

Burton Clark's half century: selected writings 1956–2006

On Higher Education: Selected Writings, 1956–2006, by Burton R. Clark,
Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008

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The work of Burton Clark extended over more than half a century – and also from its original base in sociology to embrace wider inter-disciplinary studies. His identification of the major research themes in higher education continues to be valid, despite the substantial changes that have taken place in the scale, structure and values of the system. Although his work continued to evolve taking in new topics such as the entrepreneurial university, it continued to be reflect the 'sociological imagination' which had been his starting point – and which explained its conceptual clarity and methodological integrity.

Keywords: students; systems; comparative higher education; entrepreneurial universities

The work of Professor Burton Clark has an exceptionally wide range – in terms of content, because he wrote about a wide range of topics – systemic structures, comparative systems, entrepreneurial institutions and academic and student life; in terms of time, because he published from the late 1950s through to the mid-2000s, almost half a century of scholarly output; in terms of dissemination, because his work appeared not only in scholarly monographs and academic journals but also in more popular publications; and in terms of scope, because Clark's writing was not only formative in terms of establishing higher education as a research domain but also emblematic of the wider evolution of higher education systems and institutions during his lifetime, one of the golden times of the university by any measure.

Because of this exceptional range Clark deserves to be assessed and to be remembered in several different registers – of course, as a key contributor to our better understanding of the topics he specifically addressed but also as a founder father of the whole field of higher education studies and, more broadly still, as a chronicler, deliberate and accidental, of the emergence of the extended higher education systems which have transformed the societies (and consequently the economies and cultures) of all advanced nations and the lives of millions of their individual citizens. His standing as a scholar of higher education, therefore, cannot be reduced solely to the significance of his own research, distinguished as it was. He was part of a wider 'moment' – in two senses.

First, Clark cannot be separated from the others who populated the scholarly environment from which systematic higher education research emerged and which it nurtured. David Riesman (author of *The Lonely Crowd*), Clark Kerr (President of the University of California in the 1960s and the 'Godfather' of mass higher education), Seymour Martin Lipsett (Harvard political scientist, who later took the neo-conservative turn), Ernest Boyer (Chancellor of the State University of New York), Martin Trow (Berkeley sociologist, who was in many ways Clark's *alter*

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ego), Neil Smelser and Sheldon Rothbatt (two more Berkeley sociologists) and several others – this luminous group of social scientists and (reflective) university leaders, of course, never formed a coherent ‘school’ but they did establish the *habitus* for serious research in higher education, in California, the United States and the world. Its ‘inner capital’ was initially the University of California at Berkeley – in Aaron Wildavsky’s Graduate School of Public Policy and later in the Trow’s and Rothblatt’s Centre for Higher Education Studies, and also in the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and its successors. Clark, of course, was finally based down the coast at UCLA, a rival but also deeply complementary centre which has produced its own dynasties of higher education researchers, after detours via Harvard, Yale and Berkeley itself.

Secondly, Clark researched and wrote a time of crucial importance for the development of contemporary higher education systems. At the start of career no country apart from the United States, and perhaps no individual States apart from California, New York and a cluster in the Mid West, had a truly mass system of higher education. Certainly in the United Kingdom in the decade before the Robbins report entry was restricted – fewer than 10% of the relevant age group received any form of higher education – and the higher education ‘system’, to the extent it existed at all, was merely an aggregation of three quite separate sectors, the traditional universities (fewer than 25 at that period), advanced further education and teacher training. In the rest of Europe participation rates were a little higher but an even wider gulf separated classical universities from other institutions offering higher professional education. It is sometimes difficult to recognise the comparative novelty of contemporary higher education systems enrolling millions of students in hundreds of large, and typically heterogeneous, institutions, despite their instant familiarity. It is as if they had always existed, although truly the past was a foreign country. This grand transformation was encompassed within the spin of a single scholarly career, and it first began and then gathered force where Clark lived and worked.

