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TRA POTERE E SAPERE: STUDI CRITICI SULLA VALUTAZIONE

A cura di Davide Borrelli e Diego Giannone

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THE RE-EMERGING DEBATE OVER THE RISE OF THE EVALUATIVE STATE IN THE BRITISH UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Abstract

This article problematizes approaches which conceptualise the rise of the evaluation framework in the British Higher Education as a case of the state's appropriation of a managerial ideology. It sheds light on the contradictory role of the British state during the reform period initiated in the 1980s and argues that initial evaluation policies were more concerned with shifting the burden of financing to lower levels of the sector than at devising new control technologies. It presents Neave's insights on the rise of the evaluative state in order to inform the debate on the centralizing effects of "steering at a distance" governance, suggesting that some scholars tend to conceive evaluation as a purely instrumental practice for the implementation of a new funding regime rather than as a political process in which the notion of quality was contested and rearticulated by a variety of agents at different levels of the Higher Education sector.

Keywords:

Managerialism, New Public Management, British University Sector, Evaluative state

1. *Introduction*

When embarking on the study of the rise of evaluation criteria in the British university sector, the researcher will undoubtedly be driven to analyse the state's role in shaping the framework within which universities are evaluated. Most scholars agree that the conservative policies of the 1980s are the consequence of a state's appropriation of managerial ideas, begin-

ning with the implementation of a planning approach to the public education sector coupled with a neoliberal conceptualisation of the university sector as a wealth-generating sector.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the recourse to decreasing public expenditure was elevated to a political principle (Shattock 1984) sparking off what is considered an expenditure-led approach to the governance of Higher Education (HE from now on) as a critical element of the welfare state. This historical moment is frequently referred to as the beginning of New Public Management (NPM from now on) in British HE governance, a period of change in which the British state began to radically alter its position vis-à-vis the HE sector, beginning from its rolling back of the high expectations of growth that the Robbins Report (see Neave 1985) had foreseen. As early as 1976 the government abolished the quinquennial grant system to universities (Neave 1985) which had guaranteed practically unconditional funding to the universities on a 5-year basis, followed by the decision in 1979 to introduce full cost fees to oversea students and an overall situation whereby between 1979 and 1984 recurrent resources had fallen between 11 and 15% (Shattock 1982). Given this critical context, authors' consideration of this period as a radical moment of centralization of state power in the university is comprehensible. In fact, the debate during this period attempted to dig into the causes for this clear-cut break with previous expansionary policies in HE. The concepts of evaluative state (Neave 1988) and new public management soon became the thread connecting authors from diverse standpoints. It was obvious that the state's perception of the value and, to some extent, the mission of the university sector had changed, yet the reasons for this sudden shift were less clear apart from the right-wing neoliberal orientation of the newly elected conservative government.

This brief paper explores the concepts of "evaluative state", NPM and the rise of the evaluation framework and attempts to link them to arguments on state policies and state power by presenting a debate between authors who conceive the evaluation framework as the inevitable and necessary instrument of the newly emerging managerial state on one hand and authors who consider this approach excessively reductionist for conceptualising the emergence of evaluation as a complex historical contingency on the other. The article argues for a focus on the manifestations of governance more so than on the formulation of policy in British HE.

Firstly, the article presents conceptualisations of evaluation as a form of state power in a strand of ideological approaches. Secondly, central features from Neave's work (1988, 1998) on the British HE sector are presented, arguing that these are overlooked in current studies of the rise of

the evaluation framework, and that they provide useful in disentangling some contradictions that emerge from the tendency to consider evaluation through a framework of analysis centred around a centralization/decentralization dichotomy. Finally, these insights are inserted into a dialogue with literatures which have analysed the changing funding policy[1] of the British conservative government between the years of 1979-1993.

