

Book Review

Learning under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education

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Learning under neoliberalism: Ethnographies of governance in higher education, edited by Susan Brin Hyatt, Boone W. Shear, and Susan Wright ethnographically documents the changes to institutions and subjectivities wrought by the neoliberalization of higher education (e.g., audit culture, marketization, students refigured as consumers, managerialism) and examines the possibility of pedagogical and organizational interventions. This book goes beyond its title's promise of "ethnographies of governance" and shows how scholars and educators have sought practical and local ways to disrupt the dismantling of higher education. The volume provides both useful analyses of neoliberalism's varied impacts on higher education and inspiration for instructors hoping to develop class projects that can create both critical awareness and action by their students.

The book is comprised largely of autoethnographies of scholarly life in public universities. Written by faculty members analyzing their own experiences in classrooms, interacting with peers and stakeholders, and in confrontations with

administrators, the authors are highly reflexive about the institutional pressures (e.g., budget cuts, threats to tenure, increased competition for funding) that push faculty to become “increasingly calculating and competitive rational actors” (Shear and Hyatt 12). However, only two of the essays (Hyatt’s Chapter 2 and Lyon-Callo’s Chapter 3) rely on data from fieldwork specifically designed to investigate neoliberal reforms. The other chapters, in contrast, draw from the authors’ experiences with their own universities.

The essays as a whole make careful use of the term neoliberalism, drawing on JK Gibson-Graham’s “weak theory” of capitalism to focus their attention on specificity, variation, and sites of possibility. Several authors call attention to the perils of ahistoric assumptions that juxtapose contemporary neoliberal interventions with an idyllic past of the university as unburdened by class politics or conflict with the state, emphasizing how effective programs of change depend on realistic appraisals of the past coupled with an acknowledgement of the unique depth and intensity of contemporary restructuring.

Three of the chapters examine the histories and current instantiations of neoliberalism in countries outside the USA, refuting characterizations of neoliberalism as monolithic, coherent, or cohesive. Cris Shore’s Chapter 1 examines the history of neoliberal interventions in New Zealand higher education since the 1980s, detailing how conservative and liberal governments have spent more than thirty years enacting changes (e.g., education as private investment, not public good; reliance on tuition from international students) regarded as novel elsewhere. Shore combines historical data with his own experiences at University of Auckland, focusing on New Zealand’s creation in 2003 of a market-mimicking Performance-Based Research Fund, which based the allocation of research funds on individual (not departmental) rankings and resulted in anger at a system that compelled faculty to act in new “entrepreneurial, individualistic, and competitive ways” (42) and undermined collegiality. John Clarke’s Chapter 5 examines universities in the UK, where support has been withdrawn for non-STEM fields and universities have been reimagined as businesses and faculty as subordinate staff to be managed. Clarke engages in a psychological interpretation of the effects of these changes, asserting that “collective professional melancholia” (144) has resulted in a nostalgic desire for the past glory of academia rather than considering how effective change will require imagining new ways forward. Finally, Susan Wright and Jakob Williams Orberg’s Chapter 7 analyzes the paradoxical rhetoric deployed by Denmark’s government when it declared Danish universities to be autonomous vis-à-vis the government at the same time that it reorganized funding to make universities beholden to government benchmarking that emphasizes

outputs and profitability, not learning. These chapters nicely complement the USA-focused articles, reminding scholars that the “global knowledge economy” may be treated as a singular phenomenon in the rhetoric of politicians and policy makers but its effects on universities vary by nation.

Susan Brin Hyatt’s Chapter 2 details her experience leading undergraduates in a research collaboration with community activists to interview and observe the community surrounding Temple University, an African-American neighborhood characterized by the university as poor and blighted. They quickly learned, however, that the self-characterization of the university as “‘saving’ the community from an ‘inevitable’ spiral of decline” (66) belied the complicity of universities in deleterious development plans. The students found that by funneling resources to private developers who are creating upscale housing and retail designed to attract the kind of white affluent students whose tuition dollars help offset dwindling state investment and whose high test scores improve rankings, Temple was undermining the community it claimed to be helping. The students’ research was printed and distributed for free to ten thousand residents in the researched community. Hyatt acknowledges that the class project did not itself produce substantive interventions but cites the residents’ positive reception of the project as a contribution to the community’s fight against the university.

