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Higher Education and the Politics of Disruption

Abstract: At its best education is dangerous because it offers young people and other actors the promise of racial and economic justice, a future in which democracy becomes inclusive and a dream in which all lives matter. In a healthy society universities should be subversive; they should go against the grain, and give voice to the voiceless, the unmentionable and the whispers of truth that haunt the apostles of unchecked power and wealth. Pedagogy should be disruptive and unsettling and push hard against the common sense vocabularies of neoliberalism and its regime of affective management.

Keywords: higher education, politics, progress, students, public good, public mission, public sphere

We now live at a time in which institutions that were meant to limit human suffering and misfortune and protect the public from the excesses of the market have been either weakened or abolished.¹ The consequences can be seen clearly in the ongoing and ruthless assault on the social state, workers, unions, higher education, students, poor people of color and any vestige of the social contract. Free-market policies, values and practices – with their emphasis on the privatization of public wealth, the elimination of social protections and the deregulation

¹ This theme is taken up powerfully by a number of theorists. See C.W. Mills: *The Sociological Imagination*. New York 2000; R. Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man*. New York 1974; Z. Bauman: *In Search of Politics*. Stanford 1999; and H.A. Giroux: *Public Spaces, Private Lives*. Lanham 2001.

lation of economic activity – now shape practically every commanding political and economic institution in the United States.

Public spheres that once offered at least the glimmer of progressive ideas, enlightened social policies, noncommodified values, and critical dialogue and exchange have been increasingly commercialized – or replaced by private spaces and corporate settings whose ultimate fidelity is to increasing profit margins. For example, higher education is defined more and more as simply another core element of corporate power and culture, viewed mostly as a waste of taxpayers' money, and denied its value as a democratic public sphere and guardian of public values. What has become clear is that the attack on the social state, workers and unions is now being matched by a full-fledged assault on higher education. Such attacks are not happening just in the United States but in many other parts of the globe where casino capitalism is waging a savage battle to eliminate all of those public spheres that might offer a glimmer of opposition to and protection from market-driven policies, institutions, ideology and values.

We live at a time when it is more crucial than ever to believe that the university is both a public trust and social good. At best, it is a critical institution infused with the promise of cultivating intellectual insight, the imagination, inquisitiveness, risk-taking, social responsibility and the struggle for justice. In addition, higher education should be at the “heart of intense public discourse, passionate learning, and vocal citizen involvement in the issues of the times.”² Underlying this vision of the university are some serious questions about its relationship to the larger society. For instance, how might the university's responsibility be understood with respect to safeguarding the interests of young people at a time of violence and war, the rise of a rampant anti-intellectualism, a devastating gap in income and wealth, the rise of the surveillance state, and the threat of ecological and nuclear devastation? What might it mean to define the university as a pedagogical space that disrupts, disturbs, inspires and energizes young people to be individual and social agents rather than as an institution that redefines itself in terms of market values and reacts mostly to market fluctuations? It is in the spirit of such considerations that I first want to address those larger economic, social and cultural interests produced largely by the growing inequalities in wealth, income and power that threaten the notion of higher education as a democratic public good.

² Junct Rebellion: *How The American University was Killed, in Five Easy Steps*. “The Homeless Adjunct”, August 12, 2012. [Online:] <https://junctrebellion.wordpress.com/2012/08/12/how-the-american-university-was-killed-in-five-easy-steps> [3.03.2015].

As higher education's role as a center of critical thought and civic engagement is devalued, society is being transformed into a "spectacular space of consumption" and financial looting. One consequence is an ongoing flight from mutual obligations and social responsibilities and a loss of faith in politics itself. This loss of faith in the power of politics, public dialogue and dissent is not unrelated to the diminished belief in higher education as central to producing critically engaged, civically literate and socially responsible citizens. At stake here are not only the meaning and purpose of higher education, but also civil society, politics and the fate of democracy itself. And yet, under the banner of right-wing reforms, the only questions being asked about knowledge production, the purpose of education, the nature of politics and the future are determined largely by market forces. In this discourse, education is reduced to training, public values are transformed into crude instrumental values, and public and higher education are reduced to operating systems, posing problems that can only be solved through quantification, effective programming, high-stakes testing and an obsession with numerical data. This is a form of neoliberal or corporatized education wedded to market-driven values that lacks any vestige of a democratic vision and makes clear "the contradiction between democratic values and market fundamentalism."³

