Transcript | Episode 3 | The Good University with Raewyn Connell

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[00:00:00] Intro

Daniela Heitzmann: Good evening, Raewyn.

Raewyn Connell: Well, good evening to you from the other side of the world.

Daniela Heitzmann: Greetings, dear listeners. My name is Daniela Heitzmann, I work as Diversity policies officer at Goethe-University Frankfurt in Germany. Welcome to the last episode of the podcast miniseries “The Just University. Visions of a Good and Diverse Academia”, in which we explore visions and utopian ideas for shaping a creative, inclusive and democratic university. Therefore, we need to talk about the global economy of knowledge, its inherent power structures and the privileges it produces. We will dive into the colonial history of Western universities and the effects of capitalist and neoliberal influences. From this distressing description of the current state, we will turn to examples of hopeful universities in past and present and outline criteria for a good university.

We are delighted to talk about this with Raewyn Connell. It’s quite hard to give a brief introduction into the life and work of our guest because she’s one of the best-known sociologists in the field of gender studies on a world scale. Therefore, I will point out a few highlights that are meaningful for our conversation. If you are not familiar with Raewyn Connell, please go to her website – www.raewynconnell.net – where you can find more information and a lot of resources. And you can also follow her on Twitter.

Raewyn became professor of sociology at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, in 1976. She spent a few years in the early nineties as a professor at the University of California in the United States and returned to the University of Sydney in 1996, where she worked as a professor until her retirement in 2014.

In the 1980s, she developed a social theory of gender relations, which emphasized gender as a power structure. In this field, she wrote one of her most influential works called “Masculinities”, published in 1995. The German translation is called “Der gemachte Mann”. In the 2000s, her amazing book “Southern Theory” was published. In it, she discusses social theories and concepts developed by scientists and intellectuals from the Global South, thereby exposing the colonial and racist structure of Western sociology. Raewyn has always been and still is a critical thinker questioning power relations and inequality in our global society, but also in her own professional sphere, namely universities and the scientific field. Her academic work and her political work culminated in the book “The Good University. What Universities Actually Do and Why It’s Time for Radical Change”, published in 2019, which will be an important reference for our conversation.

[00:03:31] The university work force: Learning, teaching and research as collective processes

Daniela Heitzmann: Raewyn, you start your book with kind of a mic-drop. You write about university workers and university strikes. This might seem especially unfamiliar to members of German academia. Therefore, could you please explain why you use the term university workers and also implications for your understanding and definition of university and science?

Raewyn Connell: I use the phrase university workers and university workforce quite deliberately to emphasize something about university life, which in a way is hidden in the mythology of academic life and often in the self-presentation of star academics and pompous university rectors, which is that, you know, the university is a workplace and it has a workforce, only half of which are academics. There’s another half of the university workforce consisting in many different occupational groups: secretarial workers, clerical workers, administrative workers, professional workers, technical experts, you know, ground workers, maintenance workers, people who keep the buildings running, medical workers. And I could go on, but you get the point. This is half the university workforce, half our staff. And the work that they do is not marginal to a university functioning. It is absolutely essential that these workers are there, that their work is done and done well because they work. And, you know, I show this in a little bit of detail in the book. And we won’t go through the whole story now, but you can show in quite detail how, you know, an hour of teaching, say, a lecture or a tutorial group where an academic is present, also assumes the work of a whole lot of other workers to make that hour happen. And it cannot happen unless those other workers are there and doing that other work which is: produce the space that it happens in, pay the salaries, coordinate the equipment, the technology that might be being used in the lecture, and so on and on and on.

And I would say something more, which is, I think, really important. Something that I learnt about a good while back when I was working in the sociology of education, which is one of my fields of research, and I worked with some colleagues, we might talk about this project later, in fact, it was a very cooperative project with three other colleagues, which made the study happen, and one of the things we did in that was interview teachers, we were interviewing high school pupils, secondary school pupils in working class schools and in ruling class schools as well. And I actually, at the end of the project, wrote a book called Teacher’s Work in which I considered teaching as a labour process as you might do for any other occupation. So, you can see education as coming out of a labour process, a form of labour which is controlled and managed in a certain way by a bureaucratic hierarchy, but which also requires a great deal of improvisation by the worker, as of course, other forms of work do too.

But that approach to education as a form of work, which also applies to the students, too, because the students work to produce educational effects as well as the teachers, that was something in the back of my head, I suppose, when I began to think very systematically about universities, and it was an easy step for me then to think of the university staff as a workforce and what happens in universities as a form of labour. Very complex form of labour because there are different kinds of worker, different kinds of work going on which have to be coordinated, but they’re coordinated basically from below. And that, I think, is something which is really important to know about

universities. It’s the capacity of different groups of workers to intermesh their labour processes that allows the university actually to function. And that involves a constant process of problem solving and innovation and invention, not just by the academics, but certainly research and teaching do involve that, but also by the clerical staff, the administrative staff, the financial staff, the technical staff.

