Reviews

*Learning Under Neoliberalism: Ethnographies of Governance in Higher Education*


Reviewed by Rachel J. Wilde

This edited volume unites a range of chapters investigating forms of neoliberalism within higher education. The collection is effectively a reflection of academic life in the contemporary era, and how neoliberal practices have affected academics as teachers, researchers, workers and activists. The concept of neoliberalism is dealt with sensibly in the introduction; the editors acknowledge its pervasive use and argue that the ethnographic detail in the chapters disrupts the idea of neoliberalism as a ‘coherent, cohesive project’ (5). As we travel from New Zealand to Philadelphia to Michigan to Massachusetts, the United Kingdom and Denmark, the notable point is how recognisable ideas and forms of neoliberalism find different kinds of purchase in academia.

The chapters vary in ethnographic scale. Shore’s case study of New Zealand has a macro focus, reflecting on how the meaning of the university has shifted in line with a utilitarian attitude towards knowledge. In comparison, Hyatt includes a detailed description of the history of Philadelphia as researched by her ethnography class. Her students’ investigations into the often combative relationship of her university to the local community evidences the role of universities in furthering neoliberalisation beyond their own gates.

Lyon-Callo’s chapter begins documenting middle class insecurity in Michigan and moves to discuss the lives of his students. Both groups feel threatened by reductions in standards of living, and so seek to secure their futures via individualised strategies. This, Lyon-Callo argues, directly contributes to those ideals and practices which produce insecurity in the first place. Like Hyatt, he describes his efforts in the classroom to help students recognise these individualised responses to social problems. Through providing examples of collective action elsewhere, he hopes to reengage them in developing collaborative ethnographic projects in their communities to address broader economic issues.

Shear and Zontine’s description of their department reading group, set up to address changes at their university, focuses on the difficulty of finding something concrete to rally around to effect change. Despite documenting their frustrations, they assert the university as an important place for dissent and resistance. Clarke argues a similar point, though his chapter takes a broader perspective again, charting the ‘modernisation’ of higher education in the U.K. with a particular focus on practices of audit and managerialism. While the description of such practices as Transparent Approach to Costing will not be unfamiliar to anyone who has worked in a U.K. university, collecting these together with a critical eye may help combat what Clarke terms ‘professional melancholia’ (144) and the daily, individual frustrations of such changes to academic working to enable us, as a collective, to imagine alternatives.

Davis provides a strikingly personal depiction of the frictions between being committed to acting as an activist scholar and the potential problems this raises for tenure assessments and professional progress. Wright and Williams Ørberg take us back to the macro level, comparing the notion of university autonomy in the U.K. and Denmark. They present how the rhetoric of setting Danish universities ‘free’ from state control actually meant that they were open to greater control.

At the heart of many of these chapters is a philosophical musing. The conundrum is whether the authors can prepare themselves, their own children and their student bodies for the way the world is – which
nudges at everyone to behave as entrepreneurs and engage in individually motivated strategies to progress – and achieve their desires to change the world by developing collective action and resisting these forms of neoliberalism. Despite each chapter seeking to offer some ideas for political action whether through teaching, scholarship or collaborations with those outside the university, the book as a whole is a rather discouraging depiction of the current state of higher education. Readers may find Unwin and Yandell’s (2016) ‘achievable Utopia’, as Anthony Paré describes it in the foreword, more hopeful. There is some comfort in the knowledge that others are experimenting with forms of resistance, and the familiarity of the frustrations and joys of academic life may go some way to creating a self-identified community. Despite this, the authors are still grappling with this most tricky contradiction.

This reader ended the book feeling somewhat deflated by a very promising start that did not deliver in terms of ethnographic insight or in the efficacy of the ‘activist-scholar’ ideas presented. Hyatt and Lyon-Callo’s teaching ethos and strategies, to use ethnographic methods to help students question their role and the role of universities in shaping systems of inequality, have provided excellent ideas to take forward in my own practice. However, I would have welcomed further detail and discussion of consequences. A greater emphasis on activism may have made it a more unique read.

