

Re-Becoming Universities? Higher Education Institutions in Network Knowledge Societies by David Hoffman and Jussi Välimä (Eds). Dordrecht: Springer, 2016 (Hardcover), 490 pp., 99,99 €, ISBN 978-94-017-7369-0.

The book edited by Hoffman and Välimä offers insights about the openness of universities for societies, but it is also about the monopoly universities have in comparison to any other institutions. They argue universities are the only actor able to take wide polyvalent roles. The volume offers the results of a project (CINHENKS, *Change in Networks, Higher Education and Knowledge Societies*) that analysed the contemporary role of universities in societies.

The first part of the volume offers methodological and theoretical insights. The second part analyses single countries. The third part compares the findings in a conclusive chapter.

The key concept used in this book is *network knowledge society*. The vital nourishment that universities are believed to exchange with the rest of society is *knowledge*. Once knowledge is funnelled in some connections, the key point is to access that knowledge. In other words, “power in networks through mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion” (32) determines both which actors are playing with universities, and which ones are excluded. Universities are also the highly adaptable institution to create and diffuse knowledge – tailor-made knowledge (e.g. partnerships with companies) included. Universities are functional in the both acts of being the nourishment of knowledge and being the selective and exclusive vehicle of knowledge. In this specific point, a reader may find a contradiction with the table displayed on page 31 explaining the differences between the “traditional hierarchical society” and the “networked knowledge society”. One critical point is the following. If networks’ *access to knowledge* usually distinguish good and bad positioned nodes in a network (the position of the node in a network tells about its properties no less than the intrinsic properties the node has in itself), it is not clear why the latter “network knowledge society” should correspond to be “free, open and global”. In any case, Välimä, Papatsiba and Hoffman highlight convincingly the *potential* universities have in contemporary society, looking at national policies that face the challenges of global economy. The fact of looking at national policies might look old-fashioned, but the editors follow the typical sources of funding: since systems are still funded by national States, it is correct to follow this methodology. (What is globalisation – one may argue – if not a game between nations?).

As a result of this approach, universities are the multifaceted actors that are able to embody more roles at the same time. Moreover, universities are capable of being “in-between”, or more able than anybody else to maximise its *in-betweenness*. An eloquent conclusion from the authors of the final chapter of the volume (Välimä, Hoffman, Brennan, Rhoades and Teichler) is that universities are “the perfect node” (343). Hence, the overall thesis is that “[universities have] the capacity to act, its capacity to participate, innovate and initiate activities which may involve colleagues and/or organisational contacts in local, national and global contexts” (346). This capacity to enact ties and content is the most peculiar trait of universities, as they are able, by nature, to operate in all the aspects that guarantee this creation, elaboration and transmission of knowledge: *variation, expansion, conquest, capture, off-shots*. Universities would be, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, the best players in pursuing the act of “becoming” (10), editors affirm. This is not an easy assumption, as evidence let appear a completely different trend: “the locus of knowledge production is [...] moving from universities to new constellations existing ‘between’ universities, the state and industry and

other types of organisations” (29). Instead of using popular “special theories” such as “Mode1 and Mode2 of research”, the “entrepreneurial university”, or the “Triple Helix”, authors tried with this project to pursue a tentative longitudinal exploration of the seminal idea by Kerr of “multiversity”. A new special term – *universtasis* – is at the end the thesis of the book, as universities are organizations in perennial search of stability within a context.

The book and the entire project is assuming this perspective in making empirical research about the role of universities. In a convincing way, the editors adopt a new approach in making comparative analysis of higher education systems, namely countries – that of “functional and conceptual equivalence” (6), which is unfortunately not explained so much in methodological details. The empirical analysis of the chapters – the second part of the volume – are mostly based on national secondary data and in-depth policy review. Countries analysed in specific national chapters are: UK (by Little, Abbas and Singh), Portugal (by Horta and Blasi), Finland (by Hoffman, Nokkala and Välima), Russia (by Smolentseva), Germany (by Kosmütky and Ewen) and USA (by Kollasch, Rios-Aguilar, Torres-Olave and Rhoades).

In few words, one may believe that this book relaunches the eternal issue of the role of universities in societies, opening wide gaps to be filled with more advanced (both qualitative and quantitative) methodologies in the field of Social Network Analysis – hopefully also with new primary data. More than achieving definitive results, chapters invite the reader to think about new researches using this promising approach.

Giulio Marini

Centre for Global Higher Education, UCL Institute of Education, U.K.

g.marini@ucl.ac.uk

© 2017 Giulio Marini