They all have to improvise and interweave to make this thing that we call Higher Education actually happen, or this thing that we call research actually happen, and knowledge to be produced. So that, it seems to me, was a very, very fundamental insight into universities. And I’m a bit militant about this. Therefore, I do insist on saying we are workers, you know: I’m an academic and I have been a worker all my life. I belong to the union. I joined the union the day that I started my first job as an academic and I’ve never left it since. And I must say that one of the really good things about the union of university workers in Australia is that it includes academics and other groups of staff in the same union. It’s what we call an industry union, not a craft union. Most unions in other parts of the world, in the higher education sector are actually craft unions. So, there’ll be a union for academics and a different union for clerical staff and a different union for, you know, computer experts and so forth. In Australia, we have them all in the same union and I think that is a really excellent thing, actually forcing us to think about the whole workforce that is involved in this business of making a university operate. So that’s a long answer to your question, but it perhaps is an important starting point for all of my thinking about universities.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yeah, definitely. Thank you for the long answer, because as I said in the question, I think it’s an unusual understanding, at least at Western universities and in Germany too. But we have in Germany, I think the Australian model, because we also have all people in the same union on the plus side.

Raewyn Connell: The industry union as we call it.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yes, but it’s a very low percentage of people are organized in universities. So, this is the problem.

Raewyn Connell: Yeah, that is true with us too. It’s a difficult thing to organize in universities.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yeah. But one reason is that they don’t understand themselves as a workplace and as workers, especially academics. This is why it’s very interesting to start there in your book. And it’s a total contrast to the self-understanding of universities and science, which is more like that doing research, being a scientist is more about, especially in social sciences, being lonely and thinking and having great ideas on your own without any social process around. So, this is one big contrast for me I found in your work.

Raewyn Connell: Yeah, well, that is the fantasy. I mean, it’s the Dr. Faustus kind of model of the intellectual, but even Faust had his research assistant and of course, he had his audience. So even the lonely intellectual in the humanities, for instance, or the social theorist in sociology actually depends a lot on other workers, colleagues, the audience, the people who edit the journals, the students who also are participating in the work, and the cleaner who cleans the study in which the great thinker thinks the great thoughts and the people who cook his food, I could go on.

But in fact, the trend has, in social sciences too, been more towards teamwork, collaborative work. But still, we have this imaginary of the great intellectual, the professor Einstein with his hair and his amazing brain, etc. But nevertheless the context in which individual great thinkers work is still a social or collective context, and we forget that at our peril.

[00:14:59] What went wrong? The global economy of knowledge

Daniela Heitzmann: Yes, but it’s not only the imaginary, because it’s also the conditions we find, the institutional conditions, that the whole system is built and, in a way, forces us to work in this individualized, fragmented manner and also be effective and highly competitive. And you write about the so-called global economy of knowledge. To explain this and give us an idea how it comes to this way of learning, teaching and research, that doesn’t allow this collective and social dimension to work. So, I would like to ask you to elaborate on this term, the global economy of knowledge, and also to give us some historical insights, because I really like history and I read some quite interesting things in your book.

Raewyn Connell: Very good. Yeah. Well, that was my first degree. You see, I’m a renegade historian, ultimately. It is paradoxical, but the global economy of knowledge is a concept that came, I guess, from several different sources for me. One was the experience of working a little bit internationally. I have taught in several countries and I think I was counting up the number of countries I’ve visited as an academic, I think it’s about 30, in all continents except Antarctica. I haven’t yet taught a class in Antarctica, but I live in hope. But I mean, I come from a rich country and I have had a good deal of economic privilege as a senior academic, which has allowed me to travel, to meet people, to visit universities on every continent. And so that was one of the sources of this concept, because I was actually experiencing life on campuses in every part of the world and seeing some things that differed, some things that were the same, but also seeing the connections that held those institutions together. And that as I became more familiar with it, I began to read more of the institutional histories. I collect histories of universities. For instance, one of my research techniques is hunting down obscure books in dusty second-hand bookshops. It’s a great research method. I became aware of something of the deeper history of universities and indeed of the disciplinary knowledge that universities teach and research in. Now, there are now vigorous critiques of the mainstream curriculum in universities, arguments for decolonizing the curriculum we can talk about that too later on.

But becoming aware of some of that discussion and meeting people who had different cultural backgrounds from my own, yet were working in a similar kind of institution with similar connections to universities in Western Europe and North America, I began thinking harder about, if you like, where universities came from, and there is a, if you like, a conventional story. This: universities were invented in in the European Middle Ages, in places like Bologna, Heidelberg, Oxford, Paris. And of course, that’s part of the story. That is true. But that is not the only form of higher education. There have been ways of doing advance study, institutions for advanced study in other parts of the world. It turns out, in fact, that some of the centres of advanced knowledge in the Islamic world were models for early European universities in the Middle Ages, especially in Southern Europe, of course. So, the history was a little more entangled than the conventional story actually allows. And it gets more

entangled, too, when you feed into this the history of modern science, which again is often told in a very Eurocentric way as something that basically happened during the Renaissance in Europe and then was developed by great thinkers, Newton, Galileo, etc., and then much, much later was exported to the rest of the world. And so, we got universities in other parts of the world.

