Political science and the comparative study of policy change in higher education: theoretico-methodological notes from a policy perspective *

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Abstract. Policy change is a fundamental object of interest in social sciences, and in higher education too. This essay presents several reflections for a comparative research strategy on policy change in higher education from a political science point of view. Three basic assumptions are developed: politics is not only power but also research for solutions to collective problems; the explanation of policy change calls for configurative models able to enlight the relationship between structural and individual factors; the concept of network is a fruitful analytical lens to measure and map such relationships. According to these assumptions, the author tries to emphasise how even if absolutely significant the explanatory models based on macro-factors have important shortcomings in view of the diversity and the complexity of policy changes in the different national experiences. Then, the proposal is to complement the macro-approaches by analysing of the policy-making processes and the logic of action of all the actors involved. The macro-factors shape the context of micro-behaviour, restricting the alternative of choice, but the choice itself is a matter of actors.

All policy is policy change
(Hogwood and Peters 1983, p. 25)

Politics finds its sources not only in power but also in uncertainty - men collectively wondering what to do - .... Policy-making is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf; it entails both deciding and knowing.
(Heclo 1974, p.305)

Political science, policy studies and higher education

Higher education is a field where governmental activity has made itself especially felt in the last decades, independently of the importance given to it

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by the various political parties. Such substantial attention by governments alone would justify the interest of political science in higher education. But there is more to it than that: the very features of higher education, beyond circumstantial alterations, forcefully attract the attention of political science. As has clearly been expressed by a political scientist especially involved in the study of this field:

The politics of the world inhabited by higher education are sui generis. There is, perhaps, no other zone of activity where the foci of concern are so public and the modes of operation so private. Yet higher education, even if idiosyncratic, is a testing ground for many of the more important generalizations about social life. In no other area is there so powerful a tension between institutions that are internationally visible and are expected to respond to the highest norms of moral accountability while at the same time being deeply grounded in the rights of individuals to pursue personal and small-group action. Higher education also has particularly diffuse goals which affect their internal and external relations, offering analysts the opportunity to probe the relationships between the nature of goals and patterns of power and authority. This sector also abounds with relationships between institutions dominated by professionals and environments dominated by politics of irrationality (Kogan 1984, p. 56–57).

In the light of such a composite and contradictory phenomenon, where there is a clash of public objectives and private actions, professional and political rationalities, what is the possible contribution by political science? Of course, given the intrinsic plurality of this phenomenon, the political scholar may feel somewhat embarrassed if he or she bears in mind the theoretical strength and the specialisation of the explanatory theories produced in other fields of the social sciences. In fact, when faced with the issue of the explanation for the causes or the results of education policies, the political scientist – in his capacity as a policy scholar – will find himself in the company of sociologists, economists, historians, organisation theorists and psychologists. The political scientist, however, is left with other questions for which an answer has to be provided while keeping a degree of autonomy and focusing his or her attention on the mechanisms of power distribution and production, as well as on the pursuit of solutions for the collective issues pervading decision-making processes. The political scientist, therefore, can approach the study of higher education policies in order to test the validity of theoretical hypotheses meant to ascertain who wants what, when and, above all, how. The political scientist is left with issues such as when a problem arises, who gives rise to it, what are the negotiation and handling methods for the issue, i.e. the conflict it arouses,