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References


The Unseen Things: Women, Secrecy and HIV in Northern Nigeria

Reviewed by Gayle Clifford

The Unseen Things is an ethnographic exploration of the experiences of HIV-positive urban women in Northern Nigeria, with a focus on the interaction between relationships and access to social, financial and health-care resources. The book demonstrates Rhine’s impressive depth of knowledge about the women’s lives and experiences, gathered through relationships developed over a decade of visits to Northern Nigeria (2004–2014) across a variety of settings including clinics, support groups and homes. The Unseen Things describes women’s experiences of deflecting stigma and pursuing hopeful futures which encompass love, marriage and children, alongside health and wealth. Women seek to present themselves as healthy, attractive and capable whilst concealing their HIV status as well as associated issues, such as unfaithful husbands, domestic violence, infertility and knowledge of their husband’s HIV status. Rhine identifies the concept of ‘moving on’ (i.e. securing new relationships or marriage) after an HIV-positive diagnosis and deals sensitively with the dilemmas and complexities of this in the Northern Nigerian cultural context. The Unseen Things provides a thoughtful, nuanced and powerful challenge to discourses of majority-world women as passive victims (the ‘oppressed third-world woman’ [Mohanty 2003]), and popular images of HIV-positive women as dangerous, deceitful and responsible for the spread of HIV (Sontag 1991).

The research took place over a particularly interesting point in the history of HIV in Africa, when antiretroviral medications became available and accessible. The capacity of these medications to transform HIV into a chronic disease rather than a death sentence has had a profound effect on the lives of those living with HIV across the world. In contrast to more structural accounts of HIV (e.g. Farmer et al. 2011), Rhine focuses on the personal attempts of Northern Nigerian women living with HIV to make choices and move forward in their lives with hope and dignity. Over the course of five chapters (First Loves, Twice Married, Dilemmas of Disclosure, Intimate Ethics, Hope), Rhine develops a number of key ideas: family and cultural expectations of men and women and the impact these have on relationships,
particularly in the context of HIV; the crucial importance for HIV-positive women of presenting oneself as healthy and attractive; and the complex meanings of both what is said and what is unsaid within marital relationships. The book begins and ends with introductory and concluding chapters framing these topics and providing detail on the book’s purpose and research methodology, as well as information on Nigerian culture which a
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The Unseen Things is a carefully researched and beautifully presented account of personal experiences which are often hidden. As such, beyond a general anthropology readership, it is a helpful resource for HIV and other professionals working in the Nigerian or West African context.

Gayle Clifford is currently undertaking a PhD in Maternal and Child Health at City University, London. Her research explores the experiences of HIV-positive mothers in Kingston, Jamaica.

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References


eFieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World

Reviewed by Áron Bakos

This volume is a revisit of the 1990 title Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology edited by Roger Sanjek. It tackles the effects that technological changes have had on anthropological fieldwork. That is, on the methods, ethics, practices, accessibility and also on the collection, preservation and sharing of data. Generally, it investigates the methodological implications that the shift from the pre- or early digital age to our current state of being has brought about.

The structure of the book is similar to that of the previous volume, consisting of five sections, each of which comprise three chapters. The first section offers a general overview of the question of how technological changes transform fieldwork practice; or how going digital and going online modify the methods of, and the approach towards, collecting fieldnotes. The second revisits the same question from the perspective of the authors’ fieldwork experiences with a focus on power relations, ethics and the replicability and durability of the recorded data. The third part presents how digital note-taking and access to the Internet change fieldwork and offer new ways of collaborating for anthropologists. The fourth section exemplifies how new kinds of fieldnotes come into being, and how raw data and fieldnotes merge in the digital settings (e.g. chatlogs). The final section investigates the question of archiving fieldnotes from
practical, theoretical and ethical perspectives, primarily pointing out how privacy protection trumps other values in some recent research policies.

The chapters are in a close dialogue with each other. The diversity of interpretations of electronic fieldnotes might be connected to an inherent feature of the Internet seen as a pluralistic media and to anthropology conceived as a pluralistic science. However, despite the wide range of perceptions, there are topics that reappear across the different chapters, such as the ethical implications of online research, the definition of the field, or the new types of connection to informants. These further dissolve and renegotiate boundaries (online and offline; field and home) and hierarchies (researcher and informant; academia and social realms). Considering the focus of the volume, it is part four that discusses the most notable, and in some senses revolutionary, consequence of digitalisation that affects fieldnotes: the ability to record speech events automatically, and to store the auto-created records of online interactions.

Probably the greatest merit of the original Fieldnotes title was its revelatory approach to research methods, and specifically to the production and general treatment of anthropological fieldnotes. From this standpoint, it seems worth mentioning how openly most authors quote sections of their fieldnotes and how reflexively they analyse them. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a sign that – with and since the publication of the original volume – fieldwork has ceased to be a mysterious rite de passage. On the other hand, it seems that the ways anthropological knowledge is produced cannot be investigated outside this personal perspective. The subjective (implicit or explicit) reflections on how digitalisation has changed one’s field and fieldwork confers an anecdotal and personal historical value to many chapters.

