

Anthropology Book Forum

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Wright, S., Carney, S., Krejsler, J. B., Nielsen, G. B., Ørberg, J. W. (2020). *Enacting the University: Danish University Reform in an Ethnographic Perspective*. Springer Nature B. V. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1921-4>

The anthropology of higher education is a small area in the subfield of the anthropology of education. While most anthropologists who work in education are doing research in K-12 institutions or informal educational contexts, there is a highly specialized group of anthropologists working in higher education. Nevertheless, *Enacting the University: Danish University Reform in an Ethnographic Perspective* by Susan Wright, Stephen Carney, John Benedicto Krejsler, Gritt Bykærholm Nielson, and Jacob Williams Ørberg is a very important book. It makes important theoretical and methodological contributions to social and cultural anthropology more broadly. And while it is looking at the university in one European country, the implications of this work are important for everyone who works in higher education globally. This review will focus on two main contributions. The first is a contribution to thinking about ethnography. Second, the volume makes important contributions to our thinking about institutions in a globalized and neoliberalized world and the ways the larger forces intersect with the activities of people within them.

Enacting the University: Danish University Reform in an Ethnographic Perspective is not a traditional ethnography. It is not the sole researcher engaging in participant observation with a specific group of people. Rather it is a team of researchers who are looking at a small set of large institutions (Danish universities) as they sit within a national and international context. Anthropologists tend not to see ethnography as a method but rather something like a stance toward the other. This perspective on ethnography offers the ethnographer a “tool-kit” of methods, rather than simply relying on participant observation. In fact, the focus on ethnography as a method in other fields has led to some prominent critiques in anthropology (Ingold 2014, Herzfeld, 2001).

But even as a stance toward the other, traditionally, anthropology has thought of that other in fairly simple terms. And when one begins to think of the other as “Danish Universities,” this raises a whole host of new problems. These are problems that some anthropologists have been trying to address (Holmes & Marcus 2008, Marcus 2011, Riles 2000, Strathern 2004). In a global world, ethnography often needs to be practiced in teams, and those teams need to be able to echo the kinds of collaborations that one sees in other institutions and organization in the global economy (Marcus 2011). Following Riles (2000), anthropologists are not outside of the global networks they study but are themselves part of these complex institutions and networks where there is no outside.

Wright and her team very much take this principle of being a team within the network to heart. And to understand Danish University reform ethnographically, the team takes on the different levels of analysis woven together with Wright’s Introduction and Conclusion. In this way, they are able to look at interactions and discourses at the macro level of the OECD, EU, and Danish government, as well as at the levels of university leaders, university faculty and researchers and students.

This leads directly to some of the theoretical contributions the book makes to the study of universities and large-scale institutions within a global context. In the opening chapter and the Conclusion, Wright explains the two senses of the term “Enacting.” Drawing on the perspective that developed in British cultural studies and the Birmingham School, enactment on the one hand is the enactment of laws and the ways that power frames the field withing with actors interact. The second sense of enactment is the more on the ground struggles and practices of individuals who are engaged in a range of practices, from interpreting how to best follow the law to active resistance and attempts at rearticulation. And even among the elite policy makers and the university leaders, there is not a single vision, but rather a set of ideas that people interpret differently. Using a number of theoretical tools from Stuart Hall, Norman Fairclough, Michel Foucault, Anna Tsing, and many others, the teams look at the ways that the transformation of the Danish University, has been partial, met with resistance, but ultimately the university is in the process of change.

Wright shows that within the OECD, at the most global level, and the EU and Danish government, there was a shared sense that universities needed to be aligned so as to become more competitive

