BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Neoliberal University: Hopeful Critique

Sean Sturm

Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education, University of Auckland

Corresponding author: Sean Sturm, Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1140, New Zealand; s.sturm@auckland.ac.nz

What is to be done to save the university—and the critique of which it has been the bastion—has become a leading question of the left, particularly in the Anglosphere. Following Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* (1996), most critics lament the eclipse of what he calls the 'university of culture' by the 'university of excellence' or, to be more exact, the shift from a national and 'rational' academy to a neoliberal and instrumental one.[1] They tend to agree on the drivers of this shift: the three M's of massification, marketisation and managerialism that enable education to emerge as a private good and a prosumer product. Although they tend to disagree on how to deal with the shift, they don't dispute that critique is the key to doing so. Writing in the pages of *Pedagogy* in 2008, Jeff Williams, founder of the US field of critical university studies, proposed that we should 'teach the university', by which he meant its literary, cultural and social history.[2] But others go further. Ronald Barnett, for instance, in *Being a University*, suggests that we, along with our students, should also teach the university how to be.[3]

Like Peter Coaldrake and Laurence Stedman in their critiques of Australian universities, *On the Brink* (1998) and *Raising the Stakes* (2013),[4] Ruth Barcan and Richard Hil offer a distinctly Australasian perspective on the university question. While they differ in their aims and intended readerships, both mobilise critique. Hil addresses the 'student experience' in the neoliberal university through interviews with students, academics and others. He aims to 'conscientize' students (or their parents, perhaps) to demand the neoliberal university live up to its ambitious and lavish marketing claims, and share governance with them. Barcan addresses affect in the neoliberal university from the standpoint of academics. She aims to alert academics to the structural factors that influence the affective atmosphere of the neoliberal university, particularly as it bears on academic identity and pedagogy. She draws on hope studies to make a case for 'the classroom as a space of possibility'. (218) Their respective arguments speak to each other in interesting ways.

Hil rehearses the familiar argument that, over the past thirty years, universities in Australia have been transformed 'from public institutions into money-making corporations, sites of mass consumption and industrial training centres suited to the requirements of the neoliberal economy'. (1) Driven by 'market values (competition, economic prosperity, modernisation) over collective interest and civic purpose', they now focus on 'vocationalism, narrowly constituted curricula and … the "retailer-customer" nexus', rather than 'collectivity, cooperation, shared experience, and … the free, unencumbered, critical exploration of ideas'. (1–2) This 'economic reductivism' has not only turned higher education from a public good into a private one, but also sells students short in so far as it fails to deliver in its own terms. (194)

Hil takes universities to task for a number of ills: their expensive and deceptive marketing, the financial and emotional burden of study, an over-reliance on student surveys, crowded campuses, ineffective online 'delivery', the exploitation of international students and adjunct academics, and an obsession with outcomes and employability considered narrowly. If these complaints sound familiar, so do his remedies. Firstly, universities should pursue a social democratic purpose—to educate students to be critical citizens—because that is what students really want. Universities should consider the whole student experience and prepare students for it, and they should focus on the connection and communication that face-to-face education allows. Secondly, they should listen to students, inviting them 'to critique the tertiary system of which they are part [and] to seriously question their institution's pedagogical practices or links with industry and the corporate sector'. (201) In that way, students can share in the governance of their universities.

Whereas Hil addresses the effects of the shift to a neoliberal university on students, Barcan addresses its effects on academics. For her, the problem is simpler and the solution more complex than they are for Hil. The problem will be familiar to academics alert to the tenor of management talk: that universities are in crisis due to their slow response to massification, marketisation and internationalisation and that the inertia of academics is to blame. She argues that through the performative logic of managerial politics, policy and procedures, academics are more or less subtly made to feel powerless or like imposters. Caught between the Scylla of professionalisation and the Charybdis of precarity, and driven this way and that by the winds of accountability and aspiration, academics find it increasingly difficult to steer a middle course. Her solution is twofold: first, we must recognise the structural factors that are at work in the affective atmosphere of academia, and, second, we must change the way that atmosphere makes itself felt in teaching and research.

Barcan begins by setting the scene in Australasian universities today, institutions in which massification and marketisation, along with the rise of a global market for higher education, are straining university budgets and thereby driving the shift to education as a private (personal,

corporate) rather than a public (social, national) economic good. Rather than holding its ground as an institution deeply indebted to its history, the university today has become 'a palimpsest: a scholarly community, a bureaucracy and a transnational corporation'. (42) This threefold nature is exemplified in how we see the academic career as at once peer-reviewed (scholarly), performance-orientated (corporate) and constantly mediated through policy and procedure (bureaucratic). The uneasy co-existence of the three paradigms manifests itself, for example, in two trilemmas. Is our purpose to educate scholars, train knowledge workers or prepare students for the workplace? Are our ruling ideas scholarship, academic freedom and collegiality; process, professionalism and efficiency; or innovation, engagement and excellence?