It is a simplification, although not perhaps an over-simplification, to say that he began with students and ended up with institutions. One of his earliest, and still among his most cited, publications, was on the so-called ‘cooling-out’ function of higher education (Clark 1960). Already in the United States it had become possible to discern the wider social effects of extended participation in higher education. ‘Cooling out’, in Clark’s terms, referred to the mediating role that higher education was coming to play between culturally driven aspirations in post-war America and institutionally determined (and constrained?) mechanisms through which these aspirations could be achieved. Higher education was becoming an essential lubricant. He highlighted, in particular, the role of the junior (or community) college. In the United Kingdom at the same period the dominant sociological framework within which the social functions of higher education were discussed remained that of the upward mobility (through cooption) of the so-called ‘scholarship boys’. The nearest, but inexact, equivalent of the junior colleges, colleges of further education, remained – and, to a large extent, remain – rooted in the world of technical and vocational education; efforts to develop something closer to community colleges, open-access entry-level higher education, remain largely unrealised and ‘higher education in further education’ an awkward (and anomalous?) category. As a result the idea of ‘college’ lacks the wider social resonance it has enjoyed in the United States for many generations (Boyer 1987).

Clark continued to be fascinated by the impact of higher education on the ‘character’ of students, a word which entirely lacks the *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*-ish tinge it has never lost in England. Following on from college’s ‘cooling out’ function he was interested in what more substantive differences it made to the lives of individual students. Together with Martin Trow he developed a typology of different student cultures – collegiate (football and fraternities), vocational (the focus of jobs more typical of older students), academic (tomorrow’s scientists and educators), and nonconformist (the New Left radicalism of the 1960s). Allegedly the typology was thought up during a coffee break in International House in Berkeley in the mid-1960s.

It was later incorporated into a larger study of student peer groups (Clark 1966). Once again this is relatively unfamiliar territory in England which lacks the intense focus on individualism and elaborate rhetoric of values so characteristic of American higher education. It was natural for Clark to link these generic topics with particular studies of liberal arts colleges, most notably of the upheavals at Wesleyan University. Such an endeavour would have been, and probably still would be, still-born in the United Kingdom – with the possible and peculiar exception of George Davie's – contested – work on the 'democratic intellect' in Scotland (Davie 1964, 1986).

In his later work Clark moved up the scale – to institutions and whole systems; and also from America to the world. He himself regarded his most important book as *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Clark 1983). His decision to 'go international', and to embrace comparative education, stimulated his efforts to develop an overarching (but non deterministic) theory of higher education. It also illuminated an intriguing oscillation between a belief in the superiority of American higher education and recognition of the need to learn lessons from other national systems. Clark was never an American triumphalist but he remained proud of the merits and achievements of the American system. Although other disciplinary perspectives were applied in *The Higher Education System*, the dominant framework remained sociological – and sociology of a particular time, place and quality, which will be discussed later in this article. However, his most cited work, *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation*, was comparatively late, fewer than 10 years before his death (Clark 1998). In it Clark attempted to capture a new wave of higher education which he discerned at the century's turn, a new organisational paradigm of universities as 'knowledge' enterprises freely and vigorously trading in complex markets rather than as academic institutions in which social functions had trumped economic goals and which were neatly arrayed in public – or, at any rate, stable and orderly – systems.

Clark himself provided his own schematic framework for categorising his scholarly contributions to the field of higher education studies in a still later work, *On Higher Education: Selected Writings 1956–2006* (Clark 2008). This collection of 33 key articles, extracts from chapters of his major works and published lectures provides his own account. His categorisation, therefore, offers a fascinating insight into how he saw, admittedly with hindsight, the major themes of his writing. The first section of the book is sub-titled 'Fashioning an analytical mode'. In addition to the 'cooling-out' article, one of his most seminal, it included his first articulation of what was to become an important thread in his work, both conceptually and methodologically, the notion of 'organisational saga'. It was this notion that enabled Clark to weave together other persistent preoccupations – with student culture and 'character', academic life, organisational structures and institutional transformation and, finally, higher education systems in the round. This first section also illuminated the development of his distinctive research style, carefully conducted qualitative research from which he derived clarifying concepts. This worked – well – both ways. First, it enabled his descriptions of particular slices of reality to be generalised in interesting ways. Secondly, this research style ensured that his grander concepts were rooted in empirical investigation and, to some extent, protected from the buffeting of competing theories (although one potential criticism of Clark's work is that these concepts had a tendency to be a-theoretical).

The second section he sub-titled 'Probing the American national system' – paradoxically perhaps because he always insisted there was no such thing as an American system of higher education. But he lived through exciting times from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s – the consolidation of truly mass system, the professionalisation of academic staff and, of course, the deep crisis which many universities experienced as a result of student activism. Clark wrote about these, with insight but also with balance. Included in this second section is one of his most distinctive articles, 'Development of a sociology of higher education', which is discussed in greater detail below (Clark 1973). Section 3 he labelled 'Cultivating cross-national insights' and,

broadly, comprises work published in the 1980s and 1990s. His earliest work was on the Italian system of higher education, perhaps not the best entry point into comparative studies. But his major work under this heading, of course, was *The Higher Education System* which has already been highlighted. By now Clark had become a higher education research 'star'. Feted by UNESCO and other international organisations he became increasingly influential outside the United States. But it also seemed to work the other way round; his increasingly sophisticated insights into non-American higher education systems led him to develop more nuanced accounts of the American experience.

