



Academic Identities in Higher Education: The Changing European Landscape

Evans, Linda; and Nixon, Jon, eds.
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Book Review

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Academic identity, like all identity, is fluid. This volume places questions about academic identity in the equally fluid context of “Europe,” which is here defined as at once united and fragmented, particularly after the economic crises of 2008. This volume pulls together thirteen articles in three sections: Frameworks and Perspectives, Academic Trajectories, and Formations and Re-formations. The authors are not sociologists of life course or scholars who study academic identity; they are, more usefully for this volume, speaking from their own contexts and experiences in European higher education from the late twentieth into the early twenty-first centuries.

The editors have done a fine job choosing and grouping these essays, many of which were written by authors in their second or third languages to comply with market demands for English publication. This is one of the many strengths of the book, as it illustrates the kinds of demands that are placed on European academics that are absent in many ways from American contexts. Nevertheless, much is familiar here: academics in neoliberal systems of mass higher education struggle with ever-increasing bureaucracy, top-down management, and the encroachment of academic “professionalism.” Pressure to be represented well in world rankings tends to encourage institutional systems of assessment and auditing of outcomes that shape the academic enterprise as an inward-looking, self-serving part of a labor-driven economy and individual academics as cogs in the machine. As Jon Nixon states in his introduction, treating academic work like labor, as a matter of “pre-specified outcomes and destinations,” produces an unfortunate mismatch: “Academic identity is – to come full circle – a process that is uncertain in direction and indeterminate in outcome” (13). To treat academic work as labor is to misunderstand the potential benefits of outward-looking institutions that

value intellectual autonomy and innovation above target-setting and performance measures.

Many of the chapters in this volume could stand alone as case studies; each presents its own particular balance of interrogating biographical, institutional, or broader contextual identities and each brings a coherent and defined voice to the shared project. It is impossible to capture the richness of each of these chapters here, and each somehow manages to consider an individual life within the vast institutional, sociocultural, historical, and political contexts in which that life is lived.

Although there is nothing specific to either religious studies or theology in this volume, there is much here that will resonate with academics who struggle with being pulled away from research and teaching to comply with institutional mandates. This volume should help academics in all disciplines to reflect on the power of context and particularly institutional context to shape lives and careers. Implicit here is a call to embrace the best in higher education despite the “regulations, financial incentives, rewards, quality standards, as well as academic, public, and professional values” (6) that constrain and give shape to our identities. These essays hint that a mix of resilience and subversion might well be the academic’s best allies.

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