Well, there’s truth in this, it’s not a ridiculous story, but it’s very incomplete. Because if you look at the history, say, of biology, you know, who are the great founding fathers in biology? Well, people like Linnaeus, people like Darwin. Now, Darwin actually did fieldwork in the Global South. He spent three years traveling around the colonial and postcolonial world in a British Navy ship which was sent out to collect data, scientific data, from the Global South. That’s how he came to visit South America, how he came to visit the Galapagos Islands, how he came to visit coral reefs and so forth. So, he came back to England with huge volumes of data that he collected in the colonized and post-colonial world, sat down and thought about it for 20 years and wrote "The Origin of Species". And thus, we get modern evolutionary biology that drew immensely on knowledge that came not from Europe but from the colonized and post-colonial world.

So, the history of modern science, the growth of modern science, is crucially dependent on European empire and what was set up in that process for about 400 years of imperial power and continuing in the modern world is what I now call the global economy of knowledge. That is the flow of data from the colonized and postcolonial world to the knowledge institutions of the imperial centre in Western Europe and now in North America that process the data, assemble it in data banks, libraries, botanical gardens, scientific institutes, all this data is piled up. It’s theorized, methodology is developed so that the moment of theory, if you like, is geographically located in the Global North. But enormous amount of the data that comes in comes from the Global South. So, there’s an exchange. The theory, the processed knowledge, if you like, is re-exported to the Global South, and there is an unequal, uneven exchange process.

Now, the person who made this clear to me is a philosopher called Paulin J. Hountondji, who comes from Benin in West Africa and whom I think is a wonderful epistemologist, actually one of the most brilliant thinkers in the field of the analysis of knowledge that I know of. When I read his account of, if you like, the geopolitics of knowledge in West Africa, I actually shivered as I was reading it. Because it was so close to my experience in Australia and the history of the development of disciplinary knowledge in my part of the world. And it was reading Hountondji, basically, that led me to this kind of thinking about the nature of the global, the globalized labour that we call research, that goes into the making of disciplinary knowledge which is then drawn upon to produce the curricula that we teach in universities. So, it is in fact very, very much connected.

OK, so that’s basically what I mean by the global economy of knowledge: the flow of data, of theoretical ideas and publications. It gets much more complicated pretty quickly, of course, because you ask, well, how does this knowledge circulate? Scientific journals, for instance. Where are the journals located? Mainly in the Global North, where the prestigious journals located all in the Global North, practically. I mean, apart from a few in Japan, an increasing number from China. But so, there’s massive inequalities here, which of course were produced by the economic structure of the empires from the 16th to the 20th centuries, but which have been inherited by the modern material economy, and which, of course, provides the material basis for the knowledge institutions in which the economy

of knowledge, the immaterial flows of data and theory and methodology and so forth occur. So, I hope I haven’t raved on too much about that, but I do get a bit enthusiastic about these ideas, as you will see, as you will hear.

Right. I meant to say I grew up in in a post-colonial country, in Australia, which was a British colony. No, actually, it was six British colonies. And the curriculum in the school that I went to was very largely derived from Britain, mainly England. So, the poetry that I read is practically all from England or Ireland. And when I went to university, I studied history and psychology. And the psychologists that I read were from Western Europe and North America. And the historians that I read were almost entirely from Britain. A few from France, a few from the United States and so forth. But so, here was I, you know, on the other side of the world, literally in the antipodes, but studying a curriculum that derived quite directly from the imperial centre, from the history of the imperial connection there, and therefore it has been very exciting to me to discover my own history in these concepts, in this analysis. And, you know, I don’t think that the education I got was a bad one. But it was certainly radically biased in ways that I’m now trying to unpack and correct for. Yeah.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yeah, absolutely. One quick question. The author you mentioned from Benin, did you write about him in "Southern Theory"?

Raewyn Connell: In "Southern theory”.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yeah. Yeah, sure.

Raewyn Connell: Yes.

Daniela Heitzmann: Yeah. Like I said, it’s a very amazing book because you really have to check if you don’t know about it. If you are from the Global North and don’t know about knowledge from the Global South, it gives you such an access to many different perspectives just to see and to break with your own privileges and assumptions. It’s really a training unit if you want to.

Raewyn Connell: And that’s what I’ve hoped for. The book is read in the Global South somewhat, but I certainly hoped it would be of interest in the Global North, too. And partly for that reason, the form of the book is basically storytelling. So, I’m telling the stories of particular people like Hountondji or group collectives like the Subaltern Studies collective, or even debates that might have happened in a particular field like the debate around structural economics that happened in Latin America. Telling these stories was certainly the way that I approached them, I guess. Still a bit as a historian, but also, I think it’s a good pedagogical thing. It’s a way of introducing ways of thinking to people for whom they might be rather strange.

