

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Michael Bailey and Des Freedman, eds., *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance*. London: Pluto Press, 2011.

This edited collection is essential reading for any one concerned about the current state and future trajectory of the university. Many if not all of its sixteen essays could (and should) be used as course readings in advanced undergraduate and graduate level courses, especially in courses in sociology and related disciplines concerned with higher education, social movements, and neoliberalism. The whole book is a treasure trove of insightful commentaries, challenging critiques, penetrating analyses, and inspirational calls to action. Except for the last three essays, its focus is universities and higher education policy in the UK, but Canadian readers will find obvious parallels with the effects of similar policies being pursued in Canada.

Central to the overall narrative of this book are events that took place in England in the final months of 2010 in response to *The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Report*, known commonly as the Browne Review. Lord Browne of Madingly, formerly the CEO of British Petroleum, was commissioned in 2009 by the Labour government to recommend ways to fund higher education into the future. However, Browne's review was released under the auspices of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government on October 12th, 2010. The government began immediately to act on its recommendations with legislation that significantly increased tuition fees with long-term changes to the mechanism for funding universities. On November 10th, less than a month later, students filled the streets of London and other university cities, to an extent not seen in England in over forty years, to protest the proposed legislation. By the end of the year, they had occupied spaces in forty-six universities and other public buildings. While they initially targeted tuition and fee increases and related proposals for student financing, their actions soon escalated into a full-fledged "in the streets" student movement that challenged the entire political and economic program of Britain's new coalition government.

Student marches and occupations were not the only response to the Browne Review. Although media commentary focused almost exclusively on tuition increases, Browne also recommended that the govern-

ment's annual block grant for teaching be almost entirely eliminated and replaced with direct financial aid to students.¹ This proposal was perceived by academics, commentators, and other concerned citizens as a death knell to public higher education. In Stefan Collini's words, rather than treating higher education as a public good, it treats it as a "lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choice, is sovereign in determining what is offered by service providers (i.e., universities)."²

The essays in *The Assault on Universities* respond to these events, providing nuanced and astute critiques not only of the Browne Review, but more importantly of the longer term shift in higher education policy that Browne is designed to extend. This shift dates back to at least Margaret Thatcher's time in office — even longer, according to one writer, who reminds us of E.P. Thompson's seminal essay, "The Business University."³ Thompson's powerful critique of practices unfolding at Warwick University in the 1970s stands as an early warning that university leaders were already tacking back from the arms length relationship to "the military-industrial complex" that the 1960s student movement struggled to establish. Since then, the book's contributors argue, universities have been encouraged, indeed compelled, by government policies to ever more deeply subjugate their research and teaching activities to the diverse needs of global capital. As the subtitle reveals, (*A Manifesto for Resistance*) the contributors have written this book to mobilize support for reversing policies that have been key to advancing university corporatization.

The book is divided into five sections. Three essays in "The Changing Idea of the University" contrast the deployment of universities to support the competitive needs of British capitalism with the idea of the university as an educational and cultural institution that sustains and expands democratic sensibilities. Their arguments cannot be easily reduced (although advocates of corporatization will no doubt try) to nostalgic longings for imagined golden ages. Neil Faulkner's essay, for example, "What is University Education For," locates the recent neoliberal diversion of universities away from the democratic gains of the 1960s and

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1. A similar proposal for funding universities in Canada is advocated by SFU economist, John Chant (2005, University accountability, pp. 587–94 in Charles M. Beach, Robin W. Boadway and R. Marvin McNinnis, eds., *Higher Education in Canada*. Kingston, Ontario: John Deutsch Institute, Queens University).
 2. Stefan Collini, Browne's gamble, *London Review of Books*, Nov 4, 2010, 23. Collini teaches at Cambridge University and has been an eloquent and outspoken critic of the Browne Review.
 3. E.P. Thompson, The business university, *New Society*, 19 Feb, 1970; reprinted, pp. 13–28 in *Writing By Candlelight*. London: Merlin, 1980.

70s as the latest manifestation of a *recurring contradiction* in university development, one which he tracks back to the “dual revolution” of the late 18th century.

Section two’s essays on “Current Challenges and Future Visions” include an economic alternative to the fiscal crisis of 2008 written by Aeron Davis and Jon Nixon’s eloquent appeal for reimagining and reinstating the university’s responsibility to serve the public good. Nick Stevenson augments the assault on universities into a full-blown war on democracy itself.

Section three, “Critical Pedagogy,” highlights the central claim of this collection that universities are fundamentally and primarily *educational* institutions. All three essayists concern themselves with the effects of corporatization on teaching and accessibility to education. Especially powerful and inspiring is Peter Bailey’s poignant essay focusing on E.P. Thompson and Edward Said as exemplars of “The Academic as Truth Teller.”

Section four’s essays on “Student Politics” produce a detailed, intriguing, and at times troubling, account of the student-led movement that catapulted onto the centre stage of resistance to the Browne Review. These essays are an instructive resource to readers interested in building a diverse movement that will draw broad public support for challenging corporatization, not only as it affects universities but also as it undermines democratic principles of justice and equality in other areas of contemporary life.

Among the three essays in the final section on “International Perspectives” is one on higher education in the USA by noted sociologist and critical pedagogue, Henry Giroux. Giroux (p. 153) laments that “not enough faculty, students, parents ... are mobilizing [and] willing to defend higher education as a public good.” Sadly the same can be said about Canada. Marion van Osten’s cogent analysis of what followed in Europe from the initially promising Bologna Declaration of 1999 is an exceptionally informative cautionary tale. Finally, Kirsten Forket’s provocative account of how international students are drawn into the global education market alternately as cash cows, guinea pigs, and scapegoats concludes with an intriguing discussion of how neoliberalism contributes to xenophobia.

Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of these essays, two related and important criticisms need to be noted. Presented as a manifesto for resistance, the final pages of the book contain a list of eighteen demands on the government and universities to scrap specific policies and practices that have advanced corporatization, and to commit to policy directions that will help to reverse the effects of corporatization on uni-

versities. Sixty-five named and approximately five hundred unnamed persons, mainly academics and researchers, have signed on to the manifesto. However, no concrete strategies are offered for how these demands might be secured nor is there mention of the need for such strategies.

Coupled with this the manifesto, as the book's strategic intervention, is limited to making demands on government and university administrations. By so doing, it assumes that governments and university administrations are the effective agents of university corporatization and, by extension, the key agents for stopping and reversing its effects. This assumption obscures the fact that corporatizing policies have been efficacious largely because members of the academic community, even if reluctantly, have been instrumental in implementing them. Surely then, it should also be recognized that members of the university community can play a central role in reversing them. Surely the urgency and passion of these essays could propel faculty members into action — to find ways, as Eric Olin Wright has recently urged, to create “real utopias” *inside their own institutions* as social experiments that could help recover the public purpose of public institutions.⁴

The consensus running through this book, however, is that the already underway student-initiated social movement along with its trade union allies is *the* way forward for wresting the university (and other areas of economic, cultural, and political life) from the corporate grip. In this sense, though probably unintended, this book sidelines faculty members, *as faculty members*, to bit parts in the struggle to recover the university as a public serving institution — the very same thing that the essayists criticize the government and university administrations for doing.

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4. Eric Olin Wright, 2011, Real utopias, *Contexts* 10:36–42.