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# Book review:

## Patricia J. Gumport (Ed.) *Sociology of Higher Education: Contributions and their Contexts.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007. ISBN 0-8018-8615-5. xii + 382 pp.

*Anne Friederike Delouis*
*Université d'Orléans, France*

Unique in its genre, the volume edited by Patricia Gumport, Professor of Education at Stanford University, provides an analytical survey of the work accomplished in the sociology of higher education since the inception of this subfield, as well as suggesting directions for future research. The starting point of the book is a 1973 paper by Burton Clark, then a sociologist at Yale, now Professor Emeritus at UCLA, and a pioneer in this particular research area. In his short article, Clark stated that, fuelled by the educational expansion since 1945, research on higher education had emerged as a sociological subfield in its own right. Within this relatively new specialization, he distinguished two principal domains, i.e. the study of inequality and of college effects. In addition, he identified two minor lines of inquiry, namely sociological work on the academic profession and on colleges or universities as organizations. Clark warned against the "myopia" of over-detailed (quantitative) studies as well as the superficiality of "journalistic vignettes", and called for more comparative research with historical depth. Engagement with practical concerns, and a critical distance from them, were equally necessary, Clark stressed.

In the next chapter, Gumport comments on Clark's paper and discusses research in the sociology of higher education from 1973 to the present. New themes have emerged, such as the production, transmission and legitimation of knowledge, a perspective which informs work on curriculum change, for example. Gumport advocates studies poised at a meso-level, exploring the interconnections between universities and other organizations. Cultural differences between departments, disciplines, and campuses as well as the ever-increasing diversification of the student population and academic staff provide other interesting avenues for research.

The following four chapters assess sociological work in the four domains singled out by Clark. Patricia M. McDonough and Amy J. Fann state that since the publication of Clark's article and despite his skepticism, quantitative studies on unequal access to college have continued to accumulate, recently enriched by new status characteristics, such as racial criteria, non-traditional student status, and geographical origin (urban vs. rural). New theoretical concepts have been explored, such as "community ecology" and "cultural wealth". The role of counsellors and the impact of affirmative action policies have come under scrutiny, but research on students' own agency is still scant.

In an overview of research on the effect of their student years on graduates, Sylvia Hurtado stresses that "social cohesion" and "integration" are notoriously ill-defined terms. Their

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subjective dimension (i.e., students' sense of cohesion) needs to be taken into account for them to be useful in sociological analysis. Institutional size, the selectivity and the racial composition of colleges and universities have been identified as significant parameters in the measurement of college impact. Given the large amount of empirical work accomplished, Hurtado suggests that future research may be more theoretically and historically oriented.

Gary Rhoades reviews a large body of research on the academic profession. Since 1973, sociologists, including Clark himself, have studied academics' time allocation, decision-making, as well as the academic labour market. Promising lines of inquiry include power relations between managerial and academic staff, the rise of non-faculty professions (for instance in the fields of quality assessment, IT, or fundraising), and the interconnections between universities and the corporate world. More research is also needed on academics working in less prestigious sectors, and the interaction of teaching staff with students of different backgrounds.

Marvin W. Peterson establishes an ambitious historiography of the theoretical concepts which have informed the study of colleges and universities as organizations since the 1960s. The most important of those are the "open system" (universities elaborate responses to external changes and conflicts) and the "postsecondary knowledge industry" (universities enhance their efficiency and employ strategies to compete for clients, in a context characterized by globalization, student and staff diversity, telematics, increased quality assessment, and limited resources, since the mid-1990s approximately). Other theoretical models draw on concepts of culture or on cybernetics, for instance. These recent approaches, including Clark's concept of "entrepreneurial universities" (1998), can be combined; they do not necessarily exclude each other.

The following four chapters present new directions of research in the sociology of higher education. John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, David John Frank and Evan Schofer advocate looking at universities as institutions, i.e. local structures that reflect cultural models provided by the wider environment. For instance, the "myth of the knowledge society" could at least partially account for the recent worldwide expansion of higher education. An effect of higher education as an institution is the way in which it builds authority, conferring the status of "graduates" onto students.

James C. Hearn reviews and classifies a consequential body of research on academic departments. Important themes include the power relations between and within departments, disciplinary differences, the demography, composition and organization of departments, and student socialization. Future research should concentrate on symbols and rituals, as well as on longitudinal studies.

Anthony Lising Antonio and Marcela Muňiz survey research on racial diversity. Related institutional practices, policy developments, curriculum change, and intergroup relations on campuses have come under the scrutiny of sociologists.

Finally, Michael N. Bastedo reports on the still emerging research interest in higher education policy. Promising theoretical frameworks include organizational strategy, the use of symbols by organizational leaders, entrepreneurship, and institutional logics.

Burton Clark was invited to write one of the two concluding chapters. It probably came as a surprise to the contributors to the volume that rather than celebrating the wealth of publications since 1973 and the continuing vivacity of the field, well illustrated by the preceding eight chapters, Clark chose to criticize contemporary sociologists of higher education for being disconnected from practice. In his five-page essay, written in that characteristic forceful prose, Clark calls for more qualitative field research and holistic case-studies. Scholars should study "what works" (and why), look for best practice and excellence rather than pinpointing colleges' perceived deficiencies.

In the final chapter, the editor restates the aim of the book: to make visible a field that sits sometimes a bit uneasily between sociology and education studies; a field, one may add, that deserves full recognition for the scope and ambition of its scientific production in the past 50 years.

One striking desideratum remains, however. As Clark I (1973), Clark II (2007), Patricia Gumport and other contributors to the volume emphasize, internationally comparative studies are still exceedingly rare. One would welcome a further volume which, starting from this survey of half a century of studies on higher education in the USA, would attempt to show parallels with, and undoubtedly significant differences from, research questions asked, methods employed, and results produced by sociologists in other countries and continents.

*Correspondence*

Anne F. Delouis, a.f.muller.96@cantab.net