

O'Connell, D. J., & Peters, S. J. (2021). *In the Struggle: Scholars and the Fight Against Industrial Agribusiness in California*. New Village Press. 368 pp.

Review by Frank A. Fear



**P**ick up a copy of the book and turn immediately to the back cover. Reading it will tell you what to expect in *In the Struggle* and why the volume is important. It

documents the stories of eight politically engaged scholars and their opposition to industrial-scale agribusiness in California. Their previously censored and suppressed research, together with personal accounts of intimidation and subterfuge, is introduced in the public arena for the first time.

Strong words are *censored, suppressed, intimidated, and subterfuge*. Not since the publication of Jim Hightower's *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* (1978) has the land-grant system and industrial agriculture been confronted with a book like this. For those unfamiliar with Hightower's contribution, he authored an example-filled indictment of specific forms of university-based agricultural research with the title illustrating the volume's theme. University scientists re-engineered tomatoes so that crops could be picked mechanically without the prospect of being squashed.

*In the Struggle*, like *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, reveals that America's higher education system is not without cause for reproach. Institutions make choices, and sometimes those choices fail to serve the public good. *In the Struggle* tells that story by chronicling the work of courageous and persistent colleagues who fought the system. They disdained unacceptable circumstances, proclaimed alternatives worth fighting for, and then pushed against the power structure to serve the public good. This book goes well beyond the typical academic offering of *speaking truth to power* from a distance. *In the Struggle* is about *challenging power* through face-to-face confrontations.

The book is not only about what was done. It is also very much about the perspicacious people who did it. Walter Goldschmidt, Paul Taylor, and Dean MacCannell are top-tier academics who used well-developed research skills to serve the public good. Ernesto Galarza and Don Villarejo, scholar-activists both, are consummate academic-community boundary-crossers. Isao Fujimoto, with his wisdom-filled tutorials, reminds me of the best professors that I have known. Trudy Wischemann fought persistently for racial and economic justice and against mechanisms of oppression. Janaki Jagannath is a stellar example of new generational leaders required to sustain this work.

O'Connell and Peters write expressively about each of the eight figures, including how they got started in their work, the turning points they experienced, their ups and downs, and the emotions felt as they persevered in a landscape full of risk. To a person, they faced constant and significant pushback from parties that wanted them and their work "to go away." Professional stakes were especially high for those who labored in higher education. Colleges of agriculture and land-grant schools, in general, are tied tightly to industrial agriculture. To work at counter-purposes means biting the hand that feeds you—employers that hire your students, companies that fund your research, philanthropists who support your work, and university executives who "have your back" during challenging times.

That said, it is important to refrain from categorizing *In the Struggle* as *only* about politically engaged scholars who focus their work on California-based industrial agriculture. Colleagues working on other issues and in other locations will immediately relate to the accounts of these scholars' work. Kinship is a by-product of a common quest: "research combined with

community organizing and pedagogies aimed at empowerment, [which] threaten power structures” (p. 301).

That broader view of *In the Struggle* reminds me of the vital contribution made by Robert Staughton Lynd (1939) in his landmark book, *Knowledge for What?* Lynd’s question is thought-provoking when applied to any field, including engagement. Why engage? When engage? How engage? Engage with whom? All questions point in a common direction, asking, “*What is our work really about?*”

An answer was articulated clearly at the dawn of the Engagement Movement over three decades ago by Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation. Boyer (1994) called for creating The New American College. “Our colleges and universities are not collectively caught up in some urgent national endeavor” (para. 1), Boyer wrote. Boyer’s proclamation was part of his overarching vision for higher education at the institutional and systems level. He also sought to elevate what many saw as “academic activities,” including teaching and outreach, to forms of scholarship equivalent to research. Engagement as scholarship was an inviting, if not alluring, prospect (Boyer, 1990).

With decades separating today from what Boyer wrote—long enough to make a fair assessment—it is clear there has been limited progress toward what Boyer had hoped would become a reality. Among other things, “The New American College” never emerged as a national model, although inarguably, more engagement work is under way in higher education today than before. Meanwhile, Boyer’s expansive view of scholarship has been adopted unevenly. Indeed, in *The Quantified Scholar*, Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra (2022) argues that today’s metrics do just the opposite of what Boyer had proposed.

Why did this happen? One reason is that a potent counterforce subverted progress toward achieving valued ends. Neoliberalism is that force. Neoliberalism privileges market forces and public policies that serve individual and private interests (Harvey, 2007). Catering to the appeal of personal gain, neoliberalism is a patron of what is best for the individual as it debases efforts to advance the commonwealth. In neoliberalism, society is an exchange system of producers and consumers, of sellers and

buyers. Lester K. Spence (2011, as cited in James, 2014) summarized it this way: “[Neoliberalism] simultaneously shape[s] individual desires and behaviors and institutional practices according to market principles, while simultaneously CREATING the market through those individual and institutional desires and behaviors” (para. 7).

Now, after a half-century in place, neoliberalism has a firm grip on people and institutions—including higher education. William Deresiewicz (2015) chronicled the evolution in his provocatively titled essay, “The Neoliberal Arts: How College Sold its Soul to the Market,” which portrays an arena where students are customers; college’s primary purpose is to train for the workplace; and schools, faculty, and fields are evaluated using ROI (return on investment) as a metric.

