



Compte rendu du livre de Peter Scott, "Retreat or Resolution? Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education Policy Press", Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2021, 212 pp

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Peter Scott (2021): Retreat or Resolution ? Tackling the Crisis of Mass Higher Education, Bristol, Policy Press, Bristol University Press, 212 pages.

Review by Christine Musselin (2022), Sciences Po, Centre of the Sociology of Organizations, CNRS, published in *Minerva*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-022-09475-8>.

The reader is warned on the second page of the preface. This book is not an easy to define product: it “is neither a memoir, nor a piece of journalism nor an academic study of higher education. But it has elements of all three”. And obviously it is true and this combination is pretty successful, especially as the book is served by a very limpid and well-written style.

On top of this multi-faceted perspective, this book is anchored in the Braudelian tradition of the *longue durée* and covers the post-WWII period to the more recent years. It is mostly focused on the UK but replaces the British trajectory within the broader developments of higher education in the US, Europe and East Asia. It first of all addresses the transformation of UK tertiary education but also explores the interdependences and interactions between higher education and the British society. The ambition of Peter Scott is therefore not only to describe the situation of UK higher education *hic et nunc* but to explain how this situation has been attained, how it relates to the British societal developments and to the evolution of higher education in the world.

The whole is sustained by an overall central argument announced in the introduction of the book: mass higher education (as defined by Martin Trow) is in crisis. Despite its contributions in the revolution of gender roles, in the advancement of people of minority ethnic groups, in staffing the public sector and the private sector, despite the emergence of new modes of professionalism and the spread of a wider scientific culture, mass higher education is not recognized and is even criticized because it also failed. It failed in eroding social differences, in fostering democratic and collegial institutions instead of corporate universities, in remaining independent from jobs-targeted instrumentalism.

This thesis is then deployed in a series of chapters. As each of them addresses a very specific issue, it is almost impossible to present the book without discussing each chapter. The first one (Chapter 2) is aimed at the transformation of the British society – i.e. its politics, economy, labour market, style of life or culture – since WWII. The author has chosen – without explaining his choices nevertheless – to stress the rupture introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the British political life especially with the destruction of the trade unions power and the subordination of local governments (and therefore the centralisation of political decision making); the reverse project of the New Labour and the surprising reintroduction of a Scottish parliament; the transformation of the UK economy as the government became a more active agent in this issue, while the manufacturing industry left the place to the development of the service industries.

The two next chapters deal with the development of mass higher education from the 60s to now but they each follow two different logics. Chapter 3 recalls the main reforms that have been led over this period of time in a chronological way and ends with a comparison with what happened in the US and in Europe. For those who already pretty

well know the history of the UK higher education system this is probably not the more insightful chapter of the book but more recent developments are also exposed in this part: they are probably less well known and it is thus very useful. It was in any case important to set the general scene. The next one (Chapter 4) is more stimulating because it more analytical. Peter Scott selects four main issues and analyses their transformations from the 60s to now. The first issue is the governance of the system and the author nicely shows how the system mixes steering and regulation but he also identifies the logics behind: the transition from a welfare state to a state “regulating the provision of ‘public’ services by a range of ‘private’ providers (page 62); the focus on private benefits rather than on public goods; and a decreasing deference to universities, experts and professionals. The second issue is the architecture of coordination and Peter Scott stresses the paradox of the 1992 decision to create a unified system (bringing together the universities and the polytechnics) on the one hand and on the other hand the devolution of higher education in three separate national systems (English, Scottish and Welch), a decision that fragmented the national system. But for him the most transformative issue has dealt with the institutional management and the increasing power of the executive management under the leadership of Vice-chancellors. Finally the fourth issue deals with agendas and practices in teaching and research and the development of metrics to control and manage these activities.

Chapter 5 is a more descriptive one in the sense that it looks to the current situation of the higher education in the UK and provides data and information on the size and shape of the system, on its institutional governance, on the funding and governance of this sector and on its core business, i.e. teaching and research. It is an indispensable chapter for each person who wants to know British higher education, especially as Peter Scott pulls off the feat of very clearly exposing its high complexity. All of my French colleagues who starts presenting the French system as a very complicated one should read this chapter to become aware of the apparent but false simplicity of the UK system!

