



Bottrell, D., & Manathunga, C. (Eds.) (2021). Resisting neoliberalism in higher education. Volume 1: Seeing through the cracks. Palgrave MacMillan.

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Introduction

This book forms part of a rich literature on the debate over the idea of the university. Historically, this literature has been concerned with who and what is taught, what kind of knowledge is produced as well as the design and location of university campuses. Charles Kelsall's *Phantasm of an University* (1814) is one oft cited example. Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Henry Newman are others – in Western Europe at least. However, as this book points out, the literature tends to be somewhat Eurocentric and overlooks institutions of indigenous higher learning in other parts of the world that were often destroyed by European colonialism. Furthermore, the literature tends to be highly gendered as the authors point out referencing ideas of great white men and ignoring the contributions of women to the production and dissemination of knowledge within universities.

Grounded in political activism, debate about the idea of the university took a more critical turn with action taken by the Students for a Democratic Society in the USA and globally as part the 1968 Student Movement within which students (and others) critiqued not only the nature and form of universities, but also their purpose in capitalist society. More recent academic debates about the idea of the university have come under the umbrella of Critical University Studies which examines the shift from a public to a private model of higher education provision since the 1970s and is grounded in a critique of late capitalist society. Here, there is a specific focus on neoliberal policy and reforms, culture, ethnicity, gender, academic labour and student debt. This debate has continued both inside and outside higher education as evidenced by the number of organised strikes, protests, student occupations and the free university movement that emerged in the early 21st century across the world (alongside the Occupy Movement and other forms of political activism). What is clear from these debates, critiques and activism is that there has, and continues to be, a struggle over the idea of the university. That is a struggle over its very nature, purpose and form within society.

Since the 1980s, there has been a tendency around the world to rapidly restructure higher education provision. This process, overseen by governments of different political persuasions and underpinned by neoliberal ideology, has seen higher education shift from what is often described as 'higher education as a public good' or the 'idea of the public university' to a more entrepreneurial and corporate model of provision. While universities have historically been private and elitist institutions, there seems to be a collective lamentation (at least in academic circles) for the demise of the 'golden era' of the idea of the public university, which is considered to lay in ruins, destroyed by an act of intellectual vandalism and replaced with a neoliberal model of provision. However, as the book rightly points out, not all was well within the idea of the public university and the authors are not agitating for a nostalgic return to it but, instead, the prefiguration of a new idea of the university.

Integral to the idea of the neoliberal university has been the shift to a more financialised and marketised model of provision. This includes attempts to shift the burden of funding higher education from the state to individuals through the introduction, and increase, of tuition fees. Furthermore, there has been an attempt to impose market principles through an emphasis on 'student as customer' and 'student voice' and the external imposition of quality assurance measures to create competition between higher education institutions for student numbers.

These reforms have been underpinned by the logic of neoliberalism and the belief that embedding market principles will drive up the quality of provision and improve value-for-money or efficiency. This will be achieved, according to neoliberal reformers, by increasing competition among higher education institutions to attract student numbers with undergraduates gravitating towards popular and well-run courses, forcing others to improve the quality of their provision, reduce prices or go out of business. This is not only part of an attempt to impose a neoliberal model of the university, but also the (re)imposition of capitalist social relations to produce conditions for the creation and extraction of profits by attempting to commoditise what is produced in universities – teaching and research.

These reforms have resulted in increasingly precarious working conditions for academics, deteriorating pay, contractual and pension entitlements, and increased levels of stress and mental health problems as academic labour is intensified and casualised. Furthermore, it has led the erosion of courses based in the arts, humanities and social science that have had their state funding eroded or completely removed with emphasis (and funding) being placed on STEM subjects instead. Concomitantly, students face increased levels of debt, career uncertainty and are forced to juggle their education with paid employment, voluntary work and caring responsibilities while in full-time study. Unsurprisingly, higher education students and staff are experiencing a mental health crisis, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These reforms have not gone unopposed and a diverse range of struggles over the idea of the university have emerged in response to these reforms both inside and outside of mainstream higher education. The struggles include trade union strikes, undercommons, occupations, protests and the creation of autonomous learning spaces. These struggles and resistance are often referred to as cracks – cracks in the logic of the neoliberal idea of the university that is being imposed across the globe. These cracks are spaces within which alternative models of higher education provision *contra* the neoliberal logic are prefigured that “pursue alternative priorities resistance and refusals” (p. 2).

