

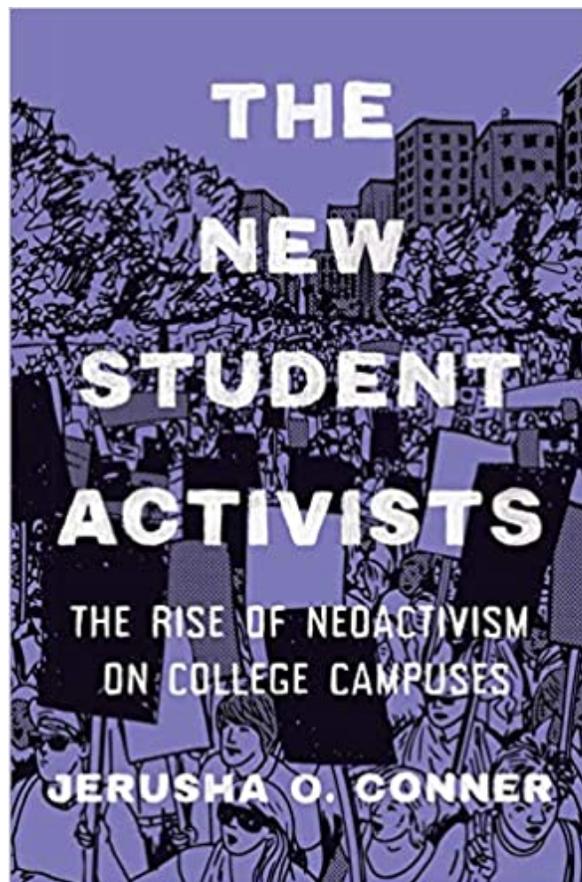
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses

by Sarah Chinn



THE NEW STUDENT ACTIVISTS: THE RISE OF NEOACTIVISM ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES BY JERUSHA O. CONNER

Review of *The New Student Activists: The Rise of Neoactivism on College Campuses*. By Jerusha O. Conner. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

Many essays in this issue on new student movements have asked and/or described what is new about these movements. Is it the political struggles they focus on? Their style of activism? How they address intersecting questions of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc? Jerusha O. Conner argues that what she calls “neoactivism” is a combination of all these factors, forged in the crucible of the neoliberal university.

Each era creates the student activists to fit the times, and the twenty-first century is no exception. Conner’s main query is what makes *these* activists different – how do they adapt to their own historical moment? In response to the bloodlessness of the neoliberal managerial bent of higher education, which “conceives of prospective students as consumers and current students as commodities that are manufactured for the workplace by the university” (21) students have turned their activism both outwards towards structural inequities and inwards towards techniques of self-care. In their critiques of institutions of higher education, “they call out the neoliberal university’s enmeshment of histories of colonialism and racism, and they call on it to understand the education it provides as a public good” (22). At the same time, they focus on the work of activism itself -- the physical and psychic energy it takes, as well as the opportunities it provides for challenging themselves and each other towards more sophisticated political analysis. This is quite different from the priorities of earlier movements, which were far more invested in discourses of self-sacrifice and urgency, often of necessity. (ACT-UP’s fever-pitch activism, after all, was explicitly linked to questions of immediate survival).

I would argue, too, that these neo-activists see themselves as part of and responding to history, not just current events. For example, the movements for educational institutions to distance themselves from colonialist and racist heritage is connected to present-day concerns around the representation of BIPOC in student bodies and on faculty, and the working conditions of mostly poor, often Black and brown staff, from secretaries to custodians. And the involvement of young people in the Black Lives Matter movement has been inspiring. But they are just as much invested in symbolism from the past: the naming and renaming of buildings, for example, or, more recently, removal of statues celebrating veterans of the Confederacy. While these issues aren’t the focus of Conner’s work, they do connect strongly with the arguments she is making both explicitly and implicitly.

Conner’s book is based on several years of research, surveying almost 250 students at a variety of institutions, and interviewing forty. She found respondents on rural, urban, and suburban campuses, public and private, across class, race, gender, and sexuality. All the colleges and universities she surveyed were residential, not commuter, campuses, which presupposes a certain level of socio-economic privilege among most of the respondents – the

poorest students are most often at local community and four-year colleges that they commute to from home. This might skew her results somewhat – I’d imagine that the poor and working-class students who enroll in commuter colleges have their own set of political commitments and involvements that could overlap with but could also be quite separate from those of more affluent students, something that Conner’s data wouldn’t delve into.

At the same time, Conner does manage to get a fairly thorough view of how student activists view themselves and their work. Most striking to me is her finding that these neoactivists have fully absorbed the lessons of intersectionality: only about 10% of her respondents focused on a single political issue, while the vast majority might lean in one direction or another but mostly supported and worked within a range of issues. White students expressed a serious commitment to facing their racial privilege and operated within an understanding of the mechanisms of homophobia and misogyny. For example, many students she interviewed were involved in climate activism. But it was not the environmentalism of traditional Sierra Club members – they saw their political work as justice-oriented, bringing concerns about environmental racism, for example, or the disproportionate effects of climate change on the global South and the very poor.

Also striking was these young activists’ emphasis on self- and collective care. While previous generations of student activists have gestured towards the danger of burnout, the assumption was that commitment to a cause meant going all in until you flamed out. Neoactivists, in Conner’s findings, recognize the toll that fighting against entrenched systems of power can take and engage in activities that restore and replenish them.

One unusual element of the book was her exploration of how the families and parents of activists dealt with their political work. For young people, the emotional and financial support of parents, especially for students living on campus, is crucial to their ability to do their activism. While few families actively opposed what their children were doing, few actively supported them either. Their attitudes were mostly reluctantly supportive, if that, not least because their children often turned their critiques of social inequality on the family itself. This was especially true for LGBT and non-binary students, who most directly challenged their parents’ and families’ ways of seeing the world, although parents also worried for their children’s safety, particularly for students who were undocumented and took real risks in their activism.

The New Student Activists is a comparatively comprehensive view of twenty-first century political college movements. The structure of the book is not overly creative: mostly it reads like the sociology dissertation it probably started its life as: Conner states the area of investigation, provides the findings, summarizes them, and then comes to a short conclusion and/or offers recommendations. I would have liked Conner to explore the issues more deeply, engage with and even challenge the worldviews of her subjects. There can be a thin line, for example, between self-care and self-indulgence, and occasionally the most diligent intersectional analyses can sound self-congratulatory on the

one hand, or rote on the other. While I enjoyed Conner's clearly appreciative take on contemporary youth activism, she could have taken a slightly more questioning stance – to what extent, for example, do current neoactivists connect with pre-existing political movements for change? How do they borrow from, adapt, and build coalitions with more established organizations, if they do so? And what are their visions for their own futures as activists?

Certainly, Conner's book is a great resource for understanding how college students today see themselves in relation to political activism. It's short, though, on judgment as to how effective neoactivism is compared to its predecessors. Certainly, effectiveness is a difficult thing to measure: how much did the movement against the war in Vietnam end the conflict? Or the anti-apartheid movement change the situation in South Africa? What counts as a "win"? Moreover, it's early days yet for neoactivism. But Conner clearly has faith in this next generation of activists, and I'm inclined to agree with her.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.pitt.edu/press/).