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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Renner, K. Edward. (1995). *The New Agenda for Higher Education: Choices Universities Can Make to Ensure a Brighter Future.* Calgary AB: Detselig Enterprises Ltd. (Pp. vii; 160) Price: $17.95.
Reviewed by John Kirkness, University of British Columbia.

In the title of his monograph, Edward Renner both establishes his objectives as author and arouses expectations in his reader. At the outset, we expect to see developed a plan for change in our universities which is definitive, innovative, active and positive. The Preface confirms the author's ambitious goals: to stimulate "others to join in the adventure of a new academic revolution" (p. vii). The link with Jencks and Riesman's 1969 classic, *The Academic Revolution* is intentional; given the value Renner attaches to revolution over reform, the omission of Webster and Etzkowitz's more recent, *Academic-Industry Relations: The Second Academic Revolution* (London, 1991) is notable. In order "to widen the current debate over the roles and functions of higher education" (p.vi), Renner invites those who "care deeply," who are "directly or indirectly involved in higher education, including parents, students, faculty, administrators and government" (p. vii) to "join in the process of the creation and the definition of a New Era" (p.vi), where "there is no truth, only adventures" (p. 123). His monograph is " the cumulation" of his previously published "series of research and conceptual papers" (p. vi); it is thus academic in focus, comprehensive in scope, while personal in tone.

This is evident particularly in his choice of transparent metaphors respecting, for example, knowledge: "knowledge...must become as accessible as a picnic..., to be picked up with the same ease as the fast foods necessary for a spontaneous outing" (p. 98); and academic freedom:

> [we must] commit ourselves, our institutions and our students to an academic star trek into the future, against the residual dying values of the church, professionals and other modern establishments; this is what academic freedom is about (p. 142).

The need to establish a new agenda is asserted frequently throughout the text, often in evocative terms. According to Renner, "we have an opportunity to shape the future during an historic time of transition" (p. v), to "move from the end of the Modern Era to what we are in the process of becoming" (p. v). He notes "the significant epochal nature of this period" (p. 40): we are all "now players in an epochal drama" (p. 138), since "the 1990's are revolutionary times" (p. 50), where "boldness is required in epic proportions" (p. 25), just as "change is required in epic proportions" (p. 54). Not only are the times distinctive, so also are the issues: "higher education has gone astray" (p. vii), "teaching and learning effectiveness is close to out of control" (p. 20-21). This requires "a rediscovery of a sense of direction and purpose" (p. vii), otherwise we "will remain on the sidelines of an epoch of social change" (p. 24). What has "allowed the academy to fall so far behind?" (p. 23). The author aims to persuade the reader that "the crisis in higher education is largely about creating the psychological and social capacity to act in constructive (not coercive) ways" (p. 82). Renner sees his text both as "a guide to thinking; it is not a handbook" (p. 125) and as "a handbook for the new academic revolution from within" (p. 114). "This monograph is about higher education as a social problem," because "higher education, like the homeless, has become a social issue" (p. 11): the book is therefore about "the issues of higher education" and "about how to solve social problems" (p. 11).

Given such broad purposes and perspectives, what does Renner propose?

The monograph has five distinct sections, each devoted to presenting overlapping aspects of his invitation to action and his description of selected strategies for change. In Section One, **Context,** the author iden-

tifies his four recurring assumptions or themes, "the foundation on which the rest of the material depends" (p. 15). These are:

- "now is an epochal time in history"
- "these are the good times economically"
- "fundamental, not incremental, change is necessary"
- "our beliefs are both the source of the problems and the means for solutions" (p. 15).

These themes are illustrated in general terms by brief references to predominantly U.S. news reports in such periodicals as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *AAHE Bulletin,* rather than supported by empirical analysis or logical argument. The author concludes the section by asserting the need to "create a new way of thinking" (p. 30), emphasizing again that "this book is about changing our beliefs in a way that will re-define problems to provide the flexibility [academic, financial and management] necessary to create a positive dynamic cycle" (p. 31). In the next section, he writes, "I will create the belief structure that is necessary" (p. 31).

Entitled **Re-defining our beliefs,** Section Two comprises four chapters, devoted in turn to "beliefs about ourselves, change, academic life and higher education". Characteristic of the discussion here is Renner's comment on "our circumstance: higher education must give up its belief that its current troubles are external, national and general" (p. 37); they are rather to be seen, he claims, "as internal, local and specific. These beliefs are empowering" (p. 37). Topics are presented briefly, with reference to "24 bipolar dimensions," such as those noted above (external/internal...), including coercive/constructive, successive/simultaneous, reform/revolution, education/training, discovery/adventure. For each dimension, the author promotes choices in favour of the second term listed, in the context of the three challenges of means, ends and processes. These challenges are "the three substantive components of higher education" (p. 62), and therefore the three key elements in the new "belief system" Renner is proposing here.

The next Section, **Opportunities,** devotes a separate chapter to the three challenges, following a common format. In each case, old and new beliefs are noted and illustrative facts presented; a feasible solution is

proposed, implementation reviewed and perspective commentary adduced. It is here that Renner makes explicit reference to two techniques (named Career Alternatives Program and Position Description Analysis) he first developed and published 5-10 years ago. They are presented here as proposals or suggestions, with some illustrative data arising from a specific application (in Canada?), but without reference to the details of either their local implementation or their impact on departmental or institutional policy and practice. Such references, now possible in view of the timing of their original development, would materially assist the reader in assessing the value of these suggestions. Perhaps a later comment is indicative: "Position Description Analysis is not an audit tool for creating a hit list" (p. 82). More explicit is this report:

> One administrator's comment was that he would like to have a spread sheet like that for his faculty in his top drawer... However, to see the technique as a management tool...is to totally miss the point. The place for the...spread sheet is painted on the side of the administration building for all to see (p. 115).

