The Strange Saga of Policy as Success:
Or
Some Thoughts of a heretical Nature
On
Policy, Rhetoric and Perception.

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Introduction.

It is always a pleasure to be back in London and doubly so when combined with the opportunity to address an SRHE European Event. 21 years is a long time to be away. So, for me, the pleasure is all the more real for being able to remedy this absence and, to be frank, is magnified further by sheer personal nostalgia as well. In this presentation, I do not intend to focus on the Bologna Process as such. There are good reasons for this, not least because some of the central issues it poses will be dealt with by my good friend Noel Vercruysse and that with his customary incisiveness and elegance. That does not mean I shall foreswear Bologna. Rather, I will use it as a device for illustrating certain issues that merit further consideration when dealing with Higher Education Policy within a comparative perspective.

So what I would like to do, if you will indulge me, is to reflect on some findings that emerged from a recent study, carried out in CIPES into the way the three Constituent Orders of Higher Education – the Academic, Administrative and Student Estates perceived the Bologna Process. And then, in the light of these findings, to explore some of the implications that arise for the general area of policy studies in higher education. In short, what does the way this particular stage – or building block - in the construction of a European multi-national higher education system - tell us about our field? And more to the point, how is our field in turn is perceived by what I once termed '*pays politique'* in opposition to the "*pays réel'* represented by the Three Estates just mentioned. (Neave, 2002; 9-18)

There are good reasons for focusing on the institutional level. The first and most obvious is that this level provides the ultimate test of how the Bologna Process is regarded by those who have the responsibility of integrating it directly into the student experience. Second, because what happens – or in this case, what is perceived as happening – is the ultimate test both of how far that which was endorsed by the leadership of Europe's universities has become embedded in the central activity of higher learning. And third, because most official studies and reports have tended to dwell on the quantitative aspects at system level rather than moving into the institutional level and the qualitative dimension though it has in all fairness to be admitted that the European Association of Universities did, at long last, take steps towards remedying the former dimension in 2007. (Crosier, Purser and Smidt, 2007) Such boldness, at least as far as the "correct" application of the Diploma Supplement, was both a revealing and a chastening experience.

In short, the CIPES study interprets progress as a sub set of implementation at the institutional level rather than the tracking whether legal guidelines had been taken up at the national level. It was effectively concerned with the *operational* outcome as opposed to taking formal legal outcomes as a surrogate. By refocusing on Bologna as an operational issue rather than evaluating it as a statement of legal principal and legislative intent, we sought to tackle two issues. First, was Bologna driven from the European level? Or by the national level? (Veiga, Amaral and Mendes, 2008) The second of CIPES concerns, like most research, was to cast light upon what hitherto had remained in stygian darkness. How far had the *political* dynamic of Bologna – for long seen as a pointer to officialdom's satisfaction at the progress made (Neave and Amaral, 2008: 40-62.) - in fact engage the informed attention of higher education's three Constituent Orders?

Survey.

The task the survey set itself was to examine the views and perceptions of these three orders about the way the Bologna Process shaped – re reshaped – the individual university and how such reshaping was perceived by those who have reform done to them. In all, some seven "comprehensive" universities were surveyed in Germany, Italy, Norway and Portugal. And from each 30 academics and 60 students were randomly selected to cover four disciplinary fields – Law, History, Medicine and Physics. 25 members of the Administrative Estate in each university were also included. In all, 947 questionnaires were completed and returned, a response rate of 35%.

To say the least, the impact the three Estates saw Bologna as having on their university was not devoid of ambiguity. Thus, when asked to express an opinion on the political rationale for integrating higher education systems in Europe, more than half – 52% - suspended judgement and a further 9% claimed to have no knowledge whatsoever! Nor was ambiguity absent vis a vis the impact of the 3+2+3 study framework For whilst just under half - 47% - agreed its impact had been substantial, slightly under one in four had no opinion whatsoever. Nor were the views of the "*pays reel*" any the less ambiguous when asked about the extent of convergence between degree systems – despite this being amongst Bologna's prime strategic purposes. Here too, 44% professed to hold no opinion on the matter! And whilst all three Estates expressed awareness of what Bologna had achieved *in other systems,* still, one in four chose to suspend judgement when it came to their bailiwick!