Market Mantras

The mantras of the new market fundamentalism are now well known: Progress can only be measured through incessant economic growth and "is the only way to handle the challenges and possibly resolve all and any problems."⁴ Consuming and discarding are the ultimate engines and measure of happiness. Inequality in wealth and power is the product of individual achievement and benefits everyone. A survival-of-the-fittest ethos drives competition and produces the most qualified individuals to inhabit the commanding economic, political and cultural institutions through which a society governs. "Individual interests are the only reality that matters [and] those interests are purely monetary."⁵ Society is a fabrication and the only viable mode

³ L. Guinier, A. Deavere Smith: *Rethinking Power, Rethinking Theatre: A Conversation between Lani Guinier and Anna Deavere Smith*. "Theater" 2002, Winter, pp. 34–35.

⁴ Z. Bauman: *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit us All?* London 2013, p. 31.

⁵ D. Massey: *Vocabularies of the Economy*. "Soundings" 2013. [Online:] <https://lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/pdfs/Vocabularies-of-the-economy.pdf> [3.03.2015].

of governance is market-driven. Privatization, deregulation and commodification are the preconditions for freedom and for regulating the social order. Public and higher education is a private right and should serve individual and corporate interests rather than the public good.

Missing from neoliberal market societies are those public spheres – from public and higher education to the mainstream media and digital screen culture – where people can develop what might be called the civic imagination. Tied largely to instrumental ideologies and measurable paradigms, many institutions of higher education are now committed almost exclusively to economic goals, such as preparing students for the workforce – all done as part of an appeal to rationality, one that eschews matters of inequality, power, public values and the ethical grammars of suffering.⁶ Many universities have not only strayed from their democratic mission, but also they seem immune to the plight of students who face a harsh new world of high unemployment, the prospect of downward mobility and debilitating debt.

A record number of adjuncts are now on food stamps and receive some form of public assistance.

The question of what kind of education is needed for students to be informed and active citizens in a world that increasingly ignores their needs, if not their future, is rarely asked.⁷ In the absence of a democratic vision of schooling, it is not surprising that some colleges and universities are increasingly opening their classrooms to corporate interests, standardizing the curriculum, instituting top-down governing structures that mimic corporate culture and generating courses that promote entrepreneurial values unfettered by social concerns or ethical consequences.

Central to this view of higher education in the United States is a market-driven paradigm that seeks to eliminate tenure, turn the humanities into a job preparation service and transform most faculty members into an army of temporary subaltern labor. For instance, in the United States out of 1.5 million faculty members, 1 million are “adjuncts who are earning, on average, \$20K a year gross, with no benefits or health-care, and no unemployment insurance when they are out of work.”⁸ The

⁶ F.B. Wilderson III: *Introduction: Unspeakable Ethics*. In: Idem: *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. London 2012, p. 2.

⁷ S. Aronowitz: *Against Schooling: Education and Social Class*. In: Idem: *Against Schooling. For the Education That Matters*. Boulder, CO 2008, p. xii.

⁸ *Junct Rebellion: How The American University was Killed, in Five Easy Steps...*

indentured service status of such faculty is put on full display as some colleges have resorted to “using temporary service agencies to do their formal hiring.”⁹ “A record number of adjuncts are now on food stamps and receive some form of public assistance. Given how little they are paid this should not come as a surprise, though that does not make it any less shameful.”¹⁰ As Noam Chomsky has argued, this reduction of faculty to the status of subaltern labor is “part of a corporate business model designed to reduce labor costs and to increase labor servility.”¹¹

While it has been clearly recognized that the ideal of shared governance between faculty and administrators has broken down, what has not been analyzed is how the Walmart model of power and labor relations – in both the university and the larger society – is connected to the massive inequality in wealth and income that now corrupts every aspect of US politics and society. No democracy can survive the kind of inequality in which “the 400 richest people [...] have as much wealth as 154 million Americans combined, that’s 50 percent of the entire country [while] the top economic 1 percent of the U.S. population now has a record 40 percent of all wealth and more wealth than 90 percent of the population combined.”¹² On a global scale, anti-poverty charity Oxfam reports that it expects “the wealthiest 1% to own more than 50% of the world’s wealth by 2016.”¹³

Higher Education as a Public Good

Higher education will not fare well as a public good under such massive inequities in wealth and power. Reduced to consumers, students

⁹ S. Jaschik: *Making Adjuncts Temps – Literally*. “Inside Higher Ed”, August 9, 2010. [Online:] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/08/09/adjuncts> [3.03.2015].

