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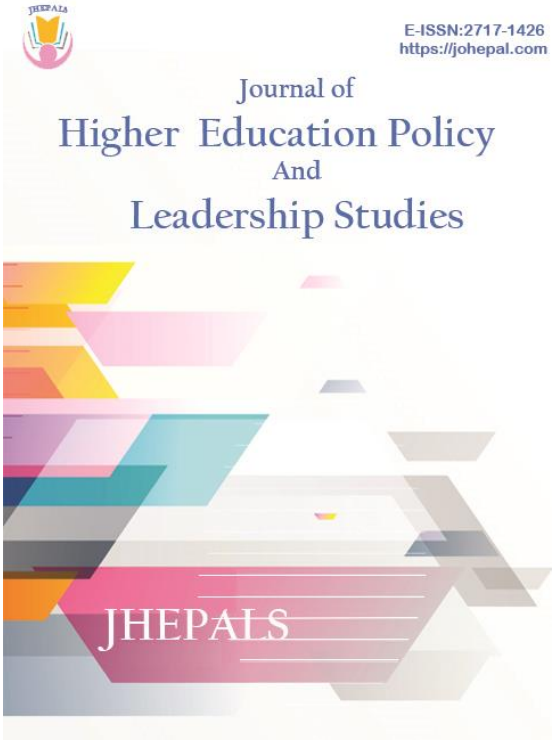

Book Review: **U.S. Power in International Higher Education**

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Book Review

U.S. Power in International Higher Education

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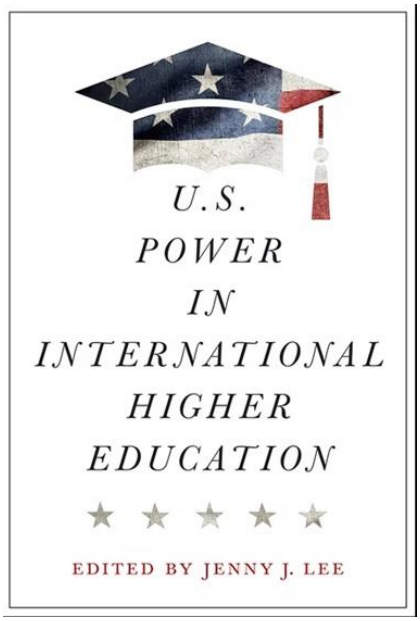

Hillary Vance *

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A timely and necessary publication that has now become even more prescient in its interrogations of power in international higher education, Jenny J. Lee's edited book "US Power in International Higher Education" would be of interest to both researchers and practitioners in the field. The edited book explores the inherent geopolitical power of US higher education and offers unique contributions to our understanding of its use and effects. Importantly, this work has real world implications regarding the advancement of the responsible practice of international higher education and partnerships across borders for the benefit of students and institutions. The book touches on many areas of concern to

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researchers and practitioners in the field, in particular internationalization policies, international students, and international education partnerships. The authors in turn go beyond the theoretical in their discussions of power, as national interests and geopolitical power have real macro, meso, and micro level impacts on international higher education programs and initiatives.

There have been other writings on soft power and international higher education, particularly in historical geopolitics, but in this collection the authors take us beyond previous studies and into the future. Instead, Lee and the other authors ask us to look at the current and future state of the field and how geopolitical forces are in real time impacting higher education, and to abandon assumptions of inherent neutrality to interrogate the real-world impacts of power dynamics.

In the opening chapter, Lee introduces us to the idea that international higher education is, in and of itself, a form of geopolitical power. At the time of this book's publication, the most impactful forces in the US higher education landscape had been a resurgence of American nationalism, and increased isolationism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and US competition with China. However, this does not mean that the book's explorations are not fully relevant beyond the pandemic and the Trump presidency. Indeed, geopolitical power assertion through higher education is something we are witnessing now in real time with Western suspensions on Russian academic collaborations in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Part one of the book is focused on geopolitics and higher education regulation. In chapter two, Trilokekar brings in the historical perspective of how "soft power," as envisioned by Nye (2005), has been a feature of higher education for generations, yet its applications have shifted over time due to political changes both globally and nationally. Hazelkorn's chapter addresses the controversial system of global university rankings and what rankings can tell us about the geopolitics of the U.S. higher education system. In it, she contends that the U.S., too assured of its own continued dominance, is beginning to fall behind in an increasingly global higher education landscape. Blanco, similarly, dives into questions surrounding the use of U.S. higher education practices as models and global standards for higher education. Quality assurance is a huge focus of international higher education, particularly in the Global South, and the use of the U.S. as a benchmark for international accreditation standards has huge implications for the development of systems around the world and their recognition, and acceptance, by hegemonic states.