2. *Evaluation: a shifting rationality of state governance?*

According to the ideological argument, the rise of the «evaluative state» in Britain is the demonstration of the ideological force of a managerial rationality. The latter holds that the state shifted to a «utilitarian vision» of knowledge and research, (Bleiklie 1998) which advocates societal control over the latter and strict planning of the use of resources. The ideological argument stresses the strength of management's technical ontology, where the measurement and the quantification of research are deemed essential tools for coordinating collective action (Townley 2002) and creating a collective benefit. The universality of management practices is the fruit of their claim to objectivity and their positivist form, such that authors (Deem *et al.* 2007), suggest that managerialism's universality and discursive strength grew in the 1980s primarily thanks to the rhetorical association of managerial practices to market forces when the conservative government associated market-driven wealth distribution to resource planning as a means to legitimate public expenditure cuts (Deem *et al*. 2007). The changing governance of the university sector is analysed as part of broader developments within the NPM paradigm. Managerial ideology is treated as a state-controlled discourse which enters policy formulation and practice, such that «new managerial permeation of universities can be attributed to external factors such as state policies and funding regimes» (Deem & Brehony 2005). It emerges that the British state of the 1980s was

1 The decision to consider literature on funding policies rather than focusing on evaluation policies is driven by the attempt to break down authors' understanding of the relationship between funding and evaluation in the reform policies, in order to then to inform a comparison with Neave's theoretical framework on the emergence of the evaluation framework. Additionally, it is important to remember that the first reforms of the British state, which have been interpreted as the managerial reforms sparking evaluation practices, were centred on reshaping the HE's funding regime. Thus, entering the debate on the state's role in shaping evaluation practices must necessarily begin from an analysis of the extent to which its initial funding policies elaborated quality assessment.

acting from a point of strength and successfully materialized the ideological tenets of managerialism by inserting a control and feedback system to the HE sector. Whereas this approach provides insights for the shifting discourse at the heart of changing neoliberal governance, its conceptualisation of the rise of evaluation tends to overlook the highly contradictory role of the British state during the period of reform to the university sector. It thus emerges that new practices of evaluation following the 1980s can be deduced from the general ideals stated in policy documents (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007) and that the intended reforms necessarily played out in the HE institutions as was intended by the carefully-planned state policy which acted in line with its managerial character.

This is evident in the debates on the reform period of the 1980s in Britain, which develop into an assessment of how the state presumably centralized its governance over the sector. An interesting aspect is that whilst authors contend that governance was more centralized, this is often at odds with the state's mission of retreating from the public sector and establishing a HE market. This is a constant contradiction in debates over the role of the state in HE, which could arguably be applied to analyses of NPM also outside higher education studies. On one hand, NPM is considered a market-creating ideology in sectors that were part of the welfare state. This commitment is advanced when describing a movement towards de-regulatory policy, marked primarily by the state's consistent disinvestments from the HE sector and a retreat from direct intervention. On the other hand, the fact that it is arguably state legislation which creates the conditions for the market to operate (Pritchard 1994) with the trend of directing investments through quantitative benchmarks is often invoked as evidence of centralized state power. So much so that have the very nature of the state during this period has been questioned, with notions of "post-capitalism", of a state which acted «at variance with the ideology of the free market as propounded by Conservative politicians» being raised to indicate a contradicting neoliberal state» (Pritchard 1994, p.263). Thus, the state is leaving space to the market whilst simultaneously strengthening its bargaining position over the HE sector during the emergence of the evaluative state. A crucial element facilitating this double function, scholars suggest, is evaluation. Having moved beyond the somewhat timid institutional practice of peer-evaluation as a scholarly mission towards the improvement of research (Ziman 1968), evaluation since the 1980s is technical, objective and state-controlled. Effectively, evaluation parameters allow governments in diverse national HE sectors to continue being the primary funders of higher education, but no longer the only ones. At the same time, quality criteria,

performance indicators and student number targets facilitate the steering of changing governments' policy priorities throughout time. Effectively then, there is no longer a single public policy regarded useful for higher education: it is constantly changing through market-like benchmarks and yet increasingly centralizing because the state maintains high control over the priorities through evaluation practices. The common acknowledgment is thus that evaluation practices have allowed states to develop a unique combination of deregulatory policy and centralised control, to the point that the managerial identity of state policy effectively overcomes traditional (yet nationally diverse) types of relationships between the state and HE[2].

