



***Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University:  
Toward a Philosophy of Higher Education***  
**By Aaron Stoller & Eli Kramer, Editors**

New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan (2018). 268 pp., \$65.00

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***Abstract***

*Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer's (2018) edited volume Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Toward a Philosophy of Higher Education is a thought provoking addition to the literature between philosophy and higher education. The editors argue for the possibilities of philosophical thinking, particularly a reconstructive philosophy as read through the work of John Dewey, to ameliorate the problems of our neoliberal times. The contributed chapters extend this work to particular sites in higher education as well as through additional philosophers and philosophical schools of thought. This volume will be of interest to philosophers engaged with problems of higher education, university community members interested in philosophical foundations and transformations of their work, and higher education scholars presently familiar with the discipline of philosophy.*

***Keywords:*** *philosophy; higher education; reconstructive philosophy; John Dewey; neoliberalism; futures*

**W**hat to do with the neoliberal university? American higher education faces the problem of the nation and of the corners of the globe in contact with Western settler colonialism: it is immanently participating in its own destruction through uncritical and atheoretical practices. Of the many pieces of scholarship hovering around this intersection, others address the atheoretical scholarship in the discipline of higher education,<sup>1</sup> the entrepreneurial subject as creation and weapon of neoliberalism,<sup>2</sup> capitalism as the immanent organizer of material↔discursive realities,<sup>3</sup> and higher education as productive of human capital.<sup>4</sup> The problem of neoliberalism is clearly pressing, and yet even with recent efforts within the discipline of higher education in the direction of theoretical

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1. Daniel B. Saunders, "Contemporary Issues in Higher Education: Introduction," *Thresholds in Education* 40, no. 1 (2017): 1-5.

2. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London, UK: Verso, 2017).

3. cf. Critical materialisms in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (1-43); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

4. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015).

engagement,<sup>5</sup> it remains firmly lodged in post-positivist scientism.<sup>6</sup> With this bleak field in focus, Stoller and Kramer aim their intervention on bridging the gulf between the disciplines of philosophy and higher education.<sup>7</sup> They argue that the higher education literature on its own does not provide the tools to create its future differently, and that tools from philosophy (and for the editors, from the pragmatist works of John Dewey in particular) produce a “reconstructive philosophy of higher education”<sup>8</sup> in this volume.

The editors here seek to create a space for higher education within philosophy and a space for philosophy within higher education. On the first count, this volume produces many chapters that engage directly and deeply with canonical philosophers including Dewey, Richard Rorty, Socrates, Alfred North Whitehead, and philosophical traditions including feminist pragmatism and African communal philosophies. On the second count, there is work still to do. There are few references to and no sustained engagement with similar canonical authors or traditions within the discipline of higher education. There are of course topical and place-based connections to higher education through and through. However, there is no similar on-ramp into the volume for readers from higher education less familiar with philosophy as there are on-ramps for readers from philosophy less familiar with higher education. This book will serve as a good reference for the latter audience as well as for audiences within higher education presently familiar with the discipline of philosophy. However, I do not imagine that this small niche, as explored earlier, is the higher education audience the editors have in mind to target. Perhaps the gulf between the disciplines is too large for one book to bridge. In that case, this book does a fine job at building the trusses that might support a roadway and connecting traffic in the future.

Perhaps this is also the location in which the editors locate this book. In calling for the higher education literature to grant an ontological separation between higher education and elementary and secondary education, the authors call upon Dewey the pragmatist, in contradistinction to Dewey the philosopher of education revered in elementary and secondary literatures. They specifically hail the Dewey as juxtaposed to Robert Maynard Hutchins in the Dewey-Hutchins debate over a metaphysical structure of versus an immanent and experimental practice of knowledge in higher education to provide a third way approach to higher education. The standard two ways in Stoller and Kramer’s telling are both derived from Hutchins, leaving a Deweyan problematization as the new way forward. This third way is to be

a reconstructive philosophy of higher education that grounds itself in the real situation of colleges and universities, and then builds robust alternatives (imaginaries) that can harness their productive heterogeneities, and be reorganized and refined as new problems and needs emerge.<sup>9</sup>

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5. e.g. Ana M. Martínez-Alemán, Brian Pusser, and Estela Mara Bensimon, *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

6. Ryan S. Wells, Ethan A. Kolek, Elizabeth A. Williams, and Daniel B. Saunders, “How We Know What We Know”: A Systematic Comparison of Research Methods Employed in Higher Education Journals, 1996-2000 v. 2006-2010,” *Journal of Higher Education* 86, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 171-195.

