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CHAPTER 5

Change or continuity in Higher Education governance ?

Lessons Drawn from Twenty Years of National Reforms in European Countries

Christine Musselin

1. Introduction

Determining whether change does or does not prevail over continuity is a classical question in sociology and political science. Higher education studies do not escape this recurrent questioning. In particular one can wonder how much change should be documented, what factors or dimensions should have been affected by change, which characteristics should change processes bear, for an analyst to be allowed to state that change indeed occurred. No simple answer can be given to these questions. Furthermore, depending on the focus chosen by the researcher – actors *versus* structures, micro *versus* meso or macro levels, local *versus* national perspectives, long term *versus* short term perspectives, individual *versus* institutional settings, norms *versus* practices, etc. – the balance between change and continuity may be differently assessed. A further difficulty results from the fact that change is not always radical and provoked by identified reforms but may also be incremental (Lindblom, 1959) when successive limited moves produce fairly profound change in the long run.

Among the contributions which may help to cope with the "change or continuity' issue, two are especially useful.

The first is common to two authors, each of whom developed it for his own field and independently of the other: Jean-Jacques Silvestre (1986 and 1998) as a labour economist and Peter A. Hall (1993) as a political scientist. Both went beyond the traditional and simplistic distinction generally made between radical and limited changes. Silvestre differentiated

structural change, i.e. change that[1] "[facilitates] new behaviours and new social relations" from change as a "mechanical response superimposed on the existing structure" or change as "an organic response, through which the structure [changes] but in a way compatible with the basic principles governing its operations." This typology is very close to the distinctions introduced by Hall (1993) to analyse change in public policies. He differentiates between, first, modifications in the settings of the basic existing instruments that do not affect the goals or the instruments, those modifying the tools but not the objectives and finally what he calls paradigmatic change. Paradigmatic change occurs, according to Hall, when the three constitutive elements of a public policy (the settings of the instruments, the instruments themselves and the hierarchy among the goals) are transformed.

A second helpful contribution is to be found in the book published by Tony Becher and Maurice. Kogan (1980 and 1992) where they distinguished four levels of change. In Chapter 8 (Initiating and adapting to change) they first explored "changes to the system as a whole", then looked at "changes at the institutional level" and at "changes affecting the basic unit", and finally came to "Innovation and the individual". They thus clearly defend the idea that change may refer to different processes at each level and that transformation at one level does not automatically imply transformation at another.

In this chapter, I intend to combine those two analytical frameworks to assess what kind of change and how much change higher education systems experienced in the last decades.

In the introduction to their book, Becher and Kogan recognised that some general characteristics (openness and loose coupling) can be attributed to any contemporary higher education systems, but that "there are also important distinctions to be noted between existing systems in one country and another. (…) The first dimension relates to access. (…) The second dimension is that of governance and control" (1992: 3). It is in particular this last dimension and its evolution that I would like to discuss here. It is frequently observed that recent developments in European higher education systems constituted a shift from academic to institutional governance or, in terms of Clark's (1983) modes of co-ordination, from the oligarchy and state corners of the triangle towards that of the market. Such conclusions entail two implicit statements: first, change did occur and second, it followed the same direction in

[1] The the quotations are from the foreword written by M.J. Piore to a book in memory of Jean.-Jacques Silvestre (Gazier, Marsden et Silvestre 1998).

the different countries and can therefore be understood as a vector for convergences within Europe.

In the first part of the chapter, it will be argued that the reforms instituted by European countries within the last two decades indeed reveal strong convergences. These are to be found, first, in the kind of governance model they aim to realise. But they are also evident in a number of important transformations: in the role expected of public authorities at the national level, in the steering instruments mobilised and in the definition of the actors involved in higher education systems. In other words, at the policy-making level, structural (or paradigmatic) change can be documented.

But if, following Becher and Kogan's approach, we turn to the institutional and individual levels, the impact and the nature of change within the systems appear to be less radical and profound. In particular, continuity prevails when one looks at academic identity (Henkel 2000).

As a result, the convergence process that could have been expected from the similar orientations and types of solution identified at the policy levels is not carried into other levels. As a matter of fact, national systems and idiosyncrasies remain very resilient. Explanations for these somewhat paradoxical results will be discussed in the second part of the chapter.

