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CHRISTINE MUSSELIN

## TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF ACADEMIC WORK

**Abstract:** Looking at the impact of the United Kingdom reforms in higher education on academic practices and identifies, British scholars, among whom Mary Henkel is a major contributor, renewed the research perspective on academic work and thus provided convincing results and arguments for the development of a sociology of academic work. This paper aims at identifying why this group of research departed from the mainstream analysis of academics and thus opened new ways in understanding academic work. It finally suggests further questions for the ongoing research agenda.

### INTRODUCTION

Different factors push for the inscription of the sociology of academic work on the research agenda. A first one stems from the fact it is still a relatively under-covered perspective in the study of the academic profession and thus can renew the existing approaches. But, fundamentally, the need to develop such a perspective is first of all that it is increasingly relevant at a time when in many countries universities are becoming more autonomous, more managed, more assessed, more responsible and more accountable. This evolution, combined with the massification experienced by this sector, is leading to a form of industrialisation of academic activities and to the progressive transformation of the higher education sector into a kind of industry (Gumport 2000). The impact of this major change on academic work has to be studied.

This shift in the nature of the higher education sector is better noticeable in countries like the United Kingdom where reforms informed by the new public management narratives (Ferlie *et al.* 1996; Ferlie and Musselin 2008) and managerialist rhetoric were implemented. In the comparative work led in the late 1990s by Marianne, Ivar Bleiklie, Mary Henkel and Maurice Kogan on Norway, Sweden and United Kingdom (Bauer *et al.* 1999; Bleiklie *et al.* 2000; Kogan *et al.* 2000), this last country clearly appears as the one where national public policies on the one hand (Kogan and Hanney 2000) and the internal governance of the higher education institutions on the other, have been the more radically and deeply transformed. Within this collective project, it is the originality of Mary Henkel's research and book (Henkel 2000) to aim at looking at the impact of this evolution on British academics from an innovative perspective. Building on the notion of community, she decided to shed light on the interplay between institutional and professional constraints. Thus, stating that academics are simultaneously affiliated to an institution and to a discipline, Mary Henkel decided to question the impact of the

institutional changes on academics by looking at their identities and beliefs but also at their activities and practices.

We have therefore taken the discipline and the enterprise, or the higher education institution, as the main institutions or communities within which academics construct their identities, their values, the knowledge base of their work, their modes of working and their self-esteem. (Henkel 2000: 22)

By so doing, her book re-configured the ways academic activities are commonly studied, and was the first published contribution of a series of research and publications which took a different stance from the usual approaches of academic work. In order to better highlight what this British group of authors brought to a sociology of academic work, one first has to identify what characterised the former studies of academic work.

#### TRADITIONAL WAYS OF LOOKING AT ACADEMICS

Most of the research on academics and academic activities shares a number of common characteristics whatever the theoretical perspective it favours, internalist *versus* externalist (Kornblith 2000), Mertonian *versus* strong programme (Merton 1957a and 1957b; Bloor 1976), differentiationist *versus* antidifferentiationist (Shinn and Ragouet 2005), etc.

First, they mostly focus on nature and life sciences, only a few studies include the humanities and the social sciences, and even fewer law. There is therefore a strong bias on disciplines where collective work, experiments and or equipment play an important role. Tony Becher's work (Becher 1989) is from this point of view rather unusual as this author compares all kind of scientific activities. He thus provides a larger scope of analysis which allows the exploration of what, for instance, distinguishes an historian from a physicist in terms of their epistemological as well as their social attitudes, beliefs and affiliation.

A second common point shared by most studies on academics stems from the fact that they are research centred. For strange reasons, especially for the studies led in countries where the Humboldtian model prevails and where faculty members repeatedly claim that research and teaching should be linked, academics are first of all studied as scientists. Their teaching activities are therefore ignored. Reciprocally, the rare research projects looking at them as teachers neglect the scientific part of their work. As a whole, the core aspect of academic work, i.e. the fact that faculty members have to carry on many different tasks, and in particular all those related to training on the one hand and all those related to research on the other, is often left aside in the analysis of academic activities. More precisely, the way by which academics manage the interplay between these two main groups of tasks, as well as the activities linked to self-governance and collective service, is barely questioned or studied.