The higher education story also includes neoliberalism’s impact on engagement. Today, much engagement scholarship has the look and feel of scholarship conducted in other fields. These traits make the work easier to evaluate using standardized measures; they also contribute to ends that higher education values, including the inflow of grant funding and the outflow of articles appearing in high-impact publications. Both outcomes improve institutional positioning in a competitive market system.

Neoliberalism not only influenced higher education and engagement’s evolution, but it did so by proceeding in a stealth-like manner, making it difficult to detect until its progression was significant and undeniable. Quoting Ernesto Galarza, O’Connell and Peters write, “There is a deceptiveness about social systems that beguiles those who view them, because of fondness, interest, or [other reasons]” (p. 112). That deceptiveness presents

only the front end of a culture. . . . It is like viewing a kaleidoscope clamped firmly in a vice so it will not turn even slightly and scatter the charmingly frozen image. There is a certain peace of mind in peering at such images, as there is in gazing at seemingly immovable social institutions.(p. 112)

Neoliberalism’s impact on higher education and its influence on engagement make politically engaged scholarship far from “just another” form of scholarship and one

among many engagement motifs. It is the preeminent scholarly approach to confront neoliberalism and its excesses. But therein lies the rub. We cannot expect higher education as an institution and system to put itself in the crosshairs by embracing politically engaged scholarship. Isao Fujimoto—one of the politically engaged scholars featured in the study—interprets it this way: For the university “to be accountable to the larger public rather than serve groups selected by nature of their manipulative advantages and concentrating power and money . . . the land-grant university itself [represents] a structure to be investigated, challenged, and transformed” (p. 216).

Those three words—*investigate*, *challenge*, and *transform*—scream for attention. Fujimoto contends that it is insufficient for scholars and higher education to focus only on the world *out there*—that is, to investigate, challenge, and help *others* transform themselves and their organizations, institutions, and professions. Academics have always been good at that. Fujimoto declares that *higher education* also must be investigated, challenged, and transformed—and one way to achieve that is through the exercise of politically engaged scholarship.

That is more easily said than done. And this difficulty explains (at least in part) why several scholars featured in *In the Struggle* began their careers in the academy but then left to advance their work elsewhere. Others operated consistently in nonacademic settings. The book coauthors’ positioning reflects this dichotomy—Scott J. Peters in the academy and Daniel J. O’Connell outside it.

As a lifelong academic, my primary interest is seeing more politically engaged scholars populate the academy—seeing their work affirmed for what it is and valued for what it accomplishes. I believe that both ends are possible, not necessarily by forging new trails, but by observing how others have already accomplished those outcomes. Here are three examples.

I was reminded recently of the work of student colleagues from my graduate school days, namely, Tom Lyson (master’s level) and Bob Bullard (doctoral level). Both went on to distinguished academic careers as politically engaged scholars, achieving national prominence and influence along the way. Lyson (2004) coined the term *civic agriculture*, and Bob Bullard (2005) launched the environmental justice movement. Lyson

and Bullard did exactly what Boyer had hoped: They focused attention on “urgent national endeavors.”

Clyde W. Barrow, a politically engaged scholar in local economic development, moved his work forward using tactics he refers to as “organizing small guerrilla bands” of like-minded colleagues (2018). Not convinced that other approaches will lead to much success, Barrow asserted that his preferred method “for the foreseeable future . . . may be all that is possible—but at least it is possible” (pp. 85–86). That said, Barrow found that this work requires political cover from administrators who are willing to “take hits” from influential stakeholders and unsupportive faculty members. Although blessed with that type of administrative support during his career, Barrow also found it uneven and episodic. He learned along the way the importance of developing survival skills to advance his politically engaged work and survive in what can be a hostile academic environment.

Another colleague, John Duley, was a consummate practitioner in that regard. Duley never sought or accepted a tenure-stream faculty position, preferring to occupy a series of shorter term and ad hoc faculty appointments. Over a career of 80-plus years that continued well into his 90s, Duley led numerous social justice initiatives and spearheaded various academic efforts, first in experiential education and, later, in service-learning, where he is credited with being a driving force of the national service-learning movement (Nurse, 2020; Palmer, 2021).

Duley sought and achieved *institutional space*, calling it “working from the (institutional) margins,” satisfied to be (what he called) *in* but not *of* higher education (2014). Duley passed away in 2021 at the age of 100 years and, when I interviewed him a year earlier, he talked about how he positioned his work institutionally (Fear, 2020), first in the church (Duley was an ordained minister) and later in higher education. He positioned the institution as a platform for change, and not as a sponsor of change. It was Duley’s way of responding to the politics associated with his work.

We are blessed to experience colleagues like Lyson, Bullard, Barrow, and Duley, as we are with O’Connell, Peters, and the eight protagonists featured in *In the Struggle*. My wish is to experience and celebrate more

colleagues like them, as well as to read and applaud more offerings like *In the Struggle*. Politically engaged scholars, and books that chronicle their work, show us what higher education needs to be in the Age of Neoliberalism—an answer to that all-important and enduring question, *Knowledge for What?*



### **About the Reviewer**

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