[00:30:25] What is wrong? Universities as businesses

Daniela Heitzmann: Yes. And it’s so important to have that, because when I listen to you and read your books, I mean, when we, from the Global North perspective, this global economy of knowledge means a massive disruption of our thinking and what we think that is right and what we think is science and what we think the whole foundation of universities and science is. I mean, it’s a big question mark. What do we talk about? How do we work in university? How do we teach? How do we do research? And I think for many people who don’t have the privilege to be social scientists and can learn about it as a job, so I have the privilege to learn about postcolonial perspectives because

I’m a sociologist. But many people who work in university don’t have this access and so it can be very overwhelming to learn about it and to deal with it. Of course, it’s always more problematic and has more negative consequences for the people in the Global South, who don’t have access, but I think I would like to emphasize here in this talk the Global North perspective.

And before I will ask you about what we can do as students and academics in the Global North to learn and teach and research in an anti-imperial or decolonial manner, I would also like to ask you, because I think if people hear the word economy, they also think about business, and you also wrote about the university as business, and I think this perspective on university as business might give us also an explanation why it’s so hard to get out of this global economy of knowledge. So, I would like to ask you, if you can give us an insight what you mean with university as business and how it is connected to the global economy of knowledge?

Raewyn Connell: Sure, sure. Again, it’s, of course, a somewhat complicated story. Universities are organizations which have a work force. They have to be paid. The running expenses of the university has to be met. So when the University of Sydney, for instance, is the university that I have retired from now, I’m still technically a member of staff as professor emerita, and also I did my PhD in this, so I know fairly well and I know its history fairly well, when it was first set up in the 1850s, it was funded by the colonial Parliament, by the colonial state, which passed an act setting up the university by law and then in its budget said so many pounds, it was in those days, the currency, so many pounds shall be appropriated for the expenses of the University of Sydney each year. And that continued basically with the university adding somewhat to that flow of government funding by charging some fees to the students who almost all came from propertied families, from wealthy families, because it was a very small, elite institution in those days. Well, in the 20th century, universities here and elsewhere began to expand. They were criticized as being elitist and exclusive and basically upper-class institutions. Which was right. It was correct. But the notion of higher education as something that should be open to working-class students spread, more and more working-class students came in, and their expenses, because they didn’t come from wealthy families, now had to be met by governments. So, there was expanding investment as it was now seen by government, by the public sector, in higher education. And by the 1950s or 60s when universities were being set up in most postcolonial countries and universities in the imperial centre and in established colonial countries like Australia university systems were being expanded. This was seen as public sector expansion, the collective investment in the intellectual and professional workforce we would need for the future. So as an investment, it was seen in those days as an investment in economic growth for the whole society. That was literally the way in which it was defended.

So, in Australia there was a great boom, universities expanded five times over in a couple of decades. A whole stack of new universities was set up. That was where I then got my chair of sociology at Macquarie University, which was a new university then. And that was a very exciting moment in university history because it meant a whole lot of new people were coming into universities, new groups of students, but also new people were becoming professors and senior lecturers and so forth with new ideas, intending to make universities work democratically. So, I talk a little bit about that in one of the later chapters of the Good University about what I call the Greenfields universities. And there were such universities in Germany, too, of course, the new universities in the 1960s and 70s.

So, it was a very exciting moment and it was basically, you know, public sector investment at that time.

But there was also the beginnings of a shift in economic strategy and political strategy, the nature of right-wing politics in many parts of the world, which were increasingly influenced by a different kind of economic model which saw the public sector not as the driving force in economic growth, but as a cost and where economic development was assumed to come only from the private sector. So that was neoliberalism and monetarist economics. It came in under the Kohl regime in Germany, Thatcher regime in Britain, Reagan in the United States. In Australia and New Zealand, curiously, that way of thinking was brought in by Labour governments, working class parties who had been persuaded that this was the only way to survive in a globalized world and so on.

Okay, so, that led then to a reshaping of university systems, too. In Australia, it took the form of a kind of backdoor privatization of universities that remained technically public institutions, but began to operate more and more like corporations, charging fees (again). Fees were reintroduced in Australia after a period where higher education had been completely free, and universities were encouraged to increase their fees. The amount of tax money flowing into universities steadily reduced, fees went up and the management of universities was more and more of a corporate model. So, corporations began seeing higher education as a moneymaking possibility. For instance, publishing corporations began taking over academic journals and charging fees to read them and making an amazing amount of money by getting free labour from the academics who wrote the articles and reviewed the articles and edited the journals, but had to pay to read them. It was a wonderful, wonderful piece of profit-making, isn’t it? It’s astonishing how they got away with that. Anyway. But that is only part of the corporatization of universities, of course.