2. From academic and/ or state governance to institutional and/or market oriented governance ?

Within the last two decades, European higher education systems experienced two main processes of change. They were, first, the national reforms launched since the 1980s by almost every European Union country; and second, the two policies developed at the European level, the construction of the European Research Area[2] (ERA) on the one hand, and

[2] This policy is pushed and managed by the Brussels European commission and more specifically by the General Direction for Research under the leadership of the Commissar Busquin: it maintains the former orientations aiming at building European research networks and programs and accelerated this process through the 6th FPRD.

the construction of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), or "Bologna process[3], on the other.

If the latter policies potentially affect the governance of higher education systems (and in particular accentuate the europeanisation of national higher education policies), it is still too early to discuss comparatively the nature and effects of the change involved. Too few research-based qualitative studies are at hand to produce more than some impressionist conclusions on this issue. Much more material exists, however, on the impacts of the national reforms. Therefore this chapter will concentrate on these change processes and their impact on higher education governance.

2.1. Converging national reforms on different higher education systems

It is quite often stated (see., for instance, Braun and Merrien 1999) that in the past European universities were "cultural institutions" or ivory towers, steered by nation states whose principal role was to produce rules and then to control whether they were respected, and that now they are becoming corporate organisations, opened up to stakeholders, and in interaction with an evaluative and regulative state (Neave 1988; Neave and Van Vught 1991 and 1994; Van Vught, 1989 and 1995). Such a view clearly overestimates the similarity of European universities in the past and tends to ignore the diverging models that were to be found in Humboldtian, Anglo-Saxon and south-European systems respectively. Let me take three quick examples. As described by Kogan and Hanney (2000), but also by other observers, until the 1970s, the British university system was governed by the community of academics. "Government assumed that what the academy thought to be good research and teaching was likely to be good for the economy and society" (2000: 55). Self-regulation prevailed and was in the hands of academics who were responsible for the allocation of money among institutions (through the UGC) and for its use. As is evident from the plan of the Becher and

[3] This process is quite clearly different from the previous European policies for higher education, which essentially focused on mobility (Corbett 2002). In fact it started in Paris in 1998 with the Sorbonne conference which was organised by the French Minister of Education, Claude Allègre. A first declaration was signed by four countries: France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. Some other countries joined this first group rather quickly but an important step was reached when a second meeting was organised in Bologna in 1999 with a second declaration and 29 countries involved. Further declarations were signed: in Prague in 2001 and in Berlin in September 2003. This policy follows an inter-governmental dynamic and, at least at the beginning, excluded the European commission (Ravinet 2003): its first impacts are to be observed in the harmonisation of the structure of study programs in the involved countries with the introduction of the Bachelor / Master / Doctorate structure.

Kogan book (1980 and 1992) and its focus on basic units rather than on institutions, universities had a limited role to play: "the norms are assumed to be determined either by single teachers or researchers, or by academics collectively within their basic units, or nationally, in response to social and economic desiderata, by central authorities. (…) This has seemed to leave the institution somewhat short of functions as a value-setter" (1992: 67).

The comparative study I led in the 1980s on France and Germany reveals two other models of higher education governance. In France, but for different reasons, higher education institutions were also very weak (Friedberg et Musselin 1989 and 1993) but, in contrast with the distance between central authorities and British academics and their respective independence, co-management between academics and ministerial staff was the dominant feature of the French scene. As a result, French higher education governance primarily reflected the preferences and goals of the academic profession, even if the ministry frequently used financial incentives to try to orient the teaching offered and the research programmes. It was the other way round in Germany. Institutions were stronger and therefore were the direct and relevant partners for the Land ministries. But the absence of co-management between the academics and the ministerial staff as well as the institutional significance of the universities for the academics (even if it was not very constraining) gave more leeway to the Land governments to set priorities, redistribute resources, cut positions, merge redundant programmes than in France. While higher education policies in France were very much defined and controlled by the academic profession, in Germany they depended far more on what the political and ministerial staff defined as the requisite policy for the Land and for the country.

