

Book review: Transforming universities in the midst of global crisis: A university for the common good

Steven Ratuva ¹

Abstract: This article provides a review of *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good*, authored by Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons and Fern Thompsett.

¹ Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Keywords: Climate crisis, common good, covid 19, neoliberalism, universities.

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Review

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It takes a major crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic before our collective consciousness recognizes the need to think critically and seriously think about alternatives. The book, *Transforming universities*, provides the ideological inspiration, intellectual impetus, moral fulcrum and political platform for unpacking, reimagining and revolutionizing an institution which has often hidden behind the universalized myth of knowledge enlightenment and human progress. This false narrative conceals a deeper societal crisis of inequality, racism, exploitation, marginalization, resources extraction, indigenous subalternation and violence, which universities have been part of, fed into, exacerbated, nurtured, manufactured, justified, legitimized, institutionalized and humanized in different ways. Or as the authors put it, "...universities are not *in* but *of* the crisis."

Universities, the authors argue, are not autonomous and sacred institutions as they claim to be but are active constituent agents of neoliberalism and colonialism by providing the justificatory discourses, institutional norms and social consciousness which sustain the extractive, individualizing, and predatory ethos of the market and the hegemonic values of colonialism. These modes of domination and manipulation are embodied and articulated in sometimes explicitly terrorizing manner (such as loss of employment due to 'reforms') or in subtle and subconscious ways such as racism and marginalization of indigenous scholars, students and knowledge systems. These are reified as normal and part of the natural order of things via the deceptive workings of the audit culture, nurturing of individual competition, ranking system, commodification of knowledge and reduction of university education into a corporate service industry.

The book makes a number of critical observations which opens up a Pandora's box of ideologically and ethically questionable practices and ideas. For instance, universities, at least in the Anglosphere, have historically been associated with patriarchal settler colonialism, extractive capitalism and colonial labour exploitation through research, scholarship, curricula, pedagogies and service. This continued to play out in later years as it became a delivery mechanism for neoliberal ideas and practices.

The book then examines how the neoliberalization of universities went hand in hand with the commodification of knowledge and academia under the tutelage of managerialism to serve corporatized interests, that are incompatible with the basic goals of empowering education and societal justice. This coupled with the massification of the university culture provides the platform for the role of the university as an ideological anchor for neoliberalism.

Along the same strand of thought, the book explores the power dynamics of the university which replicates the structure and norms of corporate institutions where top-down and centralized authority serves the singular role of commercial interests. This means that teaching, professional service and even research and discourses used become subservient to the dictates of the market. All these, the book argues, have exacerbated and fed into the ongoing crisis not only of universities but also of the global system. For instance, the capacity of universities to respond to issues of climate crisis has been compromised by the influence of fossil fuel companies in funding research institutions. The climate crisis itself has manifested the inequalities in the world where poor Global

South countries which contribute the least to carbon emission suffer the most in terms of human-induced climatic disasters. Covid-19 has also raised issues of global economic and power inequalities which has seen Global North states hoarding vaccines as pharmaceutical corporations prey on the suffering of ordinary people by extracting and accumulate billions of dollars worth of profit.

This is where the book casts a rather pessimistic outlook by suggesting that since “universities are directly implicated in these crises, they are, in their current state, largely incapable of offering an efficacious response.” This is a core argument in the book which needs serious consideration, especially as we start thinking about creative ways of transforming universities. Do we reform the old order or is this akin to giving life to a dinosaur DNA? Do we recreate a new order, a new model, a new mode of education which is more human-centred, equality-based, regenerative, politically empowering and culturally enriching? Or is this utopian thinking by abstract dreamers and drug-infested academic brain cells? My response is an unequivocal “No.” These are legitimate questions we need to ask ourselves now as the neoliberal capture of the university deepens and the fundamental values of our humanity are being subordinated to the narrow and exploitative dictates of the market.

The book provides a number of alternative strategies for creative and innovative transformation for universities. The challenge is how to delegitimize the intellectually oppressive knowledge system and its associated audit culture, managerialism, mass knowledge production and deeply embossed market ethos. This requires conceptual, cultural and structural transformation which put humanity as conscious and regenerative agency at the centre of education. Education for liberation and not for market interest must be a driver for reimagining the future of university. There have been a number of creative initiatives around the world which have reshaped alternative pedagogies, research approaches and people-based norms and structures. Aspects of these can be replicated elsewhere and nurtured in liberated spaces.

I do agree with the authors that this transformation must and ought to involve decolonization of the intellect and associated legitimizing institutions, de-racialization of academic organizational cultures, meaningful participation of indigenous scholars and knowledge and care for the wellbeing of planetary natural life, beyond just human society. Moreover, such initiatives offer the prospect of disengaging from colonial neoliberal hegemony by co-creating and enabling collaborative practices that build strong, inclusive communities capable of withstanding much of what the future holds.