Happily, there are 'positive aspects' in the perception by the "*pays reel*" of what Bologna had achieved in 2008. Internationalization and recognition procedures had brought about major change – at least in the views of one third of those polled. (32%) Likewise, improvement in university support structures and very particularly those relating to the European Credit Transfer System and the Diploma Supplement were seen as significant by almost six out of ten. (58%) Interestingly, the area where Bologna was perceived as having very substantial consequence lay in the area of teaching methods, the development of flexible learning paths and greater student participation in teaching/learning activities.

That Bologna is construed by the *pays reel* primarily in terms of 'pedagogic reform' is, I would suggest, an important finding. I will return to the implications it would

appear to pose for policy analysis later. For the moment, let us note this: only in 2005, at the Bergen meeting of the Ministers in charge of higher education, was the formal issue of pedagogy raised and largely *en passant*. (Bergen Communiqué, 20005) Only in 2009 – one year after this survey was undertaken – did the issue of student centred learning emerge clearly as part of the Bologna discourse. (Louvain la Neuve Communiqué, 2009) But for now, what we can say is that the dominant perception or construct as Bologna as an example of multi-national reform in both senses of that term, reveals marked differences depending on the level one's analysis hones in on.

Contrary Perceptions.

And similarly, the perception by the *pays réel* of the specific areas of impact Bologna has had itself varies depending on which particular Order one concentrates on. As it does in respect of different 'disciplines'. Thus, for instance, Historians in the Academic Estate displayed greater sensitivity to the impact the Bologna degree structure had wrought. They were also more positive in their views about the importance of the Diploma Supplement in easing student mobility and improving attractiveness for foreign students. For lawyers, however, Bologna's impact concentrated clearly on pedagogic reform.

The Administrative Estate, for its part, took the view that both the Diploma Supplement and quality assurance mechanisms had been fully implemented – not altogether astounding since implementing it, is amongst that Order's central responsibilities and, in goodly part, its *raison d'être*! Administrators – perhaps naturally - took the view that the Diploma Supplement had indeed improved 'readability' across different systems of higher education. Nor was the Administrative Estate any the less sanguine about the beneficial effect the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms had played in strengthening public accountability.

Yet, such a 'positive attitude' in the ranks of Administration was not always echoed by the other Estates. Thus, for example, student opinion as regards the impact of the Diploma Supplement was less complacent. For the Student Estate, the Diploma Supplement shone rather by its "non implementation", a situation which, for the Academic Estate, also applied to the ECTS system, though the Academic Estate was far more positive in its views on the progress quality assurance systems had brought about in the general area of accreditation.

What is one to retain from these varied and often diametrically opposed perceptions of the impact Bologna seems to be having at institutional level? There are, I would suggest, not a few. The first of these is perhaps unavoidable. It is the fragmentation that takes place when the researcher seeks to give operational expression to legal principles and above all when what one is seeking to do, is to estimate the impact such principles and their operational expressions have upon established practice at institutional level. However, this is not simply a definitional or methodological issue. Nor is it confined to the world of the sociologist, public administration or the measurement buff. On the contrary, the same process of re-definition is an integral part of the Bologna saga, just as it is also all too evident in the brief historiography of the way Bologna has, until recently, been studied as a policy process. (Neave and Amaral, 2008: 40-62)

The Nature of the Beast.

Why this is so springs from the nature of the beast. Regardless of whether at European level higher education's agenda is still driven by the original Bologna Declaration and its subsequent add-ons, or whether it has been digested into the broader economic imperatives set out in the Lisbon Treaty (Gornitzka, 2007:155 - 178) Maassen The Lisbon Process: a supranational policy perspective; Neave and Maassen, 2007: 139 – 141) higher education policy and most especially one that has a European "dimension", drags in its train far more than the usual set of challenges involved in translating the meaning ascribed by one decision-making level into those referential terms and vocabulary current in another. There is always the risk of "being lost in translation" between the terminology *en vogue* at one decision-making level and their operational equivalents at a second. This difficulty, as every scholar knows, is certainly present even within single Nation-State systems between the legislative intent and the grounded operational outcome. (Weiss, 1984; Ceych and Sabatier, 1986) Of necessity, it is compounded when the comparative dimension is added. This is certainly one of the more charitable conclusions one might draw from the survey.