We now have, in many parts of the world, the majority of universities are actually privately owned. So, in Brazil, I think about 70% of university enrolments are in private universities. In India, about 50%, in China, I think, it’s between 20% and 30%, but they’re expecting more support from the government to expand that. And in countries like Australia, where universities or most of them remain technically public institutions, nevertheless they now function very like profit-making corporations. So that’s what makes it really important to think about universities operating like businesses. Whether or not they are technically profit-making businesses, many of them are, but even those that don’t are pressured more and more to operate that way. And that has a whole lot of consequences. One, it pushes university managers to turn themselves, sorry, university administrators, as they used to be called, pushes them to reinvent themselves as managers on the corporate model. So, the incomes of top managers in universities now are enormously greater than they used to be and much, much bigger than the average salary of the academics or the non-academic staff.

So, there’s been an increased Gini index within universities, increased income inequality within universities, quite strikingly so. The income for this now comes mainly from fees, even in technically public universities like Australian universities. And therefore, the managers are pressured to increase their fee income by increasing the number of fee-paying students who come in. That’s their business model, to expand the income by increasing the number of fee-paying students or the amount that each student pays.

And how do you attract students to come and sign up to pay these fees? Well, by advertising. So, more and more university income is spent on advertising and creating an image, fabricating an image of the wonderful life that students will have in this wonderful place called a university or called the University X. And particularly, it will help your advertising if you can claim to be at the top of some competitive ranking scale.

So, universities have got deeply now into the ranking and competitive assessment of business. We now do this on a global scale. It’s been a very fast change because the first global rankings of universities appeared just 20 years ago, no more than that. Although within the United States rankings of universities have been around for somewhat longer than that. And there is an interesting history of how those global rankings began, because the first one was in China, the so-called Shanghai ranking of universities was the first global ranking. And that was produced because the policy of the Chinese government, which of course controls the Chinese university system quite tightly, was to model Chinese universities on the best universities in the United States principally, but secondarily in Western Europe, so they needed to know which are the best universities. So, the ranking scale thus was a product of this policy need of modelling yourself on the top universities in the world.

Now, what the Chinese government did then, practically every other university system has also been doing, because when you have these ranking scales and a market-based funding system, you don’t get diversity. You get basically what the economists call convergence on the market leader. Everybody wants to be like Harvard. And so, you market yourself looking like a prestigious university in the Global North. If you’ve got a little bit of Gothic architecture, then you include that in your advertisements, etc. And the ranking scales, now commercial products themselves, make money by telling universities how to improve their score on the ranking scale. And they then produce more rankings and finer kinds of rankings of specialized matters or individual subjects and so forth, so that every university can come top in something. So, I mean, it’s basically corrupt. As policy it’s absolutely ridiculous because all of these rankings, of course, are relative. So, every university tries to game the system to increase its ranking. But every other university is also trying to game the system, cheat if it can. I think it’s just mind-boggling, the tangle that is being produced by this market-driven lunacy in university policy.

So those are some of the features of the university business. But the one that I have to include, because it’s right in our face at the moment in Australia, is the impact on university staff, the university workforce. As the universities operate more and more like profit-making businesses, the management starts acting like the management of a profit-making business where profit or one of the key ways to make a profit is to lower your labour costs. So, university managers have also been trying to lower their labour costs, and they have three ways of doing that. Basically.

One, they hold wages down. So, we are now having strikes in Australian universities over wage bargaining where the university managers now are trying to keep the wages of university workers below the rate of inflation. In other words, they’re trying to impose wage cuts on university workers.

The second way they can lower wage costs is to outsource the work to other companies, to other corporations who have a cheaper workforce. So, more and more university work is now being outsourced and that includes [...]. So, when we were on strike at the University of Sydney, I was on the picket line one day. I talked to one of the security people who were monitoring our picket line.

He was wearing a shirt saying University of Sydney security. And I said, who do you actually work for? Oh, he said, we work for such and such a security company. So, they’d outsourced their own security. And university printing and a whole lot of other things now are outsourced. They haven’t yet got far outsourcing academic work, but they apply the third method to them, which is to what we call casualize the academic labour force. That is to make academic labour precarious by making teachers and researchers part time on short term contracts in insecure employment. And you can do that as a way of holding down your labour costs. So now in Australia, something between 70% and 80% of all undergraduate teaching is not done by permanent academic staff. It’s done by part time, casual, insecure, precarious workers who are not funded to be part of the planning of the courses that they are teaching, are not funded to do research, which we usually think is important as part of what makes a good university teacher, that they know something about research. So that holds down the wage costs for the university as a business, but it degrades the conditions of the teaching workforce and degrades the quality of the curricula, of the courses that are actually taught, inevitably. Now that is stuff that you do not see in the advertisements universities put out to say what wonderful places they are to study. They don’t tell you how many of the academic staff, how many of the teachers are actually very insecure work with no career prospects. So, it’s not only a business now, it’s a tough business. It’s not a pretty business at all.

