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Book review
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Learning and Teaching Social Theory

John Cope, Joyce E. Canaan and David Harris (eds), *The Higher Education Academy Network*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2006, xv, 212 pages, ISBN: 1-902191-34-X. (Free to UK HE institutions, or to download at http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/publications/monographs/social_theory/)

This book is a welcome addition to the material available regarding the teaching activities and practices of university lecturers, most especially those involved in the delivery of complex abstractions that deal with social theory. Much of the social theory that we teach at university has been claimed to be irrelevant because of the pop culture distillation of explanation in to some version of reality television: we see the patterns of behaviour, and as such we generalise them in to our own. Teaching social theory, and learning about its various manifestations, is fundamental to participating in our world with some form of agency. This book explores a number of important themes and issues related to this.

For example, in the first chapter, Harris discusses four points of 'radicalisation' that demonstrate the current conundrum of attempting some version of critical social theory, while employed in a contemporary university that destroys the contemplative possibilities needed for such theory. Is this the only forum, the university setting, for critical social engagement? Harris suggests that it is not, and I think I will ask my students next semester the same question that Harris does in the first chapter. This first chapter is quite useful in setting the agenda for some more radical questioning of the status quo within universities.

In the second chapter, Cope discusses some more problems with developing an approach that delivers on the possibility of engaging students with the idea of 'critical citizenry' rather than as a consumer. The behaviour of a 'consumptive agent' is quite different from a critical citizen, and requires a deeper engagement with some of the ideas offered by social theory. Cope does an excellent job of pointing out the importance of performing this pedagogic act as a politically emancipatory practice.

In Chapter Four, Canaan writes around a teaching diary put together over the course of a few years in the early 2000s (see footnote 1 on p. 92). The chapter is an important reflection on how a university lecturer goes through the process of devising and delivering a course on social theory when the course is perceived to be difficult in the extreme by many students. The chapter goes on to describe (p. 88-90) an interesting approach to taking students away from the fatalism of acceptance of the restrictions of living in a kind of neo-liberal world, to engaging in the world(s) in which they live. This is one of the main goals of a lecturer who is trying to teach social theory, and certainly one of the more difficult tasks we face. I found the diary aspect of the chapter reminding me so much of my own experience that it prompted a conversation with some of my colleagues and we have passed around the book as a result!

Chapter Seven is entitled 'Marketing a Monster?' and discusses a number of the changes that the New Zealand higher education system has undergone in the past couple of decades. Similar to what went on in Australia and elsewhere, specific kinds of neo-liberal policies, coupled with various versions of globalisation, had some interesting effects on how universities are organised and what they are meant to do as institutions. In this chapter McManus discusses the role of sociology as a discipline and how it offers paradigms to analyse the ways in which this has developed as a global social phenomenon. This becomes another form of critical pedagogy, in which students are enabled in their critique of the world around them.

Overall, I think all of the chapters are very good contributions to the main theme(s) of the book. As a lecturer who has been involved in this aspect of teaching for some years, I found the book both helpful in getting me to think about what I am currently doing, as well as a trigger for some possibilities for the future. I recommend that anyone interested in teaching and learning about social theory, at any 'level', inside the academy or otherwise, read this book. And if future books are to be of this high quality, then I look forward to reading more of the contributions to the monograph series as well.