

SPECIAL FEATURES / CONTRIBUTIONS SPÉCIALES

Objectivity and History in the Study of Higher Education: A Note on the Methodology of Research¹

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It is ironic that the pursuit of objectivity is among the most critical yet unresolved problems confronting the study of higher education. The problem is particularly evident in the history of higher education where many historians in a time-honoured tradition continue to reason that their primary task is "simply to show how it really was". In the light of this commitment it is easy to assume that the nature of objectivity has long been resolved with its pursuit at this time little more than a matter of idle curiosity.

Objectivity, however, has been defined in many ways, with one observer indicating that it has been achieved when the explanation of an historical event is considered to be "superior" to any other which might be proposed (Gorman, 1981, p. 131). This observation shifts attention away from the difficulties associated with arriving at a precise definition of objectivity, and suggests that any claim to a better and, perhaps, a nonprejudicial interpretation of events entails a judgment about the criteria or standards whereby objectivity is to be assessed (see, for example, Carr, 1961; Çebik, 1978; and Gagnon, 1982).

In the study of such criteria the work of T.S. Kuhn is of special interest. His understanding of the problem brings into focus broader methodological concerns which relate to the structure of knowledge and the hypotheses that guide its development. Although historians and others in the field of higher education may be cognizant of Kuhn's approach to the problem of objectivity as argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970b), few have taken notice of "Objectivity, Value Judgment and Theory Choice" (1977c) and "The Relations Between the History and the Philosophy of Science" (1977d), two of his subsequent essays that suggest further possibilities for an investigation of objectivity in the study of the past.¹ In explaining the history of the university, it might be argued that Kuhn's analysis has relevance where concepts² have been identified with the preservation of tradition (Harris, 1976), the revival of classical learning (Rashdall, 1936), and

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the renewal of town life (Russell, 1978). Given these and other conditions which led to the emergence of the university, how does the student of higher education decide which concepts are appropriate to an accurate and, in the light of evaluative criteria, an objective reconstruction of the past?³

OBJECTIVITY IN RESEARCH

From the standpoint of Kuhn's analysis the idea of objectivity in the study of higher education must be examined in relation to a conceptual framework or paradigm that consciously or otherwise provides a context for the explanation of events.⁴ The pursuit of objectivity in history is concerned not only with the facts, but their interconnection within a framework that is "global" in nature (1977d, p. 15) and inseparable from the hypotheses which enter into the explanation of events. At another level, and perhaps more importantly, it brings into focus the criteria employed in determining the extent to which objectivity has been attained.

Among the many criteria which may be invoked to assess whether objectivity has been achieved are those of accuracy and consistency (Kuhn, 1977c, p. 338). Although applied primarily to studies in the natural sciences, these standards of evaluation are also apparent in the social sciences and history, having, therefore, a direct bearing on the study of higher education. As a criterion accuracy is indicated when data and concepts are in agreement with the results of existing observation, or if applied to history with events established by means of historical records and artifacts. Consistency, the second criterion, is evident when the components of a paradigm, including the concepts which it contains, are employed in a uniform way both within the framework itself and in relation to "other currently accepted theories". In extending this notion to history, the use of concepts is considered to be consistent when their meanings remain unchanged in the context of a given historical perspective (Hodysh, 1984).

Of course it is not possible in a brief paper to examine the many ways that criteria of objectivity may be applied to the study of higher education. The task, however, can be made instructive by limiting the investigation to a method of explanation identified as colligation. In a generic sense colligation indicates a "binding together" of isolated data usually for the purpose of generalization. This meaning is essentially retained for historical research where the term is defined as the process of explaining an event by simply tracing its connection to other events, thereby locating it in historical context (Walsh, 1960, p. 59). The method, though not restricted to the study of history, relies in part on the use of concepts as a means of organizing and "binding together" historical data. It is frequently found in the company of other interpretive techniques and has come to be associated with explaining the more collective aspects of historical development (Walsh, 1974, p. 135).