The crucial issue with some arguments of the abovementioned "steering at a distance" approach is that there is the tendency to treat evaluation as a category through which this contradictory role of the state can be resolved, causing the generalisation of a complex process of social change such as the rise of evaluation framework for an entire sector which had previously been used to referring to the professionality of academics for recognition of its quality as well as the receipt of funding. This first issue ties strictly with a second, namely the conviction that the state has been, ever since the inception of evaluation criteria, the primary controller and discipliner of the university sector. This insistence that managerial ideology is so powerful in radically transforming the HE sector, that the state policy has since the 1980s been inherently managerial in this sense, has paradoxically strengthened a technical study of evaluation in approaches that attempt to explore the ideological strength of evaluation. Evaluation, within these narrations, becomes a theoretical instrument for sustaining the categories of steering at a distance. Authors tend to insert evaluation as an instrument of governance into their framework of analysis when unable to resolve the issue of how state power appears as much centralized as handed down to lower institutional levels, such as the quality and funding councils. At an explanatory level, steering at a distance becomes the dominant narration with which many state policies are explained, a means of approaching the conceptualisation of state governance over the sector which assigns intentionality and planning to the British state. As some have put it, evaluation is treated as a means of « […] rationalising the policy process» (Henkel 1998) more so than being studied as a political and contested process. Evaluation becomes increasingly ambiguous, given that it can serve policy for both regulation and deregulation,

2 For a discussion on different boundaries between HE sectors and the state, and an assessment of how these were transforming throughout the 1980s, see Neave (1982).

it can be applied for disinvestment from recurrent grant funding as well as investment in specific fields of research. This tends to turn a comparative historical analysis of the relationship between the state and higher education prior to the 1980s relatively irrelevant to our understanding of the state's motives and goals in shifting governance of the HE sector. These contradictions in the assumptions of steering at a distance can be considered indicative of a need for further analyses into the role, expectations and outcomes of state policy in reforming the British HE sector in the 1980s in relation to how the manifestations of governance played out in practice within the HE sector. In particular, if a study of governance should not be detached from the way that policies and their instruments are interpreted, rearticulated, and at times transformed by subjects of governance (Knafo 2010), then one must keep in mind the peculiarities and characteristics of both the agents which are to be shaped by these reforms and the structures within which they act. This was central to Neave's work on the role of evaluation in transforming state governance over the HE sector, yet some insights from Neave's studies remain largely unexplored or at times used at face value.

3. *Spaces of Negotiation in the British Higher Education sector*

One of Neave's central insights from his work (1988, 1998) is the study of evaluation in terms of power relationships. Studying the emergence of evaluation criteria implicitly translates into a study of governance given that- as *steering at a distance* scholars suggest- quality criteria are a primary instrument for the distribution of wealth in the HE sectors. However, differently to others, Neave does not necessarily suggest that this is function is necessarily attached- in all national education sectors equally- to the state. In multiple instances throughout his work, Neave's analysis of evaluation is an historical exercise of tracing the beginning of the positive correlation between funding and quality performance of universities, seeking trends and continuities in the history of the governance of British HE to then trace moments of radical change. For this reason, much of Neave's work stresses the differences and institutional peculiarities of different national higher education systems more so than their similarities. Often, there is a recall to the fact that traditional state-HE relationships tend to leave a heritage in the higher education sector and alter the way in which future policies are received and turn out (Neave 1982, 1988) The concept of centralization of state power, for example, is analysed through this lens. In the case of the UK, Neave suggests that the state was historically inclined to limit its functions towards

the HE sector. The latter was traditionally used to non-interference and autonomy from direct state intervention in funding (Eustace 1982), reason for which the process of juridification was felt more than in other European countries with an institutional set-up made of central ministries for education (Neave 1988; Bleiklie & Kogan 2007). The increasing number of norms which were put in place to advance the process of self-regulation is therefore to be studied in a context-specific manner rather than in abstract terms. Interestingly, his historical comparison brings him to conclude that «juridification» is signal of previous inabilities of the state to «[…] steer higher education and […] obtain compliance» (Neave 1988 p.13). Thus, the ideological stance to explaining NPM ignores how national peculiarities will persist as well as other possible motives behind the attempts to reform the sector, assuming that sectors being affected by common external forces will homogenise in their reaction to NPM (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007). This implicitly assumes that state's emanation of new values of governance radically alters universities' own (historically shaped) values rather than adding to the complexity of the university system (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007).

A second insight offered by Neave's studies on the British HE sector, which will be picked up later on in this article, is the conceptualisation of the evaluative state as a moment in which the state initiated a series of processes to redistribute functions between the different levels of power between the state and the HE sector in such a way that was more akin to «[…] a system of pragmatic negotiation» (Neave 1988, p.12) than to top-down managerial control. This argument is reinforced years later in his re-elaboration of his work, when he stresses that the emergence of the evaluation framework involves many diverse relationships engaged in a constant process of negotiation between each other. The evaluative state set up « […] a broad operating space» where « […] implementation interpretation and verification are split up and assigned to different agencies and different levels of decision-making within the higher education system» (Neave 1998, p. 277). This sort of ambiguity which Neave attached to the rise of the evaluative state is indicative of the necessity of maintaining our analysis of the evaluative framework in British HE as a process moulded by a multiplicity of actors rather than a single process of normalization of new values on behalf of the state.

