Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education
By Marc Spooner and James McNinch (Eds.)
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Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education is a collection of 11 essays (plus an impassioned forward by Zeus Leonardo, interviews with Noam Chomsky and Norman K. Denzin, a foreword by the editors Marc Spooner and James McNinch, and a superb afterword by Peter McLaren). The book developed out of a 2017 conference on the same theme organized by Spooner and McNinch at the University of Regina. The collection has the virtue of allowing a multi-faceted exploration of a complex problem: the deleterious impact of neo-liberal policy on universities. While the intention of the editors seems to have been to present a constellation of critical perspectives which are ultimately consistent with each other, only the former intention is fulfilled. As one works through the essays, all of which are high quality in their own right, one cannot avoid the conclusion that some key essays adopt incompatible positions on the crucial question of the social function of the university. Instead of trying to comment separately on each paper, which justice would demand but space precludes, I want to approach the book as a whole, with special emphasis on this contradiction.

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All of the essays take as their point of departure the on-going restructuring of universities in the United States and Canada. As is now commonplace, restructuring is attributed to "neo-liberal" policies. This collection is not the first to discuss funding cuts, the emergence of more authoritarian managerial styles, the growth of non-academic bureaucracies, the increasing stress on commodifiable knowledge, job training, threats to disciplines that cannot increase enrolment, attacks on tenure, or the growth of precarious academic labour. I have been engaged in the struggle against these policies and have a small collection of books decrying these changes, the earliest of which dates from 2000. The fact that this critique has been developing for nearly 20 years without having any practical effect on government and administrative policies proves that, as Christopher Meyers argues in his essay in this collection, while tenured academics may retain substantive powers over their work lives that other workers lack, we have failed to effectively exercise this agency, in our departments, our unions, and national associations, to resist the rot (p. 317). Perhaps all is not lost, but so much has already been taken away that recovery seems unlikely.

Since none of the other attacks on collegial self-governance and academic freedom have been effectively resisted, administrations and governments have opened a new front: the imposition of quantitative metrics as surrogates for qualitative assessment of academic work. Here the essays do break new ground, especially with regards to the implications of metrics for the evaluation of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous research. The essays authored by Yvonne S. Lincoln, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Michelle Fine, Patti Lather, Marie Battiste, and Joel Westheimer, focusing on the critique of metrics, are the most effective critical interventions against neo-liberalism and the new managerialism. Since academics are often our own worst enemies, uncritically embracing every administrative fad for the sake of career advancement, it is crucial that we hear the arguments that these essays are making: quantitative metrics are not neutral arbiters of scientific and intellectual value. They are political interventions in the struggle to subordinate academic work to social forces that are concerned only with cash value and political control over research and thinking more generally.

If the authors are correct (and it would be difficult to seriously call into question their findings) there is a struggle between neo-liberal social forces and the traditional values of the university. The contradiction that I noted above concerns the universality of

the value of these traditional values. Some of the authors, including the editors, Lincoln, Denzin, Chomsky, Rosalind Gill, Westheimer, Meyer, and McLaren, use the traditional values of the university—collegial governance, peer review, academic freedom—as the baseline against which they criticise the neo-liberal university. For them, these values are universal, but their realization has been imperfect. They call for resistance on their bases, while also struggling to open them to formerly excluded groups and marginalized knowledges. Other authors, either Indigenous or arguing from an Indigenous perspective (Smith, Budd L. Hall, Battiste, Eve Tuck, Sandy Grande) claim that the traditional university was itself the problem because it was, especially in North America, deeply implicated in the colonisation of Indigenous lands and attempted destruction of Indigenous life-ways and forms of knowledge. A return to the traditional university, even a more inclusive version, would be a return to colonial institutions in which "collegial self-governance" meant the old white boys' network and academic freedom meant the freedom to ignore the social responsibility of academics to criticise oppression and inequality.

There is nothing wrong with a collection of essays being riven by deep political tensions. At the same time, since it seems that each author had the opportunity to read the other essays, I would have like to have seen more critical engagement with these tensions. The authors all admirably instantiate the principle of charity when discussing each other's work, but as Grande says, "one of the many things lost to the pressures of publish or perish, quantity over quality, is the loss of good critique" (p.183). People need to be able to level respectful but sharp criticisms of each other, but that does not always happen in this book. Most of the authors who invoke the traditional values of the university acknowledge the Indigenous critique, but in response offer the very same politics of inclusion that the most radical Indigenous voices here reject. On the other hand, the radical Indigenous critique of the traditional institution exposes its complicity with colonialism and the attempted destruction of Indigenous knowledge, and suggests that perhaps the best thing to do would be to "refuse" the university (Grande). Perhaps; but if the most critical voices refuse rather than struggle for the university, the university will not disappear, but will become even more tightly integrated into the circuits of capital accumulation and political domination. The university is too important an institution to abandon to right-wing forces, but effective struggle means that difficult political arguments like the one underlying this contradiction have to be undertaken.

There is an overriding social value on preserving an institution in which, whatever its real historical limitations, maintains space for new and oppositional thinking. The first step to resolving this tension is to think of universities (like all social institutions in liberal-capitalist society) as contradictory. Numerous authors call universities contradictory, but without providing a detailed account of what that means. Universities produce, organize, and authorize knowledge. In this respect they produce commodifiable knowledge and "job-ready graduates." At the same time, in order to produce commodifiable knowledge and graduates, they must challenge people to think beyond the given and accepted. To the extent that any discipline enables people to think—to see the world as problematic and not already settled—they create a gap between the actual and the possible which is the space for social criticism. Thinking is an essential human practice, it is not the preserve of any cultural tradition but underlies them all (cultures are each of them different ways of materially and symbolically transforming the given natural world). Despite its history and despite the current threats, universities have and still do maintain a space in which people can learn to think.