This form of explanation leads to an understanding of historical developments that taken as a whole is greater than that which might be achieved by their study in isolation. On the one hand, it applies to the collection of events represented by

inquiry into periods of history. In this context events are made understandable by their grouping or classifying under "dominant concepts or leading ideas". Linked to other forms of explanation, it enables the historian to establish the order and connection of events (Walsh, 1959, p. 297). To illustrate reference can be made to the idea of the "quiet revolution" in the Province of Quebec. The "quiet revolution" is often identified as a period of change from an elitist, clerically influenced society steeped in tradition and detached from the economic life of the continent, to an egalitarian view of society with an adherence to a secular political ethic, and a concern with the technology and economics of a post-industrial state (Henchey, 1972, p. 95). The concept, frequently employed in reference to the history of higher education, identifies a cluster of events that occurred largely in the decade of the 1960's, the antecedents of which might be traced to the 1950's and even earlier (see, for example, Audet, 1971, p. 383; Le Blanc, 1972, p. 175; Magnuson, 1984, p. 1; and Martin, 1966, p. 63).

In this context the concept of revolution allows the historian to identify particular events associated with the growth of the experimental and social sciences which in part characterized the "powerful hidden forces" of social and economic change in Quebec (Martin, 1966, p. 64). Citing documentary evidence and other data, the historian may refer to both individuals and groups which consciously and at times, perhaps, unknowingly contributed to the idea of the concept. Although one may find historical events which challenged this development, they do not necessarily diminish the value of the "quiet revolution" as characteristic of the period. Any evidence which a researcher might bring forward to negate the efficacy of the concept would have to be "prominent" or "significant" (Walsh, 1974).

On the other hand, colligation may be used to explain a series of happenings related to a policy or a process showing how events resulted in a particular outcome (Thompson, 1967, p. 92). An example might be found in Harris' consideration of the "joint action" of scholars and administrators at the founding Conference of Canadian Universities (1976). In examining this development, Harris draws attention to the cooperative effort of universities in addressing a series of problems ranging from internal affairs, such as the standards of degrees and the transfer of students, to issues of an external nature represented by government assistance and financial aid (pp. 207-210). This "joint action" of universities might be identified as "part of a general movement" explaining social and policy developments (Walsh, 1974, p. 135).

Most importantly, and irrespective of the particular form which it takes, such explanation requires the historian to exercise a kind of "surface rationality" in the interconnection of events. Put differently, events in a given setting are linked by means of the historian's effort to rationally establish a connection of historical evidence. Bissell's observations on the "reorganization of the structure" of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto is an example that might be viewed as part of a larger plan of explaining the function of the fine arts program (1974, pp. 95-96). This does not imply, however, that all individuals associated with

Bissell's structural reorganization were at that time cognizant of the plan, but rather that general ideas of restructuring could influence the conduct of individuals even when at any particular moment they may not have been aware of such ideas (Walsh, 1960, p. 61). It allows the historian to admit events that might not only appear to counter or work against the general developments of the period, but those which might be termed unexpected or even "irrational".

Within this framework, then, the use of concepts in the rational linkage of data is inseparable from the hypotheses that not only postulate the theory at the historian's disposal (Shafer, 1974, p. 165), but that more specifically guide and organize the course of investigation (Carr, 1961, p. 117; Kuhn, 1977a, p. xxi, and 1977b, p. 270; and compare with Dray, 1981, p. 159). As such, the components of the researcher's intellectual framework, including the concepts, are theory-laden. Their meanings are a product of the intellectual milieu from which they emerged. It might be said that each generation must rewrite the past from its own perspective.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

These principles of research have a universal application that is not restricted in historical time and place. Their extension beyond the Canadian example to the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century provides a context for the analysis of objectivity in one of the most celebrated periods in the history of higher education. In this setting the works of Haskins (1927a, 1927b, 1929 and 1957), Leff (1968) and Cobban (1975) serve as the basis for consideration.

The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century was identified by Haskins who, in examining the intellectual and cultural events of the period, applied the term not only to the twelfth century proper, but to the years which preceded and followed (1927b, p. 10). The renaissance as a concept in research has been open to a wide range of interpretation, the precise meaning of which can be traced to formulations established in the nineteenth century (see, for example, Cassirer, 1943; Ferguson, 1963; Ladner, 1982; and Stalnaker, 1967).

