At the start of this review it is important to note that this is not an academic book in the true sense of the term, but rather a somewhat incoherent collection of ramblings from militant ‘scholar-activists’ (as they like to style themselves). Less charitable readers may wish to describe them as professional middle-class intellectual agitators.

The term ‘scholar-activist’ is an interesting one, and one which rather smacks of self-indulgence and selfishness on the part of the authors. This term, as well as the book’s opening, does lead me to reflect on the fact that perhaps the authors should be diverting the majority of their time into learning and teaching and research instead of effectively acting as full-time agitators and part-time academics. I wonder what their students would make of their, apparent, priorities. I fully support academics being involved in political activities - I am a trade union representative myself - but such activities must surely be carried out in addition to someone’s paid work, whereas some of those writing in his book appear to think they are paid to protest. Demonstrations and sit-ins may appear ‘sexy’, but they often turn violent with innocent people getting caught up in the middle. This certainly appeared to be the case with the demonstrations at the University of Birmingham earlier in the year.

‘The Imperial University’ seeks to examine and ruthlessly critique the concept of the ‘Imperial University’, which the editors argue is the correct description for the US academy as US higher education is used to defend and further America’s neo-liberal and militaristic policies. The seventeen contributors examine various aspects relating to the concept of ‘The Imperial University’ in fourteen chapters on issues ranging from ‘Militarizing Education’ to ‘Decolonizing Chicano Studies’, and from ‘Faculty Governance’ to ‘Black Feminist Pedagogy’.

The volume seeks to demonstrate how the authors believe scholarly dissent has been repressed in America, a phenomenon which they argue increased markedly after the atrocities of 9/11 and has led to an increase in criticism of academics who are perceived to be ‘anti-America’. They cite examples such as moves by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and other neoconservative groups who have called for a greater attention on, and scrutiny of, academics who challenge the concept of America’s dominance in the world. Any attempt to curtail academic freedom, whether actual or merely conceived, must be taken seriously and I fully understand that American academics are extra-sensitive to this due to the way in which their predecessors were treated under McCarthyism. However, I feel at times the writers are themselves guilty of intolerance to those who share differing views to their own, for example, in the introduction both ‘Neo-Nazis’ and ‘anti-abortion activists’ are dismissed in the same sentence, clearly emphasising this intolerance and a failure to accept that anti-abortion activists often have genuine and heartfelt beliefs for taking the position they do. To dismiss the two groups in the same sentence shows a shocking degree of ignorance.
Through all the angry rhetoric and poorly reasoned arguments, there are some issues of genuine concern which manage to shine through. Chapter two shows a worrying link between the US military and higher education, where there is relentless targeting of ethnic minority students as potential military and secret service recruits. On the face of it the increased diversification of these services is laudable, but the chapter’s author (Roberto Gonzalez) argues well that this can go too far and become coercive. He argues that society could be better served if such aggressive recruitment tactics were used by peaceful professions, such as education and medicine, whilst Victor Bascara’s chapter entitled ‘New Empire, Same Old University?’ gives an interesting and well written account of the linkages and diversities in the histories of three overseas universities all founded in countries which were, at the time of the foundation of the universities, in America’s ‘possession.’

Whilst many of the issues examined in this publication are distinctly American, there are some which will resonate with British readers. Laura Pulido, in a chapter on ‘Faculty Governance at the University of Southern California’, discusses academic rankings, changing tenure standards and writes, in tones which will be familiar to all involved in the Research Excellence Framework (REF2014), of ‘...older faculty who would not, by the new standards, be considered academically competitive.’ The increasingly target driven culture in higher education is an issue which is felt by academics on both sides of the Atlantic.

Whilst this publication is certainly thought-provoking, it is not one which I will be rushing to read again. Some interesting and helpful arguments are advanced, but to find them a reader will have to search through a large amount of overly aggressive and, at times rather nasty, ranting.