

Higher learning in Portugal: A Veblenian approach to the evolution of organizations and hierarchies

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Abstract:

On the basis of an international project on higher education transformation in Europe, and a more in-depth analysis of the case of Portugal, I develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of the internal dynamics of universities (promotion, control and mobility analysis) and the overall evolution of the population of these very universities and higher education organizations (polytechnics, private organizations, etc.). The aim of the paper "J is to go back to Veblen's analysis of the higher learning in America (Veblen 1899, 1918, L 1919) and propose a theoretical framework and a limited number of working hypothesis for studying the transformation of the higher education systems in Europe with, in the present paper, a particular emphasis on the Portuguese case by way of exemplification.

The present contribution is a modest and original proposal for studying organizations that once interested Veblen and that interest all of us and that could respond to the continuous, recent and not so recent, appeal that the work of a central figure of American institutionalism (Aryrous and Sethi 1996, Hodgson 1998, Mayhew 1998).

Veblen can be considered in the present research as much as a source of inspiration for fresh and good ideas and working hypotheses (to a similar degree as Schumpeter is for innovation and industrial organization studies). It is surely also an important theoretical point of departure for giving an institutional bent and an evolutionary theory for the study of the internal workings of universities and the evolution of their very population through different periods of growths and crises.

First, I use concepts and hypotheses that Veblen used in his studies on the American universities (from Higher Learning in America or The Theory of Leisure Class) and other relevant works (such as the Theory of Business Enterprise). His study of the American universities was then in his time either weak or of recent creation and often

with a rather low level of cumulative scholarship, a case that strangely remember us some European higher education systems such as the Portuguese case.

Second, the evolutionary approach to (1) the evolution of the organizations (universities and polytechnic institutes and to (2) the dynamics of selection, hiring policies, promotions and mobility is better adapted for grasping the historical transformations of the national systems of higher education. The object of study is neither static nor simply reducible to representative agents.

Finally, the distinction between ceremonial versus production or industrial production is reworked in order to describe some of basic mechanisms in the higher "learning" system, such as the making of hierarchies of teachers, tenure systems, and the problem of internal and external mobility. This treatment will integrate notions coming from Veblen, like ceremonial adequacy, with others from Hirschman, namely the notions of exit, voice, and loyalty, Canguilhem (pathology and normal) and Spengler (the problem of order).

In the first section, I develop the general theoretical argument that I will adopt from Veblen and compare his context with the current one in higher education. In the second section, I will build on Veblen evolutionary concepts retained in the first part such as ceremonial adequacy with other contribution coming from organization theory, namely sociology and economics. In the case of economics, I will use in combination with the Veblenian arguments the concepts of voice, exit and loyalty advanced by Hirschman with the addition of the notion of apathy that some of his followers have developed for the study of organizations. A central theoretical notion in the present study is the concept of hierarchy that is linked to the concepts of normality and pathology. The two criteria are the building blocks or specific institutions for the edification and survival of hierarchies. The theory will be developed and illustrated in two parts. First, at the level of the organization (the university) the problem of hierarchy and (internal) mobility will be discussed. Second, at the level of the general system of higher education, the survival of organizations, the (external) mobility of individuals between the schools will be characterized so that we can get see how the critical factors of evolution are. The notions of hierarchy, normality and pathology will also be part of the treatment of the overall system with the introduction of the problem of order (Spengler 1948, 1968). The last section will illustrate more systematically the working of the system in the Portuguese case and discuss the problems of conflicts of rules and institutions that are at the center of the evolution and changes of the system of higher education.

Keywords: Institutions, higher education, hierarchy, internal and external mobility, organization theory, Veblenian economics.

Code (EAEPE): INSEC, ORGTH, SOCIO, VEBLE

Introduction

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for the analysis of the internal dynamics of universities (promotion, control and mobility analysis) and the overall evolution of the population of these very universities and higher education organizations (polytechnics, private organizations, etc.). The aim of the paper is to go back to Veblen's analysis of the higher learning in America (Veblen 1899, 1918, 1919) and propose a theoretical framework and a limited number of working hypothesis for studying the transformation of the higher education systems in Europe with, in the present paper, a particular emphasis on the Portuguese case by way of exemplification.

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