From an applied anthropological perspective, some chapters point towards the ways in which fieldnotes can serve informants as individuals or as members of a community. These arguments are based on the perspective that digital fieldnotes and data – compared to the analogue ones – are easier to duplicate and share. The authors reflect on how their own research data was or could be used in their specific research and social contexts. For example, on a social level, Lederman points out that ‘these resources are valued by indigenous scholars doing cultural heritage and land claims research as well as language revitalization’ (259), while King, emphasising the historical value of notes, states that these ‘remain and speak on our behalf and on behalf of those among whom we conduct fieldwork’ (274). On an individual level, Slama demonstrates how ‘an interview that is part of our ethnographic project can be part of our interlocutors’ project as well’ (104).

The book is an important methodological contribution to anthropology, especially in terms of the questions arising in a rapidly changing technological environment. The problems touched upon here will most assuredly be in the centre of disciplinary debates in both the present and the future.

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**Tracked Children and Youth in the United States: Reimagining Survivors**


Reviewed by Kristine Hickle

- Part of the series: To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Reviews of Anthropological Works by Non-anthropologists

In this book, Elżbieta Gozdziak provides a critical overview of human trafficking in the United States, focusing specifically on the experiences of children and young people. She draws upon her own research with trafficked children and youth, and weaves their narratives throughout as a means of bringing to life complex legal and historical content. In Part I, she gives an overview of the historical and legislative milestones relevant for understanding how human trafficking is conceptualised in policy and practice today. She describes influential stakeholders, shares her own reflections regarding key turning points that helped shape the national approach to combatting human trafficking and illuminates the fundamental problems with laws intended to protect vulnerable people from trafficking. Here, she echoes the work of O’Connell Davidson (2013), Malloch and Rigby (2016) and others who have recently sought critically
to examine the contexts that actively or passively facilitate human trafficking throughout the world.

In Parts II and III, Goździak ‘unpacks the realities of captivity and rescue and rehabilitation’ (17) by shedding light on the ambiguous relationships between traffickers and victims, and the difficulties in identifying victims and successfully prosecuting traffickers. In these sections of the book, her perspective as a cultural anthropologist is particularly refreshing and her expertise on migration comes through clearly as she is able to provide insight into the ways that migration policy intersects with human trafficking policies in the U.S. She is also able to interview young people labelled ‘victims’ of trafficking from the perspective of an interested and respectful outsider; however, this perspective as an outsider may hinder the book’s appeal to practitioners, as the concerns and legal responsibilities of safeguarding professionals (such as police and social workers) are often positioned as primarily in opposition to children and young people’s own perspectives on their situation. She helpfully critiques the dominant, idealised victim narrative, echoing what Hynes (2015) calls a ‘thin story’ about trafficking. She also challenges ‘thin stories’ of traffickers, and suggests that we are wrong to label someone a criminal when they may actually be a helper. She perhaps misses an opportunity here to help professionals working within the framework of legal or statutory responsibilities to think critically and practically about the ways in which someone may be both a criminal and a helper.

Goździak closes Part III by providing a nuanced overview of the problems a foreign-born child victimised by trafficking will face within the current web of federal and state-level legal and social services intended to protect them. In the fourth, final section of the book, she invites readers into a discussion of agency, resilience and discourses of (Western, idealised) childhood. This is perhaps among the most useful contributions in the book as it enables readers to engage with a strengths-based, child-centred, participatory framework for understanding the diverse needs of trafficked children. Through the telling of children’s stories, Goździak encourages readers to make decisions regarding what is best for a child (i.e. to testify against traffickers, to undergo ‘treatment’) by listening to – and following the lead of – the individual child.

The book concludes with an epilogue revisiting some of the research participants several years later. In this, Goździak provides us with several hopeful stories of children who are now young adults, faring relatively well. She also provides parting words of caution; the economic struggles of these formerly trafficked children are too often unrecognised, and those involved in anti-trafficking work must re-think ‘labor force participation as a source of both economic stability and healing’ (141). This book is recommended for anyone interested in rethinking the modern complexities of human trafficking in the United States, and seeking new ways to help survivors of trafficking thrive.

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