The regenerative/relational university is, at its heart, about connecting with our more-than-human communities, operating within the limits set by nature, and remaining cognisant of our place in the web of life. Or as the book concludes, what we should aim for is the “university for the common good would be guided by the values of love, kindness, respect, compassion, care, reciprocity and mutuality in all tertiary relations and practices.”

There are however, a number issues such as audit culture, metricization, new proletarianization and ranking which could have been elaborated on more, although they have been touched on minimally either directly or indirectly. The audit culture which

has its genesis in the military has been used as a practical means of ensuring conformity by students and academics to the dictates of the centralized and marketized university system. This is done through very rigid assessment processes to monitor and police things like performance, promotion, course relevance, pedagogy, staffing, income generation (hidden under EFTS or equivalent of full time students), media presence (digital and mainstream), reputation, relationship with external bodies, alignment with government policies and adherence to institutional corporate conventions. In many universities, the funding model has become a central monitoring tool around which teaching, research and service are being carried out. Research and teaching are no longer central to university life as they should be.

Linked to the audit culture is the metricization of university life where human consciousness, culture and knowledge are being replaced by quantified algorithmic information on research, service, teaching, media presence and research impact and how these are used for or against staff members and students. This system privileges the power of quantitative data (and assumed myth of “objectivity” and “truth”) over human values and social discourse. This epistemic crisis spills over into universities assuming the false imagery of being the ivory tower of truth.

The new academic proletarianization process results in part from the metricized citation culture which form the central tenet of modern academic life. Academics are literally forced to publish in high ranked journals controlled by predatory publishers such as Elsevier which owns the Scopus metrics system used for subject and university ranking. The journals make hundreds of millions of dollars annually from paywall publications and not a single cent go to authors who utilize public money to carry out research. Like church congregation members being told that the more they part with their last coins the more heavenly blessings they receive, academics are likewise promised scholarly glory for commitment to publication while their sweat translates directly into profit for corporate predators. Journals use algorithms which determine citation and ranking which ultimately serve the interest of corporate profit. Academic researchers as the new academic proletariats have become providers of labour which fuels a system of predatory and extractive profit-making and universities facilitate this exploitative by promoting the use of Scopus by researchers to publish their work. In a broader context this system exacerbates knowledge and racial inequality between the Global North Universities and scholars (who control the journals and the ranking algorithms) and Global South universities and indigenous scholars whose publications and knowledge are considered devoid of rigour and inferior in quality and are often rejected by major journals.

The ranking system also perpetuates unrealistic expectation amongst universities about their capabilities and some will do whatever it takes to get high rankings and there is demand by the university authorities for the new academic proletariats to contribute towards this in their research, teaching and service. The most direct beneficiaries of university ranking are Vice Chancellors, rebranded as CEOs, who often use ranking improvement as justification for massive salary increases.

The book is a must read for all those associated directly or indirectly with uni-

versities, in other words, everyone. It speaks clearly, critically and boldly to us about the multi-layered ongoing crisis—the crisis of the market, of health, of inequality, of racism, of climate change, of indigenous subjugation, of humanity generally and how universities feed into these. The book also provides hope, hope for potential transformation of universities and hope for a more humane society and planet.

The university for the common good would be decentralised, governed democratically and fully engaged with local communities. It would centre academic freedom in the broadest sense, by ensuring education is freely accessible as well as a space of emancipation for all.

A university for the common good would: (a) reject the racialised and violent dynamics of (settler) coloniality; (b) make space for, and actively support, Indigenous intellectual sovereignty, whether within or without the institution, and meaningfully incorporate Indigenous participation in governance; (c) build horizontal, non-hierarchical, participatory communities of scholars; and (d) anchor institutional practices in an ethic of care for the more-than-human communities in which we are all embedded.

This book has emerged in the midst of a major transformative moment. A lethal pandemic has ravaged many parts of the world, exacerbating existing inequalities, driving a shocking death toll, and putting countless more lives and livelihoods at risk. Global institutions, international bodies and governments have struggled to cope with the fallout, and many responded in ways that ultimately deepened global divisions – as evidenced, for instance, by the iniquitous distribution of vaccines. The word ‘unprecedented’ has become common currency, as well-worn narratives lose their capacity to help us make sense of the world, leaving us reaching for new stories and modes of understanding.

Steven Ratuva

✉ steven.ratuva@canterbury.ac.nz

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2393-4581>

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Resenha de livro: Transforming universities in the midst of global crisis: A university for the common good

Steven Ratuva

Resumo: Este artigo fornece uma resenha do livro Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good, escrito por Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons e Fern Thompsett.

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Resenha

Palavras-chave: Crise climática, bem comum, covid 19, neoliberalismo, universidades.

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Steven Ratuva¹

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