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Climate Justice and the University: Shaping a Hopeful Future for All

Jennie C. Stephens (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024, ISBN: 978-1-4214-5005-6, 286 pp.)

Jennie C. Stephens, Professor of Climate Justice at Maynooth University, opens this provocative and immensely significant book by posing a simple but radical question: ‘Could universities become critical infrastructures for advancing transformative climate justice by imagining and creating better futures for all?’ (p. 3). The very question is likely to raise unease among many academics who have been formed to imagine the university as a more neutral and disinterested space, generating and sharing knowledge for the overall good of society. But Stephens dares to ask how true this is, exposing the ‘capture of higher education by powerful elites and corporate interests’ and the ways in which universities ‘concentrate wealth and power by gatekeeping knowledge’ (p. 6). Already in the first few pages, the reader knows they are going to be taken on a rollercoaster ride through the realities of how universities really function as facilitators and drivers of much of the polycrisis that envelops our contemporary world, and how they could be transformed to foster the foundations of a better future for humankind.

While the critique is sharp, wide-ranging and quite devastating in places, Stephens structures the book around an alternative, what she calls ‘climate justice universities’ defined as ‘higher education systems committed to addressing the planetary crisis by shaping more stable, healthy, and equitable futures for all’ (p. 4). She insists again and again that a paradigm shift is needed if universities are to realise their ‘largely untapped potential for supporting and accelerating the transformative social, political, and economic changes required to maintain a society with human well-being and planetary health at its core’ (6). Essentially, this book is about the paradigm change required,

examining both what universities have become that makes them so unfit for purpose and what they need to become to serve humanity's future.

It is rare to find higher education institutions subjected to such a fundamental critique as that developed in this book. As Stephens puts it, such institutions 'have been manipulated with investments to intentionally spread misinformation and to advance a simplistic, constrained individualism that undermines democratic deliberative processes and obstructs policies to move humanity toward a more equitable and climate-stable future' (p. 10). Despite ideals of open inquiry and dialogue, 'most universities are compelled to respond to the preferences and priorities of those who control their funding, even when it requires limiting academic inquiry in some areas while promoting other areas' (p. 11).

To many readers, the critique may seem too far-reaching and sweeping but it is difficult to deny the essential validity of the book's core insights even if they apply in different ways in different higher education systems. For example, the following describes well the experience of this reviewer: 'Rather than trying to encourage and support research and teaching on systemic social change, most higher education institutions increasingly incentivize technological innovation, incremental change, and technical fixes to discrete, narrowly defined problems', while 'the disproportionate focus on science and technology has contributed to a sense of complacency and disempowerment, which discourages engagement in the processes of social change' (pp. 26–7). The consequence is that universities end up reinforcing the status quo and delaying urgently needed social and economic transformation.

Stephens is adept in uncovering the deeper epistemological features of our dominant learning cultures. For example, she highlights the priority given to Western science which 'relies on reductionism, which is simplification of larger complex systems to understand an isolated part' (p. 119). This results in 'the systematic destruction and erasure of knowledge systems, traditions, practices, and ways of thinking' (p. 120), a process Stephens calls 'epistemicide' in which many universities around the world have been key actors, she writes. She urges a teaching solidarity, confronting the frequency of times, places, ideas, and discussions that adopt an individualistic, isolated, disconnected, and complacent approach to learning. Instead of cultures of teaching that fragment students from one another and from the natural world, Stephens writes that universities around the

world 'can teach reciprocity by nurturing students' innate relational intelligence' (p. 116).

Hence, she concludes that most universities are institutions focused on learning, but they are not learning institutions (p. 28).

The author draws on her work on energy democracy to identify three domains of system change – resisting, reclaiming and restructuring. These she uses to structure this book. The first she describes as 'resisting the financialization of higher education and the forces that prioritize private, individual benefits instead of collective benefits'; the second is 'reclaiming higher education to prioritize human well-being, ecological health, and the common good'; and the third is 'restructuring the goals of higher education toward shaping more equitable, climate-stable, sustainable, and healthy futures for all' (p. 7). In this way, she reveals her guiding epistemology which links knowledge to climate activism.