Vincent Lyon-Callo’s Chapter 3 examines individuals’ responses to the vagaries of neoliberalism both in public K-12 education in Michigan and among undergraduates at Michigan State University. Lyon-Callo focuses on how members of the middle-class react to increased precarity by “favoring individual privilege over collective efforts to transform the systematic conditions producing increased inequalities” (81). He argues that people are aware of the existent problems but feel too powerless to pursue collective solutions. In an effort to disrupt this feeling of impotence, he directed his upper-level students in a collective project that interviewed more than 150 individuals about their experiences in Michigan’s doldrums economy. These interviews formed the basis of activist ethnographic research proposals, which encouraged students to see collective action as possible. Like Hyatt, Lyon-Callo admits that teaching students how to more accurately see the causes of inequality is only a first step to real social change, though hope can be found in how some students actually implemented projects like community gardens.

Boone W. Shear and Angelina I. Zontine’s Chapter 44 is an autoethnography of the reading group and associated conference that were the impetus for the book as a whole. The authors tell a cautionary tale of how a reading group meant to

produce real interventions became paralyzed by their new-found knowledge, as members sensed that only a total dismantling of neoliberalism could solve the problems they had identified. Unfortunately, the authors are not clear on exactly why the reading group disbanded after the conference, whether from frustration at not achieving their political aims or more practical reasons like departing leadership.

Dana-Ain Davis's Chapter 6 provides the volume's most sustained examination of how racial minorities and activists are marginalized within the neoliberal project, especially when conservative audit cultures overvalue courses like Western Civilization in which whiteness is conflated with the universal. Davis details her experiences as junior faculty in charge of a Global Black Studies program and the conflicting pressures of a school that wanted the program for promotional purposes to boost its rankings but did not want to fund it because of conservative critiques of such programs as "political" and unprofitable. Not only does she reveal the fissures and contradictions of the neoliberal project, but she also gives voice to the fears that can plague scholars, especially the untenured, when progressive research and pedagogy are attacked for "liberal bias" but conservative viewpoints are deemed apolitical because they support the status quo.

Davyyd J. Greenwood's Afterword does a thorough job of considering the individual chapters as a whole, highlighting the successes and shortcomings of the volume. Greenwood rightly notes that all the essays focus on public universities and thus provide little insight into how the logics of neoliberalism impact other settings, like private universities and colleges and for-profit schools, suggesting that future research should examine these sites. I would add a recommendation to examine higher education outside the industrialized West where neoliberal policy has been advanced by organizations like the World Bank. Greenwood also mixes praise for the authors' efforts at intervention with a tempered critique of the bulk of those interventions being primarily in the realm of increasing understanding (i.e., intellectual) rather than practical changes.

The key shortcoming to the book is its lack of ethnographic observation of the administrative apparatuses through which neoliberal tenets are made manifest in higher education governance. Authors rely primarily on historical data and their own experiences in higher education; only a few authors (Davis and Shore) discuss experiences in leadership positions as a source of insight into the means by which ideas become policy and then practice. Getting access to these bodies is admittedly difficult, especially given their interest in avoiding scrutiny and denying demands of shared governance. Without this data, though, the volume is more about the

experience of being governed than the actual processes of governance seemingly referenced by the subtitle. The inclusion of such perspectives might have alleviated the homogenization of administrators noted in Greenwood's Afterword.

As a whole, the editors have accomplished their goal of not only detailing the complexity and variety of higher education reforms gathered under the heading of neoliberalism but also reminding readers that there are alternatives and that all hope is not lost. The essays collectively provide a solid discussion of neoliberalism as complex logic and practice, which will be a boon for scholars and students trying to understand just what is happening in our universities. If we can see the cracks and fissures in the neoliberal project, which, as the authors document, are inevitable given the competing and conflicting logics of the various interventions deemed neoliberal, we can begin to see a way forward. This is a hopeful message in these trying times when the continued dismantling of public universities and colleges by politicians myopically focused on instrumental outcomes threatens the much needed liberatory possibilities of higher education.