

BOOK REVIEWS

Raewyn Connell, *The Good University. What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*, Zed Books, London, 2019, ISBN (hb) 978-1-78699-541-4, (pb) 978-1-78699-540-7, (pdf.) 978-1-78699-542-1, (epub) 978-1-78699-543-8, (mobi) 978-1-78699-544-5, 233 pages

This is quite a good read – refreshing, inclusive and providing a plea, to those concerned with education as a public good, to regain control of the university system against its neo-liberalisation. As with Boaventura de Sousa Santos' volume, *Decolonising the University*, reviewed in the last issue of *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, this book is concerned with issues of demand for university education, radical action for change and subjugated sources of knowledge.

Connell is among a rare breed of academics who combine social activism and trade union engagement with great sociological insight and rigorous scholarship. She is without any doubt one of the leading contemporary sociologists around. She avoids an overriding Eurocentric concern about institutions. Author and promoter of Southern Theory, she scours a whole range of praxis in higher education. In fact, her book complements the one by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in many ways. I would like to think it complements my book on the subject produced last June (2019) and prepared for publication in 2017. I however leave judgement on my publication to others.

One of the most refreshing things about Connell's book is its international reach, drawing inspiration from several contexts, especially Global-Southern contexts, including Indigenous contexts. It has a strong cultural and political economy streak running through, captured in the masterly

chapter on the political economy of knowledge. This, as with Santos' book, sheds light on the economic purpose that changes in the University system serve.

As in textbook US-dominated development strategies, universities worldwide were steered, through a variety of means, towards western "metropolitan models". One includes the setting up of American universities, such as the American University of Rome or the American University of Cairo, and the work of foundations such as the Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford Foundations. This is particularly true of universities in the 'developing' world. Before, many universities, in say Africa, were steered towards the models of their European colonial masters.

We all know the role played by say the Rhodes Scholarship, in the name of that most colonial of political figures that is Cecil Rhodes, in preparing a colonial academic and administrative elite in colonies and former colonies, including the USA itself, western in taste and culture, though not necessarily in blood, to serve neo-colonial interests. Despite the voices of movements such as that demanding 'Rhodes must fall', the allure of Oxford University is too strong even for those taking a postcolonial stance. Recently, Bill Gates has been involved. The foundation under his name has been focusing on Oxford's rival, Cambridge University.

Of course, many universities, like all-hegemonic institutions, for that matter, were bastions of radicalism, at least and alas for a short while in people's lives – the LSE in the 70s comes to mind. They have also produced counter-currents, politicians who fought for independence, not on the colonialists' own terms and who often paid with their life for this. Some left lasting decolonizing legacies, as was the case with Jamaican Rhodes scholar, Stuart Hall, who provided insights for more refreshing conceptions of knowledge, including decolonizing knowledge.

One of the great contributions made by this volume, and that of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, is to an international decolonizing sociology of knowledge. It draws on different conceptions of learning and different multi-ethnic knowledge traditions especially from the majority world. There is strong

recognition of southern knowledges alongside eastern and western ones. We read about shifting locations for a university which moves underground. Such was the Flying University experiment in Poland under Nazi occupation. In my view, it connects with images of the shifting sites for popular education in Latin American countries under siege by counter-revolutionaries. Examples are those of Nicaragua and the Contra War or the Civil War in El Salvador around the same time – adult educators and learners often killed by the marauders.

Latin American popular education projects the image of a kaleidoscope of Southern experiences in alternative, subaltern, Southern-social movement-oriented higher education. This book and others are rich in examples: the UNITIERRA in the Chiapas region of Mexico, the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandez in Brazil with its strong connection with the MST –the landless peasant movement (needless to say, the ENFF was under attack by the interim government and is more so now under its Bolsonaro right wing successor), the Rabindranath Tagore-founded Visva Bahrati School/University in India, Al-Azhar University in Egypt, and may others, some captured in the three books I mentioned and also in a compendium on community-university relationships edited by the late Dave Watson.

There has been a number of commercial outlets in my country focusing on the granting of degrees in Management and ICT, gaining accreditation through the National Council for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE). I wonder whether a free university, catering for social education as a public good, free of charge or charging a nominal fee, accessible to those employed and unemployed and drawing on a diversification of knowledge traditions (from North and South), would be the subject of a proposal to be put forward in future and given approval by this body.

The book ends with a look to the future, beyond the ‘dog eats dog’ culture of much of the present university scenario with its league tables favouring large western based universities and the culture that accommodates them. Needless to say it favours the western generated cultures of competition, individualisation, endowments by industrial moguls and foundations, military-industrial research concerns and ‘monocultural’ patterns of

research methodologies, output evaluation and dissemination strategies. The proposed university of the future would be, to the contrary, a university or pluriversity that responds not predominantly to military and industrial needs (see Henry Giroux' *University in Chains* on this), but to those of people also in a collective sense. In Mannheim's old 'sociology of knowledge' understanding, group knowledge would be highly regarded in this scenario. In the spirit of the book under review, where southern traditions play a great part, and subversivity of knowledge remains of great concern (once the staple [declared staple?] of forward looking universities), this book promotes the collective dimensions of knowledge, in the best Freirean and social movements tradition.

This would call for a major rethink of many of our universities; I say 'many' not 'all' as some, the non-mainstream ones, such as those mentioned earlier, have embarked on this since their very inception. The educationally and politically innovative and subversive 'call all in doubt'. The book argues for radical change of a kind diametrically opposed to the neoliberal and new managerial one brought about in recent history. Connell's book offers grist for the mill in this struggle.

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