



Through a glass darkly: the social science look at the neoliberal university

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BOOK REVIEW

Through a glass darkly: the social science look at the neoliberal university,
edited by Magaret Thornton, Canberra, ANU Press, 2014, 331 pp., \$38.00 (paperback),
ISBN: 9781925022131.

In the short time I have been teaching in UK higher education (just under two years at the time of writing) the role of corporatisation – of audit, metric power, productivity and efficiency – has dramatically shaped the organisation, management and governance of the modern university. Cash-strapped due to diminished government funding, UK universities now rely exclusively on student contributions in the form of tuition fees to make themselves financially sustainable. By implication, students are activated and summoned as ‘consumers’, presumably rational agents with ‘perfect knowledge’ of higher education. Related to these trends are new demands for academics to fashion themselves as competitive-enterprising subjects (or entrepreneurial-academics, ‘entrepredemics’) so that they can freelance as consultants and successfully compete for research grant funding in the new impact economy. Expansive managerialism and risk regulation are also key to these reforms, driven by a need to enhance monitoring and scrutiny of academic work that renders them amenable to criteria-based evaluation and performance comparison. In the UK academics are so uncomfortably familiar with these customs that they have perfected the art of documenting and satirising their own subjugation by the market, key among them is Nathan Hall who runs the twitter account ‘Shit Academics Say’ @AcademicsSay.

To debate these and other timely issues, Professor Magaret Thornton has edited a new book entitled *Through a glass darkly: The social science look at the neoliberal university*. In this book, Magaret Thornton brings together academics working in law, economics, critical management and sociology, among other disciplines, to consider the impact of the market – of commercialisation, pseudo-privatisation, corporatisation, managerialism, consumerism and audit culture in particular – on higher education, especially changes to the public university in Australia. There is plenty of insight in this book that will be familiar to readers in the UK, Europe and the US and other countries where higher-education structures and practices have been subsumed by the logic of the market. The book covers a broad range of topics and issues documenting the multifarious and deleterious effects of the corporatisation and marketisation of higher education, from the rise of formalised, rule-driven systems of managerial governance that undermine the professional autonomy of academics, to the new knowledge economy imperatives shaping higher education decisions to jettison curiosity-based learning in favour of problem-based learning and vocationalism.

The commentary throughout the book is sober and well balanced. In fact, I would be concerned that any person interested in pursuing a career in higher education might be deterred by the revelations in this book. In any case, forewarned is forearmed. There is a general tendency among academics today to submit to a fatalist or reductionist logic which reduces all university work to a set of inescapable market prerogatives. And this book is no exception. University life – or the ‘neoliberal university’ – is frequently portrayed as an enclosure that is systematically policed and sanctioned by market imperatives, autocratic styles of management and the new knowledge economy. The modern university appears to function almost exclusively as a site for human capital investment and the needs of employers.

At the same time, the authors of the book are careful not to attribute all of the above changes to an effect of ‘neoliberalism’. We are reminded that monitoring of academic work by the church and state goes back centuries for example, and is not specific to the new public management reforms introduced in the 1980s. Moreover, the authors caution against overstating the reach of these effects in determining the governance of universities and the daily practices of academics. The contradictory life of the academic – someone who engages in collegiality and critical scholarship as well as career

entrepreneurship and the neoliberal game of academic 'excellence' – undercuts any general claims about the totalising effects of neoliberalisation. We are also told that universities are largely 'self-governing institutions' whose professional interests are guided by the 'imagined judgement of those whose opinions they [academics] care about' (74). The take-home message being that it is dangerous and misguided to collapse academic work and the life of the university to an effect of the market or managerial deference. Doing so only impoverishes theorisations of the messiness and slippery dynamics of actually existing higher education.

A core strength of the book is its nuanced approach to the question 'what is the neoliberal university'. It challenges us to avoid reducing all our grievances and discontents to some over-determinate, neoliberal bogeyman, and to resist the 'politics of pessimism and nostalgia' (271) that often pervades water-cooler discourse among academics on campus. Instead the authors urge us to remain optimistic about the future of higher education and point to evidence of resistance and hope taking hold and gaining traction despite the onslaught on neoliberal common sense.

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