

Book Review / Compte rendu

Barnett, Ronald (2016). *Understanding the University: Institution, Idea, Possibilities*. London and New York: Routledge. Pages: 214. Price: \$64.62 CAD (paper).

Reviewed by Victoria Handford. Assistant Professor, Education (Leadership) and Director of the Executive Leadership Program.

This book identifies the historic values and priorities of early universities, the complexities (hyper complexities) of current universities, and chapter by chapter opens windows of possibility for envisioning their positive futures, steadily opting for hope amidst the demanding choices and challenges universities face. *Understanding the University: Institution, Idea, Possibilities* (2016), is a worthwhile resource for those involved in governance and institutional futuring as well as for those toiling in the trenches. The book offers readers an insight into the realities of the university as a confusing, contradictory institution, and invites readers to see and engage in a positive future. Barnett has also provided researchers and practitioners alike with a model of planful, purposeful writing, always a pleasure to encounter when one is lucky enough to do so.

The first several chapters of the book form a sort of “dualistic” argument on each of the three planes of the university that Barnett (2016) posits. See Figure 1, below. This Figure serves as the basis for the rest of the book.

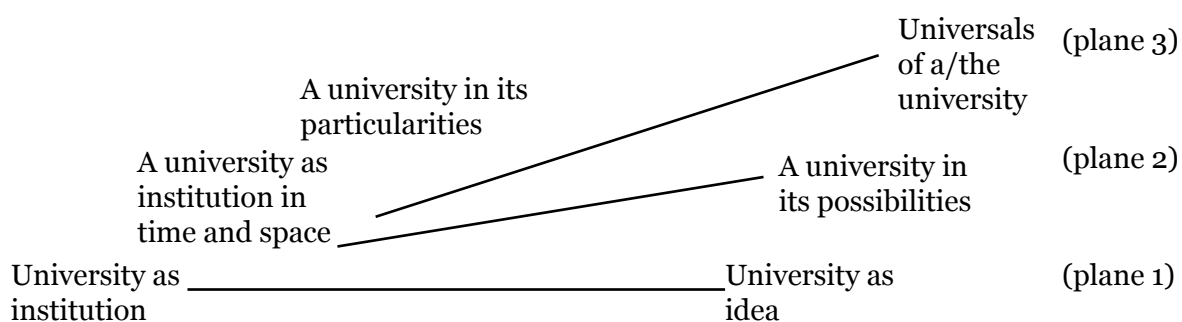


Figure 1. Three planes of the university, p. 45.

Barnett's arguments about planes of the university, about the university and its roles in society, are rendered more contemporary (and meaningful) by the potential intersections and spaces between the planes. On the first plane, considerations of the university as idea and the university as institution coexist, but delineate the extremes of the plane. The second plane considers the university as an institution in time and space and, in contrast, the university in its possibilities. While these two planes do, in fact, intersect, they do not intersect in the image itself but rather in the reader's imagined extension of the planes. This dualistic, but not concluded, development creates additional space in the reader's mind. Chapter three adds a third plane and considers a university in its particularities and universals, thus completing the Figure in its entirety. The remaining chapters use these planes, and their dualistic positioning, to articulate a thorough understanding of the multiple views of the university itself.

Part II of the book, titled "The Antagonistic University," is comprised of a chapter on "Antagonisms" and a chapter titled "Seven Forms of Dialectic." Using philosophical argumentation, Barnett considers whether or not the university is a form of a moebius strip, a paper illustration of Slavoj Žižek's description, "two sides of the same phenomenon that can never meet" (Žižek, quoted in Barnett, p. 62). "No" is the unsurprising conclusion, as the Figure of the planes of the university not only shows open possibilities and eventual, although distant, "meetings," but also has three, rather than two components.

A description of the struggles of a deputy dean serves to illustrate parts of the "Antagonisms," resolving in a satisfying but not completely comprehensive cadence with "Out of conflict and disruption can emerge spaces for renewal" (p. 70). There is hope! The next chapter, "Seven Forms of Dialectic," begins with the metaphor of the university as a ball in a pinball machine, "with the ball being bounced this way and that. Its path is not of its making" (p. 71). Barnett takes us on a dialectical journey that proclaims that universities will differ from each other but might be understood, extending the metaphor, as "the ball can be propelled up the board even between the threatening prongs. But seizing such agency calls both for imagination and for deliberative strategies to take advantage of the openings that are presenting" (p. 83). This image of possibility, then, leaves us hopeful, and thus opens us to reading the next part of the book.

"Glimpsing Spaces" is Part III. The four chapters included in this section of the book challenge the reader to consider the possibilities of an optimistic future for universities. While the thinking is hopeful, there is certainly doubt in my mind as to the rationality of the hope. There is an attempt to balance optimism (over-optimism) and pessimism, but at the end of the chapter titled "The Possibility of Possibilities" Barnett lands firmly on the terrain occupied by optimists, and perhaps realistically considers "where might be the weak points in the emerging situation? It just may be that ideas can help to wedge open the door" (p. 99). Chapter 7, "An Inevitable Remainder," explores a "set of infinite spaces" (p. 101), creating room for this Barnett-identified leitmotif for the book, by quoting Theodor Adorno's statement in *Negative Dialectics*, that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder..." (p. 102). Barnett identifies that the gap between actual character of the university and its self-understanding may, in fact, be widening (p. 103). Despite this ever-widening gap, Barnett continues to see possibility. In Chapter 8, titled "The Real Thing" Barnett plays conceptually with "thick and thin," ethical capital, and the antagonism between the empirical, the actual and the real, closing with the statement that "new universals need to be found" (p. 125). This, predictably, leads to a chapter titled "Holding Together."

Part IV, “Positive Moments,” works its way through another three chapters that reinforce the possibilities waiting to be discovered as new realities are revealed. It is, as it is titled, positive. And in many ways, this hopeful presentation of the university is deeply needed. Barnett demands that we face the future, and the many new opportunities and challenges, with what I would call the “ingenuity of Homer-Dixon.” We can see the dark, but we can also see the light. Our challenge is to explore both, looking for new ways of imagining our futures, turning these imaginings into productive, vital and engaged conversations that expand our thinking of the institution as it was and is, to one of what it can be in the future.

Barnett has written an important book. It is a balance of understanding the pessimism and the reality, while recognizing that the future is nigh: we will determine what it holds by engaging in demanding thought—or not. 🍁