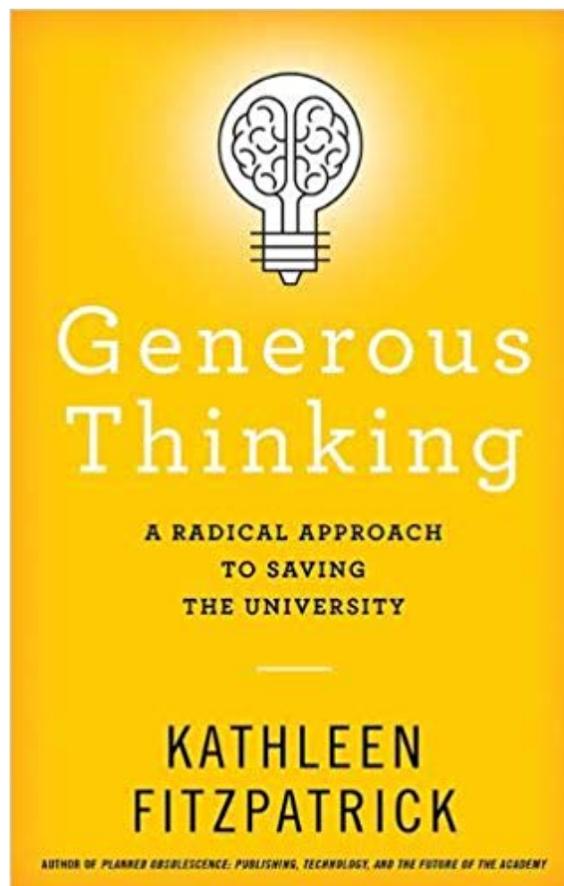# RADICAL TEACHER

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

Review

Generous Thinking:
A Radical Approach to Saving the University

Reviewed by Jocelyn Wills

GENEROUS THINKING: A RADICAL APPROACH TO SAVING THE UNIVERSITY. BY KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK.

Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University. By Kathleen Fitzpatrick. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

As readers of Radical Teacher will remember, Jennifer Washburn's University, Inc. (2005) issued a clarion call to scholars and policy makers about the need to remedy the corrosive effects that market-oriented, profit-seeking impulses have had on university research and teaching as well as democracy and the public trust. Although Washburn focused mainly on the corporate corruption of the sciences, many of her other concerns have come to pass in the wake of the Great Recession—including but not limited to accelerated neoliberal policies and public austerity schemes, the expansion of bloated bureaucracies and the careerist ambitions of administrators, escalating tuition costs and student debt, and an intensifying anti-intellectualism with populist movements suspicious of faculty research findings and expertise. As a result, an expanding body of work has emerged to tackle the mounting problems associated with the business models dominating major private and public research universities, the scandalous behavior of for-profit colleges, and, more recently, both the starvation of public higher education as well as the decimation of the humanities and the liberal arts. Following Washburn's lead, much of that work has offered solutions in the form of policy prescriptions.

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Kathleen Fitzpatrick's Generous Thinking makes an important intervention in the debate over what to do about the plight of American higher education, largely because it eschews the usual public policy tweaks that seek to address what can be done given current constraints or to reform the two competing and contradictory paradigms already on life support: what Fitzpatrick describes as "an older one, largely operative within the academic community, in which the university serves as a producer and disseminator of knowledge; and a more recent one, widely subscribed to in the surrounding culture, in which the university serves as a producer and disseminator of market-oriented credentials." (197) Instead, by drawing on her work in digital humanities and collaborative, community-driven projects, Fitzpatrick

argues that faculty members must abandon both models and take a hard look in the mirror if they want to save the university, particularly the public university, from the ravages of the neoliberal agenda and competitive self-destruction.

Fitzpatrick's book is an appeal for a revolution in thinking, a paradigm shift that forces us to embrace community as a strength rather than weakness, and to focus on education as a shared public (rather than individual and private) responsibility, a collective project that not only facilitates "the development of diverse, open communities" on campus and across borders rather than "inculcating state citizens" or training corporate leaders for more competitive individualism, but also rewards service as a central tenet of our work and helps to build and sustain communities grounded in an "ethic of care." (44) Such a shift therefore means the need to resist more than the efficiency models, accreditation traps, and market-driven, competitive structures and ranking systems that have come to define and debase the university and its priorities over the last 40-plus years. Fitzpatrick contends that, by subjecting ourselves, even buying into "a politics that makes inevitable the critical, the negative, the rejection of everything that has gone before" so that we can continue to ride the publish-or-perish treadmill, as well as accepting the reward system that discourages generosity (and service) and sanctions the drive for prestige, faculty members have played no small role in undermining the university and betraying the public trust. (25-6)

Since those involved in higher education have already lost the public's trust, Fitzpatrick argues that we cannot afford to wait for administrators to intervene. Change must begin at the grassroots level: with faculty, staff, students, and community partners working together to reground academic work in discourses with the many publics that the university serves, to get away from treating community engagement as a transactional exercise, to find and support projects collectively developed and governed, and to commit to solidarity and open, inclusive processes and practices. One example that can guide this change is Imagining America (https://imaginingamerica.org/), a 20-year-old consortium of artists, designers, humanists, organizers, and scholars committed to the creation of a more just, equitable, and "radically inclusive" America and world by promoting and strengthening public scholarship, cultural activism, and campus change that can inspire "collective imagination, knowledge-making, and civic action on pressing public issues" and bridge "institutional, disciplinary, and community divides." (35)