Daniela Heitzmann: It sounds absolutely horrific.

Raewyn Connell: It is. The people at the bottom levels of this system. It is horrific.

Daniela Heitzmann: And I mean, in Germany, we have the same mechanisms. I mean, we don’t have so many private universities. The big universities are still state funded. But we have all three mechanisms. We also have, our staff is 80% to 90% casualized, the people below professorships. We have had the outsourcing for quite a long time. And the wage, it depends because it’s state funded, so there are no specific negotiations between the university and the workers, usually, it’s on a state level. So, this is okay in a way. But yeah, I can totally confirm this for Germany.

And I was also thinking, I mean, there are so many implications and I think we can’t talk about it all. But one thing, because we talked about the economy of knowledge, that there is the crazy part, a weird part, when you think about doing research and teaching, is that this whole economic development makes research and teaching worse. Because it’s not diverse, it’s getting the same and the same, because just people who can move in the system and who can fulfill criteria that are not about the knowledge production or the teaching quality, mostly these people can move forward and the others just fall out and especially marginalized people fall out of the system. And so, the system goes in a direction which is against diversity, inclusion and creativity.

[00:55:00] Is there hope? - “Universities of hope”

Daniela Heitzmann: So now you brought us to this very dark place. So, the question is, what can we do?

Raewyn Connell: How do we get out of it?

Daniela Heitzmann: Do we get out of it? How do we get out of it? There are several ways, I imagine. And after you painted this dark picture in your book, you go to the next chapter, it’s called ‘The

universities of hope’. So, you go to the other extreme. And I would really appreciate if you could give us an idea what the hopeful note is, how we can turn the ship around or change this horrific development in academia?

Raewyn Connell: Yeah, that was my favourite chapter in the book, I have to say, and the one that I most enjoyed researching and writing. And again, it’s a matter of storytelling because I wanted to tell the other history of universities and research and knowledge making that is, if you like, not the conventional story. Because when you go looking for it, there’s actually a very rich history of alternative ways of doing higher education and more democratic ways of doing higher education.

And let me give a couple of examples. One, which is really almost my favourite story, is a story of a college, now a university, in India called Visva-Bharati, which is a name that invokes the goddess of wisdom. It was set up by a very famous writer poet Rabindranath Tagore, who’s a very important figure in the development of Indian national consciousness and the movement towards Indian independence. Who came from a rich family, a wealthy family, and became critical of his own background and began spending time with the peasants who cultivated the lands that his family owned, began to realize the lack of education, so began setting up village schools with a curriculum that was suited to their needs and eventually decided that there needed to be a kind of higher education top for beyond the school level. So, he set up a college, which he called Visva-Bharati. And his idea for that was that it wouldn’t look like the universities that the British colonizers had set up in India, which they’d set up in the 1850s, about the same time as universities were set up in Australia and other parts of the British Empire, too, but with a curriculum, as I was describing it, basically derived from Britain.

So, Tagore said, no, we’re going to have our own curriculum and we’re going to have this - the curriculum in this college or university is going to be a meeting place for civilizations. We’re not going to have just one culture, we certainly going to have Indian culture, we’re also going to have European culture, but we’re also going to have Chinese culture and Tibetan culture. This is going to be a meeting place for cultures. This university was a wonderful idea. It’s a kind of decolonial, anti-colonial, non-colonial university, but a world university. And it struggled financially, but it had very enthusiastic students, one of whom later became Prime Minister of India, it was Indira Gandhi. And it was eventually, after independence, taken into the Indian public university system. So, it’s still there. It’s got a very interesting online website, if anyone would like to look at it. It’s a great story.

The other amazing story I want to mention is the Flying University in Poland. When most of Poland was controlled by the Russian empire in the 19th century - and at a certain point, the Russians began to worry about universities in what they regarded as the provinces being hotbeds of revolution and so forth and didn’t want that. So, they started to Russify the curriculum in the universities, such as the University of Warsaw. And the Poles rather objected to this. They couldn’t stop it happening, but they thought of a way of getting around it. And they set up, in effect, their own university on the quiet. No advertising, no legal power to give degrees. But you could study. You could teach. You could learn. And they set up, I’ve forgotten exactly what it’s called, it’s called the Society for Academic Courses or something like that. And they began teaching and got hundreds and hundreds, even thousands of students, many of them women, which is remarkable for the 19th century, but women wanting to become teachers.

One of these students actually became very famous as Marie Curie, the scientist - very, very famous. Well, she was a student of this university that was known as the Flying University, because they had to move the classes around to dodge the secret police. In fact, the secret police followed very closely what they were doing, and the secret police archives actually preserved the curriculum. It’s a great boon to historians now. Amazing story. It eventually was legalized as a result of the 1905 revolution in the Russian Empire. And after Polish independence, after the second Russian Revolution, it became a national university. Then, of course, under fascist occupation, the university was eliminated. But the Poles began teaching underground again. And then after fascism, the fascists were pushed out at the end of the war, the communist regime reinstated public universities, but also controlled its social science curriculum and humanities curriculum. The Poles didn’t like it, so they did it again and set up an underground university to teach history and philosophy and social science. It’s just an amazing story. That is, I think, the earliest anti-colonial university I know of, right there in Poland. I hope they do it again.