And here, as an historian's side swipe, it is as well to remember two basic truths: First, that from the standpoint of policy-making - both supra or for that matter, inter governmental – Bologna seen from the standpoint of our fields of study, is without a smidgeon of a doubt – the shape of things to come. It is also – and this is no less an historical value judgement – the most complex reform ever to have been undertaken simultaneously in the 900 year history of Europe's Universities.[1] To parody Winston Churchill "Never in the university's long history has so much been required of so many in so short a space of time!"

Success and its Significance.

That said, the point I am making is that Bologna is of high significance. Agreed, what it has achieved in constructing itself so far– and this too, as I have hinted, is largely a function of the particular level – European, national, regional or institutional - on which one concentrates. Nor is Bologna important simply for the degree of success – legislation passed, new structures set in place, and standardized practices and procedures introduced. I am not denying their importance. Still, as the survey I have just summarized shows clearly, the vital process which is the final institutional "embedding" into the quotidian practices and perceptions of Higher Education's three Constituent Orders - is very far from endorsing so happy a portrayal. Indeed, as anyone who has pored over the early monitoring exercises carried out by the European Association of Universities cannot fail to notice, such success is very much '*un succès à rebours'*. The deeper into higher education's systemic levels and institutional fabric, officialdom's attention penetrates, the more nuanced, the less confident and the more ambiguous the outcome. From the outset, Bologna was

[1] For those who might demur from this statement, some evidence may be profitably gathered from the recently completed four volume opus which appeared over the 20 years from 1991 to 2011, edited by Walter Ruegg and Hilda de Ridder Simoens *A History of the University in Europe,* Cambridge University Press.

heralded on grounds as loud as they were raucous to be an instant - if largely nominal - success. (Neave and Amaral, 2008:40 – 62) To be thoroughly vulgar, to anyone examining Bologna's presentational dynamic, the exercise began with a bang and, since 2007, is now beginning to discover the whimper! Whether there is a moral to be learnt from this, I am not sure, though in deference to our French colleagues, it may well be that "*Trop de succès, tue le succès.*

Even so, Bologna as the most ambitious simultaneous reconstruction programme to date in the history of Europe's universities – has another and from our perspective as students of higher education policy, a more enduring significance. That significance lies less in what Bologna has done and is doing, so much as the way we examine and analyse what it does. There is, in short, a sub plot to the history of success as political "spin doctoring". To see just how really significant Bologna is, a few mental gymnastics are called for. The first of these is to see Bologna less on its own account, less a *Ding an Sich* so much as one phase in building higher education policy as a European undertaking, permanent, on going as a focus of intellectual enquiry. The second shift in perspective demands that we refocus on European higher education policy seen not in terms of its Agenda so much as the impact it has had on the multiple domains in the study of higher education. That, after all, is one of the tacit reasons why we have gathered here – to sharpen our methods, tools, techniques of analysis. As is always the case with the study of higher education, we are - most of us in different ways - an integral part of what we study. By the same logic, we are also both the means and the manifestation of the intellectual mobilization that the European Dimension is bringing about in your Society, our scholarly community and its Invisible College. Though we take this for granted – *c'est notre métier* – this aspect deserves our attention perversely because we tend to take it for granted.

A Rapid Sally into the Dynamic of Higher Education Studies.

