



Delgado, S. (2018). [Review of the book *Fighting academic repression and neoliberal education: Resistance, reclaiming, organizing and Black Lives Matter in education*, edited by A. J. Nocella II & E. Juergensmeyer]. *Workplace*, 30, 405-410.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

*FIGHTING ACADEMIC REPRESSION AND NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION: RESISTANCE, RECLAIMING, ORGANIZING AND BLACK LIVES MATTER IN EDUCATION*

A. J. Nocella II, & Juergensmeyer, E. (Eds.). (2017). *Fighting academic repression and neoliberal education: Resistance, reclaiming, organizing and Black Lives Matter in education*. New York, NY, Peter Lang, 2017

During the last three decades, neoliberal capitalism has consolidated its hegemony worldwide by increasing its social, political and economic influence and by expanding a market centered rationality throughout the world. Nocella and Juergensmeyer in their book *Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education: Resistance, Reclaiming, Organizing and Black Lives Matter in Education* remind us that the reforms implemented to higher education institutions around the world correspond to the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism spreading out and taking over education. Neoliberal reforms are designed to adjust education systems to the needs and requirements of highly marketized economies. As a result of the implementation of neoliberal reforms, universities have been forced to mirror practices and behaviors usually employed by private corporations under the logic of a ruthless capitalist competition where there is a continual need for profit in an imbalanced, unjust and unscrupulous market. However, as policy makers continue to saturate higher education with neoliberal reforms, countless resistance movements have emerged globally to fight against the expansion of neoliberal capitalism. Likewise, inside academic communities, students, faculty and staff constantly organize themselves to fight back, defend their jobs, their rights and their institutions against the neoliberal assault to education (Mathison & Ross, 2008; Petrina & Ross, 2014).

Higher education is a compound and multifarious field; it includes various conditions and settings in which students, faculty and staff could engage in resistance: teaching, studying, researching, conducting applied work, among many others. Neoliberal capitalism has transformed most of these settings and has deeply influenced the relationships and dynamics between social agents, collective action and academic life. Nocella and Juergensmeyer's book portrays some of these complexities in the activist work engage in academia. Their book helps us to understand that resistance in academia emerges and is upheld in interaction with a complex, diverse and conflicting range of political, economic, and social interests that come together and form an integral part of the field of higher education.

*Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education* collects fifteen essays that serve as testimony of the complex dynamics that social action entails. The stories and reflections in the book are told from the activists' point of view, and their voices reflect the struggles and concerns of academic activism nowadays. The book stands its ground on the need to strengthen existing resistance efforts against neoliberal reforms in higher education. One of the main aims of the book is to help activists to understand the relations between the transformations that universities have undergone during the past 30 years and the evolution of academic activism. The authors of each one of the essays contribute with a series of suggestions designed to guide activists and support them in addressing some of the major challenges currently affecting resistance against neoliberal reforms. Their book offers a comprehensive exploration of how different communities and activists are interpreting the panorama in higher education and how are they acting in relation to the challenges involved in coordinating a strong and successful resistance movement.

### **Against Neoliberalism. Inspiring Resistance and Activism in Higher Education**

The introductory chapters of the book offer an historical perspective to the neoliberal reforms currently imposed on American universities. The authors contextualize how universities and educational institutions in the US have been affected by neoliberal capitalism during the last three decades. According to the authors, universities have been ferociously transformed into "knowledge factories" and, despite the many efforts of resistance that have emerged, most universities keep being reformed to serve specific political and economic purposes in the service of capital while students and faculty are often neutralized and overworked.

Many of the transformations that have taken place in education have been gradually internalized into higher education practices and have changed the relationships among members of the academic community. Nocella and Juergensmeyer's book offers some examples of the changes that universities and colleges have suffered in context of the neoliberal reforms. For example, relationships students, faculty and administrators have with the institution and among themselves has been drastically transformed. Students, as Clare, White, and White argue in chapter 1, have departed from being active learners who are interested and engaged with knowledge to become passive "market consumers" (p. 18). The neoliberal university has also transformed the relationships among faculty members; professors have become more vigilant of each other's work as they are continuously infantilized by a bureaucratic system of surveillance. As it is described by Seis in chapter 3, there is a recurrent feeling of distrust, surveillance and resentment growing in universities, which has deteriorated the academic work environment. Faculty is intimidated by their peers and by a system of bureaucratic scrutiny ready to undermine their activist efforts. Meanwhile, university administrators continue to replace democratic academic governments by advancing authoritarian corporate rules that further compromise the possibility to construct healthy and transformative academic environments.

The corporate neoliberal reforms have also hurt the curriculum at many levels as Juergensmeyer and Doe describe in chapter 6. The neoliberal transformation of education has implied the rise of state-policed curriculum and the increasing influence that mega foundations and think tanks have gained in policy making and in curriculum making for the entire education system, from kindergarten to university. The authors use the concept of policed pedagogy to illustrate the extension of such influence in curriculum making. For them, the state and private organizations are fiercely pushing their own agendas to control the curriculum, while

administrators inside the institutions are silencing resistance and limiting academic freedom for students and faculty.

