

## Book review

Leibowitz, B. (ed.) 2012. *Higher Education for the Public Good: views from the South*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

ISBN 978-1-920338-88-6. Pbk. Xxvii+224pp.

Recently, an employee at one of my institution's partner NGOs asked an insightful and illustrative question: 'If all the university buildings burnt down, even though the university is one of the main employers in this town, would the people – the people of this community – come together and rebuild those buildings?' He answered, tentatively, that he thought they would not, and I can't help but think that I agree with his opinion on the matter. Perhaps my community partner colleague's question is an unfair one – would the people of our community come together to rebuild the local and sole hospital building in our town, or the town hall, if they burnt down? I cannot answer these questions, or offer an analysis of the complex reasons why people might respond differently or in the same way to these scenarios here, but my colleague's question does provide us with an interesting point of departure for asking questions about the role that universities, seen as social institutions, might play in contemporary South African society – questions which in the wake of the #FeesMustFall<sup>1</sup> protests need to be critically addressed.

In grappling with challenging questions about the role of universities as social institutions in a democratic South Africa, and the transformative role of higher education more broadly in addressing issues of social justice and the real and pressing needs of all sectors of our society, Leibowitz's edited collection strikes me as essential reading. The collection as a whole aims to highlight why it is essential for those of working in higher education to interrogate the purposes and practices of our own intuitions and disciplines, asking whether and how we are working *for* the public good so that we might 'conduct the three roles of higher education – research, teaching and community interaction – in such a way that we reflect on who higher education is for, who it can serve, and how' (p. xxiii).

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<sup>1</sup> #FeesMustFall represents a national and global student-led movement around, mainly, issues of funding of higher education, student debt, outsourcing of cleaning and maintenance work within universities, and broader transformation issues.

Important questions such as access to higher education – questions which are now at the forefront of higher education transformation debates – are tackled by the contributors in this book in nuanced and sophisticated ways, and contributors address the intersecting questions of both epistemological and economic access. Hall (Chapter 2), for example, highlights the interrelation between the socio-economic inequalities which structure educational opportunities in the South African education system, and the current university structures which serve to reproduce existing social stratifications which, by and large, leads to socio-economic and/or racially based exclusion within and beyond the borders of our academies. Hall argues that while universities may sometimes ‘provide life-changing opportunities, they also serve as gatekeepers that maintain difference by exclusion... and contribute to enduring inequalities’ (p. 20).

In her contribution, Singh (Chapter 1), pinpoints a crucial dilemma that needs to be further explored in the wake of the #FeesMustFall protests, saying that on the one hand the ‘current drive to make higher education more accountable is a response to a powerful and necessary social demand... and... may well produce important pedagogical and social benefits’, but on the other hand, ‘[e]ven if the values and purposes contained in earlier conceptions of the university have been asserted only rhetorically, or benefitted only an elite few, their heuristic value as a compass for the best aspirations of higher education for relevant and social accountability should not be underestimated’ (p. 3), ostensibly since what might have gone wrong is in the particular implementations of such visions. While I am sympathetic to Singh’s claim that higher education transformation should not track economic or market responsiveness alone, but should be framed within the more holistic context of the ‘emancipatory and broad-based social and political agenda’ of ‘democratic reconstruction’ (p. 4), the most valuable aspect of her contribution is perhaps her ability to raise the difficult questions within the higher education transformation debate which we seem too often, at least within the academic community, to have been sidestepped.

While I cannot provide a review of each contribution to the collection here, I will provide an outline of the collection as a whole. Leibowitz’s collection comprises sixteen chapters and is offered in four sections. Section one, Higher Education and the Public Good (Chapters 1-4), presents as the philosophical heavyweight of the collection, grappling with arguments familiar in academic circles, currently highlighted under the media spotlight, about the tensions between social responsiveness and the democratisation of higher education, the demands of neoliberal

market forces and economic responsiveness of higher education, internationalisation and ranking of higher education institutions, and conflicting government demands on and policies about higher education. Although the contributions of section one can be seen as more theoretically focused, the more practically focused contributions of sections two to four continue to draw on a variety of rich and varied social theories which makes the collection as a whole intellectually stimulating. The second section, *Within Higher Education* (Chapters 5-7), focuses explicitly on the higher education institutional context, unpacking what understanding higher education for the public good would mean for the restructuring or reformulating of institutional structures, systems and culture, as well as the formal curriculum. The third and fourth sections, *The Disciplines and the Classroom* (Chapters 8-12), and *The Academic* (Chapters 13-16), constitute the more practical sections of the collection, turning the reader's attention to critical questions of the possibility of teaching for the public good in disciplines across all faculties, from humanities to the sciences, and the contributions from these sections draw on studies and cases which serve to provide both models and inspiration for change. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions in this section highlights and measures, without relying on student's self-assessment, the impact of 'pro-public-good' teaching on student's moral development (Boni et al., Chapter 11). Importantly, the contributions from these final sections can also be seen as a call-to-arms, highlighting the role academics themselves need to play in transforming higher education institutions to work *for* the public good.

While the impetus for the collection stems from the 'Critical Professionalism' project run at Stellenbosch University (described by Leibowitz in Chapter 13), and as a result many of the authors are from this institution, the collection also has a number of national and international contributors, and the collection intentionally provides an interdisciplinary perspective. Leibowitz, I think rightly, points out that critical, interdisciplinary dialogue will be required within higher education if the project of re-imagining and re-interpreting the higher education for the public good is going to be achieved in a holistic way that celebrates a diversity of identities and the 'multiplicity of genres, styles and approaches towards inquiry' which must be accommodated in the academy today (p. xxv). The interdisciplinary perspectives, in both the more theoretical and practical sections of the collection, affords the reader an opportunity to approach the broader theoretical questions raised by understanding higher education *for* the public good through a diverse range of social theorists from numerous disciplines (contributors

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in the collection draw on theorists such as Martha Nussbaum, Paulo Freire, Jürgen Habermas, Ronald Barnett, Jack Mezirow, Steve Biko and bell hooks), and allows the reader to engage with the practical implications of these theories as they play out in numerous disciplines, such as visual arts, education, psychology, engineering and social work. Perhaps what makes this collection well worth having on your bookshelf is the fact that this interdisciplinary lens allows for the reader not only to critically engage in university-wide debates about questions of institutional transformation and reformation, but to apply the insights from the broad range of material presented in the collection to reflections on their own discipline-specific research, teaching, and community engagement practice.

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