7. Aaron Stoller and Eli Kramer, eds., *Contemporary Philosophical Proposals for the University: Toward a Philosophy of Higher Education* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

8. *Ibid.*, viii.

9. *Ibid.*, 10.

Here, the editors call for grounding in the topics and places of higher education, with creative possibilities coming from contact with philosophical thinking. This is different than bridging the literatures of philosophy and higher education, and on this ground this book succeeds.

Where this volume excels is in the provocation of thought<sup>10</sup> of how higher education might be and become differently. The editors stake out a map of the topics with which a reconstructive philosophy of higher education must grapple and the actions it must take in order to confront the accountability regimes and other relations of neoliberalism that have been built through the acquiescence and complicity of actors within the system. While some chapters advance ideas I do not cosign, all place the reader in the work of connecting how the system came to be as such, and how we might individually and collectively come to make it differently. This is precisely the gulf in the research in need of abridgement. This spark of thought and call to experimentation is the point in which Dewey would have us reside, and in doing, the editors find hope for the creation of “robust and ameliorative imaginaries.”<sup>11</sup>

In Part I of the volume, chapters two (by Crispin Sartwell) and four (by Dwayne A. Tunstall) present problems associated with diversity, or lack thereof. In chapter two, Sartwell links the postmodernists who centered the “linguistic construction of reality and of the self”<sup>12</sup> to corrosive political correctness on the American left. Sartwell takes up the works of Rorty, his former teacher, as creating the conditions for current day politically correct culture, a culture that unhelpfully non-platforms people and ideas contrary to the enforced consensus. Sartwell declares that in this environment, he “really do[es] understand how going to Wesleyan might turn someone into a neo-fascist.”<sup>13</sup> Such a position presumes the student in question is likely neither Jewish, nor Black, queer, Gypsy or a member of other communities directly (and materially, not just linguistically) targeted by fascist regimes. It is in such a recourse to materiality that Sartwell finds hope for the future, a recourse connected to speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. Perhaps also the inclusion of feminist new materialisms and Black, borderlands, and indigenous materialist philosophies would help Sartwell and others theorize the white, patriarchal, cisheteronormative assumptions of language (and materiality). Chapter four takes up similar themes, searching for a corrective from a too-rigid left regarding diversity. Whereas Sartwell locates a corrective a step back from where postmodernists like Rorty have gone, Tunstall locates a corrective to stalled-out diversity initiatives a step forward from current practice. Tunstall describes simplistic university efforts towards diversity, such as those in marketing materials, “as a veneer to cover over the messy realities on their campuses, especially on the campuses of predominately white colleges and universities.”<sup>14</sup> He gives the work of his home institution, Grand Valley State University, in implementing the AAC&U’s Making Excellence Inclusive as an example of diversity work that gives a richer engagement with inclusion and equity.

Also in Part I, chapter three (by Gabriel Keehn, Morgan Anderson, and Deron Boyles) presents a problematization of online coursework as neoliberal through Max Weber’s work on rationalization. This chapter lives up to the editors’ call for works situated in the problems of higher education that use philosophy to experiment towards new futures. The authors quickly situate the status of online courses in higher education and move into a lengthy discussion of Max Weber’s

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10. cf. Brian Massumi, “Introduction: Like a Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), xiii-xxxix.

11. Stoller and Kramer, *Contemporary Philosophical*, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, 32.

13. *Ibid.*, 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 68.

rationalization, leading to the thesis that "...the proliferation of online learning is an instrument of the rationalization of the university"<sup>15</sup> as "online classes are merely a more efficient means of collecting credits for program completion and increasing enrollments."<sup>16</sup> A more detailed engagement with the everyday experience of online teaching, learning, and administration would meet the critique from Weber point for point, and allow this chapter to pack an even bigger punch with audiences located in the place and in the discipline of higher education.

