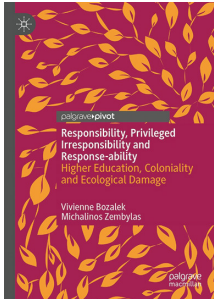




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Responsibility, privileged irresponsibility and response-ability: Higher education, coloniality and ecological damage



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Difficult times ... exciting times!

Joan Tronto, in the Foreword to *Responsibility, Privileged Irresponsibility and Response-ability: Higher Education, Coloniality and Ecological Damage*, opens with the following line: “These are difficult times in higher education; there are difficult times everywhere.” In this book, Bozalek and Zembylas live up to their usual high standard of engaging with the complex questions of our time, by skilfully balancing “the creative potential of critical thought with the dose of negative criticism and oppositional consciousness that such a stance necessarily entails”¹.

Bozalek and Zembylas’ intellectual project traces coloniality and ecological damage as it relates to higher education, and, in so doing, they do what Donna Haraway² suggests: they stay with the trouble (of higher education), and through the trouble, they invigorate productive, alternative lines of flight that can help us to navigate ourselves in rapidly changing higher education spaces. Put differently, they work through problems of humanism which are, by implication, problems and difficulties of our times. In their commitment to ‘stay with’ and ‘work with and through’ these difficult times, Bozalek and Zembylas make a unique contribution to Critical University Studies through introducing posthumanism and new feminist materialism (one strand of thinking in posthumanism) to the debate. Posthumanism opens exciting possibilities for us to think about. It is not anti/against humanism, nor does it imply something post/after humanism. Posthumanism suggests staying with the troubles and difficulties of our time and challenging the centrality of (the) human/ism. It entails a sensitisation toward the multiple realities of our times (which includes the dominance of humanist thinking that has led to unprecedented ecological disasters) and seeks critical and creative alternatives to difficult times.

For Bozalek and Zembylas, difficult times in higher education are marked by several interrelated global challenges. The COVID pandemic has disrupted normal processes, ecological degradation continues rapidly, violence is scaling at exponential rates, and there is increasing demand for justice. In higher education, these global challenges manifest as disruptions to the traditional notion that academic inquiry exists in a separate, purified realm. Economic pressures force universities to prioritise fields of study that are instrumentally useful, leading to a decline in the collective academic life and increasing inequality within institutions. Academics face challenges from both political extremes, with criticisms of being too left-leaning or ‘woke’, combined with the slow progress of institutional change prompting anger from students. Bozalek and Zembylas argue that these issues indicate a loss of faith in the ability of higher education to respond to problems, especially when employing traditional ways of thinking.

In tracing a new line of flight for Critical University Studies, and suggesting alternatives by thinking-with theorists (such as Karen Barad, Vinciane Despret, Deborah Bird Rose, Donna Haraway, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Anna Tsing, Iris Marion Young, Joan Tronto and Margaret Urban Walker) who have written about responsibility, privileged irresponsibility and response-ability, Bozalek and Zembylas not only illustrate how higher education can be conceptualised in current conditions, but also how it might be done differently and reconfigured in more generative and transformative ways. They justify their intellectual project as “timely because the current conditions of the world – coloniality, capitalism and neoliberalism, social injustice and the ecological crisis – have dire implications for higher education and its future. Responsibility, privileged irresponsibility and response-ability are all concerned with ethical, ontological, epistemological and political understandings and implications for our world; therefore, the combined use of these concepts will shed new light on these implications for higher education.” (p.2)

To develop their intellectual project, they dedicate the first part of the book to chapters that separately deal with the concepts of responsibility, privileged irresponsibility (including complicity and non-innocence) and response-ability or responsiveness, drawing on the entanglement of posthuman/feminist new materialism and political ethics of care. The integration of feminist new materialism, posthumanism, and political ethics of care offers alternative perspectives to these concepts; privileging relational and material engagements over abstract, individualistic notions of ethics and agency. In the second part of the book, they turn their focus to higher education and how privileged irresponsibility has given rise to and exacerbated such world conditions as coloniality and ecological damage. “More explicitly,” as they explain, “the second part of the book considers how privileged irresponsibility has been important in producing coloniality and ecological damage. It also explores what can be done about this state of affairs, in terms of assuming responsibility (in the form of acknowledgement of complicity and non-innocence) as well as the ability to respond (response-ability) (being able to respond and allowing for responsiveness) to the conditions of colonialism and the damaged planet.” (p.5)

Bozalek and Zembylas explain that our ability to respond (response-ability) always happens in intra-action (nothing predetermined precedes our ability to respond) and that being able to respond or allowing for responsiveness is always an ethical matter. Against this backdrop, the book emphasises the importance of ongoing ethical engagement in higher education. This means continually questioning and reconfiguring academic practices and policies as a form of enacting our ability to respond. Universities should be spaces for critical questioning and complicated conversations, encouraging students and staff to engage with complex ethical issues and injustices. This requires dis-identifying with the mechanistic worldview and practices inherited from colonial modernity and racialised capitalism.

In conclusion, *Responsibility, Privileged Irresponsibility and Response-ability* offers a comprehensive and critical tracing of the role of higher education in addressing colonial and ecological challenges and suggests that higher education spaces embrace relational and decolonial ethics for more just and sustainable futures. The book invites us to think otherwise, in a radically open manner, to enact our ability to respond, and be responsive, in the difficult times that higher education faces. The immanent potential of such a radically open approach is ripe with possibilities. Difficult times, yes... But, exciting times!

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