Part two of the book is focused on higher education research, both national and global. Haupt and Lee introduce the idea of scientific nationalism and globalism when discussing the current tensions in academic collaborations between the U.S. and China, something that the academic community in the U.S. is extremely concerned about given proposed legislation intended to scrutinize these collaborations. Such legislation, and related legal cases against individual researchers, has had a demonstrated chilling effect on U.S.-China academic relationships. Cantwell takes the discussion to graduate student and postdoc academic mobility. While the inflow of international graduate students to the U.S. has allowed the country to enjoy a strong scientific and research advantage for decades, increased xenophobia and the limiting of certain visa types as a political tool in the U.S. under the Trump administration provides real proof of the effects of geopolitics on graduate education, and academic research, in the U.S.

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Part three of the book is concerned with university internationalization strategies. Mwangi, Chen, and Chinkondenji begin this section with the exploration of how the internationalization plans of U.S. universities are framed as geopolitical tools for the advancement of individual institution's goals, more so than in pursuit of international cooperation at a higher level. LaFleur's chapter then delves into the life cycle of higher education transnational partnerships, and the imbalance that can often come from these types of institutional partnerships when checks and balances are not responsibly put in place. LaFleur argues that short term entrepreneurial mindsets among U.S. institutions leads to a loss of focus on the sustainability and balance of truly successful transnational partnerships.

Part four of the book is centered on university students. Yao takes a dive into the commodification of student mobility as a tool of what she terms U.S. "academic imperialism." The marketization of U.S. higher education to students abroad in the face of decreasing U.S. government subsidies is a frequent discussion topic among higher education observers and will be of great interest to researchers of higher education finance and marketing. Glass' chapter on global competence in U.S. universities and how it is framed in terms of economic competitiveness and, more broadly, national security, shows the multi sided motivations for internationalization of U.S. higher education from a national standpoint. Stein brings the discussion then to the internationalization of U.S. higher education curriculum, a main aspect of practitioners' internationalization at home efforts. The chapter argues that in their pursuit of internationalization, many U.S. institutions instead end up reinforcing hegemonic beliefs and fail to interrogate global power dynamics.

Finally, in part five, consisting of a closing chapter by Lee and Castiello-Gutierrez, drives home the purpose of this edited book and explores the large 'what ifs' raised by the book as a whole. Where do we go from here, they ask? Hopefully, we commit ourselves more fully to the critical thinking required to truly begin to internationalize U.S. higher education partnerships, curriculums, and goals. This means a deeper exploration and acknowledgment of power relations, and an abandonment of old assumptions on where the U.S. sits in the global higher education landscape. Their recommendations, however, are not only relevant for U.S. based researchers and practitioners, but for anyone engaged in the internationalization of higher education and concerned about the entanglement of geopolitical power and university missions.

The rise of China, renewed geopolitical tensions with Russia, populist and isolationist tendencies in the U.S., COVID-19 and the subsequent shifting mobilities and downward enrollment trends – all need to be considered by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the field as not just threats to their work but realities that require planning and advocacy as well as some real soul searching. Lee's book implores us to develop an increased awareness of how geopolitical power in international higher education filters down from national strategy and university missions to program agreements and contracts, all the way to curriculum and student admissions. This appreciation and awareness of power is critical to developing a full and comprehensive understanding of higher education's impacts. As scholars and practitioners, it is imperative that we appreciate these forces as well as their effects and disruptions on our programs, students, and partnerships. And beyond the initial recognition of these forces, researchers and practitioners alike need to

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take responsibility for their roles in perpetuating power relations and apply critical eyes to their work, something Lee's book continually reminds us. This could not be clearer than right now in this very moment, when some U.S. politicians have called for the expulsion of Russian university students, European institutions have suspended academic collaborations with Russia, and African university students in Ukraine find themselves caught in the middle of a war. The use of higher education as a tool in the service of geopolitical power, much like imperialism, is not a relic of the Cold War, it is a reality that continues in the here and now.

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