Under the influence of Burckhardt and others, Haskins applied the concept of renaissance as "a revival of ancient learning and also of ancient art". The period signalled "an age of new life and new knowledge" (Haskins, 1927b, p. 190), beginning with the growth of the cathedral schools and closing with the founding of the earliest universities. In the development of curriculum, it started with only the basic outlines of the seven liberal arts and ended with new works in philosophy, law, medicine and science (Haskins, 1927b, p. 6). Above all it was a period characterized by an intellectual revival.

Haskins' usage of the concept, however, is somewhat novel in that he places the phenomenon in what traditionally is identified as the Middle Ages, a period which for some in the development of higher education has been seen as uniform, static and unprogressive (1927b, p. 3). He challenges this view and by contrast questions the unique and decisive characteristics so often attributed to the "great" or Italian

Renaissance, claiming that the difference in culture between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries "was not nearly so sharp as it seemed to the humanists and their modern followers" (1927b, p. 6). The twelfth century was typified by a "requickened intellectual life" that grew into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It embraced, for Haskins, a variety of "leading ideas" that extended the accepted understanding of the renaissance to an earlier period of time, implying in the process a continuity of curriculum development (Ferguson, 1963, p. 25).

Whether the twelfth-century renaissance is looked upon as a revival of learning in its own right or as an extension of either the Middle Ages or the Italian Renaissance, it is apparent that the colligatory concept is more than the sum of its individual parts. For Haskins the concept of renaissance is placed in the context of an intellectual framework that includes not only the introduction of new historical data, but an hypothesis about the spread and proliferation of knowledge affecting the emergence of the university.

Additional insight into the relationship of concepts and hypotheses centres on Leff's colligation of events surrounding the ecclesiastical censure of Aristotelian works in the curriculum of the faculty of arts at Paris in 1210 (1968, p. 193). In explaining the importance of this event, Leff hypothesizes the antinomy between Aristotelian thought and Christian theology. In so doing, he examines the difference in outlook between the faculties of arts and theology, noting the increasing influence of philosophy in the intellectual life of the university. It was not only the writing of Aristotle that challenged the "conservative" theology reflected in the curriculum, but the Aristotelian influence evident in the work of such medieval scholars as Amoury of Bene and David of Dinant (p. 193). The conflict, though situated in the University of Paris, had wider implications that reflected an ongoing dispute between the use of the concepts of "reason and revelation" and their effect on the control of curriculum throughout the medieval period.

Focusing on the synod of Sens of 1210, Leff examines the interconnection of events leading up to and following the proscriptions against certain aspects of Aristotelian thought. His explanation of the event might be viewed as more than a concern with interfaculty rivalry. It represented a "rational" examination of policy and a joint action on behalf of theological masters to question and, if necessary, remove Aristotelian references that were seen to challenge established beliefs. Particular attention is given to restrictions against the use of philosophical texts and their exclusion from the program of studies. For Leff, the "debate between reason and revelation" functions as a hypothesis by which he makes intelligible not only the proscription of 1210 as an individual event but its relation to other events in their historical setting.

A final illustration refers to Cobban (1975) who, directing his interest to social and economic data, provides an alternative perspective on the development of university curricula. He finds in this development a strong commitment to a "utilitarian" outlook on education which, from the standpoint of continuity, can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome (p. 6). Although there occurred in the early part

of the twelfth century a reassertion of humanism in education as a study of the style and substance of classical literature, and although this study had an impact on the universities, it is Cobban's contention that utilitarian pressures prevented literary humanism as such from becoming entrenched as the basis of higher education (p. 8). This does not imply that higher education was devoid of a humanistic tradition, but that in curriculum its intellectual roots in logic and speculative thought responded to an "urban and economic revival" which had made an appearance by the thirteenth century (p. 20).

For Cobban, the principle of utility "most adequately" represents the "medieval university-community nexus" and serves as a referent for much of the analysis from the founding of Salerno, Bologna, Paris and other institutions to the investigation of student power and the nature of the academic community. Universities are viewed primarily, though not exclusively, as vocational schools with a concern for exploring the possibilities of "the established social pattern" (p. 165). Along with the colleges they were products of "impersonal economic and social forces of change" (p. 140) and were "born of the need to enlarge the scope of professional education in an increasingly urbanized society" (p. 22).