Nevertheless, despite this variety of models, despite the national characteristics and the specificities of each European higher education system that prevailed twenty years ago, the reforms that they all experienced in the 1980s and/ or 1990s certainly expressed the same concerns, pointed to the same orientations and mobilised the same range of solutions[4]. As

[4] The reason for this common set of orientations is an open question, which should be more thoroughly studied than has generally been the case. Some authors have used functionalist explanations and argued that facing the same problems European countries developed the same solutions. Others have mobilised the dissemination of ideas as an explanation. They admit that new public management spread all over Europe and was applied in a range of public sector bodies, including universities. It is also frequently admitted that international organisations such as the OECD played a role in this diffusion. But no serious study is at hand to analyse how and if this really did happen. Furthermore, in a country like France, new public management ideology infiltrated later than in other countries (Bezes 2003). Reforms on similar lines to those introduced

already mentioned by previous observers, such evolutions slightly varied (cf. Goedegebuure *et al* 1993) from one country to another. They did not happen at the same time or with the same intensity. (Some countries –like the United Kingdom- began very early in the 1980s while others started later, the second part of the 1990s being a peak time almost everywhere (Eurydice report 2000). In some countries rupture was preferred to incremental change). Nor did they follow the same kind of process. Decentralization was most frequently the mechanism of choice but not in the UK (Kogan and Hanney 2000). However, it is surprising to see how the orientations of these policies and the nature of the solutions mobilised in their name converged.

2.2. Converging orientations

First of all, reforms all insisted on the central role of universities in developed societies. But they were no longer or not only to be the sources of welfare benefits and redistribution (as was the case in the 60s) but rather tools and resources in economic international competition (Kogan *et al.* 2000). This general perspective strengthened over the years and became even more explicit as the notion of "knowledge society" became a *leitmotiv* within Europe.

While the academic community and/or the state were previously the two cornerstones of the European higher education systems, the changes introduced in the 80s and 90s favoured a shift in power towards higher education institutions in order to avoid two risks. One was that posed by too independent, too autonomous and too loosely regulated professionals. Even if anti-professionalism has not been as explicit everywhere as in the policies and discourses of the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, it is often presented as one of the sources of the development of "new managerialism" and of the support of institutions better able to control and manage professionals, in higher education as well as in other parts of European societies (Cave et al. 1988; Reeds 2003). On the other hand, institutions were expected to counterbalance, if not replace, some of the state prerogatives. There was suspicion as to the capacity of public authorities to set the relevant preferences or priorities and develop effective policies, as well as criticisms of the bureaucratic character of their activities. Institutions, and the more competitive relationships they were expected to adopt with one another, were seen as a way to escape such dysfunctions.

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in the other countries were launched but before new public management came on the agenda (Musselin 2003).

This rhetoric based on suspicion towards the individual academics as well as towards the state informed most of the national reforms and produced rather similar policy orientations and instruments for their realisation.

Strengthening university autonomy and leadership

First, increasing university autonomy became a slogan and decisions were made to strengthen leadership within higher education institutions. This went along with the devolution of new tasks and responsibilities to the universities and expectations for increased accountability.

In some countries (Netherlands, Austria, and Norway, for example) the status of institutional leaders was redefined and new legislation on university governance was created (de Boer 2002). In other countries such changes were brought about through less direct and less mediatised processes[5]. The intention was to develop executive leadership and to weaken the deliberative bodies and collegial decision making. Academic leaders (often appointed rather than elected) were now expected to behave like managers and were recognised as such. This went along with a general professionalisation of the university leadership, thanks to the introduction of management methods and tools and to the recruitment of more administrative staff and/or staff with new competencies (Rhoades and Sporn 2002; see also Bleiklie in this volume).

The emergence of universities as more organised and structured collective actors also affected university-academic relationships and the conceptions underlying academic activities. In many countries (for instance the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden, and Austria), staff management was decentralised to higher education institutions, which became responsible for the posts they established and for the persons they recruited to them. As a result the increase in temporary academic staff (Enders 2000 and 2001; Altbach 2000) is not the only change experienced by the European academic profession. The relationships between tenured academics and their institutions also evolved: more incentive mechanisms were introduced and the university level (and leaders) became responsible for decisions in which they were not previously involved. The relationships between the universities and their academic staff increasingly resemble employer / wage-earner relationships and academic activities are

increasingly conceived as academic work (Musselin 2005). The orientations followed by the recent German reforms[6] clearly reflect such an evolution: the introduction of merit-related salaries for university professors gives university leaders the opportunity to reward or sanction their permanent faculty members, whereas they had almost no possibilities of that kind before.

