

Learning Under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education Susan Brin Hyatt, Boone W Shear, and Susan Wright (eds.), New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books (Higher Education in Critical Perspective: Practices and Policies Series), 2015, ISBN 978-1-78238-595-0, 226pp., Hb. £80 Pb. £20.00

Reviewed by Rachel J Wilde

This edited volume unites a range of chapters investigating forms of neoliberalism within higher education. The collection is effectively a reflection of academic life in the contemporary era, and how neoliberal practices have affected academics as teachers, researchers, workers and activists. The concept of neoliberalism is dealt with sensibly in the introduction, the editors acknowledge its pervasive use and argue that the ethnographic detail in the chapters disrupts the idea of neoliberalism as a ‘coherent, cohesive project’ (2015: 5). As we travel from New Zealand to Philadelphia to Michigan to Massachusetts, the United Kingdom and Denmark, the notable point is how recognisable ideas and forms of neoliberalism find different kinds of purchase in academia.

The chapters vary in ethnographic scale. Shore’s case study of New Zealand has a macro focus, reflecting on how the meaning of the university has shifted in line with a utilitarian attitude towards knowledge. In comparison, Hyatt includes a detailed description of the history of Philadelphia as researched by her ethnography class. Her students’ investigations into the often combative relationship of her university to the local community evidences the role of universities in furthering neoliberalisation beyond their own gates.

Lyon-Callo’s chapter begins documenting middle class insecurity in Michigan and moves to discuss the lives of his students. Both groups feel threatened by reductions in standards of living, and so seek to secure their futures via individualised strategies. This, Lyon-Callo argues, directly contributes to those ideals and practices which produce insecurity in the first place. Like Hyatt, he describes his efforts in the classroom to help students recognise these individualised responses to social problems. Through providing examples of collective action elsewhere, he hopes to reengage them in developing collaborative ethnographic projects in their communities to address broader economic issues.

Shear and Zontine’s description of their department reading group, set up to address changes at their university, focuses on the difficulty of finding something concrete to rally around to effect change. Despite documenting their frustrations, they assert the university as an important place for dissent and resistance. Clarke argues a similar point, though his chapter takes a broader perspective again, charting the ‘modernisation’ of higher education in the U.K., with a particular focus on practices of audit and managerialism. While the description of such practices as Transparent Approach to Costing will not be unfamiliar to anyone who has worked in a U.K. university, collecting these together with a critical eye may help combat what Clarke terms ‘professional melancholia’ (2015: 144) and the daily, individual, frustrations of such changes to academic working to enable us, as a collective, to imagine alternatives.

Davis provides a strikingly personal depiction of the frictions between being committed to acting as an activist scholar and the potential problems this raises for tenure assessments and professional progress. Wright and Williams Ørberg take us back to the macro level, comparing the notion of university autonomy in the U.K. and Denmark. They present how

the rhetoric of setting Danish universities ‘free’ from state control actually meant that they were open to greater control.

At the heart of many of these chapters is a philosophical musing. The conundrum is whether the authors can prepare themselves, their own children and their student bodies for the way the world is – which nudges at everyone to behave as entrepreneurs, and engage in individually motivated strategies to progress – and achieve their desires to change the world by developing collective action and resisting these forms of neoliberalism. Despite each chapter seeking to offer some ideas for political action whether through teaching, scholarship or collaborations with those outside the university, the book as a whole is a rather discouraging depiction of the current state of higher education. Readers may find Unwin and Yandell’s (2016) ‘achievable Utopia’, as Anthony Paré describes it in the foreword, more hopeful. There is some comfort in the knowledge that others are experimenting with forms of resistance, and the familiarity of the frustrations and joys of academic life may go some way to creating a self-identified community. Despite this, the authors are still grappling with this most tricky contradiction.

This reader ended the book feeling somewhat deflated by a very promising start that did not deliver in terms of ethnographic insight or in the efficacy of the ‘activist-scholar’ ideas presented. Hyatt and Lyon-Callo’s teaching ethos and strategies, to use ethnographic methods to help students question their role and the role of universities in shaping systems of inequality, have provided excellent ideas to take forward in my own practice. However, I would have welcomed further detail and discussion of consequences. A greater emphasis on activism may have made it a more unique read.

Yandell, J. and A. Unwin (2016), *The NoNonsense Guide to Rethinking Education: Whose Knowledge is it Anyway?* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications).

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