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BOOK REVIEWS

Amy J. Binder and Jeffrey L. Kidder (2022), *The Channels of Student Activism: How the Left and Right are Winning (and Losing) in Campus Politics Today*

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 225 pp., ISBN: 978-0-226-68427-7

Before commenting on the book, which deals with student activism in the United States from the political spectrums of right and left, I would like to situate my position as a reader. I was a member of a student political organisation at my university (as an elected representative of an undergraduate student union organisation in 2013–2014) and participated in other student political collectives that were aimed at internal campus activism and outside politics issues as well. I consider these spaces and experiences to be located in the left field (something relevant, since, as the book shows, the channels of activism of the different spectrums are different). Later, during my doctoral research, no longer active in campus politics, I studied some right-wing and far right-wing political organisations in my country, some composed of students who were active in the university environment. Both experiences made me appreciate the value of keeping an eye open to student politics to understand important aspects both of campus life and politics issues beyond campus as well (in all geographical scales).

Thus, I was particularly struck by the similarities in the organisational form and action strategies of the right-wing student political clubs in the United States and Brazil. Both mobilise the narrative of leftist hegemony on campus, and both have substantial connections with and support from outside political organisations. This similarity does not occur by chance, as many of these groups form international networks of political action on and off campus. In this sense, the book stands out for placing different political spectrums of student activism into perspective, constantly highlighting similarities and differences between them and tracing the connections between student activism and off-campus politics. The book aims to report the results of research seeking to understand the channels of student

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activism in the United States, considering a recent period marked by greater polarisation and political unrest in the country and by Donald Trump's administration. To do this, the researchers conducted a qualitative study based on interviews with seventy-seven politically engaged students (forty-two progressives, thirty-five conservatives) chosen on the basis of their political activities and affiliation to political clubs. They also interviewed leaders of political organisations that were active in the field of higher education, as well as university staff.

It is interesting to note that the interviews sought to give voice to the views of the students themselves and their experiences about politics on and off campus; voices that we can perceive strikingly throughout the narrative. It is also worth mentioning how the authors classify the political spectrum, considering a scale ranging from leftists and liberals (progressist side), moderates, libertarians and conservatives (conservative side). The book reaffirms that even within this classification, it is possible to note diversity in viewpoints. However, the classification allows us to envision that political clubs and students from all points on the spectrum have well-demarcated ways of acting and often disagree about the strategies and actions undertaken by both the same and rival political sides.

One of the book's merits derives from its analytical approach, which seeks to see the *'outside in'* and *'inside out'* dynamics in student political activism in order to trace the channels in which activism flows inside and outside campus. As the authors pointed out: 'we emphasize the importance of school institutions in shaping the experiences and perspectives of matriculants, and we examine the role that outside groups play in attempting to guide the content and direction of campus politics' (8). This dynamic reveals, as the book's findings point out, how politically engaged students access diverse resources (material, symbolic, human) and are influenced by the organisations they participate in or relate to.

The book is organised into seven chapters that range from an introduction to the research conducted, a general discussion of Generation Z's political positioning and mobilisation, and chapters that focus on more detailed analysis of the political sides considered. In the final chapters, it presents interesting discussions on the issue of free speech on campus and future perspectives of the issue.

Some conclusions and debates can be highlighted. First of all, the importance of political clubs as incubators of activism. In both political



spectrums, the decision to join a group of students with a similar objective and political vision is an important step for students, who then find channels for action. Clubs, however, have a trajectory that largely shapes the way these students act politically. Moreover, such clubs may receive support (resources and training) from external political organisations, something that marks many differences between progressives and conservatives.

Progressive activism tends to receive fewer resources from outside organisations and is more rooted on campus (say, it seems to be more a ‘grassroot’ type of activism). Conservative activism, on the other hand, seems to have a large flow of financial resources from think tanks and the Republican Party, business owners and other groups. It is also noteworthy that such channels of support offer promising political career prospects for conservative student leaders who become members of these groups in the future (something little seen in progressive activism).

In addition, progressive activism tends to focus on campus politics, such as calling for the strengthening of institutional policies and spaces to combat discrimination and support marginalised groups (such as Black, Latinx, and LGBTQIA+ groups), promoting inclusion and equality, among other agendas. Frequently, they act together with the university staff in centres and initiatives created for such purposes, even though they often establish conflicting or tense relations with the universities’ formal leaders (e.g., directors). On the other hand, conservative activism tends to focus on campus culture, claiming more ideological and political space for right-wing students who, in their view, suffer from a university environment with leftist hegemony and are repressed in expressing their views. Thus, left-wing activism in general finds an outlet in a university environment that tends to be more progressive. However, this progressive environment also provides the inputs for the strategy of conservative student groups, who position themselves as ideologically underrepresented to justify their actions and bring the agendas of the right-wing and extreme right-wing political organisations outside campus to the academic space. In this sense, they mobilise a radical interpretation of the right to free speech to promote points of view that generate constant tensions with left-wing activism.