The issue he addressed in these accounts was not so much what had gone wrong with American higher education after the early promise of mass higher education (most optimistically expressed before the 'Fall', in other words before the crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s triggered by student radicalism). Unlike many of his contemporaries Clark never succumbed to cultural pessimism (and political reaction). Rather the issue was the transformation of the American, and most other developed, higher education systems as the political (and ideological) consensus of the post-war decades crumbled through the 1980s, and the social democratic/ Great Society moment passed. This led to the work grouped in the fourth and final section subtitled 'Revealing the armature of university change'. His most significant contribution during this period, *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities*, has already been discussed. It was typical of Clark that as he moved into his fifth decade of research he embraced change as an analytical mode; not for him the comforting nostalgia for the status quo or the recent (or even distant) past. As a result his research trajectory continued to be dynamic to the very end. When he died his intellectual project was still unfolding, incomplete – as all the best such projects should be.

However, there is one aspect of Clark's research journey as exemplified in *Selected Writings* which deserves more detailed discussion. It is a double journey – from sociology to embrace other disciplines, notably economics, political science and history; and from a disciplinary perspective (very much rooted in the scholarly conventions of disciplinary research) to an inter-disciplinary perspective (which also allowed more political, even popular, discourses to be injected into Clark's conversations). The article 'Development of a sociology of higher education' published in *Sociology of Education* in 1973 is an excellent starting-point for this more detailed discussion. First, it is a clear but concise statement about the sociology of higher education at the high tide of the great post-war development of American higher education – and, as such, an intervention of considerable historical interest. Secondly, it is an excellent statement of the disciplinary base from which Clark embarked on his later inter-disciplinary journey – and, as such, provides some measure of the extent and success of that journey. Thirdly, it can be used to assess the currency at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century of the sociological programme which he mapped out more than 30 years earlier. Does that programme still represent a set of policy priorities and preoccupations, research methodologies and intellectual perspectives that remain current? Or, more specifically, is it necessary to develop a new sociology of higher education – for a 'market' system of higher education rather than for a strongly publicly oriented and socially directed 'mass' higher education system?

When he wrote the article in 1973 the sociology of higher education was still a comparatively new field – for two main reasons. The first, and more significant, was that mainstream sociologists were predominantly interested in large-scale phenomena that were shaping society in new ways; as a result, to the extent they were interested in education at all, their focus was on schools which enrolled whole age populations. Higher education still appeared to be too restricted, affecting too few people, to produce grand social change (however important it might be in forming elite political cultures and in terms of intellectual history). It remained a niche area – under-regarded perhaps and under-resourced. The second reason was that higher education was seen as treacherously familiar. Sociologists recoiled from investigating their own *habitus*.

The wider academic community did not encourage such investigation, either because it could be interpreted as intrusive, a threat even to institutional and so academic autonomy, or because it appeared banal, hardly a topic for serious study because higher education was a given, a known. Although this has changed substantially since Clark wrote the article, higher education research remains a marginal field in terms of mainstream sociology (and some other social sciences). Indeed the major impetus to the field has come from an influx of practitioner researchers and institutional researchers, which itself may have compromised the field's disciplinary credentials without necessarily enhancing its inter-disciplinary potential.

Clark listed four main areas of sociological investigation. First, he listed equality. To what extent did higher education promote greater equality – and to what extent did it perpetuate inequality? This was a natural preoccupation in the United States in the early 1970s because the post-war expansion of higher education beginning with the GI Bill and culminating in Clark Kerr's 'multi-versity' was in reality a grand experiment in social engineering, although expressed through an unprecedented extension of opportunities for individual citizens (Kerr 1963). The Civil Rights movement, and the 'Great Society', provided the wider political context in which this expansion had taken place. Secondly, Clark listed the impact of higher education on students – their values, their beliefs, their character, their culture. Again this was a natural American preoccupation in the 1970s. It is important to remember that well into the twentieth century the average American's experience of higher education was not of a large multi-campus research-oriented university; the key institution remained the 'college' (as it had been since colonial times). The emphasis on general education, sometimes in the form of a 'great books' core curriculum, and intense student life as expressed through fraternities (and other manifestations of what Clark and Trow had defined as 'collegiate culture') were characteristic of the American college experience. In Britain this has always been difficult to understand. Our focus has often been on the 'top' research universities. For all our talk of liberal education and pastoral care a rather unsentimental view of higher education, even in Oxbridge, has generally prevailed and a degree of cynicism about its capacity for moral improvement. Of course, in 1973 the emphasis on student 'character' had just been given a (very) sharp edge by the experiences of the late 1960s which still continued, when the behaviour of students seemed to suggest the opposite of being 'improved' in an old-fashioned American sense.