Despite the expansion of neoliberal reforms in education, and the repression and violence suffered by members of the academic community, students and faculty have not resigned in their efforts to organize and fight back against the expansion of neoliberalism. On the contrary, as the authors in the book persistently remind us, resistance from academic communities around the world has grown and there are motivating possibilities of radical transformations that inspire hope for students, faculty and staff to work collaboratively and reclaim higher education. To elucidate this point, the authors of the essays offer several examples that can be found throughout the book. The Free University of Sheffield is one of the most illustrative because, as Clare, White and White assert in chapter 2, it “promotes alternative methods of education and disseminating ideas outside of the parameters of neoliberal pedagogical structures ...” (p. 25). According to the authors, the University of Sheffield contributes to inspiring practical ideas of how alliances can potentially nurture better conditions for resistance to emerge, gain momentum and become transformative. Throughout the book, the authors also describe many other inspiring examples and forms of resistance and offer testimony of the coordinated lived experiences in academic communities fighting against neoliberalism. In addition, in each one of the chapters, the authors suggest a series of practical advice and guidelines of how academic communities can actively organize themselves, interact with each other and find points of convergence.

### **Stories of Resistance in Higher Education**

Despite the continuous efforts to fight against the neoliberal assault to universities and colleges, looking at formal education systems from a global perspective reveals that resistance has not been successful in stopping the expansion of neoliberal reforms and the fact is that academic communities are facing an intensification of academic and financial repression. In this context, many challenges arise for activists and members of the academic community interested in building up resistance. For instance, there is an impending need to explore the reasons why a durable and united academic resistance movement has not been able to flourish. Heath and Burdon in chapter 2 identify some possible causes. For them, there is a strong sense of passivity, fear and isolation inside academic communities and those factors may play a role in perpetuating the disconnections between academia and effective collective action (p. 38). In chapter 7, Finley narrates her frustrations trying to organize collective action on her campus. From her experiences, she argues that rules, policies and bureaucratic procedures are the ones that have triumphed, dissuading activism, discouraging collective action, and controlling free speech. In addition, as the universities are being transformed into neoliberal knowledge machines and as the resistance grows, many activists in academia have come to experience face-to-face repression, and violence, as described by Hurst. As many authors in Nocella and Juergensmeyer’s book narrate, students and faculty are constantly targets of coercion, life threats and despotism. For instance, Vallera describes the persecution and intimidation she has faced as member of a negotiation committee for a collective bargaining agreement. The author reflects upon her experience as an activist and offers several suggestions for organizers who are facing related situations on their campuses. Similarly, Sean, Donaghue-Johnston and Tanya Loughhead depict the living and working conditions that adjunct professors are undergoing while capitalist academia exploits and marginalizes them and their work. The perverse dynamics of academic competition and the continuous decrease of stable and dignifying job positions at universities have forced many of adjunct professors to poverty and sentenced them to a vicious cycle of

underpaid and unrecognized labor. The authors offer some strategic suggestions to build a movement towards improving working conditions for adjunct professors. A comparable situation is described by Marmol, Hande and Bejan in chapter 12, in which they narrate the story of graduate students who struggle financially to survive while they are underpaid in their teaching and research assistantships. In their essay, the authors describe how academia has become a site of exploitation for graduate students who are continuously facing academic and financial repression.

Gibney, Limes-Taylor and Hurst each narrate the horrors of institutional racial oppression in academia. Gibney, in chapter 13, narrates her own experience facing institutional racial repression as a Black activist scholar. Her story powerfully evidences the cruelty of the corporate university and the unethical behavior of individuals who lead it. The author offers remarkable guidance for activists who are experiencing similar situations in their campuses.

Limes-Taylor's and Hurst's experiences as black activist scholars provide vivid evidence of how the corporate neoliberal institution discriminates, represses marginalized groups in society, and silences voices of dissent from cultural and racial minorities. Most of all, their stories are evidence of how educational institutions are structurally designed to perpetuate social and economic injustice and privilege. The authors in their essays make a call for fellow academic activists concerned about academic freedom and social justice to unite their voices and find alternatives to protect academic freedom and create spaces in education where students and faculty can reflect and organize against privilege on the bases of race, class or gender.

The narratives of many of the activists illustrate that resistance movements are failing in their attempt to fight back the expansion of the corporate university because they have not been able to converge, cooperate and form collaborative networks among themselves. For authors such as Bassi, the problem with current resistance movements may be associated with a limited and compartmentalized approach to different forms of oppression. She bases her argument on her own experience confronting and challenging the politics of privilege and intersectionality in different forms of resistance. From her perspective, confrontations and deadlocks in the politics and theory grounding resistance are limiting and dividing. She argues that instead of uniting activists, theories are creating a sense of "resentment" among academics. In chapter 4, she invites activists and educators to rethink our approaches to social change in the practice and in the theory towards building a way back to a positive engagement that enriches more critical understandings of solidarity and resistance.

