

***The Good University: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*, by Raewyn Connell (2019) London: ZED 240 pp. Paperback, £12.99, ISBN: 9781786995407.**

Some books frustrate not because what they say is wrong, or wide of the mark, but because one feels that the author could have given us something much better. Raewyn Connell's *The Good University* is in this category. She is deeply knowledgeable about the history and nature of the contemporary university; her knowledge is internationally far broader than shown by most writers on "the university"; she has a gendered perspective missing from much (though by no means all) of the recent literature; she offers significant theoretical insight. All these qualities are to be seen in *The Good University*. Nevertheless, the book disappoints.

Why? I think, first, because its purpose is ill-defined. Perhaps, to be more accurate, the stated purpose is not really carried through. Universities are, Connell rightly argues, collective social assets, "produced by many thousands of workers and students over long periods of time" (p. 8). They are sources not only of technical and professional knowledge and education, but of "much of the critical thinking and imagination in society and politics" (p. 8). Yet the vacuous slogans promulgated by university managers ("own the future", "excellence", "aspire", and the like) offer us no sense of what role universities should play in society: "if we want a democratic society ..., we must find a better logic than that". The book "is a search for this better logic". (p. 8)

Connell's approach has a certain plausibility: rather than starting from basic principles or ideals, or classic texts such as Newman's *Idea of a University* (1852) or Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1918), or even contemporary critiques such as Readings' *University in Ruins* (1997) or Collini's *Speaking of Universities* (2017) – though several are mentioned – she begins with three chapters on what universities today actually do. So there are chapters on the research process, on teaching and learning, and on the universities as workplaces. Their key message is that all are collective social processes, and shot through by (unequal) power relations. She gives short shrift to managerial vanities: universities are held together "informally from below" (p. 60; emphasis in original) by networks of people (students, workers – academic and non-academic), not by strategies and targets.

Chapter 4 situates universities in a "global economy of knowledge". Again, there are strong and innovative elements – in particular, a strong "Southern" perspective – as well as more well-rehearsed stories such as the role and commercial origins of citation indices, league tables, and multinational publishers. Chapter 5 – to me probably the strongest – frames universities as "privilege machines". They are "increasingly complicit with market ideology" (p. 114), playing an active role in undermining "collective, public-interest projects". "Once upon a time, bishops and kings provided their societies with an ideology of hierarchy," Connell writes. "Now the university system does." (p. 105). When university leaders install "banners extolling 'leadership'", they might – but do not – suggest students and staff consider them "in terms of the fascist *Führerprinzip*" (p. 104). Chapter 6 ("The University Business") is a fair if broad-brush account of the "managerial takeover".

The final two chapters are at once the most potentially important and the most disappointing. Chapter 7, entitled "Universities of hope", outlines "alternative models" and

“reform movements” to suggest how things might be done differently. Unfortunately, the examples – from an impressively wide canvas, geographically and historically – are sketched in only the broadest outlines, with little critical or evaluative discussion. Chapter 8 sets out criteria for “the good university”: it should be *democratic* in its operation and serve democratic purposes, *engaged* (“fully present for the society that supports” it, p. 172), *truthful* in its operations and in its presentation of itself to the world, *creative* in research and teaching (“foreground[ing] student agency”, p. 174), and *sustainable* (able to “flourish ... over the long run”, p. 174). A good university system “is co-operative rather than competitive” (p. 175). Who could disagree? Yet most of those who actually “run” (i.e., rule) universities today would think this hopelessly utopian.

Glosses are inevitable and necessary in a short book, but some (for instance, the story of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, p. 81) take simplification too far. What appears, or does not, in the index seems to follow no rule. There are some irritating errors: the British Research Assessment Exercise, whose malign influence Connell sketches, began in 1986, not 1992. Gaye Tuchman, author of *Wannabe U*, is twice misnamed – Barbara Tuchman was a very different scholar.

A more fundamental problem is that by starting from “actually existing universities”, Connell ignores dimensions of activity that neoliberal university managements have already eradicated. So, for instance, adult education played a key part in democratizing the 20<sup>th</sup> century British university (and in shaping academic disciplines from social and economic history to archaeology, from industrial relations to cultural studies) – but for Connell students are aged 18-22 and study on campus. This is a strangely human-capital “given” for universities in democratic learning societies.

So altogether, while agreeing with the great bulk of the book, I read it with a growing sense of disappointment. Though more international, and less elitist, than Collini’s work, *The Good University* somehow lacks the edge, the sense of passion, he conveys. Too much of it reads as a strange cross between *The Lonely Planet Guide to Academia* and *How to Get a Ph.D.* The level is of a basic introduction for the new lecturer or graduate student, but the narrative is bitty. Good and important points are made – often, individually, well-made – but with little sense of contributing to a developing argument. For my taste, too, they seem based too often on anecdote rather than evidence. This is common, of course, in the popular management texts that populate airport bookstalls. But while they can afford to preach to the converted, Connell aims (rightly) to convince a wider audience: for that purpose, her text needs the weight that specificity gives to argument.

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## References

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