Anyway, so, look, there’s just a wealth of stories about popular scientific movements, citizen science, anti-racist colleges that have been set up, anti-colonial universities, you know, democratic free universities, colleges for workers, folk high schools in Scandinavia, which are basically working-class higher education centres, and so on. So, look, there’s many models. That’s what I mean by universities of hope. We’re not bereft of working models of how higher education can be done in different, much more democratic and student-engaging ways. We don’t have to think of higher education as a commodity which students buy and then which get into advertising and online cheating websites and all of this kind of stuff. We can do it differently. We even know how to do it differently. But how to make those inspirations work in the new circumstances that we’re facing now with, yeah. -And here I’m going to say, I don’t know. My job is to show how it has been done and how it could be done and how I imagine it being done.

But how it will actually be done is going to be local. It’s going to involve on the ground struggle to democratize existing universities, to create a political context in which public higher education becomes normal again, to where people will create, if you like to put it this way, the political coalitions that are necessary to produce more democratic higher education institutions that function democratically as democratic organizations, because we know something about workplace democracy. It’s not, that’s not rocket science. We know a lot about worker managed enterprises or co-managed enterprises. This is something that’s perfectly possible but will only happen when social movements and political leaderships, unions, intellectuals, potential students come together around new agendas. And that is a process, that is a practical process, which is going to work differently in every part of the world, I’m quite sure.

Therefore, I don’t come along with a blueprint of how we ought to make a good university. I could say that good universities would be multiple. There would be many kinds of higher education in the future, in different circumstances, serving different communities. But I think I have made a bit of an effort to think what properties those different institutions might share. And that’s my list of the criteria for a good university, if you like. It’s not a blueprint. It’s a way of talking about the kind of process that has to happen on the ground in many different settings.

Daniela Heitzmann: Of course, everybody wants a blueprint. It would be great to have that. I would like you to share the criteria, but before we go there, I have to ask if you are hopeful that we can change the universities in a few decades maybe, to reverse or to change the development it has taken, we have talked about in the last couple of minutes. Are you hopeful for that, on a personal level, or do you see – or do you think that it will work better if we start new places? If we start to create new places? Or do you think we can do both?

Raewyn Connell: I think we should do both. I think there is a real place for full-on experimental, inventive new efforts. They’re likely to be small. I mean, many of the anti-colonial, experimental democratic institutions I talk about were actually on a relatively small scale because you don’t have, you know, the economic resources of giant corporations or governments. That’s just a practical necessity. So, scaling up, then, is a big issue if we go for new foundations. I think both things ... the most hopeful path will be for both kinds of efforts to go on at the same time, feed off each other, because you can make more radical experiments, if you like, in a small new context, perhaps. And that can then become a resource for the slower, larger process of transforming existing institutions, existing universities. Now, we’ve done that in the past. When I was talking about those Greenfields universities earlier on, that was partly a matter of drawing on experiments. That was using government, that was creating big institutions, but drawing on small experimental models which had happened in the generation before. So, it’s a conceivable way that a different kind of university system could be produced. I mean, it depends on so many things, like we’re seeing.

One of the worrying things in the last ten years or so of global history is the rise of more authoritarian right-wing politics. And I don’t think we will get democratic university systems out of an authoritarian right-wing regime. So, we also won’t get a happy solution to the problems of universities if we’re facing devastating climate change in the near future. So, all those struggles have to go on at the same time, and doubtless they will in some ways feed into each other or condition each other.

But thinking about the struggle in and around universities, I am actually somewhat hopeful. I think there is now, compared with the situation, say, ten years ago, there is much more awareness now of the problems of the corporate model of universities, of the downside of that for the workforce, of the corruption that goes with the corporatization of higher education, that is an increasing problem. There is more consciousness, I guess, of the problems in the current system and therefore of the need for change.

And there’s one other thing that gives me hope, and that is the COVID-19 epidemic, oddly. That’s affected my life rather badly because at my age, I’m very vulnerable to a respiratory disease. So, I have had my life very, very sharply constrained by this. I’m not glad that we’ve had the epidemic, but I am glad about the response to it in universities, because within two years an enormous change in university practice has occurred. In the practices of teaching, a whole lot of stuff was moved online, new ways of running conferences, hybrid formats became familiar. A whole lot of administrative problems were overcome by the administrative staff, the uses of the campus changed, the incredible burst of innovation, very hard work, and creating new kinds of connection happened, all very fast. So, if you ask, does the university workforce have the capacity for radical change in the foreseeable future, I would give a very clear answer: Yes, we know that’s possible. Whether it can happen organizationally, of course, is another matter because the people currently running universities don’t

want the institutions to be democratized. They don’t want higher education to revert to the public sector. So, there are very tough struggles ahead if we’re to achieve anything like these kinds of goals, but that it can be done, I’m very clear. It can. It’s possible.