Furthermore, universities are expected to act as policy makers. In the past, their development resulted either from the individual decisions made by the faculty members and/or from the preferences and objectives set by the public authorities. They now have to define their strategies, to implement their own policies, to decide on their own development within a general framework designed by the state[7]. This reveals how state – university relationships have been transformed.

Transforming State-University relationships

The national reforms clearly also aimed at modifying the role of public authorities, especially in countries where they were rather interventionist and centralised. In most cases, [8] they were expected to abandon their traditional role of rules producers and controllers for new competencies. These included setting a general framework within which institutions may choose their own directions , providing the support needed to facilitate new developments rather than dictating to them how to proceed , intervening ex-post if problems arose rather than setting rules ex ante, and evaluating ex post rather than controlling.

The transformation of state-university relationships further included the development of other interactions and the diversification of the universities' interlocutors in order to introduce competition into a state-university relationship described as too exclusive, bilateral and monopolistic. Most reforms therefore were intended to favour the participation of more actors, or even of new ones into the higher education systems. This orientation was supported by two arguments.

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5 For instance, the transfer of tasks to the university president.

6 Introduced in 2001 by the *Fünftes Gesetz zur Änderung des Hochschulrahmengesetze*.

7 Such a framework and the instruments associated with it may be much more constraining than the previous more bureaucratic steering mode. It therefore should not be understood as a withdrawal by public authorities.

On the one hand, university systems were suspected of being guided by their own interests rather than those of society. This criticism in fact called into question the hitherto prevailing belief that what was good for universities was good for society. It also questioned the idea that public authorities were the best and only actors able to collect the needs and demands of society and to mediate and reformulate them for the academic community. It was argued that the latter should develop direct relationships with society and that universities should themselves listen to and incorporate the needs and demands of external stakeholders.

New or more actors were recruited to engage in higher education issues and challenge state steering. In some countries this occurred through the introduction of external personalities in university councils (as in Norway and Sweden) or (as in the Netherlands and in Germany) through the creation of new bodies, called university boards and composed of university stakeholders (and sometimes of university representatives, too). They would be involved in the management of a higher education institution, in the definition of its main orientations and in the approval of its budget (Mayntz 2002).

On the other hand, the difficult budget situation confronting European countries also spoke in favour of breaking the monopolistic relationship linking the universities to the state. The diversification of university funding mechanisms became a maxim. Universities were asked to find financial support from local authorities, economic partners, European programmes, etc.

Finally, the transformation of state – university relationships included the introduction of new tools and a more frequent recourse to existing but hitherto rarely used instruments. Very often, but not always, this was linked to the influence of the proponents of the New Public Management (for instance Ferlie *et al* 1996, Reed and Deem 2002). As Bleiklie *et al.* (2000) observed, symbolic tools, learning tools and contractual procedures were brought in alongside the traditional production of rules and control activities. Also, an important emphasis was put on the introduction of new budget allocation principles, paying more attention to outputs (the number of students finishing with a diploma, for instance) than to the inputs (number of

[8] In the UK, the exceptional case, public authorities were also expected to develop this kind of role but, because it was previously very non-interventionist this evolution resulted in strengthened public interventions in higher education.

students), or directly linked to the realisation of specific projects. Furthermore many countries introduced global budgets rather than strictly defined items (in Germany and Italy for instance).

At first glance there thus seems to be substantial convergence between the reform orientations and the solutions adopted for higher education in most European countries. Moreover, most of the reforms that have been implemented can be defined as "structural" or "paradigmatic" change: they affect the instruments, the contexts in which instruments are applied , the goals and the conceptions of higher education. If these two observations are taken together, it is plausible to conclude that European higher education systems have experienced profound transformations and are less divergent than before. At the policy level, this is true but when one looks at the institutional and individual levels, the image of change gradually becomes an image of continuity. As a result, convergences among the different systems also vanish.