The book is structured around six core themes, to each of which a chapter is devoted. The first focuses on what prevents universities from playing the transformative role they could in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises. Chapter 2 helps to provide an answer through showing how private funding and the constraints it imposes structure links between knowledge, wealth and power that restructure transformative change. The next two chapters focus on knowledge, chapter 3 on its dissemination and chapter 4 on its creation. If these chapters focus on resisting and reclaiming, the subsequent two focus on restructuring: chapter 5 on regenerative financial structures and chapter 6 on empowerment of local communities in a context of global solidarity. A concluding chapter summarises the argument and examines some hopeful examples of what Stephens is advocating.

There is lots of detail in the argument that cannot be captured in a relatively brief review, but three key themes deserve elaboration because they are largely ignored in the culture and discourse of today's higher education. The first is the financialisation of universities, a topic it might be claimed gets a lot of attention but not in the way that Stephens develops it. For she follows the consequences of the decline in public funding to expose an ever-greater reliance on private sources, leading universities to act more and more like businesses focused on profit and competition. The result is that financial markets, elites and institutions gain greater influence over university policies and practices, opening the door for corporate and wealthy donors to leverage higher education for the accumulation of wealth and power. She refers to this as the 'academic-industrial complex' leading to 'the

increasing commodification of knowledge production and consumption, and the marketization of education' (p. 80). She illustrates her point by showing how extensive funding by fossil-fuel interests resulted in the emergence of research programmes on solar geoengineering, the largest of which is at Harvard, despite the risks of disrupting the earth's hydrologic systems. Meanwhile research on fossil-fuel phase-out has been effectively thwarted due to 'the power and influence of those who are continuing to profit from fossil fuel production' (p. 128).

The chapters on research, knowledge creation and dissemination, introduce two seminal concepts that were new to me and that certainly do not figure in higher education discourse. These are unlearning and 'exnovation', which challenge us as individual educators and as educational systems in a very fundamental way. Stephens introduces the concept of unlearning in chapter 3 and she defines it as 'letting go of existing and constraining knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and assumptions to allow for appreciation of new perspectives and information that may not align with our previous understanding' (p. 92). Higher-education institutions, she writes, 'have a responsibility to stop reinforcing narrow, distorted perceptions of how the world works and instead nurture creativity and well-being beyond conventional economic measures of students' individual, competitive success' (p. 93). The chapter goes on to apply the concept to many fields of learning such as unlearning curricula of deception that perpetuate a narrowly defined set of knowledge, while failing to prioritise exploration of the social systems, structures, policies and practices that are perpetuating intersecting crises.

Stephens pays particular attention to the importance of learning in the fields of economics and knowledge. She quotes President Michael D. Higgins criticising the fixation of economics on 'a narrowly defined efficiency, productivity, perpetual growth' which has resulted in a discipline that 'has become blinkered to the ecological challenge' (p. 106), and she writes that 'the climate crisis demands that mainstream economic assumptions are unlearned and alternative cooperative and regenerative economic systems are imagined' (p. 108). Stephens is particularly fascinating in listing the many women economists who are leading this task of unlearning – Kate Raworth, Mariana Mazzucato, Stephanie Kelton and Carlota Perez. Lara Monticelli and her colleagues at the Copenhagen Business School have developed three required modules on 'Re-imagining Capitalism', 'The Political Corporation' and 'Organizing for Social and

Environmental Change'. Such alternative pedagogies are needed, she writes: 'Instead of perpetuating disconnection and isolation, higher education institutions around the world can teach reciprocity by nurturing students' innate relational intelligence' (p. 116).

The concept of exnovation is introduced as a challenge to the ubiquity of innovation in the discourse of higher education. In introducing the concept of exnovation, Stephens writes: 'I have always been troubled by the intellectual arrogance that is nurtured in the false meritocracy of universities' (p. 126). To overcome this, she proposes two major shifts. The first is to complement a research focus on innovation with one on exnovation. By this concept she means 'intentionally letting go of outdated or inefficient methods, technologies, or ideas to make space for alternatives'. The second is the co-production of knowledge as 'an iterative, collaborative process involving diverse expertise and actors producing context-specific knowledge' (p. 130) thereby bridging the knowledge-action gap and involving the people and communities impacted by the research.