Third, there is a common tendency to present scientists as rather specific workers. This is of course particularly accurate in the Mertonian perspective. Science being considered as a specific sphere, with its specific ethos and norms, incorporated in and defended by a specific community of professionals, the

Mertonian sociology of science automatically stresses the exceptional character of this group and the non reducibility of their activities to any others. But it also holds true, of course in a different way, for the tenants of the strong programme in spite of their claims to consider science as an activity like others. As a matter of fact, the ethnological descriptions provided by some of the scholars of this programme, tend to succeed in demystifying the traditional and popular views on scientific activities. In particular, such studies deconstructed the caricature of the scientist suddenly having a genius idea leading to a major discovery. Following the scientist into his/her day-to-day work, authors like Bruno Latour and Michel Callon (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987; Callon 1989) or Karin Knorr-Cetina (1999) are describing actors whose main activity consists in translating, enrolling and interesting other actors or technical devices in order to construct and solidify the network linking human beings and objects which allows their work to be recognised as scientific. But even if these networking scientists are losing the exceptional character pushed by the Mertonian perspective, they nevertheless remain the heroes of the story, they are the network's builders, the scientific entrepreneurs: they are located at the centre of the network they develop and extend.

Fourth, most of these studies are a-contextual. One the one hand, they are frequently not so much interested in the temporal location of the activities under study. It is typical to see that the seminal book of Bruno Latour (1987) "Science in action" starts with a comparative description of scientists working in different places and at different times but hardly builds on these factors. On the other, the national context in which these activities are taking place does not play a role: because science is implicitly considered by many authors as universal, they often neglect the potential effects the local culture or the national science policies could have. This is one of the criticisms which have been addressed to Tony Becher in his previously quoted book (Becher 1989): he describes and analyses academics with no reference to their nationality, gender, race or culture. Last but not least, little attention is paid to the institutional environment of academics: whether they are working in universities or not, whether these institutions are private or public, whether they are autonomous institutions or state agencies is, in the best, considered as an indifferent background, but more often not even mentioned. The kind of leadership exercised by their leaders in these institutions, the management tools that exist (or not), the type of employment agreement they benefit from, etc. are supposed not to play a significant role in academic activities.

#### HOW CAN THE SOCIOLOGY OF WORK INFORM THE TRANSFORMATION OF ACADEMIC WORK?

Following the transformation of the United Kingdom's higher education system and the policies launched since the 1980s (Dill 2002; Henkel and Little 1999; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Tapper and Salter 2003), different studies have been undertaken in order to assess their concrete impact. Some of them, led by Michael Reed, Oliver Fulton and Rosemary Deem, more specifically looked at the transformation of management and leadership in British universities (for instance, Deem 2001; Fulton

2002, 2003; Reed 2002; Reed and Deem 2002), while Mary Henkel focused on the academic work and identities (Henkel 1999, 2000). After having described the methodological standpoint adopted by these studies and its implication, their results will be interpreted in the light of four fundamental issues in the sociology of work.

*Looking at academics as actors in universities and not only as members of disciplines*

Two major methodological options characterised these various studies. First, universities, as institutions targeted by the reforms, are the point of entry for these research programmes, not the disciplines. Second, the national reforms – which covered a very large scope of domains and concerned the funding allocation formula, the assessment of the research activity, the evaluation of teaching, etc. – are used as revelatory tools in order to approach academic leadership on the one hand, and academic work and identities on the other.

As a result, the conclusions of these researches are deeply contextualised. They concern the United Kingdom within a precise period of time (end of the 1970s to 2000s). As a result, they look at all the different disciplines represented in the universities, not to a few of them. Furthermore, these authors consider both research and teaching activities and the concrete interplay between these two categories of tasks is questioned. Last but not least, and especially in Mary Henkel's works, academics are studied as workers confronted with institutional change, i.e. neither primarily as a cohesive professional group, nor as network builders. The issue of leadership is therefore central and is discussed in two ways: what characterises the exercise of leadership in the transformed universities and how does leadership impact on individual work?

*Academic work in the light of the sociology of work*

In his latest book, (*Le Travail. Une sociologie contemporaine*), the French sociologist of work Michel Lallement (2007) identifies four main questions pertaining to this specific research domain: di-vision, individuation, integration, and regulation. Building more specifically on the book dedicated by Mary Henkel to academic work and identities and how they are impacted by the reforms of the British higher education sector, these four dimensions will be used to interpret the transformations of academic work.

