

Book Review

American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges, 3rd edition

Philip G. Altbach, Patricia J. Gumport, & Robert O. Berdahl, editors
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011

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The editors of this text, which is now in its third edition, have curated a broad overview of pressing issues in U.S. higher education. Despite considerable continuities in chapter topics, the fact that there have already been two new editions since its initial publication nearly 15 years ago attests to the pace of change in higher education in the century it purports to canvass. For example, Slaughter and Rhoades' intervention on the expanding commercialization and neoliberalization of higher education through the framework of an "academic capitalist knowledge-learning regime" (p. 433) was added to the second edition, published in 2005, and remains a vital inclusion in this most recent edition.

Even since 2011, there have been notable developments in the landscape of popular and scholarly concern, including the growth of online education, especially in the form of massive open online courses (MOOCs), as well as intensified trends in the adjunctification of faculty, mounting concerns about for-profit colleges, and growing student debt loads. Perhaps in part due to the pace of change, it is not uncommon today to read pieces in the mainstream press signalling a kind of crisis moment predicting the end of higher education (particularly public colleges and universities) as we know it. While many such pieces include thoughtful observation and critique, they do not always engage rigorously with the earlier precedents of many current challenges.

The notion of crisis is itself equivocal. According to Rancière, "what we call "crisis" is the extreme form of a normal operation" (as cited in Kakogianni & Rancière, 2013, p. 19). Crises are often cyclical. It was nearly a century ago that Veblen (2005) wrote his stinging critique of rising business influence on "the intellectual enterprise for the pursuit of which the university is established" (p. 50), but similar laments are frequently voiced about the current higher education landscape. Yet if crises are largely exaggerations of ongoing challenges, if not pathologies, *crisis* has nonetheless found wide purchase as a concept in scholarly and popular accounts of higher education alike, in part because of its flexible use. For example, state legislatures might frame a projected budget shortfall as a crisis to justify slashed funding for public colleges and universities, while those in favour of radical pedagogical alternatives might view intensified public defunding as further proof of the need to expand deinstitutionalized educational opportunities (e.g., Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007; The Edu-factory Collective, 2009).

Altbach, Gumport, and Berdahl's text does not address the urgency that characterizes many crisis accounts of higher education. Although some authors have shifted, and content has been updated, chapters dedicated to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and accountability, the role of university presidents, legal changes, and campus diversity all maintain their places throughout this third edition and attest to the ongoing centrality of these issues according to those who study U.S. higher education. Mainstays include Geiger's widely read historical sketch of ten generations of U.S. colleges and universities and Johnstone's treatment of higher education finance with a pragmatic and almost technocratic review of fluctuating revenue sources and the efficiency of educational outputs with regard to costs and revenues.

In addition to continuities in topics covered, the measured tone and longitudinal tempo of many pieces can serve as a contextual grounding for the vibrant and more staccato exchanges that occur in immediate response to campus incidents, proposed policy changes, budget decisions, and dubious experiments with online education. For example, Willinsky, Fischman, and Metcalfe's chapter considers the effects of new technologies on learning and research. Their suggestion that these developments are rarely inherently progressive or destructive, and therefore, require thoughtful review in their development and deployment, could serve as a useful position from which to engage the notions that digital classrooms spell either the end of public higher education or its rejuvenation.

Similarly, Smith's chapter on diversity in higher education provides an overview of the shifting role of the concept and its material practicalities in higher education since the civil rights reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, which could be a resource for those seeking to contextualize the Supreme Court's recent *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2013) ruling as well as the recent ruling on the constitutionality of banning affirmative action through state referendum. At the same time, Smith's emphasis on top-down and institutional practices and policies leaves limited space to explore examples of more radical and grassroots resistance by faculty, students, and staff to institutional and interpersonal race and gender violence.

O'Neil's piece, *Academic Freedom: Past, Present, and Future*, provides a useful sketch that allows him to situate recent challenges to academic freedom in the wake of some scholars' critiques of the U.S. government's response to the events of September 11th, 2001, with reference to McCarthy era curtailments. However, more critical consideration could have been given to the historical and theoretical lineage of the construct of academic freedom itself. For instance, engaging with Barrow's (1990) suggestion that the American Association of University Professors' first adumbration of academic freedom in 1915 represented an accommodation to corporate hegemony that "reflected the class consciousness of most intellectuals" (p. 174) could provide grounds for a much needed discussion of the concept with regard to the swelling ranks of precarious adjunct and non-tenure track faculty.

