

matter is that it only discusses policy in the UK, and mostly in England. It does not look outside of the UK. Thus, we lose the lessons that can be learned from the experiences of other countries of what can be achieved through educational reforms. Perhaps that could be his next book?

## References

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**The governance of British higher education: The struggle for policy control**, by Ted Tapper, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007, 257pp., £88.50, ISBN -10 1-4020-5552-8

This is an important book from two points of view. It is the first major book on higher education policy, studied from a national perspective, since Kogan and Hanney's *Reforming higher education* published in 2000. Tapper is the first scholar to be able to write with authority on the impact of political devolution on British higher education policy and his masterly account of the development of research assessment policy, the most critical force in the shaping of British higher education, from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) through the 2003 White Paper to the Roberts Review and the latter's eventual rejection, and the interposing of a metrics solution, provides the clearest account so far of a contentious policy area.

The second ground of the book's importance is that Tapper is a political scientist who regards an analysis of the development of higher education not as an end in itself but as an illustration of the changing relationship between the state and society in modern Britain. There are strengths and weaknesses in this position. On the one hand the study of higher education benefits enormously from the interventions of scholars from other disciplines – economists, political scientists, sociologists and so forth – but on the other there are dangers if higher education's unique identity as an area of public policy is not recognised. Tapper claims that 'The study of the governance of higher education makes sense only when placed in the disciplinary framework of political science' (8). This is a large claim which higher education scholars may think takes them back to Isaiah Berlin's famous essay 'The hedgehog and the fox' (Berlin 1953) ('The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing'), where Berlin compares writers who base their thinking on 'a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance' to 'those who pursue many ends, often related and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way'. Indeed, Tapper's own excellent case studies on the politics of quality, the RAE and on access would seem to suggest that he is by no means the hedgehog that he appears to be claiming to be.

The central thesis of the book, with which it is impossible not to agree, is that higher education is part of a wider narrative which begins with the political breakdowns of the 1970s and is taken forward by the recognition 'that there needed to be a restructuring of the funding, delivering and purposes of public policy, of which higher education was but a part' (225). He is also surely right when he concludes that, certainly over the last decade, there has been a fragmentation of state responsibility of higher education partly as a result of devolution

but also because of the incursions by the Treasury into policy-making and by the location of science policy in the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). (It is an illustration of the current volatility of policy-making that the creation of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) has brought research back into a close relationship with university policy and perhaps, more important, a change of Chancellor of the Exchequer has re-concentrated authority back into a single department.)

Where the historian might disagree with the political scientist is with the emphasis he places on political/ideological interpretations of changes which may have been the product of other forces. For example, he argues (227) that the change in the Government's approach to higher education with the arrival of Thatcher was ideological and based on the idea that higher education was an economic resource, whereas it seems to me that a more plausible policy drive, at least during the 1980s and 1990s, was the difficulty of reconciling increasing demand with Treasury economies. The 1981–1984 cuts, often seen as an example of Thatcher's hostility to higher education, were no more than were applied to most Government programmes; the introduction of the first 1985–1986 RAE was the UGC's response to Treasury questioning about the distribution of the research component of the recurrent grant; the earth sciences 'rationalisation' (which was primarily responsible for the UGC being seen as a 'planning' body) was not followed by chemistry and physics because the Treasury would not agree to fund the costs of implementation; and the control mechanism on student numbers (the 'MASN') was imposed in 1993 as a response to Treasury pressure to close off an open-ended commitment. Tapper is absolutely right to see the comprehensive reform of the public sector as being a main driver of policy towards high education, but it is arguable that over this period he undervalues the impact of budgetary restraint, and the politics of the annual dialogue between DES/DFES and the Treasury over budget allocations, as against an overarching theory about the role of the state.

For historians the trouble with an overarching theory is that there can be a danger of ignoring the untidiness of factual evidence. Much of higher education policy over the period was reactive rather than pro-active: the replacement of the UGC by the Universities Funding Council was seen in Whitehall as being no more than a technical adjustment rather than the major shift in policy which it later seemed to be; the 1992 Act was as much a reaction to the lobbying of polytechnic directors and the recognition that there were political points to be scored prior to a General Election, than to beliefs about creating a regulatory rather than a 'planning' regime; the idea of education as an economic resource, which Tapper locates much further back, only really took root post-1997 under Gordon Brown. (Under this reading, the transfer of the science budget to the DTI was simply a tidying-up exercise and to get it out of the Cabinet Office).

Occasionally, overarching theory can also encourage a misreading of the facts, as I believe, has been the case in the claim that Government 'orchestrated' the creation of the Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA, now UCAS). There is no evidence that I am aware of, and Tapper does not reference any, that the state 'engineered' its creation. Indeed, material in the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals' (CVCP) archive, confirmed by the official history (Kay 1985), points in entirely the opposite direction: it was first raised as an issue by the Incorporated Association of Headmasters but later became a general university concern that some institutions were being overburdened with multiple applications; this led to the Kelsall enquiry (1957) and the CVCP's Chapman working party; it was entirely a CVCP-led initiative. This was not therefore part of 'an important sequence of change [whereby] the state would apply pressures and the universities would reply positively in order to ward off direct political intervention' (211) – although the creation of the CVCP Academic Audit Unit, in the 1980s, would certainly merit that description. Nor can it be said that the Wilson group set up to

design a new admissions system, nor even the creation of OFFA, all of which stemmed from pressures within the Blair Government, can yet be said to justify the statement that the right of universities to select their own students is 'little more than a ritualistic reiteration of a faded value given that institutions increasingly have less control over the structure of the selection process itself' (220).

Indeed what is striking in the record that Tapper presents and, accepting his main thesis that the restructuring of higher education over the last quarter of a century has almost entirely arisen from pressure from the state, is how effective higher education's rearguard action has been in the fundamentals of how the system is run. Tapper does not present evidence that 'the liberal idea of the university and institutional autonomy' (227) has been overthrown, only that it is under pressure and may be fraying somewhat at the edges. The recent triumph of the argument against a wholesale reliance on metrics in the 2013 RAE represents a case in point. It is too sweeping to describe higher education institutions as 'creatures of the state' (234), although Tapper's general depiction of a transformation from a 'deferential' to a 'regulatory' to a 'prescriptive' state rings true. However, the picture is sometimes more variegated and the optimist might look back at the fragmented policy formation picture that Tapper paints and be reassured that parts at least of the higher education system have an inbuilt capacity for survival which may continue to frustrate the encroachment of the state. This book represents a very stimulating contribution to the debate as to how these institutions can maintain their core values in a changing governance environment.

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## **Knowledge is power! The rise and fall of European educational movements, 1848–1939**, by Tom Steele, Bern, Peter Lang, 2007, 315pp., £40, ISBN 978-3-03910-563-2

Popular education has been a vibrant element in the development of all modern European societies as they have evolved from feudal structures into the industrial and post-industrial eras. Modern societies, especially in their fully developed capitalist phase, require ever increasing levels of literacy, numeracy and appropriate technological and administrative skills to ensure that the workforce is equipped to build an efficient, competitive economy. The fundamental motivation for educational expansion, at the most general level, and spanning all sectors, is thus based upon the perceived needs of the economy at any given stage. It is from this base that what we now term skills-based, vocational training has developed and has been dominant.

There is, however, a wholly other dimension to educational development and analysis: the popular education which Tom Steele, following Habermas, argues constitutes a key part of the