Stephens goes on to give a few telling examples of what she has in mind. One is the urgent need for research on how to dismantle, disrupt and move away from harmful extractive and exploitative systems, what she sees as a new kind of research 'explicitly decoupled from growth and capitalism' (p. 134). Exnovation is badly needed in economics and finance to move away from the constant growth paradigm and exploring potential policies to cap income and wealth. Research on phasing out fossil fuels and attributing climate impact to specific fossil-fuel companies is needed as is research on phasing out plastics. 'Rather than focusing on producing research to be appreciated by other researchers or to be commercialized or make profit, university research should be reframed and realigned with community needs and well-being,' she writes (p. 143). This makes explicit the huge paradigm change required to move research in radically new directions, away from the assumptions that currently, largely unconsciously, dominate. A great contribution of the way Stephens addresses issues and strips them back to essential features is that it shocks readers out of their unexamined assumptions to look at things afresh.

In highlighting how our universities more and more give priority to financial success rather than societal impact, Stephens is lifting the veil on deep-rooted tendencies and forcing us to face their consequences. One example she gives, which this reviewer found very shocking and which illustrates her central point tellingly, is that in 2015 the *New York Times* revealed that Yale had spent \$480 million that year on fees

for fund managers to grow the university's already massive endowment, while spending \$170 million on tuition assistance and fellowships for its students. Stephens highlights how little transparency and accountability there is for such spending, alerting us to the fact that there may be many similar examples from Irish universities which are never willingly revealed.

This gets us to the heart of what our universities are for, a question far too rarely asked and even less rarely examined with any thoroughness. 'If the mission of academia was to reduce, rather than reinforce, economic inequities, higher education could be slowing down and reversing, rather than worsening, the intersecting crises facing humanity' (p. 169). The question of what universities are for is an entry point into the final major subject examined by Stephens. Essentially, she exposes whose company matters to universities, and how this is fundamentally reshaping higher education. Instead of partnering with corporate and elitist groups, she urges universities to be 'all inclusive hubs of civic engagement and action' (p. 197). While universities are anchor institutions in their local communities, many of them abuse their tax-exempt status to buy up local land and property depriving their local municipalities of tax in the process. Stephens labels this as 'exploitative and extractive relationships with local communities' (p. 86). Instead she urges universities to 'find new ways of empowering and co-creating with local communities' (p. 192) such as hosting citizens' assemblies, partnering with local food producers to expand distribution, co-creating community-centred workshops on how to start up a co-operative business. Suspicious that some community engagement programmes are strategically designed with a goal of promoting an appearance of engagement rather than achieving any specific community-centred goal, Stephens proposes the cooperative model be applied to universities, such as in Mondragon University in the Basque country. 'Rather than being exclusive and exclusionary institutions, universities could be designed and supported to be all inclusive hubs of civic engagement and action' (p. 197).

Among the many strengths of this remarkable book are the examples the author gives of institutions embodying features of what she is proposing. Among two that stand out for this reviewer is the Campus de la Transition in France 'an institution focused on training to transform by linking together ecology, economy and humanism' with a pedagogy based on areas of teaching and learning that 'focus on living and discerning for social cohesion, interpreting and imagining, governing and taking action, and strengthening connections'

(pp. 114–5). The Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT) ‘focuses on practical applied sustainability transition projects and co-production of knowledge with local governments, nongovernmental organisations, policymakers, communities and business actors’ (p. 144). It first emerged in the Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2004 but was ousted from the university in 2011 because it did not fit the traditional model of an academic unit. Freed from the constraints of the university, DRIFT ‘became extremely successful in co-designing for sustainable transitions’ (p. 210); seeing this success, a decade later the university became increasingly interested in the DRIFT approach and invested in a university-wide institutional experiment called the Design Impact Transition. In these ways, Stephens shows that what to some readers may seem utopian and impractical proposals are being tried with success.

This book is among the most thorough, exciting and hopeful books on the crisis of higher education that I have read in my career. It embodies the very best of utopian thinking, combining the ability for radical re-imagining with evidence that the approach she proposes is achievable in practice. Though much of the analysis reflects the many years the author has spent in higher education in the United States of America, a number of Irish references make it very relevant as a resource to rethink our higher education sector. The resonance of the ideas and approach she champions is evident in the series of meetings convened by a cross-disciplinary group of Irish academics in each of the four provinces in 2023–4 from which the Climate Justice Universities Union has emerged. This book offers a great resource to inform this initiative (in which the author is involved) but it deserves to be much more widely read by university administrators, policymakers and, indeed, our Minister for Higher Education.

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