3. Persistent national systems and resilient individual practices and beliefs

I shall now examine the two observations more closely. Because the question of convergence is in part linked with the question of what change has actually occurred and where, I shall begin by discussing change.

3.1. Various levels of change

Political scientists have very nicely and convincingly shown that many obstacles may stand in the way of successful reform and that ambitious change may be poorly implemented (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Bardarch 1977; Cerych and Sabatier, 1986). They provide many explanations for this phenomenon stressing amongst other things the complexity of implementation processes, the re-appearance of actors excluded during the decision-making processes, the shift in objectives, and the construction of new problems. But in the case under study we are not confronted with a reform which did not succeed (unlike, for example, the French law for the mergers of towns in 1971: France had 36000 cities and towns then and still have as many today, Dupuy and Thoenig 1983).. Neither are we talking about reforms that met with subversion and distortion or strong resistance.

In fact, one can hardly say that the reforms put in place failed: even if they were not all strictly implemented[9], all analysts recognise that the characteristics of today's higher education systems do not look like those of yesterday. Conceptions of higher education have evolved. Nowadays, governments are steadily pursuing such policies and many of the recent public decisions can easily be understood as continuing the line of the previous reforms, rather than drawing back from them.

But a more careful look at the institutional and individual level reveals both change and continuity: some groups, bodies or structures are influenced, affected by or mediate change, while others remain the same. There is indeed a strange pace of reform as confirmed by the comparative study led in Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom by Maurice Kogan and his colleagues[10] (Kogan, *et al* 2000). The design for this comparative research (Henkel, 1996), made it possible to observe change at the national public policy level, the institutional level (universities) and the individual levels (academics). The study showed that the public policy level evolved considerably and the institutional level (universities) was also affected by change (but less than the macro level), while at the level of the basic units academics' values, identities, research agenda and educational practices remained quite stable. The case of the United Kingdom illustrates this point particularly well because the discrepancies to be observed are the larger. While the reforms put in place by the British government (Kogan and Hanney 2000) were radical and rather brutal, the transformations discerned at the institution level were less profound and the modifications detected in the practices, norms and values of the lay academics appeared to be rather marginal and superficial. One can thus speak of a kind of surface transformation where the deeper layers of the system are rather untouched (Henkel 2000, Henkel 2005).

The same observation holds for France where the last decade has been marked by an increase in institutional autonomy and in managerial practices (Musselin 2001). University presidents mostly adopted this evolution. A quantitative study undertaken in 1999 (Mignot-Gérard and Musselin 2000) shows that they conceive themselves and behave more and more as managers. They are pro-active, develop strategic plans and generally are in favour of more organisational and financial autonomy. By contrast, the deans have very different discourses:

[9] The mergers fostered by the Norwegian (Bleiklie et al. 2000) government, for instance, did not succeed.

they value collegial style and for the most part present themselves as *primus inter pares* rather than as leaders. This creates some conflicts linked to the fact that the presidents are lacking transmitters within their universities to diffuse change and implement different institutional policies.

At the individual level, the recent study on academic work in France (Becquet and Musselin 2004) comes to conclusions close to Mary Henkel's research: it first reveals that the practices of lay academics are weakly affected and that their core values and norms remain stable, even when their concrete situation has changed. Physicists, for instance, are all obliged to find resources by submitting proposals to funding bodies or firms but at the same time they remain very attached to what they consider to be the model for fundamental research in physics.

One explanation for this mix between change and continuity relies on a top-down conception of change, where diffusion proceeds through successive disseminations from the policy level to the individual practitioners and where time is the decisive variable: just wait and change will progressively overtake the whole system. Supporters of change take this view, as well as the critics of the evolution set in motion who fear that in the long run the new conceptions will completely absorb the old (Reed 2001). But such an interpretation strongly relies on a zero-sum game conception of change, where what is lost by some (the professionals) is gained by others (mainly the institution).

But other explanations or scenarios may be mobilised and among them a non-zero-sum game where the new higher education governance is characterised by the empowerment of some actors without a corresponding decrease in the influence of others. The interplay between profession and organisation should not be conceived as a duel (with the death of one of the protagonists at the end) but much more as a construction of new arrangements (which can be rather different from one country to another). Strong institutions are not inherently incompatible with a strong academia as testified by the elite American universities.

