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Introduction

This paper reports findings from a project attached to the Centre for Global Higher Education exploring the historical relationship between higher education (HE) participation, macro-economic fluctuations and social change. The main aim of the paper is to explore the historical relationship between HE and economic crises to inform contemporary debates. The strong attention paid to the ways in which HE contributes to or is impacted by economic growth contrasts with the scarce interest devoted to the links between HE and economic crisis (Ball et al, 2010). Yet, turbulent times ask tough questions about the connections or tensions between wealth and welfare. As such, crises represent key turning points during which the political, cultural, economic and social dimensions of HE are often tested and confronted to issues about finance and provision. The study offers a historical lens on those multiple dilemmas which are back at the top of the policy agenda since the 2008 crisis. The key objective is to explore how the questions about wealth creation and distribution raised during past socioeconomic crises (1930s, 1970s) have been articulated to those related to the political-economic settlement in HE (PESHE). By PESHE, I mean the principles and mechanisms driving the articulations (and sometimes the tensions) between funding, equity and quality.

Higher education and socio-economic crises

The study is interdisciplinary combining history of education and political economy in order to examine the ways in which past crises influenced HE and reciprocally. The research follows a reasoned approach of the use of the past considering that although history does not repeat itself, lessons can be drawn from changes and continuities to illuminate the current context (Aldrich, 2003). It also builds on the enduring economic history tradition of informing contemporary issues with the analysis of past crises. Although the 1929 crash and the 1973 downturn are usual points of reference (Galbraith 1954; Dimand 2014; Gamble 2010), previous significant crises have also been explored by works associated to long economic (or Kondratiev) cycles (Loucã and Reijnders 1999). These are known as the First depression (1830-1848), the Long Depression (1873-1897), the Great Depression (1921-1939), the Long Stagnation (1973-?) and what some have started referring to as the Great Recession (2008-?). The research focuses on the last three. The literature reveals key commonalities and differences between those crises in relation to their origins, intensity and duration, their degree of internationalisation and impact on (un)employment, productivity and prices (Rosenberg et al 1983; Lewis 1978). Research also shows that these crises conform or differ according to the structural socioeconomic transformations they responded to, or the ones they have triggered (Fontvieille and Michel 2002; Mandel 1995). HE is one of those key transformations which remains underexplored (Brown, 2012; Carpentier, 2012; Geiger, 2010).

The study provides a comparative dimension with a focus on the UK, France and the USA which have all reached mass HE through different financial models. The research will map out similarities and differences between countries and will examine whether the historical trajectory of the funding and quantitative and qualitative developments of their HE systems impacted on and (or) responded to economic fluctuations.

Methods

The research design combines quantitative and qualitative methods to examine patterns and processes related to the PHESE funding, equity and quality during the three key phases of economic turbulences (1930s, 1970s, 2008-?).

A statistical analysis of a new dataset on qualifications will explore the historical trends, patterns and structures in finance and development of education before, during and after each crisis and compare and contrast them to key socioeconomic data.

The paper will report the first findings from this new dataset on HE qualifications gathering historical statistics on the numbers of degrees and diplomas awarded and their distribution according to gender, institutions, levels, grades, disciplines, general/technical. I will use the methodology of quantitative history which is a retrospective history ruled by national accounting principles (Marczewski 1961). This offers an exhaustive and coherent system of collecting and processing of data which provides homogenous statistical series comparable across time and space. I will consult primary sources in order to reconstruct complete annual statistical series

This focus on the formal qualification will complement our quantitative picture of HE. The series from the qualification dataset will be compared and contrasted to key data on funding and enrolment in HE (Carpentier, 2004). They will then be matched with key historical socioeconomic data including GDP, productivity, labour market and datasets on inequality, taxation and public spending developed by Piketty (2014) and Lindert (2004).

Those quantitative data will then be confronted to a qualitative documentary analysis of policies, practices, debates and discourses related to the PESHE and their connections with socioeconomic debates about wealth creation and distribution. Thus, the project proposes to compare and contrast changes and continuities in funding, equity and quality in education before, during and after each crisis along the following lines:

Trends and perceptions about the PESE before the crisis: What are the main characteristics and turning points of each crisis? Were they perceived as such by contemporaries? What were the trends, patterns and debates in funding, equity and quality of HE before the crisis?

Changes and continuities in the PESE during the crises: Have the levels and distribution of funding, provision or expenditure been affected by the crisis? Has the crisis influenced the level and social structure of access, participation, experience (staff/student ratio, pedagogy) and outcome (qualification, diplomas and insertion to labour market)? Has the crisis generated debates on the rationales associated to HE (growth, innovation, taxation, unemployment, citizenship, immigration, social cohesion, crime)? Were the working conditions of staff influenced by the crisis (professionalism, accountability, pay and work condition)? Was there competition between levels of education and with other social activities?

Education and the overcoming of the crisis and after: What did signal the end of the crisis? Was education perceived as contributing to its resolution? Has the trends and discourses on funding, equity and quality in education changed after the crisis? What happened to HE once growth returned?

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