¹⁰ S. Patton: *The Ph.D. Now Comes With Food Stamps*. “The Chronicle of Higher Education”, May 6, 2012. [Online:] <https://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to-131795/> [3.03.2015].

¹¹ N. Chomsky: *How America’s Great University System is Being Destroyed*. “AlterNet”, February 28, 2015. [Online:] <https://www.alternet.org/corporate-accountability-and-workplace/chomsky-how-americas-great-university-system-getting> [3.03.2015].

¹² D. DeGraw: *Meet the Global Financial Elites Controlling \$46 Trillion in Wealth*. “AlterNet”, August 11, 2011. [Online:] [https://www.alternet.org/story/151999/meet_the_global_financial_elites_controlling_\\$46_trillion_in_wealth](https://www.alternet.org/story/151999/meet_the_global_financial_elites_controlling_$46_trillion_in_wealth) [3.03.2015].

¹³ R. Peston: *Richest 1% to own more than rest of world, Oxfam says*. “BBC News”, January 19, 2015. [Online:] <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-30875633> [3.03.2015].

will fare no better and will be treated as either clients or as restless children in need of high-energy entertainment. Within such iniquitous conditions of power, access and wealth, education will not foster a sense of organized responsibility fundamental to a democracy. Instead, it encourages a sense of organized irresponsibility – a practice that underlies the economic Darwinism and civic corruption at the heart of a debased politics.

| **What happens to education when it is treated like a corporation?**

What has become clear is that universities are losing their sense of public mission, just as leadership in higher education is being stripped of any viable democratic vision. In this new Gilded Age of money, greed, selfishness and profit, academic subjects gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market. What happens to education when it is treated like a corporation? What are we to make of the integrity of a university when it accepts a monetary gift from powerful corporate interests or rich patrons demanding as part of the agreement the power to specify what is to be taught in a course or how a curriculum should be shaped? Some corporations and universities now believe that course content is not an academic decision but a market consideration. In addition, many disciplines are now valued almost exclusively with how closely they align with what might be euphemistically called a business culture.

One egregious example of this neoliberal approach to higher education is on full display in Florida where Gov. Rick Scott's task force on education attempted to implement a policy that would lower tuition for degrees friendly to corporate interests in order to "steer students toward majors that are in demand in the job market."¹⁴ Scott's utterly instrumental and anti-intellectual message seems to have been: "Give us engineers, scientists, health care specialists and technology experts. Do not worry so much about historians, philosophers, anthropologists and English majors."¹⁵

In Wisconsin, Gov. Scott Walker drew up a proposal to remove the public service philosophy focus from the university's mission statement, which states that the university's purpose is to solve problems and improve people's lives. He also scratched out the phrase "the search for truth" and substituted both ideas with a vocabulary stating that the

¹⁴ L. Alvarez: *Florida May Reduce Tuition for Select Majors*. "The New York Times", December 9, 2012. [Online:] <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/10/education/florida-may-reduce-tuition-for-select-majors.html> [3.03.2015].

¹⁵ Ibidem.

university's goal is to meet "the state's work force needs." But Walker's disdain for higher education as a public good can be more readily understood given his hatred of unions, particularly those organized for educators. How else to explain his egregious comparison of union protesters to the brutal terrorists that make up ISIS? Walker represents a new breed of politician waging war on higher education, the public good and any viable notion of the welfare state. Like many of his politically extremist colleagues, he epitomizes an era in which there is near zero tolerance for the postulates of economic and racial justice and "infinite tolerance for the crimes of bankers and government embezzlers which affect the lives of millions."¹⁶

Students find themselves in a world of massive inequality in which heightened expectations have been replaced by dashed hopes and a world of onerous debt.

