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Structure and agency in the neoliberal university
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relationship to the members of their community, popular culture artists, music, and films, as well as their schools. Emphasizing the need for educators and students to change their attitudes toward all types of writing and their uses, Weinstein teaches us not only to read their words but to feel them.

References

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As a higher education scholar specializing in equity and social justice, I find the title of the book under review, *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University*, particularly poignant. It addresses a dilemma with which scholars in the field continue to struggle: How do we successfully foster transformative change within the neoliberal structural context of the academy? How do we continue to maintain our analysis of larger contexts (structures) that stifle or shape individual and collective possibilities for change (agency) and simultaneously implement these possibilities? Given their interdependence, how do structure and agency influence each other? Furthermore, in an academic context where expressions such as “we need to make money,” “the competition,” and “distance learning,” are increasingly becoming the norm, Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar’s edited collection provides the reader with insights into these issues. This volume has come at a critical time given the recent resurgence of scholarly debate on the impact of neoliberalism on higher education, particularly in the USA, Canada, Australia, and Britain (e.g. Currie and Newson 1998; Giroux 2002; Olssen and Peters 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). *Structure and Agency* elucidates a more multifaceted understanding of the underlying structure/processes that are changing the culture and identities within higher education, and reveals the “sets of complex relations” within which faculty and students find themselves by locating ethnographic and structural studies within the “context of material transformations” evident in higher education (5).

*Structure and Agency* helps answer the following questions: How does the discourse of neoliberalism in higher education operate at the interstices of micro, meso, and macro levels? What is the impact of neoliberalism in higher education beyond the context of the global North? What are the similarities and differences in
terms of the impact across various sites of analysis such as academic disciplines, race, gender, ethnicity, class, and geographical contexts? What are some possible sites of resistance and transformation in dismantling the neoliberal paradigm in higher education? This volume includes a foreword, an afterword, and 13 chapters divided into three parts. Part I consists of the editors’ introduction, which provides a theoretical framework on neoliberalism in higher education. In this first chapter, “Higher education in the era of globalization and neoliberalism,” Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar use a political economy approach to describe and contextualize the changes we may observe within universities by linking these processes of change with the rearrangement of capital in the global knowledge economy. Part II, entitled “System,” includes Chapters 2–6, which interweave the structural elements of abstract neoliberal reform with the evolution of faculty identity, institutional practices, physical landscapes, and national and transnational agendas within higher education. Part III, entitled “Practice,” forms the bulk of the book and includes Chapters 7–13, which look at the impact of neoliberalism on faculty, students, and communities and how they respond to these global processes in their everyday practice.

While the first two chapters in Part II insightfully explore faculty identity in the USA and Canada, respectively, I found the last three chapters most intriguing and theoretically illuminating. Academics who have lived in small college towns will find resonance with Chapter 4, “Space, place and the American university.” In this chapter, Wesley Shumar reveals how the use of campus space and neoliberalism are intimately tied together in American universities, with the growing trend of transforming college towns into consumer spaces and corporate research parks. Shumar argues that these new “ideal” models of social space may perhaps be replacing the old factory towns. The last two chapters in Part II shift our attention from the global North, towards the global South. In Chapter 5, “Entrenching international inequality: the impact of global commodification of higher education in developing countries,” Rajani Naidoo provides a grim look at the role of higher education in developing countries, by examining the contradictions of the growing neoliberal climate within these contexts. Drawing on extensive literature, she argues that the penetration of neoliberal policies within developing countries will not only worsen the quality, purpose, and functionality of higher education in these regions, but also has: “little potential to contribute to developmental goals which may be capable of eroding current disparities between high- and low-income countries” (95). This chapter, however, provides some alternative strategies for these regions to engage in the development of higher education systems that are able to resist the pressure of neoliberal reforms. Sarah Amsler’s case study from Kyrgyzstan in Chapter 6, “Higher education reform in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: the politics of neoliberal agendas in theory and practice,” draws on the author’s own experiences, as well as ethnographic studies and policy analyses to highlight the tensions and possibilities of neoliberal reform in the post-Soviet context. Juxtaposing this chapter with Naidoo’s, readers will discover similarities and differences in the various influences of neoliberalism among southern contexts and appreciate that how such policies are articulated and received depends on regional and socio-political-historical processes. Amsler’s chapter, for instance, highlights how neoliberal reforms are “often more contingent and contested” (103) while being “reflexively appropriated as spaces for opportunity” (109) in the everyday practices of local educators. The author presents
a formidable challenge to the deterministic and inevitable myths surrounding the official discourses of neoliberalism in higher education.