On a similar note, Cash and Boyce argue that members of the academic community who are social activists need to urgently address many contradictions in their discourses and practices of resistance. For these authors, activism in education encompasses a rather conflicting set of interests that on one hand center all efforts on defending universities and education as if they were the "last great Commons" (p. 79), but on the other hand, there is also the need to acknowledge that universities are far from being sites freedom of thought and speech. The authors remind us that schools, as well as universities, historically have become more connected to a "regime of credentialing" where students learn to self-discipline and become comfortable with an unfair system of production and exploitation. In this context, educators render students obedient and governable by using a gradation system and by maintaining institutional hierarchies. For the authors, students are explicitly and constantly resisting inside the scope of everyday classroom dynamics and it is the duty of radical educators to encourage, support and foster resistance instead of disciplining and punishing students who practice it.

Academic activists face many challenges and the institution often relies on repression, intimidation, work overload and bureaucratic procedures to discourage any of the efforts to resist. Activists are put in a situation where, on the one hand, they need to connect to people, communicate ideas better and gain support from inside and outside of formal higher education to do their activist work, but on the other hand, activists continuously fear the loss of their credibility, security and jobs. Formal education has become an unapologetic source of academic and financial repression (ICES, 2014; Petrina, Mathison, & Ross, 2015). Therefore, it is of great importance for those who are interested in resistance to obtain guidance and advice to avoid making mistakes that put their movements and themselves at risk.

### **Tactics and Strategies to Reclaim Resistance and building Momentum**

One of the most useful elements to understand the dynamics of social movements and collective action is the observation and analysis of the tactics and strategies employed by activists and organizers. In the literature on social movements, there is a long tradition of scholars who have dedicated their work to interpreting the role and importance that these tactics and strategies have. When resistance movements coordinate themselves to struggle against an issue or injustice, they choose discourses and tactics that are loaded with symbolic meaning and often contribute to disrupt normality and routine. For activists it is key to select adequate tactics that help them to gain support and momentum for the movement. In this sense, Nocella and Juergensmeyer's book is written by activists considering that their primary readers are fellow activists that need guidance at the practical level and therefore they offer in every one of the essays a list of suggestions and possible strategies designed specifically to help them at the tactical level. The lack of strategic communication, solidarity and most of all, the lack of tactical guidance are common factors identified as challenges in the authors' narratives. Therefore, the throughout the book the contributors argue that there are several tactical aspects that can be re-organized and rethought.

In chapter 8, Thomson suggests the importance of producing a comprehensive analysis of contemporary tactics and strategies used by students to resist different forms of repression. To start, the author compiles some recent tactics and strategies used by student activists from several student organizations around the world. Thomson offers an overview of how campus occupations, strikes, street line tactics and many other types of militant tactics are being used more often by movements as repression and violence intensifies.

Lupinacci offers a different tactical stance in his description of how anarchist pedagogies facilitate collective action and inspire movements to reclaim education by creating alternatives to institutionalized schooling. Lupinacci uses the concept of pedagogy of solidarity to describe a variety of pedagogical possibilities to empower learners and allow teachers the opportunity to open spaces for experimentation and transformation. Lupinacci's work is also inspired by the concept of guerilla pedagogy, where the goal is to "interrupt, expose and inspire" knowledge production in educational spaces as an invitation to creatively reclaim learning and teaching as spaces of solidarity and social transformation.

The experiences narrated in this book leave several key questions in mind that are important for us as scholars and activists. As many contributors suggest, campus protests and academic activism are rather isolated and disconnected, and this isolation also becomes evident throughout the book. Although the essays present a great variety of forms of activism and testimonies from activist from all over the world, the chapters are also isolated attempts to resist

the neoliberal corporate university from different fronts. Such attempts could be seen as efforts that are detached one from another. Without doubt, there is an urgent need to reverse detachment and the sporadic nature of recent student and faculty movements. Therefore, the question about how can we break the patterns of isolation and find convergence in our own understandings and lived experiences of resistance remains relevant as we theorize and practice resistance. Moreover, if we take into account that there are various movements and activists' efforts happening outside the academy, it is also relevant for activists, students and faculty to ask how can we improve the impact of academic activism beyond the campus? *Fighting Academic Repression and Neoliberal Education* contributes to a much-needed conversation towards that end. It is our task to ask ourselves what it is that we can offer to other movements and to think about how we can be relevant and connected to other emerging resistance movements outside the walls of academia, as found in community organizations, trade unions, among others, to come together to form a united front against repression and neoliberalism.

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