Barcan argues that having to balance these paradigms has negatively affected the wellbeing of academics because they have been 'called upon to *embody* the fractured multiplicity that is the contemporary university'. (70) She argues that the corporatisation of the university has driven academics to be more productive by intensifying their work and sense of self-government by focusing on their teaching outcomes and research outputs. They feel obliged to hold together the palimpsestic university through their sacrificial (unrecognised, communal) labour, since their time is spent more and more on work that is not core to their academic role and their goodwill is employed to present a united front to its 'stakeholders'. Because this task is nigh on impossible, academics feel like imposters who are '*structurally* never good enough'. (196) Barcan offers several strategies by which academics can resist this productivism and advance 'a new art and politics of academic living'. (134) In their practice, they can set limits to their productivity, embrace productive inefficiency, reclaim the pause, model reflective and ethical academic being, and acknowledge a multiplicity of ways of being an academic. In their teaching, they can embrace experimentation and failure, recognise that originality and mastery are mythical, and find their own place and writing voice, thereby crafting a more open, reflective and ethical academic persona. To do so is to practice hope as 'a discipline': to foster the 'intellectual and personal sustainability' of the university and to see the classroom as 'a place of possibility'. (217–18)

As can be seen, both Hil and Barcan mobilise critique to answer the question of the university: Hil on behalf of students and Barcan on behalf of academics. Where Hil argues that students want to be educated and to exercise their role as critical citizens in the university, Barcan argues that academics should model that role and thereby enable students to exercise it. As you would expect, they ground their respective critiques in slightly different sources. Hil straightforwardly draws on mainstream critical pedagogy (including the usual male suspects like Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux); Barcan updates that tradition by drawing on feminist cultural studies (Jane Gallop and Meaghan Morris) and hope studies (David Hicks and Mary Zournazi). Surprisingly, Barcan does not explicitly mobilise feminist critical pedagogy (for example, bell hooks and Elizabeth Ellsworth) or affect studies (for example, Sara Ahmed, or her precursor, Judith Butler). While Hil's idea that universities should listen better to what students have to say is easy to endorse, his solutions sometimes seem top-down and policy-driven. Many of us would have experience of being compelled to implement educational 'innovations' driven by 'what students want' that are usually based on anecdotal evidence or poorly designed surveys. In contrast, Barcan's attempt to advance 'a new art and politics of academic living', (134) a hopeful minor politics through which we—along with our students—can teach the university, is more compelling.

That said, Barcan's minor politics must be read carefully to ensure that it allows for minor politics *plural*, as she would no doubt agree. She advocates the well-worn concept of authenticity, if one that draws on 'that old feminist project of a rigorous examination of

the seemingly personal'. (215) This notion of authenticity is based on a 'self-interrogatory' reflexivity (30) that uses 'troubling experiences as a prompt for actual critical reflection, conceptualization and action' in order to allow the individual to 'account truthfully for [their] emotions'. (16–17)While authenticity as an amalgam of affectivity and reflexivity rings true, it must, I think, be circumscribed in two ways (again, I suspect Barcan would agree). First, because affective reflexivity requires self-declaration, it must be distinguished from the coercive accountability that marks the neoliberal discourse of transparency. Second, it must avoid the extremes of both 'soft' authenticity, which focuses on 'self-fulfilment', and 'hard' authenticity, which excludes more clandestine or complicit forms of academic performance (like complying knowingly with accountability mechanisms). I would hold Barcan—and the rest of us—to her advocacy of 'different ways of being an academic', (218–19) which suggests we belong to what Readings calls a 'community of dissensus' that 'would seek to make its heteronomy, its differences, more complex'.[5] Like Barcan, I endorse the strategic optimism of the new academic who means to teach the university to be a place where conditions of possibility, including its own, are asked after as a matter of course. To further this aim requires a new concept of critique: a hopeful critique that addresses the university, not just as it is but as it can be.

About the author

Sean Sturm is deputy director of the Centre for Learning and Research in Higher Education at the University of Auckland. His writing ranges widely across the higher education landscape, taking in the nature of the university, academic labour, learning spaces, the digital humanities and academic writing.

Notes

1. Bill Readings, The University in Ruins, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

2. Jeffery J. Williams, 'Teach the University', Pedagogy vol. 8, no. 1, Winter 2008, pp. 25–42.

3. Ronald Barnett, Being A University, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.

4. Peter Coaldrake and Lawrence Stedman, On the Brink: Australia's Universities Confronting Their Future, University of Queensl and Press, Brisbane, 1998; Peter Coaldrake and Lawrence Stedman, Raising the Stakes: Gambling with the Future of Universities, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2013.

5. Readings, 180.

Bibliography

Barnett, R., *Being A University*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.

Coaldrake P. and L. Stedman, *On the Brink: Australia's Universities Confronting Their Future*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1998.

Coaldrake, P. and Stedman, L., *Raising the Stakes: Gambling with the Future of Universities*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2013.

Readings, B., *The University in Ruins,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

Williams, J.J. 'Teach the University', *Pedagogy* vol. 8, no. 1: Winter 2008, pp. 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-2007-023.