4. *The ambiguity of government policy between 1981-1992*

In light of these considerations, the following sections will recalibrate the notion that funding reforms, whilst being a central element in spark-

ing the negotiation between university and non-university agents, were driven by a strong evaluative movement on behalf of government. Rather, it is argued that they fuelled a space for wide interpretation of quality as well as the content and scope of evaluation practice. This is visible in two instances within the changing context of the British HE sector: the bidding process initiated by the University Funding Council (UFC from now on) as a result of the decision to allocate a part of the diminished resources as 'rewards' to universities, and the engagement of universities in devising quality assessment (QA from now on) criteria. These will briefly be presented in turn.

4.1. *The changing funding regime and the bidding process*

Henkel's suggestion (1998) that government funding policy was largely shaped by the leverage that management consultants exerted over civil servants indicates that conceptualising managerial practices as an inherent part of the operating system of government at the time is a more complex argument to make than is assumed. Government may have had the aim of using managerial techniques, yet it was seeking external agents for developing these practices in its policy formulation, and commissioned consultants for evaluating its own policies as well as the financial context of the university sector through a managerial framework. Though during the 1980s evaluation acquired an unprecedented prominence in government and performance indicators (PIs from now on) proliferated in all parts of the public sector, there was a state audit system «[…] severely restricted in scope and expertise» (Normanton 1966, as cited in Henkel 1998, p.122). Government pressed for a reduction in public expenditure, but civil servants had limited instruments for implementing it.

Perhaps the fees only policy can be considered an example of the government's initial experiments with managerial conditionality criteria yet at the same time raises doubts as to whether this can be considered a form of "evaluation" on the sector. One finds that the «fees-only students» policy (Pritchard 1994) was an attempt to introduce conditional funding for universities but was limited to the achievement of quantitative student targets (a method similar to previous policies). Still, it is peculiar in that it initiated a process of "bidding" in the British university sector (Pritchard 1994). By 1991, the University Grants Committee (UGC) and then the UFC had already dismantled a large part of recurrent grants which had ensured financial stability to the universities. Yet, it attempted to increase student

numbers[3] whilst maintaining lower levels of grant funding by financially rewarding universities that reached an above-average proportion of students on a 'fees-only' basis (a level of funding which was just enough to cover the cost of university fees). This conditionality also worked in the opposite direction, whereby those institutions that did not achieve the UFC-funded targets would be threatened with possible reductions in funding already allocated (Pritchard 1994). In this policy, efficiency was expressed in terms of the achievement of such targets, such that this race to the enrolment of lowest priced students led some universities to promote cheaper subjects in order to attract more and cheaper students. However, the UFC quickly modified its policy by implementing minimum and maximum student numbers for subjects with different costs (Pritchard 1994), almost as if to correct the quality unbalance that this may have caused. Arguably, this points to the fact that the state was to an extent unaware of the quality implications of its funding policy, as if the element of quality had not been taken into consideration in initial policy implementation. The process that this policy initiated is insightful in reference to the debate mentioned above[4] in two central ways.

Firstly, as Neave suggests, more so than a top-down controlled policy, this is an example of a negotiation practice at work, where the reactions of universities to an extent corrected initial government policy. Secondly, in terms of evaluation, the policy was not so much expressing targets in terms of quality of education, but in terms of the targets necessary to obtain given sets of public expenditure. Thus, when authors consider that the changing funding regime was driven by a new evaluative agenda, it is important to consider how the form of evaluation that the government was carrying out during this period of reshaping of the university sector's funding was primarily economic and scarcely referred to quality[5]. This calls for greater attention in the analysis of the relationship between funding policies and evaluation, and the extent to which one can claim that evaluation was instrumental in shaping the new funding regime.

3 Some say it was concerned with student numbers given the failure to do this through the Robbins report (Neave 1995) and the inability to increase numbers in the long-term in the transition to mass HE.

