



Higher Education in Societies: A Multi Scale Perspective

Goastellec, Gaële; and Picard, France, eds.
Sense Publishers, 2014

Book Review

Tags: administration | higher education | politics and education

Reviewed by: James W. Watts, *Syracuse University*

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This book contains an introduction by the editors and eleven papers from the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) conference in Lausanne in September, 2014. The first five papers address arguments over the rationales for public funding of higher education, especially in current political contexts: “How Do University, Higher Education and Research Contribute to Societal Well-being?” by Michèle Lamont, “A Persian Grandee in Lausanne” by Sheldon Rothblatt, “A New Social Contract for Higher Education?” by Peter Maassen, “Higher Education and Public Good: A Global Study” by Simon Marginson, and “Defending Knowledge as the Public Good of Higher Education” by Joanna Williams. The remaining six papers focus on regional or national developments: “Partisan Politics in Higher Education Policy: How Does the Left-Right Divide of Political Parties Matter in Higher Education Policy in Western Europe?” by Jens Jungblut, “Access Equity and Regional Development: a Norwegian Tale” by Rómulo Pinheiro, “Shrinking Higher Education Systems: Portugal, Figures, and Policies” by Madalena Fonseca, Sara Encarnação, and Elsa Justino, “Pathways to Higher Education in France and Switzerland: Do Vocational Tracks Facilitate Access to Higher Education for Immigrant Students?” by Jake Murdoch, Christine Guégnard, Maarten Koomen, Christian Imdorf, and Sandra Hupka-Brunner, “The Development of the Québec Higher Education System: Why At-risk College Students Remain a Political Priority” by France Picard, Pierre Canisius Kamanzi, and Julie Labrosse, and “Engineering Access to Higher Education through Higher Education Fairs” by Agnès Van Zanten and Amélia Legavre.

The editors ground the collection in social contract theory, specifically the claim that higher education should foster equality of opportunity (2). Many of the chapters discuss how that goal is being problematized and privatized by political pressure to emphasize education’s economic

benefits to individuals and society in a knowledge-based economy in place of other kinds of personal and public goods, such as an informed citizenry. These political shifts have the effect of calling peer review into question as the standard for evaluating academic research because different generations of researchers may emphasize different standards and measures of performance, and because public managers impose their own criteria (13). These articles document some paradoxical developments, such as *declining* student demand for science and engineering courses in some countries (139). They also illustrate how the increasing internationalization of higher education standards, through processes internal to the European Union and also due to the rising prominence of international rankings, puts disproportionate pressure on humanistic disciplines that tend to emphasize national or regional topics (12).

Higher Education in Societies provides an important reminder of the crucial role of national politics in formulating the goals and ideals, as well as the funding, of higher education. For this reader, it highlights by omission the unusual situation of American academics like myself who work for private colleges and universities, which disproportionately dominate the teaching of theology and religion in the U.S. (A complementary discussion of theology and religious studies in European universities appears now in Christoph Uehlinger's "Is the Critical, Academic Study of the Bible Inextricably Bound to the Destinies of Theology," in *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond* [Korpel and Grabbe: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015], 287-302).

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