The brand of free-market fundamentalism represented by the likes of Scott and Walker undermines both civic education and public values, but also confuses education with training. Moreover, this market fundamentalism wages a war on what might be called the radical imagination. For instance, thousands of students in the United States are now saddled with debts that will profoundly impact their lives and their future, likely forcing them away from public service jobs because the salary is too low to pay off their educational loans. Students find themselves in a world of massive inequality in which heightened expectations have been replaced by dashed hopes and a world of onerous debt.¹⁷ For those who merely struggle to survive the debt crisis represents a massive assault on the imagination by leaving little or no room to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. David Graeber is right in insisting that "student loans are destroying the imagination of youth." As he puts it, "If there's a way of a society committing mass suicide, what better way than to take all the youngest, most energetic, creative, joyous people in your society and saddle them with, \$50,000 of debt so they have to be slaves?"¹⁸

¹⁶ A. Badiou: *The Rebirth of History*. Trans. G. Elliott. London 2012, pp. 18–19.

¹⁷ See S. Fraser: *The Politics of Debt in America: From Debtor's Prison to Debtor Nation*. "TomDispatch.com", January 29, 2013. [Online:] <https://tomdispatch.com/steve-fraser-another-day-older-and-deeper-in-debt/> [3.03.2015]. On the history of debt, see D. Graeber: *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York 2012.

¹⁸ A. Reed Kelly: *David Graeber: 'There Has Been a War on the Human Imagination'*. "Truthdig", August 12, 2013. [Online:] https://www.truthdig.com/avbooth/item/david_graeber_there_has_been_a_war_on_the_human_imagination_20130812/ [3.03.2015].

In a market-driven system in which economic and political decisions are removed from social costs, the flight of critical thought and social responsibility is further accentuated by what Zygmunt Bauman calls “ethical tranquillization.”¹⁹ One result is a form of depoliticization that works its way through the social order, removing social relations from the configurations of power that shape them, and substituting “emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to political problems.”²⁰ Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult to provide conditions within institutions of schooling that expand the capacities of students to think critically and teach them how to take risks, act in a socially responsible way and connect private issues with larger public considerations. The current attack on higher education, teachers’ unions, women’s reproductive rights, voting rights, low-income people and youth of color suggests that we are witnessing the breakdown of democracy, the infantilization of thought, the disappearance of critical intellectuals and what C. Wright Mills once called “the collapse of those public spheres which offer a sense of critical agency and social imagination.”²¹ This is a particularly important insight in a society where the free circulation of ideas is not only being replaced by mass mediated ideas but where critical ideas, if not dissent itself, are increasingly viewed or dismissed as either too liberal, radical or even seditious.

As educators we need to recognize that the most important forms of domination are not only economic, but also intellectual and pedagogical, and lie on the side of belief and persuasion. This suggests that educators bear an enormous responsibility for challenging this form of domination. Nor should the relevance of education being at the heart of politics be lost on those of us concerned about inviting the public back into higher education and rethinking the purpose and meaning of higher education itself. Democracy places civic demands upon its citizens, and such demands point to the necessity of an education that is broad-based, critical and supportive of meaningful civic values, participation in self-governance and democratic leadership.

¹⁹ G. McCarthy: *The Social Edge Interview: Zygmunt Bauman*. “The Social Edge” 2007, February. [Online:] <https://webzine.thesocialedge.com/interviews/the-social-edge-interview-sociologist-and-author-zygmunt-bauman/> [6.01.2013].

²⁰ W. Brown: *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton, NJ 2006, p. 16.

²¹ C.W. Mills: *The Politics of Truth. Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*. Ed. J.H. Summers. New York 2008, p. 200.

“Pedagogy of Disruption”

Reclaiming higher education as a democratic public sphere begins with the crucial recognition that education is not solely about job training and the production of ethically challenged entrepreneurial subjects, but also about matters of civic engagement, critical thinking, civic literacy and the capacity for democratic agency, action and change. It is also inextricably connected to the related issues of power, inclusion and social responsibility.²² If young people are to develop a deep respect for others, a keen sense of social responsibility, as well as an informed notion of civic engagement, education must be viewed as a cultural, political and moral force that provides the knowledge, values and social relations to make such democratic practices possible and connect human agency to the idea of social responsibility and the politics of possibility.