Fitzgerald maintains that such a cultural shift requires faculty to adopt a "mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, [and] collaboration over competition," a commitment that involves showing up, day after day, to do the work required to communicate our shared responsibility along with the public goals (and public good) of our scholarship and disciplines. That mode of engagement flows into what Fitzpatrick means by "generous thinking"—working with rather than against others; broadening the definition of who our peers might be; and having the kind of "critical humility" that allows us to acknowledge that we might be wrong about

some or many things and have much to learn from artists, students, community partners, and others. Engaging the work of trauma studies scholar Dominick LaCapra (particularly his 2004 History in Transit), Fitzgerald argues that, above all, listening, reflecting, and thinking with others helps to develop a generosity based not on a one-time transaction but on "persistence in the absence of hope," an ethical empathy that we must practice continuously in order to recognize that we may not understand others in our midst but must nevertheless continue to try to learn about them and why they think as they do so we can make the commitment Fitzgerald envisions, to the communities and collectives we need to build and sustain. (4, 12-13, 22, 39-40, 60, 66-8, 232-5)

Fitzpatrick insists that listening, deep, generous listening is the foundation for generous thinking, but we need to do more. Drawing on her career in literary studies and research into "connected communities of readers" (including Oprah Winfrey's Book Club), Fitzpatrick argues that faculty also need to hear, to pay attention, to "open ourselves to the same questioning we ask of others." That begins with attempting to understand why students read what they read, including the connections they seek, so that faculty can lead them from more to less accessible texts over time. This kind of openness to understanding students additionally involves learning as much as teaching, so that everyone involved has a better chance to "scale the empathy wall" imagined in Arlie Russell Hochschild's work. If we read together, as part of a collective process both in and beyond the classroom, we might just remember that questions matter more than answers, that listening allows us "to question what we already know," and that reflecting on multiple perspectives fosters community building and deeper learning. (119-22) As an additional benefit, reading, listening, reflecting, and thinking together provides an opportunity for faculty to share their love of reading, research, discovery, and learning in ways that can bolster why the humanities and other disciplines continue to matter to the public good.

To convince the larger public that our work is critically important (to democracy, social justice, the environment, etc.), that it remains relevant to the public good, Fitzpatrick also argues that we need to find better ways to get around the institutional constraints that keep us from working in and with the public to build communities of generosity on and off campus. Employing her own "Planned Obsolescence" blog as a vehicle for discussion, Fitzpatrick examines the dangers and rewards of sharing work more broadly. Audacious, perhaps. Frightening, absolutely. But, Fitzgerald argues, the experience was also richly rewarding in providing opportunities to self-question rather than self-confirm, risk enthusiasm about the humanities, and work with communities she had not previously considered: scholars in other fields, artists, policy makers, and the broader public. Fitzpatrick's most important take-away was that faculty need to make their scholarship more available and accessible to those who care about and can support it. Failing to tell stories of our work and why it continues to matter, she cautions, will only continue to "undermine the public's willingness to support our research and institutions." (150)

Fitzpatrick claims that she is not asking academics work as volunteers in this effort, but rather that they invite others to care about and contribute to their work, and to signal their scholarly commitment to ongoing review, so that, as members of multiple communities, faculty can focus on gathering together our collective knowledge and creating "not just tools for production, but tools for living." (180) Will any of this be easy? Absolutely not, Fitzpatrick concedes, but she also contends that we can no longer avoid working on what we need to think and do about the very real crises in higher education that authors from Washburn forward have exposed. Among the many things we need to tackle, she argues that the first one must center on uprooting the "prestige" and "market-driven" paradigms that reinforce hierarchies and exclusion. In their place, Fitzpatrick suggests that we need to commit ourselves to the collective, privileging service to the public good by working as public intellectuals and offering up new narratives, some based on historical examples that succeeded, at least for a time (including the work that paved the way for the Morrill Act of 1862, which, despite its flaws, focused on educating those who could help their communities from the grassroots-up; the lyceum movement; labor colleges and folk schools; and the Wisconsin Idea that, although top-down, at least invited public involvement, and dared to ask what communities needed and how the university might help).

Fitzpatrick references other projects that attempt to build and sustain communities, including the "Object Lessons Workshop" (http://objectsobjectsobjects.com) that helps scholars to express the significance of their work to broader audiences (165), through Michigan State University's "Citizen Scholars" program (http://citizenscholars.msu.edu), and on to indigenous knowledge and slow movement collaborations that privilege communities of knowing, learning, and being over knowledge production and scholarship as a competitive exercise (see, for example, http://indigistory.com). She also provides the example of her decision to post the first draft of the book manuscript for community review and feedback at http://generousthinking.hcommons.org, where she hopes the conversation she has started will continue.

Fitzpatrick offers an excellent roadmap for re-imagining the university, and how we might live within and beyond it. Like Berg and Seeber's Slow Professor, however, the individual interventions that Generous Thinking proposes offer little in the way of how best to tackle the incentive and reward structures that have long undermined the very community-building projects Fitzpatrick envisions, and to scale "generous thinking" beyond the already converted in ways that protect those increasingly over-burdened by the call to "communities of care" and service—especially women, people of color, contingent workers (including those in the academy), and the poor. Still, at this moment of paradigm failure, her challenge is timely and important, providing many of the arguments progressive scholars will need to save the university from neoliberalism and the faculty's self-destructive acquiescence to it. Let the conversation continue.

Notes

1. Jennifer Washburn, *University, Inc: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (Basic Books, 2005). In addition, see Renate Bridenthal's review of *University, Inc.* in *Radical Teacher* 73 (2005):35-7, 48. For recent works on higher education that resonate particularly well with *Generous Thinking*, see Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press, 2016); and Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

2. See, for example, Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (The New Press, 2016).