The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why it's Time for Radical Change
By Raewyn Connell
Monash University Publishing, 233pp, 2019

Reviewed by Gillian Russell

One of the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown has been to make universities 'no-go' areas, locked and patrolled by minimal security, a situation they share with other cultural institutions such as theatres and churches. I live in York, England, near the magnificent Minster which has been closed to the public since March, its monumentality enhanced by the sense of suspended activity and absence of people inside, especially around Easter when it would normally have been busy and full of sound. Cutting off access to such spaces, even more than empty streets or football stadiums, is a sign of the challenge that COVID-19 poses to institutions, especially those invested in face-to-face encounter, collective rituals, and performative 'liveness', whether of religious services or seminars and lectures. The term 'campus', deriving from the Latin for field, emerged in the U.S. in the nineteenth century to refer to, in the words of the *OED*, the 'grounds of a college or university; the open space between or around the buildings... Hence allusively university or college life or people'. The crisis created by COVID-19 represents a fundamental threat to the idea of the university as an 'open space' as well as its 'life and people'. But we cannot say that we did not know that a threat was looming, even if we could not predict the specific form it would take. Campuses will reopen but what kind of 'life' will be conducted on them remains to be seen and experienced.

Raewyn Connell's 2019 book *The Good University* draws attention to the vulnerability of universities, particularly what would happen if 'flows of incoming students' were to dry up (113). She also paints a nightmare scenario of what universities of the future might look like as fully realised businesses 'owned by investors and managers':

> All operations work is outsourced, and all of the teachers are sessional. Staff are appointed by managers. Curricula are trimmed back to fee-earning vocational programmes. Teaching is done online by the cheapest labour available in global markets, under automated

> surveillance. The most profitable universities have no campuses at all, just brands, managers, and online systems. National hierarchies of university-firms exist, under a global hierarchy of English-language universities. Only those at the top conduct research. All the research they do depends on military or corporate funding. (168-9)

Some aspects of that scenario such as the ubiquity of online teaching and the closing-down of campuses are scarily familiar from the response to COVID-19, but Connell's book is not a doom-laden jeremiad. It is realistic about the problems faced by universities but is also deeply committed to universities as life-affirming, and capable of being places of 'joy' (41). Connell's advocacy of the 'good university' is rooted in an emphasis on universities as integrated communities engaging in a collective enterprise. Her book offers a refreshingly lucid and concise explanation of what underpins research (which, incidentally, all first-year postgraduates should read). Research begins, she says, with 'encounter-work', that is, the process of finding materials to form the object of study, that are then 'patterned' by the application of intellectual models or structures, and subject to a process of critique, followed ultimately by dissemination or 'broadcasting' to the wider scholarly community. Research is 'a highly social process', always evolving, open to revision and the possibility of its own redundancy. (As we in the UK have become all too aware of recently, 'following the science' is not what the politicians think it is, but in practice entails following the process of formulating the questions that might lead to the answers, not necessarily the answers themselves).

The labour of research is sustained by another 'layer of work' within the university, that undertaken by what Connell calls 'operations staff'—workers who 'keep the institutions running and keep the research staff paid, supplied and safe' (24. Connell emphasises the interdependence of academics and the community that enables and sustains what they do, extending, though she does not highlight this, to maintenance workers, cleaners, and garbage removers (now categorised in COVID-19 time as 'essential workers'). In the last couple of months I have realised how much I miss the team of mostly women who run the Derwent College Costa café on campus (though as an Australian I haven't missed the quality of the coffee).

A similar emphasis on interdependence characterises Connell's discussion of what's at stake in teaching and learning. She argues for the necessary connection or '*collective* relationship' between teaching and research, the former being weakened if it is not based in 'an intimate understanding of how that knowledge is made. This connection is currently at risk' (49). While dismissing the lecture as 'a little better than sneezing in Morse code', only surviving because it is a cheap mode of delivery, Connell advocates strongly for classroom teaching as a collaborative encounter, in which processes of inquiry, patterning, and critique

can be modelled in a mutually enriching way (50). 'The teacher is on both sides of the relationship, working for the students as well as for the [Republic of Knowledge]' (53). Students also, most importantly, learn from each other, in the classroom or in the open space of the campus, by participating in the 'life' that is the university. These arguments will be familiar to many academics, though it is valuable to see them being laid out so clearly and cogently. Those who have most to benefit from this book are general readers seeking to understand what the twenty-first century university does: it should be required reading for parents and grandparents, journalists and, dare I say it, politicians. Contact your local member of parliament to see if she/he has a copy.