Academics have a duty to enter into the public sphere unafraid to take positions and generate controversy, functioning as moral witnesses.

In this instance, teaching needs to be rigorous, self-reflective and committed not to the dead zone of instrumental rationality but to the practice of freedom, to a critical sensibility capable of advancing the parameters of knowledge, addressing crucial social issues and connecting private troubles and public issues. What we do not need are modes of governance that reduce faculty to clerks, or forms of pedagogy rooted in modes of infantilization, conformity and repression. Instead of models of governance that vacate egalitarian and democratic principles, we need pedagogical practices that create leaders, people capable of envisioning a more just and democratic world and willing to struggle for it.

In opposition to such a debased view of educational engagement, educators need a pedagogy of disruption. That is, a cosmopolitan, imaginative, public affirming pedagogy that demands a critical and engaged interaction with the world we live in mediated by a responsibility for challenging structures of domination and for alleviating human suffering. This is a pedagogy that addresses the needs of multiple publics. As an ethical and political practice, a public pedagogy of wakefulness rejects modes of education removed from political or social concerns, divorced from history and matters of injury and injustice. This is

²² On this issue, see the brilliant essay: S. Searls Giroux: *Foreword: On the Civic Function of Intellectuals Today*. In: *Education as Civic Engagement: Toward a More Democratic Society*. Eds. G.A. Olson, L. Worsham. Boulder 2012, pp. ix-xvii.

a pedagogy that includes “lifting complex ideas into the public space,” recognizing human injury inside and outside of the academia and using theory as a form of criticism to change things.²³ This is a pedagogy in which academics are neither afraid of controversy nor the willingness to make connections between private issues and broader elements of society’s problems that are otherwise hidden.

It is crucial that educators insist that intellectuals have a responsibility to unsettle power, trouble consensus and challenge common sense. This is a view of education that should disturb, inspire and energize. The very notion of being an engaged public intellectual is neither foreign to nor a violation of what it means to be an academic scholar, but central to its very definition. Academics have a duty to enter into the public sphere unafraid to take positions and generate controversy, functioning as moral witnesses, raising political awareness, making connections to those elements of power and politics often hidden from public view, and reminding “the audience of the moral questions that may be hidden in the clamor and din of the public debate.”²⁴

Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy is being waged.

The view of higher education as a democratic public sphere committed to producing young people capable and willing to expand and deepen their sense of themselves, to think about the “world” critically, “to imagine something other than their own well-being”, to serve the public good, take risks and struggle for a substantive democracy has been in a state of acute crisis for the last 35 years.²⁵ When faculty assume, in this context, their civic responsibility to educate students to think critically, act with conviction and connect what they learn in classrooms to important social issues in the larger society, they are hounded by those who demand “measurable student outcomes,” as if deep learning breaks down into such discrete and quantifiable units. Or, even worse, they are derided by politicians such as Rudy Giuliani who believes that any attempt to hold established power accountable amounts to not loving one’s country, and, of course, not loving Rudy and his friends. What do the diverse faculties of higher education amount to if they do not teach the practice of freedom, especially at a time when training is substituted for education?

²³ E. Said: *Out of Place: A Memoir*. New York 2000, p. 7.

²⁴ E. Said: *On Defiance and Taking Positions: Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 504.

²⁵ See, especially, Ch. Newfield: *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class*. Cambridge, MA 2008.

In a society that remains troublingly resistant to or incapable of questioning itself, one that celebrates the consumer over the citizen, and all too willingly endorses the narrow values and interests of corporate power, the importance of the university as a place of critical learning, dialogue and social justice advocacy becomes all the more imperative. As part of a broader discourse of excellence, equity and democracy, we must defend the distinctive role that faculty play in this ongoing pedagogical project of shaping the critical rationalities through which agency is defined and civic literacy and culture produced, along with support for the institutional conditions and relations of power that make them possible.

Educating to Sustain Democracy

Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy is being waged. It is the site where the promise of a better future emerges out of those visions and pedagogical practices that combine hope, agency, politics and moral responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse. Academics have a distinct and unique obligation, if not political and ethical responsibility, to make learning relevant to the imperatives of a discipline, scholarly method or research specialization. But more importantly, academics as engaged scholars can further the activation of knowledge, passion, values and hope in the service of forms of agency that are crucial to sustaining a democracy in which higher education plays an important civic, critical and pedagogical role.