The significance of professional study emerges in a number of instances including the University of Bologna where Cobban observes that administrative control rested largely in the hands of students. Noting the relationship of the "predominantly municipal and lay character" of education in northern Italy to the need for legal skills based on a curriculum emphasizing grammar and rhetoric (p. 48), he colligates events under the concept of "student power" in which control of the university was vested in the student community (p. 62). Reference is made to data pertaining to the regulation of professors in their delivery of lectures, and on the nature, organization and evaluation of curriculum, reflecting in southern Europe the "economic stranglehold" exercised by students. Cobban establishes the basis for his theory with an hypothesis that highlights the socioeconomic relationship of the university to society and, in response to the development of professional studies, the utilitarian bent of curriculum.

HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVITY

This analysis suggests that the process of concept formation is inseparable from the hypotheses that the historian of higher education brings to the selection and organization of data. The extent to which the process contributes to an objective determination of events brings into focus the criteria of accuracy and consistency by which objectivity is to be assessed. In considering whether a concept accurately reflects the actual state of affairs, attention must be given to historical data and the particular events which they represent. Such a concept serves to group particular events in the historical situation (Walsh, 1960, p. 59), showing in a rational way how they are interconnected within the researcher's intellectual framework or paradigm. The meaning of the concept in turn is dependent on the hypothesis which governs the general direction and organization of events.

Haskins, for example, derives the concept of the renaissance not from the actual period of the twelfth century but from the more recent work of Burckhardt who identifies the renaissance with classical and secular meanings. In following this approach, Haskins introduces an imported term to account for the data of an earlier historical time. It might be queried if the identification of secular and classical meanings with the renaissance adequately accounts for the available data. Put differently, and notwithstanding the excellence of his research, it could be argued that Haskins has excluded historical evidence pertaining to religious and theological developments in the study of higher education (Benson and Constable, 1982, p. xxiii).

In defense of Haskins, it is obvious that the selection of data is inevitable, recognizing that this can only be accomplished at the expense of full agreement with the actual events of the period. After all, the rational reconstruction of events must take into account those data which are considered to be "prominent" or "significant" (Walsh, 1974). Of course the hypothesis that the renaissance is a secular and classical revival bound to a particular period of historical development has in the final analysis much to do with the kind of data Haskins may introduce. It is evident that in fulfilling the criterion of accuracy, the historian is challenged with a task that extended to its fullest implications can best be described as monumental.

Cobban also inserts an imported concept into the presentation of events not as a way to describe the period as a whole, but rather in terms of social processes within the period itself. Hypothesizing the importance of economic and social factors, he examines "the emergence of student power" as a route to an "economic stranglehold" on the curriculum. Colligation under this concept allows Cobban to introduce historical data pertaining to the university of Bologna. In what way does the emergence of student power as a contemporary concept, trailing present-day connotations, accurately reflect the actual social processes affecting curriculum in twelfth century Bologna? Moreover, what weight or importance should be assigned to the selection of evidence in determining what actually happened? After all, irrespective of the hypothesis which guides the interpretation of events, the historian must decide on the significance of data to be embraced by the concept, keeping in mind that the introduction of a contemporary concept to different spatio-temporal conditions allows for a perspective which may misinterpret, not only the facts the historian has elected to omit (Kuhn, 1977b), but by implication those which the historian has elected to include.

Many of these concerns apply equally to the use of concepts indigenous to the historical period under investigation. Leff's explanation of restrictions placed upon the study of Aristotelian works at Paris in 1210 is linked to an hypothesis of continuing tension between the proponents of reason and revelation. These dominant concepts, extending back in one form or another to the fifth century, and perhaps earlier, play a critical role in the dispute between masters in the faculties of arts and theology. How is the historian to decide what historical evidence should be brought forward to clarify the nature of continuing tension between reason and

revelation and their respective roles in explaining the proscription of Aristotelian thought in the university curriculum? Whether concerned with periods, group processes or individual events, such accuracy would seem to be dependent both on the preferences of the historian, who in fashioning historical explanation establishes a “demonstrated agreement” of concepts and data, and on the availability of evidence, including documents, diaries, letters and artifacts, pre-selected according to what the historical peoples and cultures themselves assumed were worth preserving.