Thirdly, Clark listed what he called the study of 'academic man' (no doubt, 'academic woman' too) which was to become one of his major preoccupations. Although there had been studies in the past, usually of teachers in particular (often in those distinctive 'college') settings, two new things were emerging in the 1970s. The first was the sheer scale of the academic workforce, a mass workforce that seemed to have little in common with the old-style professoriat (and at times may even have resembled a kind of academic proletariat, an analogy that might have appealed at that turbulent but exciting time). The second was that the study of 'academic man' was becoming part of a thriving literature about professions and professional bureaucracies on a much wider scale. Fourthly, Clark listed the organisation of higher education itself. At this stage his interest was not so much in the internal organisation of individual institutions (which was to come later, with the rise of the so-called 'managerialism' – which he did pick up towards the end of his career in the shape of his interest in 'entrepreneurial universities' and the management of change); it was more in terms of groups of institutions – community colleges, liberal arts colleges, catholic colleges – and in terms of whole systems. It was this last element that was new. The existence of higher education is now accepted as a given. But even as late as the 1960s, and even in the United States, the notion of higher education systems was regarded as novel (and largely confined to the world of higher policy rather than the real lives of institutions).

Next Clark looked forward – and asked how the sociology of higher education was likely to develop. His focus shifted from topics to methods. He identified two approaches, both of which

are still familiar. The first he labelled the 'intensive' path; and the second the 'wandering' path. The dangers of the first approach were that it could produce what he called an 'inbred tradition of work' (he even used the phrase 'tunnel vision'). Clark feared that this relentless specialisation and focus on empirical research rather than normative enquiry could lead to too much emphasis being placed on the instrumental aspects of higher education as the expense of its expressive qualities. The danger of the second approach was that it could degenerate into a 'game of vignettes'; he believed that ethnography needed to be disciplined by a clear conceptual focus and also by systematic data collection. But perhaps the point Clark was making was not simply about the need for conceptual clarity and methodological rigour. His remarks may have prefigured the shift he later acknowledged from disciplinary focus (a sociological perspective as validated by the conventional apparatus of a peer-based scientific community) to inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary breadth (across the wider social sciences, and enriched by practitioner – and policy – perspectives).

Almost four decades later and on the opposite side of the Atlantic this list of research topics, and methodological reflections, retain much of their currency. Of course, there have been important changes. Sadly perhaps, research on equality/inequality has moved down the list of priorities among mainstream higher education researchers. Much of the most high-profile work on participation has been undertaken by institutional researchers analysing their own particular institutions' data (which has made it difficult to 'join up' much of this published work) or by 'think tanks' such as the Higher Education Policy Institute (where the focus, inevitably, has been on a short-term political agendas). As a result, although there is plentiful data about the impact of widening participation, there is perhaps a dearth of deeper structural analyses from which new concepts and theories (and, therefore, effective actions) can be derived.

In the case of research on students there has been a marked shift from the 'expressive' to the 'instrumental', precisely what Clark feared. Too much of the research perhaps is focused on student learning in a narrow sense, at the expense of wider considerations about how the experience of higher education shapes students' lives, lifestyles and life-chances. The greater reluctance in the United Kingdom to see higher education as any kind of moral project has already been mentioned. No doubt this has been a factor in encouraging a narrow focus on student learning and employability. It may also help to explain the comparative absence of studies about the deeper relationship between participation, both elite and mass, in higher education and progressive social and political change, of which there are many examples in the United States. A notable example is Amy Gutmann's *Democratic Education* (Gutmann 1999). In the rest of Europe these larger connections have also been explored. For example, Louis Althusser wrote about the political relations between academy and society in terms of a contrast between the temptation to treat the 'enclosed' stage of higher education as an alternative political reality and the attempt to open this privileged world to wider social movements (Balibar 2009). But in the United Kingdom there has been little sustained scholarly investigation of this transcendent issue.