The next chapter aims at drawing the current situation, in a less precise and detailed way of course, for three main Regions in the world (the US, Europe and East Asia). As for the rapid comparative efforts at the end of chapter 3, this not very convincing. The author has probably feared to be too UK focused and be accused to ignore or not to admit that the UK situation is not independent from the rest of the world but it leads to contestable generalizations. The US can certainly be considered as a coherent higher education Region because even if it consists in 50 different public systems and many private universities, they constitute a single academic labour market, use the same language, depend on the same research funding system etc. But this does not work for Europe and East Asia. Even if convergent trends can be observed in Europe, the evolution of each country remains so national, despite the Bologna process that it can hardly been summed up in a few pages. The description of the UK system in the previous chapter has stressed the incredible complexity and variety of the British higher education: this is multiplied by 27 in the European Union. And the same holds true in East Asia: how to make sense of the evolutions of let say China, Japan and Singapore higher education systems in a few lines?

Chapter 7 is certainly a very challenging but also a very dangerous one, from a scholarly point of view. The whole discussion about the disappearance of social classes, the evolution toward a classless society or the emergence of a graduate society could open

infinite debates with specialists of social theory. I will not engage into this as Peter Scott finally adopts a very moderate position admitting that classes still exist but that other potential determinants of individual identity (such as gender, ethnicity or being a graduate) have emerged. In a way, he does not enter the academic discussions on this issue and avoids controversies. I think it is more important to outline two other contributions of this chapter. First, the author does not only point at the differences between graduates and non-graduates but goes a step further: recalling that graduates have more chance to get a job, have higher salaries, better life conditions etc., he comes to suggest that they constitute a social category that defines their identity. A further important contribution of this chapter is to show that the interactions between the society and higher education are reciprocal and that both lead to increased needs in graduate workforce. A different view from the one adopted by David Frank and John Meyer in their last book (*The University and the Global Knowledge Society*, Princeton University Press, 2020) in which they stated that universities are central and have the lead on society developments. A perspective with which Peter Scott could have engaged a discussion.

The next chapter is a curious one, probably not foreseen at the beginning but made necessary because of the COVID pandemic. How to publish a book in 2021, without mentioning the pandemic and its potential impacts? This seems indeed difficult but in terms of the construction of the book, these considerations on the potential consequences of the COVID could have been addressed in the general conclusion or a afterword as they do not clearly fit with the second part of this chapter that deals with the very interesting issue of the faltering of the England adoption of market principles to higher education. This limited but nevertheless real reversal in the recent years recent development of the reforms would have made a highly relevant fifth transformation in chapter 4. Furthermore, the two reasons drawn by Peter Scott to explain this faltering (the difference between higher education and consumer goods and the entanglement between politics and higher education) should have been given more space and led to more developments and arguments to be more convincing. For instance, the role of the state and of politics has been stressed for many other markets to work: why would it be different for higher education?

The final chapter is of a different nature. It answers the question raised in the title of the book. Having achieved the diagnosis of the mass education crisis, Peter Scott comes to the solutions to implement. It is probably the main rationale for this book. Five central proposals are developed and defended. First he expects the passage from mass to universal higher education, with the objective of a participation rate of 70 to 80% of young people. Secondly, he suggests building a seamless and cooperative rather than competitive tertiary system. Thirdly he pleads for increasing fair access thanks to free tuition, a variety of financial support to students, national targets of access, and remedying devices (such as contextual admissions) built on the transformation of higher education institutions rather than on the adaptation of students coming from under represented groups. Fourthly, Peter Scott suggests different evolution in the institutional governance and in the steering of the higher education system. Finally he rethinks the place of the university in the society in order to address the critics attached to mass higher education. This chapter is an ambitious political manifesto. Each reader will decide whether he adheres or not to the proposals. Each of them can be debated, adopted or contested. But the crucial question they all raised is the overall acceptance of

such orientations. Whatever their accuracy, who will support them and make them possible is now the crucial question to address. Would the new forthcoming post-Johnson government endorse them? And the UK Vice-Chancellors?

I do not have the answers to these questions, nor Peter Scott probably. And getting support to these proposals was most likely not what firstly motivated him in writing this book. Inscribing the UK higher education system in the *longue durée*, making sense of this trajectory by itself and in relation to the British society's own trajectory, identifying the contributions but also the failures of the UK transformation into mass higher education and finally drawing on this diagnosis to develop proposals for the future were the central ambitions of the author. And each of them are achieved, thus making this book an insightful input for higher education analysts, but also for the higher education community and for decision-makers. A multi-faceted book providing multi-faceted contributions for a multi-faceted public.