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[10] B. Askling, M. Bauer,. I. Bleiklie, S. Hanney, M. Henkel. R. Høstaker, F. Marton, S. Marton, A. Vabø. Five books were published Bauer et al. 1999; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Bleiklie et al. 2000; Henkel 2000; Kogan et al. 2000.

3.2. Persistent national systems

This interpretation of on-going change as an aggregation rather than as a substitution process can also help us to understand why the overall convergences stressed in the policy orientations did not lead to a discernible reduction in the divergences among countries. In each place, change had to combine with the existing situation and different configurations and agreements emerge from this specific encounter. This is precisely why it is so important not to understate the previous existing divergences: they help us to understand why different implementation of the same ideas occurred. Evaluation, for instance, developed everywhere but has given rise to different outcomes. In some places (France) evaluation is mostly institutional, while it is discipline based in others (the Netherlands). In some cases, it relies mostly on self-evaluation (Sweden, at least initially), but in some other countries external evaluation by peers prevails (for the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom). The point at which evaluation occurs and the weight of its impact also varies. In France for instance, evaluation is almost always a priori, i.e. based on the assessment of projects and very rarely on outcomes [outputs?], while in other countries it is either exactly the contrary, or at least both kinds of assessment exist but the latter (evaluation of outputs) is the most important. Finally the link between the results of evaluation and the allocation of resources can be very tight or completely loose. For instance the reports of the French National Evaluation Council (CNE) have no impact on the budget allocation. But, in the United Kingdom, the results of the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) have had a deep impact on the public funding which is directly linked to the RAE performance and to the private resources too: as the RAE results are published, firms looking for collaboration with research units develop relationships with the best ranked. Consequently, differentiation has increased between the top research universities and the others (Shattock 2002; Dill 2002). The same term thus hides very different meanings and practices from one country to another.

The maintenance of the national character of the different higher education systems despite the convergent orientations, comes from the fact that everywhere reforms had to cohere with the former national system. As a matter of fact, no country experienced a “revolution” and went from a situation “A” to a “situation “B”. Indeed each country went from “A” to “A+”, where “A+“ results from an aggregation process between what existed before and the new solutions (Musselin 2000 and 2001).

4. Conclusion

As outlined in the preceding sections, the national reforms in higher education governance in European countries provide a nice case to reflect on change and continuity.

It first of all stresses the limits of the transfer of the Kuhnian conception of change in science to the sphere of social systems (Kuhn 1962). The shift from one paradigm to another in science is much more radical and revolutionary than the shift from one policy paradigm to another. The main reason for that is linked to the last point discussed above: policy change does not occur on sand and has to cope with the resilience of former institutions, structures, actors and logics. The new combination resulting from this transformation may be very different from the previously existing one but nevertheless it always bears characteristics of the latter.

Second, change is not uniformly spread within a system. Some aspects or levels may be more affected than others; structural change may impact on some parts and not on others (or not as much). This is precisely what the comparative study led by Kogan and his colleagues so clearly documents and outlines in their comparative work on Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

More generally this confirms the heterogeneous nature of higher education systems. Instead of seeing them as a hierarchical nesting of levels (academics, within units, within institutions steered by the state, the market or an oligarchy of professionals) as in Clark's terms, it is more plausible to view them in terms of a complex and nationally different interplay between three heterogeneous elements, which in Europe are a profession, institutions and public authorities (Musselin 2001 and 2004, chapter 7). If one of these changes, the others will of course be affected and in turn impact on the on-going transformation. But because each element has its own characteristics, practices, norms, values, identities, change in one element will not automatically mean change in the same way or with the same intensity for the other two. Thus, while the national reforms deeply affected the governance of higher education systems within European countries, this in turn obliged academics to develop new practices but it

barely impacted upon their identities and beliefs[11]. In other words the profession shows more continuity than the policy level, even if it more than before has to compose with stronger institutions.

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Ferlie, E., Ashburner, L., FitzGerald, L. and Pettigrew, A. (1996) '*The New Public Management in Action'* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[11] This means that there is no perfect connection here between practices and ideas or representations. Or to put it differently, actors may change their practices (as a result of the introduction of new instruments, rules, settings) but nevertheless still adhere to the same norms, values and identities.

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