The problems are no less critical in attempting to determine the implications of consistency, the second criterion of objectivity. This criterion, which is evident when the meaning of a concept remains unchanged either in the context of a given intellectual framework or in relation to other concepts to which it is connected, is also associated with the criterion of accuracy (Kuhn, 1977b). Attention is directed to Haskins’ use of the term *renaissance* which one critic observes is employed in different ways (Ladner, 1982, p. 1). At one point, Haskins identifies the term with a “revival” and at another with a “new birth”, prompting questions about what he actually meant and, in reference to the criterion of accuracy, the events which the term portrays. It would seem that a university curriculum represented by a “revival” is different in its nature and purpose from one which has experienced a “new birth”. By way of comparison, Ferguson associates the meaning of the *renaissance* with social and economic changes of the fourteenth century. Although both historians endeavour to apply the term consistently within the context of their conceptual frameworks, its extension beyond their respective boundaries would expose the concept to differences not only in the meaning, but in the data evidenced in its support.

Now it may be argued that difficulties associated with determining the accuracy and consistency of concepts is resolved in part by the historian’s attempt to rationally explain historical events in relation to the identification of a policy, whether this was consciously or unknowingly carried out by historical actors and social institutions. But to what extent does “student power” represent a conscious or unconscious manifestation of policy and what importance might Cobban assign to the evidence on behalf of one interpretation or the other? Once again the historian has imparted to the selection and classification of data a direction and surface rationality that is not necessarily inherent to the evidence itself.

These examples address not only the influences that act upon the program of studies in higher education, but at a methodological level the hypotheses that enter into the process of explanation. Whether the hypothesis applies to the period of the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century as a whole, to a singular event in context such as the curricular restrictions of 1210, or to the social processes that affect the method and context of studies, it is part of the global relationship or paradigm which serves to organize the presentation of events. As in all research, an hypothesis is neither correct nor incorrect in its own right, but is merely a guide to the rational investigation of events (Hodysch, 1977).

IMPLICATIONS

The observations on the works of Haskins, Cobban, and Leff in no way impugn the accuracy or consistency of their explanations. They simply illustrate the kinds of heuristic questions that in terms of objectivity may and, perhaps, should confront research into higher education, whether these are associated with explanation as it applies to the control and administration of university curricula, or to the justification of curriculum content in the light of particular or socially directed events. They suggest that the process of research, in whatever form it appears, is interdependent with the hypotheses that direct the course of investigation. If this is the case, then the criteria of accuracy and consistency as measures of objectivity can only be applied within a global relationship or framework wherein the explanation resides. It would seem, therefore, that the entire process of explanation is theory-laden and any attempt to determine a nonprejudicial and "superior" explanation of events is confronted with provocative questions about the possibility of objectivity in historical investigation.

It would seem that the pursuit of objectivity is a legitimate, if not an essential affair of research in the field of higher education. Yet to clarify the nature of this quest is anything but an easy task. This does not imply that the pursuit should be abandoned, but rather that it might be seen in a different way. The standard criteria of accuracy and consistency, though useful measures of objectivity in a narrow sense, are meaningful only within a particular paradigm, their value prescribed by the concepts and hypotheses that govern the research. For the historian to "simply show how it really was" is, indeed, a lasting ideal, yet to ignore the difficulties which this purpose would seem to incur is no doubt unacceptable. If this is the case, then it may well be the meaning and not the limit of objectivity that is ultimately at stake (Kuhn, 1977c). Perhaps it is this dimension of objectivity that should focus the attention of researchers in the field of higher education.

FOOTNOTES

¹In addition to *The Structure* (1970b) and the collection of new as well as previously published essays in *The Essential Tension* (1977a), especially the "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research" (1977b), Kuhn has developed his views in a number of related papers (1968, 1970a, and 1971).

²See Kaplan (1964, p. 46) for a discussion of the concept "as a rule of judging or acting, a prescription for organizing the materials of experience . . ."

³This is not to imply that research into higher education has ignored such theoretical concerns, but rather that its direction has often been general in nature and explored somewhat apart from an abundant and informative literature (see, for example, Blackburn and Conrad, 1984; and Thelin, 1982). Whether or not this might be attributed to a lack of communication between practitioners and theorists, it is evident that the benefit of interaction remains to be achieved (see, for example, Johnson, 1983; and Tyack, 1978).

⁴This paper is not directly concerned with the process of theory change but limits investigation to problems in what Kuhn identifies as the "normal" phase of theory development (1970b, p. 10).

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