The importance of this book is that it documents these cracks. It provides an account of the diverse range of struggles, resistance and experiences that academics have within the neoliberal university and how they try to resist the imposition of its logic. These accounts capture the practical and emotional implications of the neoliberalisation of higher education and consider the intersectional discrimination and oppression groups face in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class (both inside and outside of the university). Much of what is documented in the book will no doubt ring true for many of those that work(ed) in higher education. Indeed, one of the strengths of the book is its ability to connect on an emotional level with the reader. However, the book is much more than a tale of woe about life in the neoliberal university. The documentation of these struggles engenders a spirit of love, hope and political resistance that many readers will find inspirational.

Both editors and the contributors to this book have backgrounds in education and educational research, especially with regard to social justice, social pedagogy and intersectional inequalities within education. The composition of the book was a communal process and a political act of love that emerged out of conversations between the authors about their struggles in higher education. This blend of expertise provides astute insights into higher education policy and practice in the Australian university context. The book is intended for those that work within higher education or who are interested in the impact of neoliberal reforms to the sector and those involved in the struggle over the idea of the university and serves as a platform for likeminded people to share experiences and connect. The key message of the book to those in higher education (or previously inside) is that you are not alone.

That others share your experience. That others are resisting and struggling and walking and asking questions about alternative models of higher education that are grounded in “academic freedom, autonomy, participatory and cultural democracy and the public good” (p. 23).

The book is prefaced with a powerful foreword by Antonia Darder about the politics of love which perfectly captures the sentiments and hopes of the rest of the book. Chapter 1 does all of the heavy lifting and provides a forceful critique of the neoliberal university and introduces concepts, such as ‘cracks’ and ‘prefiguration’. This is an important chapter as it gives authors in the subsequent chapters space to reflect on their experiences rather than revisit conceptual definitions important to the progression of the text. The book is divided into two sections, Part 1: Seeing Outside-In and Part 2: Seeing Inside-Out. Part 1 is an account of the intensification of academic work and highlights how the transformative claims made about university education’s cultures of respect and care towards its staff and students are a pretence. “Behind the shiny public façade, we see how ‘traditional’ aims are carelessly discarded by the hand of authoritarian managerialism” (p. 17). Part 2 focuses on the cracks or spaces within neoliberal closure and openness within which people struggle and prefigure alternative forms of higher education provision. The chapters are presented as a series of reflections and autoethnographic accounts of life within the neoliberal university. The autoethnographic accounts allow the book to convey the experience and sentiments of working conditions and the impact neoliberal reforms have had on people as well as educational provision. Reading the book, you get a tangible sense of the frustration and heartache of the authors and much of what is written will resonate with those who work(ed) in higher education.

This book makes a meaningful contribution to the literature in this area. It documents and reflects in detail about people’s experience with the neoliberal university in the Australian university context. Furthermore, it provides hope that there are cracks in the neoliberal university within which resistance, struggle and the prefiguration of alternative forms of higher education provision can be experimented with. As such, the book is similar to publications in the UK (see Lawrence, 2021; Noble & Ross (Eds., 2021); and Hall & Winn (Eds., 2017) in that there is a similar critique of the neoliberal model of higher education and an exploration of how it might be organised differently along more egalitarian, democratic, collective and humanistic lines.

Overall, this book provides an insight into life within the neoliberal university within an Australian context. The autoethnographic accounts capture the difficulties and struggles that people face and how they resist the imposition of neoliberal reforms within higher education. The strength of the book is how it examines the prefiguration of alternative ideas of the university that are grounded in love, hope, compassion, social democracy and social justice. I highly recommend this book to those who work(ed) in higher education or involved in the struggle over the idea of the university.

Additional references

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