With regard to Clark's third topic, 'academic man', a similar pattern of reductionism can also be observed. In the past two decades there have been fewer deeper analyses of the academic profession, of how that profession fits into wider professional structures (and, by extension, of how these professional structures are shaped by higher education). They seem to have been displaced by politically important, but intellectually less challenging, work on the academic workforce – often in terms of its renewal/replacement rather than of its core values (which, of course, is really what interested Clark). Finally, in the case of his fourth topic, research on higher education systems (both in terms of devising theories of how systems develop and also of comparative studies of different national systems) there has also been an important shift. One factor is that it is less clear how 'systems' are constructed when individual universities are increasingly encouraged to be 'entrepreneurial' – a tendency, of course, which Clark had

analysed towards the end of his scholarly career. The higher education 'systems' which developed in the second half of the twentieth century were effectively public systems in which the State played a key steering role. Even in public systems the emphasis is now on individual institutions are contractors – or as delivery organisations. A second factor is that, just as there has been a reluctance seriously to research and reflect on higher education's 'political relations', so there has been limited progress in investigating how higher education and research systems relate to other great systems of modernity (or maybe post-modernity) – culture, the economy and other social systems.

Perhaps these changes can be summed up in a single phrase – higher education research has become less 'sociological' than it was when Clark wrote in the early 1970s. Now the emphasis is much more on 'policy' – and, to borrow the celebrated distinction of the French historian Fernand Braudel, 'policy' in terms of *histoire événementielle* rather than the *longue durée*. There appears to be less appetite to investigate either more fundamental structural change within higher education systems or the larger connections between mass higher education and contemporary societies. Clark's role in this retreat from sociology was complex and ambivalent. In one sense he actively abetted it as he deliberately moved beyond sociology towards interdisciplinary eclecticism as his career developed. But in another sense he never abandoned sociology – or, perhaps more accurately, a sociological mentality (or sociological imagination). The later phrase, with its echoes of C. Wright Mills, is perhaps significant (Mills 1959). Clark was a sociologist of a particular time (and maybe place) when sociology could still recall its pre-history as the 'science of society' in the grand tradition of Comte and Weber and its comparatively recent formation into an academic discipline. Clark was only the second, or at the most third, generation of sociologists as currently conceived. Well into the post-war period sociology retained for some time its grander ambitions as more than a discipline in terms of subjects and methodologies but as offering larger explanatory schemes. Perhaps Clark's urge to go beyond sociology should be seen as much as an effort to reclaim those grander explanations rather than as a rejection of its intellectual bases. And what better subject of study than mass higher education, arguably the university's first pervasive intervention in society-at-large.

Reading through the more than 30 articles and extracts in *On Higher Education: Selected Writings 1956–2006* one cannot but be struck by two things. The first is that Clark's range was very wide. One way or another he wrote on nearly all the major topics that have been current over the past half century (and remain so today) – grand(ish) theory down to really quite detailed quasi-ethnographic studies (the latter especially in his early years); the research university all the way to the community college; the academic profession but also student culture; California all the way to Italy and points far beyond. And he wrote with great fluency and insight. In none of these many varied areas was his contribution not substantial. But the second reflection is that it would be a mistake to conclude that, just because of his wide range of interests, his work lacked intellectual coherence. He was never just playing, in his own words, 'a game of vignettes'. And what gave his work coherence was precisely his 'sociological imagination' – 'sociological' because that was his core discipline, where he began his academic journey; but also 'imagination' because the way he wrote expressed his feelings as well as ideas.

As has already been already said, Clark always emphasised the 'expressive' values of higher education over its 'instrumental' goals. In that he was a man of his times – and his formative times were the United States (and especially California) in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Even during the moral chaos engendered by the Vietnam War and the fears that the university itself was under siege by utopian but ruthless radicals, optimism about the inevitability of 'progress' in an almost quasi-religious Victorian sense remained – and a strong belief that higher education itself was a key player in this saga was equally strong. In the United Kingdom, still disoriented by the loss of empire (and industry), that feeling was much weaker – and the

confidence of higher education's role more tentative (and ephemeral). But in both American and British systems 'instrumental' have won out over 'expressive' values. Higher education research – not Clark – with its emphasis on 'policy' at the expense of the 'sociological imagination' must bear some of the responsibility.

Notes on contributor

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