in a global knowledge economy. But even at the highest levels, Wright shows, through detailed ethnographic work, that change was not a coordinated elite plan, but rather a shared view of the world among a fairly small group of elites. One of the ideologies among elites is a different sense of freedom. Wright shows us how the idea of freedom among the politicians and policy makers is not the traditional notion of academic freedom, but rather seeing the university as an individual and free agent capable of making contractual relations with other for-profit players in the economy providing the knowledge and technologies that the market demands. Wright and Ørberg show that the process of articulating the relationship of political leadership to organizations in the society went through a series of changes. And as universities went through those changes, they became freer, but at the same time more beholden to the state, because as free actors they needed to earn their keep rather than just relying on an assumed budget from the state. At no point in the work do we have a simplistic view of the powerful dominating or the less powerful simply being dominated. But the overall effect of the changes in legislation in Denmark has been the transformation, and perhaps what I would call the destruction of the modern research university as originally envisioned by the Humboldt tradition. Indeed, if the modern university was founded on an idealistic contract with the state where the individual and society is called upward through and unfettered pursuit of knowledge, the new contract is one that is one where all are called to help produce profit for the knowledge economy, the new definition of well-being.

The book moves from this larger view through each of the levels of the university. Carney looks at how university rectors have dealt with the new legislation and the new pressures on them to, like a corporation, make their institutions leaner and more accountable to the goals of supporting the knowledge economy. In important ways these university leaders become more like corporate CEOs and begin after the 2003 University Law to try to make quick and sweeping changes to the structure of the university and the makeup of the faculty. Using a Foucauldian model, Carney discusses the ways leadership uses a discursive model for articulating what is normative within the university. Academic decisions shift to financial ones as new priorities are articulated at different levels. And while the first wave of reforms and reform leaders were resisted, and several of them replaced by leaders who pursued the agenda more softly, the overall effect of these efforts have been to change the university and its orientation to teaching and knowledge in significant ways.

As Wright showed in the early chapters of the book, “freedom” and “democracy” were floating signifiers. Policy makers and politicians used the slippage in these terms to move from a traditional notion of academic freedom to a free institution, free to offer its services in the global information marketplace. And so, the university is freed on the one hand as an economic actor. But on the other hand, it gave the state more control over the university by using an accountability discourse and seeing accountability in terms of being an economic service to the public. Krejsler, like Carney, shows that the discursive play around key signifiers is both a mechanism to control behavior, but at the same time can be invoked as a strategy of resistance on the part of academic faculty. And further, Krejsler shows that faculty’s attitude toward the changes in the university vary by field and type of institution. The success in slowing down the process of instrumentality also varies by institution as well, with the older more established universities being able to more successfully deploy an Humboldtian discourse surrounding the status of the university. In different ways, much of the discussion is about how academics are positioned by the knowledge economy discourse, and how they responded by attempting to position themselves within the Humboldtian, academic freedom, discourse.

In my own work, I suggested that university students in the United States, struggling for the rights to be part of the process of knowledge production in the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately lost that battle, but in the process gained consumer rights. And this shift in freedom and rights was part of the larger American transformation of the university. In a somewhat similar way, but in a very different context, Nielson talks about the struggles over imagination of the student in the Danish context. She uses the notion of “figures,” a concept articulated by several anthropologists, to talk about the ways that university students have changed over time and particularly from the 1960s to the present. For Nielson, a figure is both a product of imagination, but also a social category that has been forged from the empirical context in which students find themselves. For example, the current notion of the student as consumer is both a product of social imagination, but students are also literally engaged in consumer behaviors and activities in relationship to the new marketized university. Nielson captures the ways that student have moved from struggling to have claim in the production of knowledge within the university, to a more issue-oriented approach to their relationship to knowledge within and without the university. And while students have moved to a

more “consumer rights” position, they also remain a political force in the ways, as she points out, that Hardt and Negri (2004) might see political struggle.

Enacting the University gives us a lot of detail at a number of different levels of the changes going on in Europe and Denmark. But the book has implications for these processes that universities are facing around the world. And while the particulars networks and institutions vary in different locations, the increasing focus globally on an instrumental rationality to evaluate universities is almost universal. Rider (2009:87) drawing on the vision of Humboldt and the sociologist Robert Merton, suggests there is real value in the autonomy of science. Scientific discovery needs to be separate from the particular instrumental goals of various actors. This is true for the good of society, so that science does not get adopted for nefarious purposes. But it is also true, that scientific discovery, even discovery that is useful for the economy, cannot always be preplanned. Otherwise, it would not be discovery. The processes that Wright, Carney, Krejsler, Nielson, and Ørberg discuss are ultimately detrimental to universities as institutions, and to society at large.

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