[01:15:42] Criteria for a Good University

Daniela Heitzmann: That is very good to hear. To have this hopeful note. And let’s finish this hopeful turn of the conversation with the outline of ‘The Good University’ and the criteria you give. You already mentioned some of the criteria, but maybe you can paint this picture at the end and give it to our listeners.

Raewyn Connell: Sure. I’m very happy to do that. Thank you. That’s a very nice way of summing up. I’ve got five criteria for a good university and three for a good university system. Because individual universities, of course, are not isolated from that. They operate as part of the university system. The criteria for a good university to me are that it’s democratic. So, it serves democratic purposes of inclusion and fairness and so forth. And it operates, internally, democratically. It’s an industrial democracy.

Secondly, that it is engaged. And I don’t think this is very controversial, but it means that it serves community needs, serves public needs, not just by making money or by helping corporations to make money, but also by doing things that don’t make money, such as public outreach and sharing research-based knowledge for free for everyone who can use it.

Thirdly, a good university is truthful. It’s committed to truth, and everyone who does research knows that that’s a tough proposition. Truth is not an easy thing to establish, but that’s what we’re trying to do. And therefore, a university doesn’t engage in things like misleading advertising or creating spurious images of university life. It actually respects people’s need for truthful and honest discourse.

Fourthly, it’s creative, and I think the university curriculum should include the creative arts and many forms of creativity. It should celebrate the creative dimension in teaching and learning, innovate and experiment in teaching, not just teach to the textbook or to the exam or learn for the exam and so forth.

And finally, it should be sustainable. And I certainly mean that in the environmental sense that we should be giving the lead in terms of the sustainable economy, but also sustainable in human terms. And that to me is the really devastating thing about this corporate turn commodification of universities, that they’ve made university work unsustainable for large parts of the workforce. Unmanageable. Overwork, underpaid, casualized, insecure: That is not the way to have sustainable institution for the future. So, the university should be sustainable in human terms as well.

And then at the level of the university system, firstly, it should be cooperative rather than competitive. I mean, it’s mad to think of universities as separate enterprises competing with each other when we all depend on each other, we rely on each other for almost all of our organized knowledge, for our teaching techniques, for our resources, basically. Having a university system cooperative allows universities to specialize more because we’re not all trying to converge on the market leader in order to maximize our money. We’re able to do different things for rural communities, urban communities and so forth. That requires, I think, university systems to be public,

publicly accountable as well as publicly funded, to be responsible as every public institution ought to be. And, third criterion for a good university system is that it would be redistributive. It would work to reduce the massive inequalities that currently characterize the global economy of knowledge, to go back to that concept, and the enormous inequalities that exist between universities, say, the elite universities in the United States and, say, a community college in a poor developing country. We should be using the resources of university systems to direct resources, human resources, as well as material resources, to where they are needed most rather than where they reinforce privilege. So, a good university system then is cooperative, public and redistributive, as well as those criteria for a university on a particular campus. That’s my vision for the university system that I think would be really worth working for and sustainable into the indefinite future, which I fear our current system is not.

Daniela Heitzmann: I think we have to wrap up. Raewyn, thank you very much for your time and sharing your knowledge and hopeful perspective with us.

Raewyn Connell: Okay, Goodbye. Thanks. It’s been a pleasure.

Daniela Heitzmann: And thank you very much to our listeners. You can listen to two other episodes in this podcast miniseries in German, which you find on our website. And since we talked about the colonial history and post-colonial present of universities, I like to recommend another podcast episode. It’s also in German. It’s from the “Pott Kaffee-Podcast” and the episode is called “Experiment rassismuskritische und dekolonialisierte Hochschule” with students from Goethe University Frankfurt, Karim Fereidooni from Ruhr-University Bochum and Dilara Kanbiçak from Goethe University Frankfurt, recorded in October 2021. You also find the link on our website. Thanks for listening. See you soon.

[01:23:07] Outro

The podcast miniseries “The Just University. Visions of a Good and Diverse Academia” was created as part of the event series “All Equally Different: Diversity in Theory and Practice”. With the series, over the past ten years at the University of Göttingen lectures and workshops have been organized around the topics of diversity and discrimination in science and society, and likewise on possibilities of intervention and resistance. Under the leadership of the Equal Opportunity and Diversity office colleagues from various departments such as the Gender Studies Department, the Institute for Diversity Research, the Graduate School of Social Sciences, the Central Institutions for Teacher Education and for Languages and Key Qualifications have worked together.

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After 10 years, the series “All Equally Different” ends and we say goodbye and thank you to all contributors, companions and participants - in presence and virtually - learning and discussing with us and who will continue to work towards a just university!