To bring the point home, let us make a quick foray into the unfolding of the study of higher education. Here I am well aware that each national system has its own very specific context and chronology This applies very certainly applies to the comparative aspect which, though there are exceptions, was a consequence of the initial decision to set up permanent organized groups primarily devoted to studying *national* provision. To this too, there are many dimensions. Adapting the study of higher education beyond its historic primary focus on the Nation State, is relatively recent. Amongst the first was T.R. McConnell's Centre for the Study of Higher Education, set up in the mid Fifties at UC Berkeley[2] (Clark, 2000: 8 – 9); in the UK the Higher Education Research Unit at LSE which, brought together to service the Robbins Committee, acquired permanent status in the late Sixties under the Directorship of Claus Moser. In Germany, though a number of groups dealing with higher education teaching methods saw the day in the early Seventies, only in the latter part of that decade was a long-term permanent research body set up at the then Comprehensive University at Kassel under Ulrich Teichler. By contrast, the embedding of cross national studies into higher education, outside such International

[2] Amongst its research staff were Martin Trow and Burton R Clark. (Clark, 2000: 9) The University of California system's President was then Clark Kerr, perhaps the most influential and incisive thinker in US higher education – a status he continued to enjoy right up to his death in 2003.

Organizations as UNESCO, OECD (Amaral and Neave, 2009:82 – 99) and the Council of Europe, showed a somewhat lagged response. Burton Clark's team, which he put in place during the Seventies at Yale, figures amongst the earliest to make the comparative dimension an explicit part of its mandate. (Clark, 2000: 19) The first moves within academia to move systematically and sustained in this direction, date from the late Eighties, though international organizations such as OECD and rather more fitfully, the Council of Europe and UNESCO can trace an interest as far back as the mid Sixties in the case of the first two.

The Dynamic of the 'Comparative Aspect'.

Where did the comparative aspect figure during the early days in the shaping of Higher Education as a domain of scholarly analysis? It is fair to see it as having an ancillary purpose – to provide a broader setting against which national developments could be placed. Amongst the annexes of the Robbins Report, for instance, were accounts of both the USA and the then Soviet Union. In short, comparative higher education saw the nation double checking its current status – or to reassure itself about the proposals under review by occasionally peeping into the neighbour's back yard. There is, however, a slightly different rationale, which began to get under way in the late Seventies and which gathered strength in the course of the decade following. Whereas earlier, the comparative dimension provided additional power and evidence to feed the domestic discussion of "the national agenda", the second was bolder, if not a little evangelical: namely, to make others abroad aware of the strengths and achievements of the Nation's universities, if not to convert them to the benefits to be had by adjusting their practices to those presented as more effective or less inefficient. An excellent example of this latter motive may be seen in the American-based Association for Institutional Research. It began holding regular meetings in Europe, eventually split off a Europe-based body - the European Association of Institutional Research - in the early Eighties. Interestingly, this particular venue reflected a very North American interpretation in its constituency line up, being conceived primarily as a meeting point between university administrators with those researching higher education. By contrast, where it was regularly exercised, the comparative dimension in the study of higher education in Europe tended, with the exception of the major international organizations, largely to remain within the purlieu of the Academic Estate.

By the mid to late Eighties, with the growing presence in the European higher education landscape of the then EEC and the provision of a juridical base for higher education that the Gravier Judgement (1985) conferred – we see the emergence of "dual mandate" research units. The role of external intelligence gathering for the home agenda thus combined with the mission of "noising abroad" the achievements, virtues, exceptional feats and initiatives in hand or envisaged at home. Succinctly stated, the comparative aspect was thus an integral part of their task rather than, as had previously been the case, having a supplemental or ancillary rôle. To the curious and those for whom empirical evidence is all – that is to say, all of us - I would suggest that the Dutch Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, launched in 1984 is an excellent bellweather to illustrate the way this intellectual dynamic in our field unfolded.

Verification by Self Awareness.

To judge just how rapidly the 'comparative', ' cross national' or 'international ' dimensions have in the meantime become the norm is easily ascertained. You have only to think back a little to the changes that have taken place in your own research units and centres over the past two decades. Or, if yours is less than a decade and a half in existence, the changes that have taken place in the nature, scope and contents of the projects it has undertaken during those years. CIPES, which has been my stamping ground for the past five years, was founded in 1998. From the very first, it took on a dual mandate, which is more than reflected in its output. More than half its reports and publications are taken up with the international dimension. I have not the slightest doubt that your units, if they have not already in a similar condition, are very certainly hot on the same path.