Let us start with di-vision. For Michel Lallement (2007: 28-29, my translation) this includes on the one hand “the way segmentations with cognitive virtue are built, last and are destroyed” but on the other it also deals with “the principles which structures the division of work” and “the criteria determining hierarchies within the productive spaces”. Because of the contribution of the sociology of professions to the understanding of the notion of segmentation (Bucher and Strauss 1961), the first aspect of di-vision has been frequently addressed by studies pointing at the constitution of the academic profession into different disciplines and specialities. But the second aspect has been mostly ignored. In particular, questions about the

allocation of work among peers are rarely raised as it is broadly admitted that within a segment, peers are supposed to develop about the same activities. This view is nevertheless challenged by Mary Henkel's work and by other studies led on the influence of the Research Assessment Exercise on British academics (for instance, Harley 2002; Harley, Muller-Camen and Collin 2004). They all conclude that this regular and nationally-led evaluation of research activities led to a higher division of work among peer faculty members. This happened in two ways. First, those who are recognised as 'research active' may negotiate for fewer teaching duties or even apply for research professors positions, while the others, within the same department, institution and discipline, will spend more time on training<sup>1</sup>. Second, the RAE also participates in transformations in the role of academic leaders. In order to enhance the results of their department in the RAE, the chairs must adopt a more managerial role and depart from the traditional figure of *primus inter pares*. This results in the tensions they experience between their academic identity and the function of managers they have to endorse.

This differentiated allocation of work among peers is closely linked to the process of individuation, i.e. the process "at the crossroad of the policies producing a diffraction of the social" (Lallement 2007: 29, my translation), which is also diffusing in academic institutions. As in the artistic sphere, the reward of personal talents has always been a characteristic of the academic world, and the names of prominent scientists (Galileo, Louis Pasteur, Albert Einstein or Pierre and Marie Curie, for instance) are associated with some major scientific discovery and progress. But this strong personalisation only concerned the world-renowned academics. All others formed an indefinite group of unknown contributors. With the introduction of individual assessment within universities, this is changing. The mass is singularising. First the RAE led to distinguishing between active researchers and the others, as already mentioned. But finer classifications may be led among active researchers themselves. In recent years the development of access to instruments such as the citation-index or the web of science, the multiplication of quantified indicators (impact-factor, H-index etc.) and the publication of rankings are favouring increasing forms of individuation. It is possible today to search for the performance of colleagues (as calculated by these indicators) on the internet and to compare oneself to others. The idea of belonging to a common group of equals sharing the same norms is further shaken by the differentiated salaries and work conditions proposed to newly recruited academics on a competitive basis mostly based on research productivity (Musselin 2005a, Enders and Musselin 2008). This in return affects the willingness of the most ambitious academics to participate to teaching activities but also to collective tasks and to self-governance.

Nevertheless, an increasing integration<sup>2</sup> process is occurring simultaneously. This can be observed at the institutional level of universities. They more and more present themselves as integrated entities. This has been the case for a long time in the United States but is a rather new phenomena in continental Europe. As stressed by many authors (Krücken and Meier 2006; Musselin 2006; Enders, de Boer and Leisyte 2007; Whitley 2007) universities are adopting organisational features. Following Nils Brunsson and Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson (2000) they are 'constructing into organisations', which for the two authors means that they are

drawing their boundaries, reinforcing their hierarchy, looking for rationality and defining their identity. While in most European countries, the idea that every university should be similar to the others previously prevailed, “being special” now becomes the main motto and academics within each university are expected to adhere to a specific institutional identity, to feel affiliated to his/her institution, and to adopt the objectives developed in the mission statement of their university. This is furthermore reinforced by the increase in collective devices and practices which can be observed at the infra-organisational level. In order to better perform individually, British academics are introducing more collective practices (seminars, mentoring, etc.) at the department level. This was already suggested by Mary Henkel (2000: 133-135 and 1999) and is analysed in more details by Norma Morris and Arie Rip (Morris 2002; Morris and Rip 2006), or by Felipe Camerati (2007) in his study of a performing British geography department. In other words, individual success depends on increased collective collaboration and exchanges at the departmental level.

If one finally looks at the regulation aspects, i.e. at the “continuous movement of creation, recomposition and destruction of rules” (Lallement 2007: 31, my translation) two main points characterise the recent evolutions of academic work in the United Kingdom and in many other countries. First, academic rules, criteria and norms are playing a crucial role. As stated by Mary Henkel:

[The dominance of the discipline] has been strongly defended by elite members and remains a powerful influence in rewards systems and in the creation and maintenance of academic agendas. It remains a strong source of academic identity, in terms of what is important and what gives meaning and self-esteem. (Henkel 2005: 173)

Academic performance in research is playing an increasing role with the development of the evaluation procedures at the institutional or national levels and the assessment of achievement is led according to scientific criteria and by peers. The role of academics sitting in the evaluation bodies and their advice have thus become crucial in the career developments and in the allocation of tasks of their colleagues, because their decisions are used by the university executive leaders in the management of the academic staff and in strategic decision-making. Being highly ranked or receiving a positive assessment has never been as important as today to get funding, grants, reward or promotion.