Shifting gears from the macro to the micro-level, but still interconnected, four chapters in Part III (Chapters 7–9 and 11) focus on student experiences. I found the two chapters that focused on indigenous student experiences particularly interesting. Chapter 8, “Protocols and performances: scientific discourse in the molecular biology laboratory,” is based on an ethnographic case study of a Navajo undergraduate student in a molecular biology laboratory. The reader is privy to how she “plays” with and resists the “language game” of science within a global socio-political-economic context that demands the speedy production of molecular data for corporate profit. Echoing some of the active resistance discussed in Chapter 8, Bryan Brayboy, Angelia Casatgno, and Emma Maughan, in Chapter 9, “Indigenous epistemologies and the neoliberal view of higher education,” draw upon longitudinal ethnographic studies to examine the plight of two American Indian students attending Ivy League schools. In this inspiring chapter, Brayboy et al. demonstrate how these two students, despite their struggles with the Eurocentric academy, informed by their indigenous knowledge systems construct a student subjectivity in which they view their education as part of community survival, rather than a means for individual profit. They highlight how these two students return to their communities and contribute to the cause of tribal sovereignty, using the tools and cultural capital they have gained during their time at an Ivy League institution.

Moving beyond student experiences, Chapters 10, 11, and 13 focus on the response of a working-class community and faculty members to neoliberal forces. In Chapter 10, “No burden to carry: social class and self-improvement in Cape Breton,” Jane Jensen uses ethnographic data to elucidate how the aspirations for higher education among a working-class coal mining community in Canada have shifted from collective empowerment towards an individualistic push for upward mobility due to shifting economic conditions and hyper-credentialism. In Chapter 12, “Communication and emotion in gendered organization: the hidden transcripts of power in higher education,” Breda Luthar and Zdenka Sadl provide an insightful examination of the hidden transcripts of power underlying the communication and interaction realm of social relations among social science faculty in a Slovenian university. The chapter elucidates how explicit traditional patriarchal norms of a socialist welfare state are being replaced by more subtle forms of domination through gendered discourses of neoliberal accountability, which operate at the realm of the body and emotions. Within this realm of performativity, “certain types of selves are valued” which “contributes to new gender order in academia” (248) where one must closely manage their emotional expression. In Chapter 13, “A funny thing happened on the way to the (European Social) forum: or how new forms of accountability are transforming academics’ identities and possible responses,” Joyce Caanan extends this discussion by mapping out how performativity functions within higher education at both the macro- and micro-levels. Drawing on Judith Butler’s ideas on performativity, Caanan opens up discursive possibilities for change within a neoliberal era. The author reminds us that such neoliberal discourses require performative norms to be naturalized and repeated in order to be effective because “the very process of their production leaves out many possibilities for subjectivity” (267). This therefore leaves room for us to “interrupt” (268) such norms in the academy and produce, “more inclusive practices with which more aspects of bodies and selves can be accounted for” (274).
Overall, the contributions to this excellent volume provide rich conceptual and empirical analyses of how neoliberalism impacts higher education teaching and learning, faculty, students, and community members. The key strength of this volume is its illumination of contexts beyond the confines of the global North – specifically the representation of countries in the global South, Central Europe, and Central Asia – while shedding light on indigenous perspectives, as well as working-class communities, which remain at the periphery of these discussions. Furthermore, drawing on empirical qualitative studies, this collection represents a departure from the predominantly theoretical literature, by providing a “human face” to the impact of neoliberalism on the everyday lives of faculty and students in universities, as well as their surrounding communities. Finally, this book also provides a tapestry of insight into neoliberalism and higher education by drawing on various critical theorists.

However, I was left with the following questions: How does neoliberalism impact the working and personal lives of other staff within higher education such as student affairs personnel, administrative staff, custodial workers, and librarians? Furthermore, how do the trends and processes discussed in this collection play out in the context of higher education institutions that are not public universities (e.g. community colleges, private liberal arts colleges)? These are critical issues for higher education scholars to consider today. Finally, the collection focuses primarily on one or two lines of difference (e.g. gender, or race, and/or class), while questions of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression seem to be missing.

Overall, this collection is an excellent read – certainly, it has inspired me to see the complexities of and transformative possibilities for changing the neoliberal academy – and I would highly recommend it to audiences that include faculty and graduate students in the fields of higher education, sociology of education, comparative and international education, educational policy, and curriculum studies.

References

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