Educators must go on the offensive in defending higher education as a public good.

C. Wright Mills was right in contending that academics in their roles as public intellectuals ought to transform personal troubles and concerns into social issues and problems open to critique, debate and reason.²⁶ Matters of translation, connecting private troubles with larger systemic considerations were crucial in helping “the individual become a self-educating [person], who only then would be reasonable and free.”²⁷ Yet, Mills also believed, rightly, that criticism is not the only responsibility of public intellectuals. As Archon Fung points out,

²⁶ C.W. Mills: *On Politics*. In: Idem: *The Sociological Imagination*. With a new Afterword by T. Gitlin. Oxford–New York 2000, p. 181.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 186.

they can also join with other citizens to address social problems, aid popular movements, develop broad-based unions and “organizations in their efforts to advance justice,” and sometimes work with governments “to construct a world that is more just and democratic.”²⁸

We live at a time in which public values, social provisions and public goods are under attack, just as power is being concentrated more and more in the hands of the upper 1%. Higher education is under siege along with faculty, students and unions, and as such democracy itself is on life support. But history is open and there is a new spirit of resistance emerging in both the United States and around the globe. Educators must be at the forefront of such resistance because education is central to overcoming both the crisis of ethics, public memory and agency itself. Let me conclude by suggesting a few things that educators might do as part of this struggle to reclaim higher education in the service of democracy rather than in the service of the agents of privatization, deregulation, commodification and the concentration of power in the hands of the few.

First, educators must go on the offensive in defending higher education as a public good. This means fighting back against a conservative-led campaign “to end higher education’s democratizing influence on the nation.”²⁹ This means defending higher education as a public good in order to reclaim its egalitarian and democratic impulses. Higher education should be harnessed neither to the demands of the warfare state nor the instrumental needs of corporations. Clearly, in any democratic society, education should be viewed as a right, not an entitlement. This suggests that higher education in public colleges should be free. According to government figures, tuition at public colleges in 2012 was about \$62.6 billion. As “ThinkProgress” points out:

That’s less than what the government already spends to subsidize the cost of college through grants, tax breaks, and work-study funds, which comes to about \$69 billion. It spends another \$107.4 billion on student loans. That means that with the money it already spends to make college affordable, the government could instead subsidize public college tuition, thereby making it free for all students. This would not just mean anyone could attend a higher

²⁸ A. Fung: *The Constructive Responsibility of Intellectuals*. “Boston Review”, September 9, 2011. [Online:] <https://www.bostonreview.net/archon-fung-noam-chomsky-responsibility-of-intellectuals> [3.03.2015].

²⁹ G.R. Nichol: *Public Universities at Risk Abandoning Their Mission*. “The Chronicle of Higher Education”, October 31, 2008. [Online:] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/public-universities-at-risk-abandoning-their-mission/> [3.03.2015].

education institution without worrying about cost, but it could incentivize private ones to reduce their costs in order to compete with the free option.³⁰

This suggests a reordering of state and federal priorities so as to make that happen. In addition, much needed revenue can be raised by putting into play even a limited number of reform policies in which, for instance, the rich and corporations would be forced to pay a fair share of their taxes, a tax would be placed on trade transactions and tax loopholes for the wealthy would be eliminated. It is well known that the low tax rate given to corporations is a major scandal. For instance, Bank of America paid no taxes in 2010 “and got \$1.9 billion tax refund from the IRS, even though it made \$4.4 billion in profits.”³¹

While there is a growing public concern over rising tuition rates along with the crushing debt students are incurring, there is little public outrage from academics over the money squandered on the military budget, and billions of dollars wasted on military projects like the F-35 stealth fighter jet (average cost for three variants is \$178 million), which over the lifetime of the project (55 years) is expected to cost \$1.5 trillion – and by the way, they cannot fly in the rain. Democracy needs a Marshall Plan in which funding is sufficient to make all levels of education free, while also providing enough social support to eliminate poverty, hunger, inadequate health care and the destruction of the environment. There is nothing utopian about the demand to redirect money away from the military, powerful corporations and the upper 1%.

