those not similarly endowed'. [Hay 2002: 380–381]

It is important to note that opportunity structures are analytic categories, not empirical ones. Students of HE act within opportunity structures which legitimate, favour, and prioritise some forms of decision and action over others: they 'embody and exemplify what is to be regarded as 'sensible, realistic and legitimate' [Koopmans and Statham].

The specific argument here is that HEism is a response to and a product of the Political Opportunity Structures confronting the fields (of HE and research on HE) as a result of massification, instrumentalisation, etc. They include:

- much greater political interest in HE as a potentially powerful instrument of forms of desirable social change—economic, cultural, individual;
- the development of international cooperation and competition;
- the imposition of NPM-like forms of management of HE as a sector and organisation;
- changing institutional and individual reward structures;
- HEism in part a consequence of these changes;
- and propelling the study of HE in the direction of 'problem-solving theory', which, as Robert Cox famously put it, 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action. The general aim of problem-solving is to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble' [Cox 1981: 128–129].

In terms of the Methodological Opportunity Structures influencing HE researchers, a crucial—and relevant-- distinction is that in the production of knowledge in social life, two contexts come together—the context of investigation, which consists of the social world of the investigator, and the context of explanation, made up of the social world of the actors who are the objects of the study [Reed 2008].

There are clear continuities here with the idea of 'in and of' the field of HE, and attempting to resolve this conundrum involves problematising both contexts. We might say that the context of investigation is framed by the politics of knowledge production in the area, but that it is 'interpreted' in the social world of the actors. So, the key issue becomes investigating the relationships between the two contexts.

The basic claim I want to make around the forms taken by and the relationships between these two contexts in the case of HE research is that, because of the specific characteristics of researchers' relationship to the field, distinctions between these two elements become blurred, and that this represents one key element of what I have referred to as 'HEism'.

The argument I have tried to advance in response to the paper's authors is that the context of explanation is framed by the—political, cultural, and economic—interests they perceive—albeit somewhat unreflectively, as they note in the Conclusion—to be at stake, which also inform their roles as investigators. Their involvement in these social worlds thus has a double, and circular, character; they are 'investigators' of the same social world that turns their investigations into explanations.

The key questions then become: What are the particular, HE-specific, forms taken by these two contexts? How do the same groups simultaneously inhabit both contexts, and with what consequences for the ways that we may understand HE? How do the investigators perceive their social world and its relationship to the actors they study—where their own activities are their own objects of study?

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And these questions seem to me the crucial ones in respect of the forms of explanation I have attempted to set out in the second part and to justify in terms compatible with the ambitions and purposes of the authors' project, if not with the limitations it sets itself.

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