4 This policy has been chosen as an example of the negotiation process at work but is not intended to be seen as a reflection of other policies. It is intended to problematize the relationship between funding and evaluation that is considered crucial in steering at a distance and ideological approaches.

5 «[...]The pegging of research funding at 15% for top-ranked institutions was a «buckling of the market» (Pritchard 1994, p.263).

4.2. *Attempts to institutionalise university-led evaluation criteria*

As some have suggested, in fact, though the government advocated quality and efficiency, the state's implementation of these concepts was « […] sufficiently formless as to be difficult to identify with particular policies except in very general terms» (Shattock 1984, p. 205). Regardless of this vague interpretation of quality, though, universities did not remain still, given that government plans announced to initiate a series of assessments and conditional funding policies. A key university actor which has largely influenced the development of QA criteria is the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP from now on). Its work on academic standards was officialised in 1983 through the creation of the Academic Standards Group. The committee then later initiated working groups on PIs both internally and with other institutional actors in 1985, when the Jarratt Report was published (CVCP 1985). As a strong representative body, the CVCP aimed to articulate the contents of quality in the university sector by working on the measurements that could be used to evaluate it. This developed into a proliferation of PIs, (see Cave *et al*. 1997) and reports on the direction that universities ought to take within the «quality movement» (Cave *et al*. 1997). By 1994, the Academic Audit Unit (AAU from now on), founded in 1990, successfully entered the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) as part of the CVCP's Division for Quality Audit (DQA) (Pritchard 1994), becoming part of the first ever, sector-wide, QA body of the British University sector and entering ever higher levels of governance at a sectorial level when compared to its previous representative functions. The work of the CVCP in the development of practices of institutional management through a process of performance assessment began to form part of the HECQ's policy guidelines. The CVCP's extensive engagement in the development of QA criteria, along with its attempts to enter institutional channels, is significant of attempts to devise proper, university led forms of evaluation and establish a long-term, permanent form of leverage over the process of reform in the HE sector. The CVCP's struggle to enter the policy process on conditional funding by advancing (its own interpretation of) university interests during the formulation of the PIs, which would feed into the Research Assessment Exercise (Cave *et al.* 1997), together with the success in entering the HEQC, are indicative of an effective appropriation, on behalf of university agents, of the concept of evaluation at both a conceptual and practical level.

Beyond the actions of the CVCP, finally, it is interesting to recall that a group of universities were engaged in the process of planning ahead

for the marketization of the sector, so much that Shattock (1984) argues that some universities were so extensively engaged in the process of defining their strengths and weaknesses that they to an extent "preceded" government pressures for change at an institutional level. In light of their changing context, universities were quick to create emergency committees, adding new values and concepts of self-assessment to the already existing climate of change.

5. *Conclusion*

This article has argued that authors which focus on the ideological strength of NPM in the British HE sector make the claim on the centralization of state power largely due to the fact that they focus extensively on the rise of evaluation practices as a mere function of funding policy. This leads them to consider evaluation as an exclusively state-led and state-designed process, rather than as a moment in which multiple interpretations and attempts to institutionalise definitions of quality clashed and produced criteria which the government itself had not yet devised nor yet applied in policy reforms. As such, this article has argued that there has been an interpretation at face value of Neave's work, given that central to his argument was the focus on the fact that government policies often inadvertently created new spaces which clashed with traditional historical relationships between the state and the HE sector. For Neave, the state was more concerned with «[…] withdrawing from the murky pain of overwhelming detail, the better to take refuge in the clear commanding heights of effective strategic 'profiling'» (Neave 1988, p.12) and this, to an extent, opened up the actions and interpretation of evaluation to agents which attempted to exert leverage over the policy formulations on evaluation frameworks. This is particularly relevant when considering that the rise of evaluation practices, by large, altered the interplay of power between existing agents – the state and the groups within the HE sector generally - as well as creating the space and role for 'new' figures, such as the Chief Executive vice chancellors and the funding councils (Neave 1988; 1998). It emerges, thus, how the juridification process was not exclusively a case of centralization of state power in the British HE sector, particularly when, as this article has attempted to demonstrate, many new funding norms were consistently reshaped following the reactions of universities. The historical development of managerial evaluation practices such as QA criteria can thus be more

accurately studied if detached from the assumption that they represent the expression of state power at work.

Laura Giovinazzi (laura.giovinazzi@hotmail.it)
Department of Human and Social Sciences
University of Naples "L'Orientale"

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