Second, addressing these tasks demands a sustained critique of the transformation of a market economy into a market society along with a clear analysis of the damage it has caused both at home and abroad. Power, particularly the power of the largest corporations, has become more unaccountable and “the subtlety of illegitimate power makes it hard to identify.”³² Disposability has become the new measure of

³⁰ B. Covert: *How The Government Could Make Public College Free For All Students*. “ThinkProgress”, January 12, 2014. [Online:] <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/how-the-government-could-make-public-college-free-for-all-students-c959314a4525/> [3.03.2015].

³¹ M. Snyder: *You Won't Believe Who Is Getting Away with Paying Zero Taxes while the Middle Class Gets Hammered*. “InfoWars.com”, February 19, 2013. [Online:] <https://www.infowars.com/abolish-the-income-tax-you-wont-believe-who-is-getting-away-with-paying-zero-taxes-while-the-middle-class-gets-hammered/> [3.03.2015].

³² S. George: *State of Corporations: The Rise of Illegitimate Power and the Threat to Democracy*. Transnational Institute and Occupy, 6 February 2014. PDF

a savage form of casino capitalism in which the only value that matters is exchange value. Compassion, social responsibility and justice are relegated to the dustbin of an older modernity that now is viewed as either quaint or a grim reminder of a socialist past.

The US public does not need more prisons; it needs more schools, free health services and a living wage for all workers.

As the welfare state is defunded and dismantled, the state turns away from enacting social provisions and becomes a punishing and surveillance state more concerned about personal security than social welfare. In this script, fear replaces compassion, and a survival-of-the-fittest ethic replaces any sense of shared responsibility for others. This suggests, as Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander and others have argued, that there is a need for academics and young people to become part of a broader social movement aimed at dismantling the repressive institutions that make up the punishing state. The most egregious example of which is the prison industrial complex, which drains billions of dollars in funds to put people in jail when such funds could be used to fund public and higher education. We live in a country in which the police have become militarized, armed with weapons from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. The US prison system locks up more people than any other country in the world, and the vast majority of them are people of color. Moreover, public schools are increasingly modeled after prisons and are implementing policies in which children are arrested for throwing peanuts at a school bus or violating a dress code. The punishing state is a dire threat to both public and higher education and democracy itself. The US public does not need more prisons; it needs more schools, free health services and a living wage for all workers.

Third, academics, artists, journalists and other young people need to connect the rise of what we might call the Walmarting of the labor force, in both the university and the larger society, to the massive inequality in wealth and income that now corrupts every aspect of US politics and society. For instance, the Koch brothers made \$3 million an hour on their dividends in 2012. Moreover, they “made enough money in one second to feed one homeless woman on food stamps for an entire year.”³³ And they, along with their billionaire friends, are corrupting

File. [Online:] https://www.tni.org/files/download/state_of_power-6feb14.pdf [3.03.2015].

³³ P. Buchheit: *4 Ways the Koch Brothers' Wealth Is Incomprehensible*. “Salon”, November 27, 2013. [Online:] https://www.salon.com/2013/11/27/4_ways_the_koch_brothers_wealth_is_incomprehensible_partner [3.03.2015].

politics by buying candidates, shaping legislation with an army of lobbyists and turning higher education into an outpost of corporate power.

The current state of inequality in higher education is most pronounced not simply in rising tuition and the growing exclusion of working and middle-class students, as serious as these issues are, but in the transformation of more than two-thirds of faculty positions into an army of exploited, overworked and powerless academic laborers. This shameful Walmarting of academic labor needs to be challenged and changed as soon as possible. Higher education will lose its critical focus and ability to teach students how to think critically and learn how to take risks as long as a large number of faculty are relegated to the status of part-time workers who are struggling just to make ends meet financially. Clearly, the call to take back higher education from the corporations and religious and political fundamentalists will not take place unless faculty are provided with full-time positions, tenure, benefits and the power to influence the meaning, purpose and operation of higher education. Faculty need to take back the university and reclaim modes of governance in which they have power while denouncing and dismantling the increasing corporatization of the university and the seizing of power by administrators and their staffs who now outnumber faculty on most campuses.

