

R5 Caerphilly Friday 7 December 9.00 –9.30

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Making stratification explicit – a study of verticality in German higher education

Stratification in higher education – as elsewhere – is a vague metaphor. Originating in geology, it has travelled to the social sciences sometime in the late 19th century to induce an image of the social as vertically structured. It thus helps to envision differences of scale between people and organizations. While sociological glossaries lack precise definitions, we can find two distinct ways in which the term is used in higher education.

It first refers to differences of scale among status positions or groups in society. Higher education contributes to social stratification by the means of a sorting machine that largely mirrors social class structure: children with high cultural or economic capital go to elite universities (e.g. Husén 1987; Naidoo 2004; Gerber and Cheung 2008; Khan 2012).

Second, stratification is used to describe an order among higher education institutions that is decoupled from social class structure. Higher education is framed as a field of variables in which organisations compete for money, research publications or students (Trow 1984; Palfreymann and Tapper 2009; Münch 2009; Cantwell and Taylor 2013; Marginson 2016; Bloch and Mitterle 2017).

While both notions seem to co-exist, they raise very different questions to the study of stratification and to a degree contradict each other. Either stratification among organizations is in flux and induces reputational anxiety (Tuchman 2009; Power et al. 2009; Ortiz and Muniesa 2017) or it is stable and homologous to class structure. The reason the two meanings reside so prominently next to each other (and sometimes even in the same article) without causing much of a stir is because they each refer to different roles of the university. Organizational/Institutional stratification mostly refers to research and organizational logics, while social stratification refers to education and career pathways.

As a metaphor stratification cannot solve the dilemma, as an analytical perspective it can. Rather than taking stratification by its geological and sedimented image we might rather look at stratification through the eyes of an archeologists. Here layers are complex, structured by erosion, mining, well digging, collapsed building structures and can be destabilized by the slightest brush of a trowel (cf. Pydokke 1961: 104-105; Barker 1998). In other words, stratification is less a metaphor and more a granular process of building up scale which has to be explained (Trow 1984)¹.

The German higher education system is an excellent starting point for such an excavation. Until very recently it has been characterized by a strong understanding of equality among German universities – both in research and in teaching (Stock 2018). Educational expansion, growth in private higher education providers, new public management and the Bologna reforms have changed its shape considerably but no clear vertical order among universities has saturated.

The presentation focusses on the process of stratification in higher *education*. It is based on seven case studies of aspiring private and public degree programs in the classificatory scheme of law, business and social sciences, conducted between 2012 and 2016. The research draws on 139 semi-structured interviews with faculty, administration and students, participant observation of courses, enrollment and graduation ceremonies as well as extracurricular events. It also used content analysis of mission

¹ Max Weber, the reference point for most social stratification literature, used the term “*Schicht*” (*strata*) in a similar way.

statements, curricula and university documents to understand the respective organizational discourses.

The paper argues that within a wide variety of granular changes (press relationships, ranking responsiveness, admission selectivity, curriculum rationalization, career building, etc.) stratification is strongly connected to the way universities *can* organize their degree offerings. Private higher education is less restricted by state regulation but more dependent on the way it is seen by potential donors and prospective students (private providers overwhelmingly live from hand to mouth). In optimizing various aspects of degree programs and study experience they can be seen as promoters of a certain kind of stratification. This stratification is structured by organizational agency and the way relevant topics in higher education can be integrated and positioned as organizational abstractions (such as internationality, career progression, student competitions, etc.). Stratification in other words follows a field logic in which verticality is dependent on socio-technical arrangements of visibility (search engines, rankings, GMAT- or TOEFL-tests, moot courts, etc.), the way these visualize and attribute qualities of higher education and how universities respond to them.

This kind of logic is opposed by stratification based on privileges assigned through the state. As “creatures of the state” (Trow 1984) German public universities are funded and equipped by the state and subsumed under sector regulation. While they have received wider leeway in building their respective profiles throughout the last decade, they are still very much structured through the chair principle, staff restrictions, equal access rights in admission and to a degree fixed student-staff relationships per discipline. They cannot organize their degree programs in the same way the private providers can. They build their reputation on history, a specific ideal of the university and their stability as a public research university.

With stronger regulatory leeway and a claim to organizational actorhood, public universities have also started to build some special degree programs that aim to distinguish from their counterparts (cf. Meier and Krücken 2006). They use similar measures as private providers. The latter on the other hand strive to obtain public-equivalent status through accreditation. Two logics are thus at play: sector stratification in which verticality is based on coercive state regulation and privileges and field stratification that follows the flux and competition of organizational agency, a wide range of socio-technical devices that induce visibility and the ‘hot international topics’ of higher education research (Ramirez and Tiplic 2014; Bloch und Mitterle 2017; Nespör 2018). Students, donors, academics, politicians and the press navigate between them, constructing various images that do not provide clear pathways into status positions. It is precisely because of these two opposing logics that a clear-cut vertical image, as explicated in stratification as a geological metaphor, has so far not been established.

Literature

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