But a second evolution is affecting the regulation of academic work today. It deals with the rise of non-academic rules, norms and standards which are developing in parallel. Academic regulation is reinforced but no longer is the sole form of regulation exercised on faculty members. It is combined with but at the same time challenged by other forms of regulation developed by the institutions themselves and leading to the expansion of controls, procedures, organisational rules within universities. One symptomatic sign of this evolution can be seen in the increasing equipment of the internal labour market (Doeringer and Piore 1971) that each university represents: the introduction by the university leaders of merit-salaries, contracts by objectives, advancement rules etc. is a common trend in many countries (Musselin 2005b).

Looking at academics through the way they manage their work and analysing how professional and organisational features are interacting clearly help understanding and interpreting the ongoing changes. Unfortunately, such a perspective, focused on the shopfloor level, has been developed in the United Kingdom but is rarer in other countries. It would indeed be very fruitful to expand it to other countries experiencing major institutional reforms.

#### NEW ISSUES FOR THE RESEARCH AGENDA ON ACADEMIC WORK AND IDENTITIES

Looking at academic work from the perspective of the sociology of work also brings about new questions and new research perspectives. Two of them seem particularly promising and could further feed the research agenda.

The first one deals with the transformations of professions. The evolution described above is not restricted to academics. Recent works on the legal profession in different countries (Vigour 2005), or on the medical profession (Castel and Merle 2002 Ritzer and Walczak 1988, Setbon 2000) also stressed the development of managerial practices and rationalisation processes. As for academics, some authors refute to speak of a crisis of the profession and thus come to conclusions which are very close to Mary Henkel's (2000, 2005): the conditions of work are changing, but identities remain quite stable and there is a growing differentiation within each profession between those sitting in the new regulatory and evaluation bodies and the others, as well as between those endorsing the role of leaders and the others. Further and more precise comparisons would help better understanding the recomposition of professions confronted with the mutation of their organisations (see for instance Paradeise 2007).

The second perspective consists in bridging the sociology of academic work and the sociology of work. As already argued (Musselin 2008; Musselin forthcoming), two contradictory interpretations point at the fact that academic work and work are becoming closer. On the one hand, some authors, building on the rise of managerialism, accountability, evaluation etc. are arguing that academics are transformed into knowledge workers<sup>3</sup> and thus that the distance between them and other workers is shrinking. On the other hand, some sociologists and career analysts observe that the evolution of firms (less hierarchical and structured around projects) and the evolution of employment agreements (increase in the share of fixed-term contracts) transform how work is achieved and individual careers are managed in such a way that they bear some of the characteristics of artistic and academic occupations (Menger 2002). Both approaches thus plea for simultaneously considering work and academic work and for understanding the interplay, convergences and differences between these two forms of occupations.

#### CONCLUSION

The reforms experienced by many higher education systems since the 1980s share common traits: they all enhanced the institutional autonomy of universities and



aimed at introducing managerial practices and tools. This construction of higher education institutions into managed organisations leads to question the situation, conditions of work, ways of producing and diffusing knowledge, norms and identities of the academic profession. In other terms, the transformation of the relationships between disciplines and organisations has to be addressed, as the latter are increasingly developing their own modes of regulation. This is the perspective which had been chosen by Mary Henkel to understand how the reforms of the British higher education institutions impacted academic work and identities. This opened a new perspective to the understanding of the academic profession.

With the rise of organisational regulations, it is therefore no longer possible to look at academics simply from the perspective of the sociology of profession. The closer they come to the figure of professional workers, the more questions issuing from the sociology of work have to be raised. Issues such as division of work, individuation of performance, organisational integration and regulation of behaviours are particularly helpful to highlight the ongoing transformations they experienced.

By extension, it is the specific character of academic activities which is challenged and the confrontation with other types of professional work which is opening up new perspectives.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a study led on French academics, Musselin and Becquet (Becquet and Musselin 2004 and Musselin and Becquet 2008), explored this issue and identified the different factors explaining how work is allocated among academics, even when there is no RAE.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Lallement (2007:30, my translation) defines integration in Durkheimian terms: “the conformation [of individuals] to a unified model of passions and the adoption of shared ideals and common representations” but he nevertheless dedicates a whole chapter to organisations “whose integrative function is recognized today” (2007: 31).

<sup>1</sup> Some even speak of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2005).

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