Fourth, academics need to fight for the rights of students to be given a formidable and critical education not dominated by corporate values, and to have a say in the shaping of their education and what it means to expand and deepen the practice of freedom and democracy. Young people have been left out of the discourse of democracy. They are the new disposables who lack jobs, a decent education, hope and any semblance of a future better than the one their parents inherited. They are a reminder of how finance capital has abandoned any viable vision of the future, including one that would support future generations. This is a mode of politics and capital that eats its own children and throws their fate to the vagaries of the market. If any society is in part judged by how it views and treats its children, US society by all accounts has truly failed in a colossal way. How else to explain the fact that over half of all public school children live in poverty and thousands of students will not have access to higher education because of rising tuition costs.

Fifth, there is more at stake here than making visible the vast inequities in educational and economic opportunities and the corruption of the political process; there is also the corrosion of democracy itself. Multinational corporations have abandoned the social contract and any vestige of supporting the social state. They plunder labor and perpetuate the mechanizations of social death whenever they have the chance to accumulate capital. This issue is not simply about restoring a bal-

ance between labor and capital; it is about recognizing a new form of serfdom that kills the spirit as much as it depoliticizes the mind. The new authoritarians do not ride around in tanks; they have their own private jets; they fund right-wing think tanks, and lobby for reactionary policies that privatize everything in sight while filling their bank accounts with massive profits. They are the embodiment of a culture of greed, cruelty and disposability. Democracy in the United States is on life support and as a recent Princeton University study noted, democracy has been hijacked by a free-floating class of ultra-rich and corporate powerbrokers and has been transformed into an oligarchy “where power is effectively wielded by a small number of individuals.”³⁴

Finally, while it is crucial to analyze those neoliberal ideologies, values and policies that are waging a war on higher education and other crucial public spheres, it is equally important to recognize that the production of particular kinds of neoliberal subjects and desires must be connected to a range of concrete problems including homelessness, poverty, crime, lack of adequate health care and the militarization of the entire society. Thinking about social and economic changes must be accompanied by direct action by unions, students, intellectuals, young people and social movements. Demonstrations must give way to political formations that have a comprehensive view of politics and are willing to create the long-term institutions and strategies necessary to seize power from the financial elite. Demonstrations such as the Walmart protests or for that matter the huge demonstrations taking place against government corruption in Brazil provide hope and put the spotlight on collective struggles but such demonstrations must imagine a different way of life, a different future and a mode of governance in which the obligations of democracy are both recognized and reclaimed.

The time has come to rethink the meaning of politics, take back power and to reclaim matters of justice, equality and freedom as part of the logic of democratic socialism. Americans do not need more provisions; they need to redistribute power and wealth into the hands of all Americans, not just a few at the top. Neoliberal capitalism is the death knell for any claim to democracy and must be stopped through an endless chain of disruptions that extend from the production of troubling knowledge and collective action to the creation of alternative organizations that offer the real promise of a radical democracy.

³⁴ T. McKay: *Princeton Concludes What Kind of Government America Really Has, and It's Not a Democracy*. “Popular Resistance”, April 16, 2014. [Online:] <https://www.policymic.com/articles/87719/princeton-concludes-what-kind-of-government-america-really-has-and-it-s-not-a-democracy> [3.03.2015].

Conclusion

The promise of educated citizens along with the enduring character of critical reflection and the search for economic, political and racial justice lives on in the demonstrations of workers, unions and young people all across the United States who are not just protesting police brutality, but also marching in order to have their voices heard as part of the promise of a radical democracy along with the arrangements that give it and them a meaningful and just life. At its best education is dangerous because it offers young people and other actors the promise of racial and economic justice, a future in which democracy becomes inclusive and a dream in which all lives matter. Universities should be subversive in a healthy society; they should push against the grain, and give voice to the voiceless, the unmentionable and the whispers of truth that haunt the apostles of unchecked power and wealth.

Pedagogy should be disruptive and unsettling and push hard against the common sense vocabularies of neoliberalism and its regime of affective management.³⁵ We live in an age of growing authoritarianism and the need to change both the collective consciousness of society and the everyday lived experiences that give it meaning has never been more urgent. This is the great challenge Americans face in the midst of a deepening crisis of history and agency. The educative nature of politics is waiting to be grasped, mobilized and transformed into a broad social movement of resistance and long-term organization. History is open, but not for long.

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³⁵ M. Fisher: *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester, UK 2009, p. 74.

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