There is much to be gained by emphasizing the continuity, albeit a dynamic continuity, of challenges to and within higher education. Yet this emphasis on continuity is also potentially limiting. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the suggestion by the editors in their brief introduction that *coordination* of academe and governments is "the most desirable (or least undesirable) means of accomplishing" (p. 8) the resolution of the two institutions' competing demands. This is framed as preferable to either bottom-up voluntary cooperation or top-down governance. In this formulation, the editors suggest that what should vary by circumstance is not so much the nature but the degree of coordination. Such variance would entail adjustments according to time and place, and perhaps socio-political context, but would be unlikely to fundamentally alter relations of power and governance within, between, or beyond the two sets

of institutions.

To propose that there is a preferred mode of engagement, even one in which the balance of forces might be variable, is to presume a model of consensus that occludes other means of engagement and possible social arrangements. According to Rancière (2012), consensus is not “peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement as opposed to conflict or violence” (p. 42) but rather a circumscription of the topics and questions that are open to deliberation, the subjects whom are recognized as appropriate participants, and the sites and formats of deliberation itself. Consensus contrasts with dissensus, the latter of which disrupts what is deemed sensible and in so doing, calls into question otherwise self-evident (i.e., consensus-based) social positions and modes of “being, seeing, and saying” (p. 139). Dissensual acts make it possible to redraw “the frame within which common objects are determined” (p. 139) rather than merely working within existing frames. In excess of acceptable modes of disagreement and deliberation, dissensus thereby creates opportunities wherein radical social change is possible.

In this edition, it is not just portraits of continuity but also those of change that paradoxically naturalize certain realms of sense, and therefore, relegate disagreement to consensus. For example, declining state funding for higher education is largely framed as an unfortunate consequence of competing budget demands, such as rising health care and K-12 education costs. This account forestalls reflection about the concurrent increase in law enforcement and incarceration costs with the decline in higher education funding in many states. It also fails to disrupt a common and consensual response to defunding, i.e., appeals to preserve higher education as a public good, whereas a dissensual approach might destabilize taken for granted notions of who constitutes the *public* (e.g., does it include undocumented residents?) and what constitutes the *good* done in their service.

Among higher education scholars, scholars in other fields, and reporters in the mainstream press, there are many disagreements about what constitutes the most pressing social, political, and economic challenges facing U.S. colleges and universities (let alone what the sources of those challenges are or how they might be met). In this way, graduate students in the field of higher education might understand this compilation as a resource that is instructive not only for its content but also as a snapshot of the issues that are understood to be most relevant by prominent scholars in their respective fields of study. Those looking for a synthesis of these issues, however, might need to look elsewhere, as the editors provide little. For example, the book’s 17 chapters are grouped in four parts: the setting, external forces, the academic community, and central issues for the 21st century. However, little effort is made to frame this particular organizational choice as meaningful.

While this third edition nonetheless provides a valuable review of current issues in higher education, it should be understood as one of many possible framings. Thus, those interested in more dissensual approaches to higher education might, for example, supplement Smith’s contribution on diversity with Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, and Lynn’s (2004) critical race theory analysis, which suggests that current manifestations of affirmative action are an important but limited means for achieving racial equity. Ahmed (2012) also provides a critical account of how official pronouncements of inclusion often stand in the place of substantive anti-racist institutional restructuring. O’Neil’s piece on academic freedom might be read alongside more contested philosophical treatments of the concept, such as that produced by Butler (2006) regarding the academic boycott of Israeli universities. Students might also consider the work of faculty in disciplines outside of higher education who have reflected on changes in their profession (e.g., Bousquet, 2008; Newfield, 2008; Nussbaum, 2010; Readings, 1996), a subset

of whom have even organized around the heading of critical university studies (Williams, 2012).

Rather than attempting to pre-emptively resolve these diverse perspectives and risk eliding contradictions or embracing a falsely comforting notion of liberal pluralism, all of those concerned about the position of U.S. higher education in the 21st century would do well to engage with this text alongside differently oriented treatments of the subject. What the editors describe as “[t]he perennial dynamism evident at all levels of American higher education” (p. 10) does not demand a singular and static vision for (re)structuring U.S. colleges and universities. Rather, this dynamism demands rigorous genealogical accounting of, and relentless dissensual responses to, the crises of higher education, in both their mundane and exceptional manifestations. This would enable a better understanding not only of the character of the crises themselves but also of how they came to be framed and understood as crises in the first place, and ultimately, expand our capacity to reconfigure higher education outside of the given frames.

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