

Book Review

Barnett, R. and Bengtsen, S.S.E. (2020) *Knowledge and the University: Reclaiming Life*. Routledge.

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It is perhaps one of the great ironies of academic debate that the late 20th century philosophical movements of postmodernity and postmodernism, in questioning that knowledge can be trusted to give insights into the world, signalled crises not only within the humanities but within the university sector as a whole. This book seeks to reclaim the importance of knowledge at the centre of university life because without this, the authors claim: "The life of the university is in jeopardy".

Of course, the world has seen many advances in this time, some such as digitisation have been revolutionary across all sectors, not just higher education. Globalisation, widening participation, the global financial crash, and disillusionment towards major institutions have all played a role in shaping the sector in the 21st century.

Taking a global view of this "crisis" of identity in higher education, Roland Barnett (Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at University College London, UK) and Søren S.E. Bengtsen (Associate Professor at the Centre for Teaching Development and Digital Media and Deputy Director of the Centre for Higher Education Futures at Aarhus University, Denmark) leave the reader to place the ideas presented within a wider socio-political context. This aspect feels an obvious omission but allows for a freer debate, ambitious in its scope.

The book is divided into three parts, which follow some linearity in building an argument for reinvigorating vibrancy and life into the wider perception of

academic knowledge, and thus into the university sector as a whole. In this view, knowledge is not separate from life but grows from an inquisitiveness about the whole of life while also transforming it.

Part I: *The university and life*, sets out what the authors see as the current narrowing and 'impoverished' view of knowledge, not just within higher education but society in general. There is an air of nostalgia to some of the arguments, however, it is clear the authors do not want to completely roll back the questioning scepticism of postmodernism. Instead they argue for a reclaiming of ideas through a 'spirit of truthfulness', placing a thirst for knowledge at its centre, as an aspirational, guiding light for academic work. As they explain: "The university matters because it is an institution geared to trying to understand that which can *never* be satisfactorily understood (p. 31)". Similarly, the pair don't offer a defence of the humanities but instead argue for what they call a "re-placing" of the humanities as "cognitive capital", a reflective space to grapple with issues of life, without which our culture becomes impoverished. In this sense, both knowledge and the humanities are not absolutes but instead, like life, are continually evolving and provide a means for us to contribute to life in its fullest sense, and our understanding of it.

Part II: *The spirit of academic knowledge* takes the ideas set out in Part I and discusses them in a changing context of academic debate, specifically highlighting concerns over "no-platforming" of speakers at universities. After what seemed like an initial and exciting reclamation of knowledge the book takes a somewhat disheartening turn. This is where wider context would be helpful. Minimising staff communal spaces and a reduction of face-to-face conversations is not only an issue for the academic community, it is a feature of 21st century life. To simply push against these changes feels futile and unnecessarily antagonistic. However, the authors raise some interesting points for further research about the changing nature of academic conversations and what it means to be a "multi-vocal" university. On a more positive note the authors suggest the "spirit of academic knowledge", in its

aspirational search for truth, could adopt a position of 'world listener' open to all viewpoints and voices.

Having set out their theory in the first two parts, Part III: *Cultivating knowledge in the university* considers its possible implications for higher education. However, in doing so it paints a gloomy picture of the current situation as one narrowly driven by economics, with increasing bureaucracy and punishing workloads. Sadly, many of the situations described will be familiar to all academics. The authors' use of "university" assumes a homogeneity that recognises that while institutions operate differently across the sector there are core values and issues that align universities across the globe. Sometimes, however, this generalisation weakens an otherwise well-evidenced text, by making sweeping and unsubstantiated statements about higher education. For example, in concluding the first part of the book the authors make emotive, unreferenced and seemingly unevidenced remarks such as:

"Wise and sympathetic university leadership can enhance the energy level of a university and so enliven it; but, where it takes on the strong managerial and bureaucratic aspects, leadership can diminish the life that is in a university. Staff and students can feel demotivated and even commit suicide (p. 63)."

Again, in Part III the authors claim commuter students choose to travel to a university out of preference because they "do not feel at home in their institutions" making no reference to the social, economic and political context that may have impacted on this choice (p. 135).

The ambitious scope of the book makes it attractive to all those working in higher education, but its argument weakens when comments such as this are made casually, without context. As a form of disruptive rallying cry such remarks are unnecessary, because the central message of the book creates enough positive food for thought on the future role of universities. In highlighting the limits of the role which is currently being carved for

universities, it offers a foundation for a wider, more inclusive and optimistic vision, the practicalities of which are left open, no doubt seen as being determined by those willing to embrace an aspirational spirit of academic knowledge.