So rapid a shift in both emphasis and perspective is, not surprisingly, driven by many motives just as it is also an expression of what the technically elegant would term "a pro active" stance and what others would deem "entrepreneurial" behaviour. Which all goes to show that whether we call ourselves "researchers" of, or the rather more old fashioned, "scholars" in, higher education, we are all children of our times.

Delicate Issues.

The elision between the historic nation state perspective that our field had until recently with the "European Dimension" poses a number of very substantial issues to our field. Amongst them the following: can we today analyse national policy *without* including the European Dimension? This is no idle matter, and very certainly because much of what is often presented by the Prince and his servants is often justified by them as being the inevitable outcome of, or consequences springing from, that self-same dimension – or, to the more cynical, are interpreted by the Prince in this light, even if in reality the link is more tenuous. (Musselin, 2009) If I were to give a CIPES response – without, I might add, having consulted my colleagues – our view is that one without the other is tantamount to Hamlet literally without the Prince. We have explored this issue very closely. And our conclusions will shortly come forth towards the end of this year from the town of Dordrecht, where Springer Books have their being. *A vous de juger donc le moment venu.* (Neave and Amaral, forthcoming)

The other issue I have chosen precisely because the survey that forms the earlier part of this presentation illustrates it with blazing clarity. Is it possible to obtain what seafarers call "full purchase" – effectively a reasonable grasp over what is happening - across three very distinct levels of political or administrative decision-making? The issues posed by what Robertson and Dale have termed "Rescaling" (Robertson and Dale, 2006) effectively the fragmentation and relocation of the shaping functions of higher education on the one hand, down to the sub national regional and/or institutional level and on the other, beyond the Nation State as part of the inter or supra governmental level, are formidable. They are formidable precisely because of the on-going fluidity in their institutional location in contrast to the relative fixity in the administrative firmament they once possessed within the Nation State. The issues "rescaling" poses for instance for system coordination, to take but one item, are no less of a challenge simply because one of the outcomes of the intellectual

effervescence in the domains that contribute to the study of higher education has been to multiply the sheer conceptual terminology used to analyse it. Coordination has and is dissected within the canons of the Sociology of Organizations, Public Administration, Political Science in addition to the Sociology of Education and very certainly from sub-fields within each and every one of these major disciplines. The same phenomenon or *problématique* is thus open to immensely rich, diverse and varied analytical accounts.

This, you will say, is all for the better. We, in Europe, are at last testing - if we have not already moved beyond - the unimpeachable clarity that the Clarkian school of thought brought to our domain. (Clark, 1983) In so doing, we are in process of both refining and identifying the ways higher education in Europe has moved - and is still moving at different rates and with differing priorities away - from its historic siting at the bottom left hand corner of the famous Clarkian triangle of coordination, where State and Academic Oligarchy ruled in the Republic of Letters and Sciences.

Still, even if our conceptual universe is enriched by new categories and new devices in easing higher education's Eiuropean agenda forward – the notion of 'de agentification' and the Open Method of Coordination(Amarl and Veiga, 2011) may serve respectively as examples of this process of conceptual enrichment, this does not mean the more time-honoured notions are instantly irrelevant. This latter, I would suggest, is a particularly significant element, for the simple reason that very often those whom we observe are not always au courant or even take into account what to the world of scholarship and policy analysis are well documented and oft observed phenomena. Indeed, the Bologna process is itself a supreme illustration of this curious paradox. If we look closely at its early stages – let us say, prior to 2007 – when the predominant mode of analysis turned around the take up, enactment of the legal framework, when the focus of attention was on the interplay between the 'European' and 'Nation State' levels of decision-making, one paradox stands out four square. It was that policy-making itself followed what might be termed the "legal fallacy". The legal fallacy has two faces: the first is that legal enactment anticipates institutional reality; second, that policy follows enactment as a rational, linear process. In the jargon of the 'policy buff' this is sometimes known as the "Engineering model" of policy-making. (Weiss 1984; Cerych and Sabatier, 1986)

The Woes of a Linear Imagination and of the Legal Fallacy.