Finally, I would like to emphasise again the magnificent work of the researchers in shedding light on the performance and political identity of student activists (aspects that I could not deal with in detail in this review). Such findings and reflections about politics on campus provide us with

important insights not only to understand life on campus but also to understand the political dynamics of the country or region where they are located.

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Julia Molinari (2022), *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 224 pp., ISBN: 978-1-3502-4392-7

In 2020 and 2021, I had a unique opportunity to teach academic writing to first- and second-year bachelor's students at a higher education institution located in a country whose educational culture was quite different from what I'd been used to in my country of origin. While, at the time, I found this an intriguing and positive challenge, looking back on my experience now makes me realise the enormous tension that was going on: How to get students excited about academic writing and make them understand what it is for when the professor next door is telling them that 'the use of *I* is not academic'? How to help them develop their own academic voice when the thing they are terrified of the most is getting caught of unintentional plagiarism?

Although I did come up with some solutions to these problems, I was definitely lacking something: concrete pedagogical tools, support and the reasons why that professor next door perhaps thought the use of *I* wasn't academic. Julia Molinari's *What Makes Writing Academic: Rethinking Theory for Practice* is what I would've needed at the time. Unfortunately, it didn't exist before summer 2022. In fact, nothing quite like it did.

Academic writing is understandably a topic about which a great deal has been written and for a variety of audiences. There are guidebooks for students and researchers on how to craft beautiful essays, theses, research articles or books. Some of them have become widely read classics, such as William Strunk's (and later also E. B. White's) (1918) *Elements of Style*, William Zinsser's (1976) *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Non-fiction*, or Steven Pinker's (2014) *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. There are books tackling the frustrating



process of writing, such as Paul Silvia's (2007) *How to Write a Lot* or Helen Sword's (2017) *Air & Light & Time & Space*. And then there's an abundant scholarly literature exploring academic writing and publishing practices of different groups.

All this literature surely has its value and audience. I've definitely benefited from it as an academic writer and as a teacher of academic writing. However, none of that literature has really been able to explain or ask – though it might've not even intended to – crucial questions, such as: What is academic writing exactly? Why do we write the way we do? Why can't it be academic *drawing* instead? (It can!) Molinari not only asks these questions but also provides answers to them. And does so with style.

The book begins with a compelling 'Letter to the reader', followed by five chapters and finally a 'Signing off'. Complemented by a Foreword by Chrissie Boughey as well as an Afterword by Suresh Canagarajah, the 224-page book forms an engagingly written whole, where each part has its own distinct and important purpose. In short, the book is about how we *could* write academic texts, or not even necessarily *write*, as Molinari skilfully argues. The theoretical foundation of the book is critical realism, which might surely sound scary to some (like it did to me at first), but the chosen framework serves as a perfect lens to examine something as complex as academic writing, a practice extending to all corners of higher education and beyond.

While the book most likely first draws the attention of those studying academic writing, the audience of the book ought to be much wider than that, and it does offer valuable content for a variety of audiences: Those interested in the historical developments of academic writing practices can focus on Chapter 2, whereas those more interested in the philosophical questions of academic writing can navigate to Chapter 4. Again, if you're already familiar with Molinari's work and want to simply find ideas for academic writing assignments, you might find Chapter 5's practical examples highly useful.

In my view, everyone teaching or advising others on academic writing should read this book. However, to move towards more socially just writing practices, that would hardly be enough, as academic writing instructors can't always affect what's going on outside of academic writing classes. Unfortunately, many of those who *should* read the book probably never will – the ones who think academic writing is about learning a set of rules,

the ones who think we can't write differently because 'it's too risky', the ones who think using I is 'not academic', or the ones who've been frowning upon my use of contracted forms in this review. For this reason, the main question I ask myself after finishing the book is: how to spread the message of the book as far and wide as possible? What can I do differently the next time I teach academic writing in an institution whose views on academic writing might differ from mine?

To summarise, the book is an ode to the power of academic writing, treating it as an agent of change instead of as 'a straitjacket, a pigeonhole, a skill, a generic practice, or a subservient "handmaiden to the disciplines"' (166). It is about giving a voice to those students and scholars who are wondering how to share knowledge in a way that is not currently mainstream. Most importantly, it is an incredibly empowering book. It gave me, and hopefully all its future readers, the reasons, tools, arguments, counterarguments and ways forward to transform academic writing practices towards being more socially just. I'd sincerely like to thank Julia Molinari for writing it.

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