Nor will readers who are academics be unfamiliar with Connell's trenchant critique of the managerialism that has transformed universities worldwide in the last thirty years or so. She writes of 'the violence I will call violence' that has perverted 'university business' throughout the Anglophone world, but especially in Australia (115). This 'violence' takes the form of a distrust on the part of management of the autonomy of intellectual workers of all kinds (researchers, teachers, and the operations workers who identify with them). This distrust is manifested in ever more exacting and punitive auditing of performance, and a centralised control of the curriculum (if not its actual content). It has resulted in a mental health crisis among staff that is widely reported but never seems to be alleviated. Many Australian universities are run on the basis of what might be called crony despotism—this is my point, not Connell's—and though news of court cases or mysterious sackings or departures occasionally make the news, the often-brutal workplace culture of many universities remains opaque to the wider world. Systemic problems in how universities are managed and governed are rarely, if ever, addressed. Connell's book explains why the 'violence' of managerialism is felt so keenly, leading to despair and often the loss to the profession of 'good' academics. These problems are not just on account of some academics' reflex assertion of a time-honoured right not to conform to the prescriptions necessary for the effective running of a university. The lack of trust fundamentally undermines the 'humanist culture of the university workforce', the possibility that the university as an institution could be 'for' something, apart from, as the V-C of the University of Wollongong signalled on 27 May 2020 when he announced job losses, 'value for money'.[1]

The greatest service of Connell's book may therefore be in enabling some academics to rationalise why their job is currently so hard, why they are feeling it so badly. The social contract between academics and management about the value

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[1] Ben Langford, 'University of Wollongong Preparing to Axe Major Faculty, Merge Schools, Cut Jobs', *Illawarra Mercury* 27 May 2020. <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/6771819/university-of-wollongong-to-axe-major-faculty-merge-schools-cut-jobs/>. 27 May 2020.

and purpose of the university is hanging by a thread and may or may not endure the strain that the post-COVID situation will put on it.

Connell's vision of the 'good university' is unashamedly political in advocating for the renewal of the university as a body working in a collective, democratic way, for all its 'citizens' and the community as a whole—local, national and global. In that sense the revival of campus 'life' after COVID-19 will be essential to maintaining the viability of the university as a social body: a place to which people can go, that's separate from other forms of social communication and existence. The effects of COVID-19 can be seen as accelerating the process whereby sociality, including the acquisition of knowledge, is conducted primarily online, via screens in the home-workplace. There has been a revival of interest in MOOCS that seemed to be heralding a brave new world of the campus-less university in the early 2010s but disappeared, largely due to the lack of interest in them from students.

One topic that Connell does not address significantly is what role the internet might play in creating a 'good' university for the future. She acknowledges how electronic communication has enabled a small group of publishers to control and excessively profit from journal publication and refers to the Open Access movement in a section of the book dealing with alternatives to the university, but she does not specifically engage with how the world wide web, developed to facilitate communication within and between universities, has been both an immense benefit and a curse. Universities have continued to function and pay their staff during lockdown because 'working from home', at least for humanities and social science scholars, as well as operations workers, is made possible by the internet. On the other hand, the internet has enabled the amplification of what counts as academic work, increasing the volume and complexity of administration and in the form of email and remote access blurring the boundaries between work and home life. The sense of being tied to the computer, of never being able to switch off the ever-expanding online academic community, is confounding the fraying of the ties that bind the individual scholar to the idea of the university as a locatable physical space or separate 'life' because, increasingly, the campus is virtual and is to be found everywhere. The result may be that we lose touch with what campus 'life' is and thus, conceivably, the university itself. (Or the university may become something else entirely).

Raewyn Connell's account of the 'good university' is thus very much reliant on being able to locate the university in the 'real' world, to go back to occupy the buildings that are currently dark, dusty, and empty. Is a 'good university' just a pipedream then, especially in the light of the shock administered to the business models of universities dependent on 'flows' of students that may never come back in the same numbers again? One of the arguments that Connell makes in a stirring final chapter is that universities need to plan, not for the end of year budget

reckoning or the next election, but for how to 'address the collective need for the advancement of knowledge':

> Societies facing turbulent and uncertain futures need the critique, imagination and dependable knowledge that a strong university system provides—whether the issue is environmental sanity, social justice, public health or liveable cities. (189)

Do we go back to campus to carry on as before? Or do we try to use the opportunity of the disruption of COVID-19 (against the background of the greater in magnitude disruption of climate change) to re-evaluate and re-imagine how the university might be reconfigured on the lines recommended so powerfully here? 'A good university', Connell says, 'will have a modest demeanour in the world. When it needs to teach in a shack, it will teach in a shack' (175). Maybe it is time to find and occupy our shack.

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