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Individual Book Review:

Broke: The racial consequences of underfunding public universities.

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The concept of “postsecondary racial neoliberalism” explored in *Broke: The Racial Consequences of Underfunding Public Universities* by Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) is an attempt to describe the impact of a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends class. Their case study of University of California Riverside (UCR) and University of California Merced (UCM) discusses how past and current policies are creating structural inequities that are reinforced through circular reasoning and is used as the basis for “five interlinked recommendations that will work against postsecondary racial neoliberalism: challenge diversity logics, abolish the SAT, combat organizational hierarchies, encourage collaborative public systems, and reinvest in public higher education” (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021, p. 194).

Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) systematically address the subject matter surrounding each of their five recommendations. They provide thoroughly researched and supported claims with both historical and current trend examples. This allows for triangulation of their qualitative data and reinforces their conclusions. Hamilton’s background as a professor of sociology at UCM and Nielsen’s role as a postdoctoral scholar at UCM gives them a vested interest in discovering the “truth” and make them uniquely qualified to conduct this case study.

The student demographics featured in this book are similar to those featured in Turner’s (2020) *Suddenly Diverse*, only now at an undergraduate level. The students of both UCR and UCM are relying on their education for upward mobility, and they will face the traditional barriers that comes with this socio-economic status. These neoliberal barriers are further compounded by the obstacles that Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) establish in their introduction and first section (chapters 1 through 3) that “new universities” are facing today. The neoliberal lens in higher education, typically used in reference to privatization and austerity principles, is critical to Hamilton and Nielsen’s study as it provides the basis for analyzing the structural and societal inequities that have persisted, even after *Brown v. Board of Education* (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). More specifically, it allows Hamilton and Nielsen to

explore how the defunding of public higher education has impacted research institutions serving marginalized students and examine the strategies those institutions have used to adapt.

According to Hamilton and Nielsen (2021), the “cultural logics” espoused by UCR and UCM reflect the growing belief that austerity is essential for survival, even if the facts or zeitgeist does not necessarily align with that belief. As Hamilton and Nielsen explain, there is a monumental shift in administrative beliefs when transitioning from the “golden era” to the “austerity era.” This means that UCR shifted from the days of Ray Orbach, Chancellor of the University of California, Riverside from 1992-2002, and the availability of University of California (UC) system funding to a belief that UCR must be self-reliant and not rely on substantive external funding from the UC system. UCM did not exist during the ‘golden era’ and as such has only known austerity principles. By shifting towards a competitive private market mindset, it could be argued that not only was UCM left behind, but they were also not given the same chance to grow as the other UC branches. This is a problem Hamilton and Nielsen suggest could be alleviated by more investment in public higher education at the state and national level.

To operate under these austerity tenets, Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) show that UCR and UCM, like many other schools, had to enact a policy of tolerable sub-optimization. Hamilton and Nielsen connect the experiences of UCR and UCM to the community college system throughout the United States to show the dangerous effects of continuing to cut costs when non-vital services have already been cut. While the intent may have been to help stabilize the university (or college), there is no question that gamification in this way has negatively affected the student experience (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021). Austerity is not an exclusive problem to higher education as the longitudinal study conducted by Turner (2020) shows how austerity impacted K-12 education in a similar fashion.

Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) seek to indict austerity principles by revealing that private market concepts are a major contributor to the disparate funding at UCR and UCM. Both UCR and UCM essentially followed the tenets that Hamilton and Nielsen describe as “grow big, cut costs, be market-smart, and think (inter)nationally” (p. 101). There were some small successes for UCR and UCM, but most decisions made under these principles adversely affected students, particularly underrepresented racially marginalized students (URS). Austerity has a similar effect on other institutions, such as those in the state college system in Florida where the community college system has seen a tuition freeze for over ten years now. The Leroy Collins Institute (2016) found that the average appropriations per FTE significantly lagged institutions in other states, which only exacerbates the problem.

The concepts explored by Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) are not new. “To get big,” (p. 101) as they describe it, schools have long pored over enrollment statistics and most, if not all, have some form of a Dean of Enrollment Management guiding institutional policies. The other tenets often receive similar attention from upper administration, who many times have a buffer of distance, availability, and/or access from students. This allows for decisions to be made with no immediate repercussions for those making them. Students notice this absence, even when the absence is to help secure funding to better serve students (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021). What makes this case study interesting is the detailed

examination of these two universities provides a large data pool that could be used to support systematic change in higher education.

Overall, Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) have made a compelling argument for change in higher education. That said, their conclusions do leave some questions. While politics are mentioned, there is no clear solution for how to address the population who may oppose the validity of identity politics of state and federal legislative branches. Turner's (2020) study in *Suddenly Diverse* found that color-blind management, which is a racial neoliberal policy, is a result of economic, political, and sociocultural influences and societal structures that disproportionately favor wealthier white populations. Turner posits those in power seek to hide behind color-blind principles. While their suggestion to combat diversity logics by strengthening equity-oriented infrastructure and communities seems to be obtainable at the university level, it would more than likely face fierce opposition if attempted to be enacted on a large scale, particularly in states other than California.

Hamilton and Nielsen's (2021) claim that "we need to combat the racialized organizational hierarchies that penalize new universities and other schools serving racially marginalized students" is also problematic because opposition will argue against wealth redistribution and because universities will be hesitant to give up on the U.S. News & World Report Rankings or their Association of American Universities (AAU) status for fear of being isolated by their choices (p. 197). It will take more than expanding the University Innovation Alliance (UIA) and their related research into college graduate diversity to address this issue. It will take great political capital for state legislators to agree and tie funding to new metrics rather than the traditional model.

In fairness, Hamilton and Nielsen (2021) do seek to address these, and other, concerns in their conclusion. They provide sound advice that is backed by robust data and testimonies. Combining the results of the studies by Hamilton and Nielsen with Turner (2020) could enable practitioners and researchers to raise awareness and identify new avenues to possibly address the inequities both explore. For example, this could lead to improvements in distance education, which Bambara et al. (2009) claim is particularly attractive to the underrepresented racially marginalized students studied by Hamilton and Nielsen and Turner, because work or family issues conflict with traditional face-to-face courses. Greenstein (2019) states that there is a real danger that the privileged institutions Hamilton and Nielsen point out will simply outpace underfunded institutions in implementing distance learning innovations. This would translate into increased recruitment and retention of online students that may have otherwise attended a "new university." Without oversight, distance learning could become a new tenet of austerity or tolerable sub-optimization as no physical classrooms are necessarily required. Class sizes could drastically increase, which Beattie and Thiele (2016) have shown can negatively impact first generation, Black, and Latino students through lack of engagement with their instructors. It is important to be forward looking for situations like this and Hamilton and Nielsen's research provides a foundation to create positive change in the future.

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