



Rethinking Knowledge within Higher Education: Adorno and Social Justice

McArthur, Jan
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Book Review

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It is common to hear concern about the commodification of higher education. Administrators' reliance on business models built on the logic of the marketplace -- emphasizing the bottom-line, rational management strategies, and consumer-focused marketing -- is often at the center of any conversation about the future of higher education. Although Jan McArthur's book does not address these issues directly, it does, in fact, make an important contribution to the discussion by forcefully challenging the instrumental economic basis for the university or college educational experience. Moreover, she rejects the "traditional liberal ideas of education as a good in itself" (19). For McArthur, higher education's primary purpose is to contribute to the building of a more just and equitable social order.

McArthur's monograph is a revised version of her PhD thesis, written under the supervision of Paul Ashwin at Lancaster University (UK). She divides her book into three major parts. Chapters one and two lay the theoretical groundwork for the rest of the book, offering an overview of her understanding of the relationship between knowledge and social justice. She draws on the work of Theodor Adorno to develop her own approach to critical pedagogy, especially emphasizing his ideas of negative dialectics and non-identity. This, in turn, leads to her commitment to a higher education that can be a "home for complex and contested forms of knowledge, engaged with in risky and uncertain ways, where there is safety from normalizing forces" (32).

The next four chapters make up the second part of the book and each addresses a different aspect of knowledge in higher education. In chapter three MacArthur argues that what should be distinctive about knowledge within higher education is that it be "not easily known." That is

to say, the difficulty encountered with such knowledge mirrors the complexity of the social and natural worlds, thus making it useful. In the fourth chapter, MacArthur critiques the current emphasis on the standardization of knowledge, arguing that knowledge within higher education should allow students to develop “their capacity to step outside of the mainstream, to question and challenge the status quo; to live in their own right in the intellectual world” and should not be grounded in a predetermined set of acceptable ideas that denies students their “true autonomy” (98). MacArthur’s fifth chapter introduces three metaphors she sees as especially useful for informing the educational experience of students and critical academics: exile, sanctuary, and diaspora. These metaphors speak to the ways that knowledge can be both a cause of separation from, but also a means of linking to, society. In the sixth chapter, MacArthur argues that the dichotomy between theory and practice is a false one. All knowledge should be “understood in an holistic way, as both theory and practice, philosophical and useful, social and economic” (147). Finally, in chapter seven, she summarizes her argument and suggests several avenues for additional work and reflection.

This necessarily brief overview of the book cannot adequately convey the significance of MacArthur’s refreshing and well-written work. Her argument for placing social justice at the very core of higher education is both forceful and convincing and relevant for those teaching in religious studies or theology departments. For faculty struggling with questions regarding the future of higher education and who are looking for something beyond a business-model approach, MacArthur’s book offers a worthy conversation partner. She concludes her work with a challenge to those who would choose to follow her lead: “We should cease to feel the need to apologize for academic work that shows its passionate motivations and committed values. . . . Free and curious human beings can never be mainstream, predictable, or standardized” (160).

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