Whilst the "Engineering model" had its day in the Seventies, by the early Eighties and throughout that decade, it came in for severe mauling even amongst its adepts. (Heitor and Horta, forthcoming) Implementation is neither linear nor rational. Rather, it is both reiterative and untidy, subject to re-negotiation, re-interpretation and thus re-prioritization as its consequences are translated from the stated principle towards its operational outcome and consequences. There is more than sufficient evidence to show that what may appear to the "fathers of the feast" as a massive 'perverse effect', very certainly operates at the interplay between European and Nation State levels of decision-making. (Musselin, 2009: 181 – 206; Witte, 2009: 227 – 256) How far the "legal fallacy" was embedded in the Bologna Process from the outset is, I would suggest, clear for all to see in the particular methodology used to show a fathomless success. It simply contented itself with registering legal enactment as proof of that success and outwardly at least, by the way it thus defined the surrogates of success, it

dismissed any possibility of re-interpretation, re-definition not to mention hesitation. In short, having nailed the whole timing of the venture to a bare decade, Bologna as an example of higher education policy brought onto the European stage could take no account that the unfolding of the Process was in fact devastatingly non-linear. As the Bard of Scotland, Robert Burns pointed out more than two centuries ago:
"The best-laid plans o' mice and men
Are aft tae gang agley."

If this is not an unfair representation of the interplay between the European and the Nation State levels of policy-making, what the survey I presented to you shows is that translating administrative intent from the Nation State level down to the institutional level is more fraught still. In short, if there is one single conclusion one may draw from CIPES' foray into the milieux that have reform done to them rather than those involved in "doing" reform, it must surely be this: non-linearity is amplified further. Or to put a different slant on matters, re-iteration is reiterated, communication diluted and the perceived significance of what reform would have executed takes on an unquenchable ambiguity where once in the legislator's mind 'all was sweetness and light'. (633)

But, the convinced European will cry, we had to start somewhere. And legislative enactment remains in the purlieu of the Nation State even if resounding Declarations can be made beyond it and new practices urged on from the same level. I could not agree more. To this I would add however, that if legislation is necessary to move matters ahead, that is not the same thing by a long chalk as ensuring that its intent is realized in the exact form legislation laid down, still less within the chronology higher education leadership thought possible. If the truth were out, in examining the way the three Constituent Orders of Higher Education have responded to the first example of higher education policy having a Europe-wide dimension, we have not for the first time unearthed a basic feature that Bob Clark identified eight and twenty years ago. That is the "bottom heavy" nature of higher education at the operational level. (Clark, 1983)

The Final Heresy.

As a final heresy let me suggest this: The notion of higher education as "bottom heavy" was certainly more evident in those systems where the individual university enjoyed a high degree of self determination. It was also a concept forged by a scholar, intimately knowledgeable of the American University. (Clark 1983) The question this raises in its turn is whether other systems historically coordinated through legal codification were fully aware of the consequences of "bottom-heaviness" or even alert to the general phenomenon itself. I pose the question not out of speculative mischief, but because it has – and if my thesis is born out, will come increasingly to have - considerable importance as a key element in any future step to move European higher education policy on from its present condition. Why this should be so is no mystery.

One of the macro trends across Europe's systems of higher education is precisely the drive towards what the Prince in his infinite sagacity is pleased to present as enhanced and extended institutional autonomy. (Neave, forthcoming) Taken at face value, this development may well serve to increase "bottom-heaviness" and by the same token,

to strengthen yet further the capacity of the Constituent Orders to re-interpret and adjust future examples of Europe's 'reforming impulse'. Of course, this is speculative and can be dismissed – rightly perhaps – on that account. Prophecy ought not to be part of our trade, though it is made acceptable by labelling it as "anticipation"! Either way, whether this surmise comes to pass or vanishes like the mist in the morning, policy-making as an interaction across the European, Nation State and institutional levels will remain a crucial domain that justifies fully meetings such as this to weigh up the success of the venture.

Guy Neave.

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