In Part II, chapters five and six present reflections on higher education as ethically practiced. In chapter five, L. Jackson Newell presents his experiences with liberal education as a student, faculty member, and administrator. This chapter lends texture to the ways in which liberal education, in this chapter and throughout the volume presented as something of an antidote to neoliberalism, has functioned to keep thought moving for Newell and his students. In chapter six, George Allan calls for the university, an institution already with functions in excess of education, to (re)commit to education in excess of training. Education in this view is a tangle of practices that "can be learned but they cannot be taught."<sup>17</sup> For Allan, the site of this learning is in conversation rather than outcomes. Recursion of conversation and refinement brings about learning as a moral practice, and members of Oakeshott's "civil association"<sup>18</sup> of persons according to moral considerations.

Part III presents three chapters focused on reconstructive ideas in higher education. Chapter seven (by Ronald Barnett) explores the (dis)entanglement of culture(s) and the university and proposes an ecological approach as a fruitful suturing of the two. This chapter is thought provoking as it stands, and would do well to have as robust of a description of ecological as it does of culture and the university. Chapter eight (by Martha Nussbaum) brings the dispute between the conservative Aristophanes and the, well, Socratic Socrates on a proper education to the present day. In siding with Socrates, Nussbaum proceeds to flesh out the three capacities she first enumerated in *Cultivating Humanity* as essential to education in a networked world. Chapter nine (by Thaddeus Metz) is another exemplary chapter in this volume. Here, Metz brings his selected reading of sub-Saharan traditions in contradistinction to Western traditions of autonomy, truth, and citizenship. Afro-communal ethics would honor communion within and without university communities, prioritize such communal relationships over other relational configurations, and reject the development of communal relations through the creation of others outside of the community. The final ends that flow from these ethics present the reconstructive possibilities to which the editors gesture.

Part IV consists of one standalone chapter, chapter 10, by Danielle Lake, Amy McFarland, and Jessica Jennrich. This chapter details the experiences of these authors in putting their feminist pragmatist commitments to work in a faculty (and staff and student and community) learning community. This chapter is arguably the most deeply embedded in university practices of any in the volume, going so far as to share their mappings of actions taken by their learning community against the relevant sections of their university's strategic plan. The authors deploy feminist pragmatist commitments inside of the neoliberal logics and structures of the university and in doing so chart a course for transdisciplinary engagement, as understood to traverse disciplinary boundaries as well as boundaries dividing the university and its publics, to produce "small wins"<sup>19</sup> within the siloed academy.

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15. *Ibid.*, 58-59.

16. *Ibid.*, 60.

17. *Ibid.*, 112.

18. *Ibid.*, 106.

19. *Ibid.*, 207.

Part V concludes the volume with a final standalone chapter, chapter 11, by Randall Auxier. This chapter pushes the boundaries of what we consider the university of the future to be farther than almost any other essay in this volume. Here, Auxier works through a reading of Whitehead consistent with radical empiricism to not only theorize Michel Foucault's "'age of Man,'"<sup>20</sup> but also to speculate through a process philosophy-inflected reading of time and space as to the future forms of university teaching and learning. His vision is monstrous compared to everyday university experiences today. Auxier includes some speculative hope in the power of access to information to rationally resolve conflict that I find hard to believe in given American history as well as current events,<sup>21</sup> but perhaps holding on to radical hope is the point. Auxier takes us beyond the singularity of the eclipse of man by machine. Singularity, along with entropy, that could use more detail here, as both are central to the chapter's arguments. In this spacetime (if those are even accurate coordinates) of the transformation, the university becomes both recognizable to its current mission and so different in form as to also become virtually unrecognizable. This unrecognizable form, in fact, is harmonious with many of the final ends that Metz reads of a university organized through Afro-communalism. It is perhaps this resonance, a working-with without becoming-equal, that gives this send-off chapter a character that provides a recursive conclusion to the volume, an enactment of the very process Allan calls for in chapter six.

Again, audiences for this volume include those within and adjacent to the discipline of philosophy seeking to engage transdisciplinarily (in the narrower, unused sense of Lake, McFarland, and Jennrich in chapter 10). A receptive audience should also include others within the university who seek to engage the philosophies of their circumstances. An aspirational audience would be those within the discipline of higher education. Whereas this volume does not come with the citational links to smooth this path, perhaps the experimental and recursive thoughts these works spark might continue in this direction.

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20. *Ibid.*, 243.

21. cf. Stoller and Kramer, *Contemporary Philosophical Proposals*, 249.

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