Given the complex political settings where decision-making occurs in the academy, more detail is needed to ensure the reader's full engagement with the challenges presented here. A conclusion such as this:

> The political reality at this university and at others with serious labour conflicts, are probably similar to each other, but different from many others. Once such local data is in hand..., the ingredients for problem solving are in place (pp. 89-90)

requires further justification.

In Section Four, **Change**,

> the new beliefs will be used to introduce global ways of thinking which allows the means, ends and processes to be simultaneous parts of addressing the substance, people and organization of higher education. These are the prescriptive beliefs for assuming academic leadership and becoming an agent of change. (p. 95)

Renner here continues his preferred practice of listing topics in a variety of groupings, thus following his own characterization of the New Era as "marked by experimentation and new activities, existing side-by-side, often incompatible in their philosophical or logical assumptions and purpose..." (p. 58).

In chapter 11, **The Substance**, he returns to 'the three challenges', commenting very briefly indeed on curriculum, diversity, cost-containment and community, the higher education issues on the current agenda. Since, in his view, "the problems of higher education are not technically complex or difficult" (p. 113), Renner invokes in the next chapter, **The People**, the benefits of community psychology and utility theory, in order to understand and subsequently shape the relationship between psychology and power in promoting revolutionary change. The chapter concludes with a series of suggestions about sabotage, understood in this sense:

> Part of a good incentive system [for change] is to cut off trouble at the pass. Once the basic structure is in place, the next question to ask is how someone can do it in. If there are 50 ways to leave your lover, there are at least ten ways to sabotage these approaches as applied to the three challenges. (p. 122)

The relevance to the New Era revolution of the subversive tactics then listed is not clearly demonstrated.

Chapter 13, **The Organization**, returns to management issues, reviewing two perspectives noted but not defined earlier. These are Total Quality Management, here presented as a means of providing commentary on Position Description Analysis (and therefore more appropriately located in the earlier discussion) and on Women's Ways of Knowing. Three summary paragraphs constitute the latter report, where Renner suggests that "feminism...may very well hold much of the wisdom necessary to meet the modern management challenge" (p. 135). This contention is neither elucidated nor illustrated at any point in the monograph. Similarly absent are references to the now very numerous studies of leadership in higher education: this is at least disconcerting given the author's promotion of leading rather than managing change.

The final chapter, **Joining the Quest,**

> provides a glimpse of the total implications of the assumptions, beliefs, approaches, opportunities and challenges for change proposed in this monograph. [Here] I describe an exciting new university in the forefront of a transitional period of human history. (p. 138)

After rejecting the myth of intractability in favour of constructive alternativism, Renner presents, in raising a new vision, a fleeting glimpse of Outrageous U, describing in a single page two characteristic examplars of his 'new university'. The first is an assistant professor who began an innovative consumer affairs class, only to leave the academy for real estate sales - "alas...she was not a promotable academic" (p. 144); the second is a high school principal who sets up a day care project. There are no other references to exemplary practice in higher education, no actual or ideal description of 'forefront U'. Such a brief glimpse is far too allusive to be persuasive.

The monograph includes an index and about 200 references, half these represented by items in *The Chronicle of Higher Education, Change* and the *AAHE Bulletin.* There are ten Canadian studies cited, plus over a dozen papers by Renner. Throughout, the primary focus is American practice and comment.

While many in higher education in Canada will share Renner's view that the enterprise in all its complexity deserves our sustained commitment as scholars and participants, fewer will find the discussion and notes innovative, the lists and suggestions instructive. Paradoxically, the author recognizes quite explicitly, more than once, that "any view which dichotomizes the world is a prescription for conflict" (p. 38); "as with using any belief as a template [to guide action], forcing issues into dichotomous distinctions can be dangerous if they lead to either/or thinking instead of relative emphasis" (p. 48). Yet in the presentation of his "24 bipolar dimensions," Renner announces that:

> the beliefs at one end of each of the dimensions are used to describe the current issues, ...[while those] at the opposite end...redefine the issues in a way which will present new alternatives and options (p. 33).

The discussion does not support the contention. For example, after advocating constructive not coercive choice (p. 45), the author defends his PDA practices in these words:

> A unique feature of Position Description Analysis is that it immediately and personally involves everyone at the university, at least to the degree of calling them an eight digit name. This involuntary nature of the involvement with the process is also a means for achieving commitment. If we must be that heavy-handed, and I think we must for there cannot be individual bystanders, then the process should be one that pulls all, voluntarily or not, into a constructive process. (p. 81)

Such recurring contradictions weaken the case advanced here.

The monograph reads as a progress report on the development of a framework in which to locate the two named techniques originally developed in the eighties. It is more a listing than an argument, emphasizing discrete topics over persuasive synthesis, advocacy over theory. As the author notes, his "monograph clearly reflects a singular perspective of higher education" (p. vi). Despite the author's claims, the new agenda in higher education in Canada still awaits cogent formulation and analysis.

Lunde, Joyce Povlacs, with Baker, Maurice, Buelow, Frederick H., & Hayes, Laurie Schultz. (1995). *Reshaping Curricula: Revitalization Programs at Three Land Grant Universities.* Bolton MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc. (Pp. xix; 262). Price $34.95.
Reviewed by Michael Pitt, University of British Columbia

In the 1980s, it became increasingly clear across all of higher education that undergraduate education needed major revitalization. The general public pictured higher education and faculty as notoriously resistant to change. Faculty, however, normally viewed research and publications as the primary avenues to achieve recognition, job security, and financial