

The New Brutalism in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: In spite of its broad-based, even global, recognition, higher education in the United States is currently being targeted by a diverse number of right-wing forces, which have hijacked political power and have waged a focused campaign to undermine the principles of academic freedom, sacrifice critical pedagogical practice in the name of economic growth, and dismantle the university as a bastion of autonomy, independent thought, and uncorrupted inquiry. The article argues that under the material and affective assaults of neoliberalism, higher education across the globe is experiencing an unprecedented attack on its role as a democratic public sphere. At stake in this struggle is a concerted attempt by right-wing extremists and corporate interests to strip the professoriate of any authority, render critical pedagogy as merely an instrumental task, eliminate tenure as a protection for teacher authority, define students as consumers, produce a form of indebted citizenship, and remove critical reason from any vestige of civic courage, engaged citizenship, and social responsibility. The article offers both a critique and some suggestions about how such an attack can be collectively resisted, especially by those of us working in the universities.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Neoliberalism, United States, Academic Freedom, Critical Pedagogy

Across the globe, a new historical conjuncture is emerging in which the attacks on higher education as a democratic institution and on dissident public voices in general—whether journalists, whistleblowers, or academics—are intensifying with sobering consequences. The attempts to punish prominent academics such as Ward Churchill and Steven Salaita and others are matched by an equally vicious assault on whistleblowers

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such as Chelsea Manning, Jeremy Hammond, Edward Snowden, as well as on journalists such as James Risen.² Under the aegis of the national surveillance-security-secrecy state, it becomes difficult to separate the war on whistleblowers and journalists from the war on higher education – the institutions responsible for safeguarding and sustaining critical theory and engaged citizenship.³

Marina Warner has rightly called these assaults on higher education, “the new brutality in academia” (Warner, 2014). It may be worse than she suggests. In fact, the right-wing defense of the neoliberal dismantling of the university as a site of critical inquiry in many countries is more brazen and arrogant than anything we have seen in the past and its presence is now felt in a diverse number of repressive regimes. For instance, the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism and its threat to higher education as a democratic public spheres was on full display recently when the multi-millionaire and Beijing-appointed leader of Hong Kong, Leung Chunying, told pro-democracy protesters that “allowing his successors to be chosen in open elections based on who won the greatest number of votes was unacceptable in part because it risked giving poorer residents a dominant voice in politics” (Bradsher and Buckley, 2014). Offering an unyielding defense for China’s authoritarian political system, he argued that any candidate that might succeed him “must be screened by a ‘broadly representative’ nominating committee, which would insulate Hong Kong’s next chief executive from popular pressure to create social provisions and allow the government to implement more business-friendly policies to address economic” issues (*ibid.*). This is not just an attack on political liberty but also an attack on dissent, critical education, and public institutions that might exercise a democratizing influence on the nation. In this case the autonomy of institutions such as higher education are threatened as much by corporate interests as by the repressive policies and practices of the state.

² For the war on academics see Giroux, 2007; 2014. For an analysis of the war on journalists, see Radack, 2012

³ There is nothing new about the squashing of dissent in the United States and the complicity of liberals in such acts of repression. While I have not focused on this history, it is well to remember that the suppression of dissent is not a recent phenomenon. The sordid attacks against Scott Nearing, Paul Sweezy, Paul Piccone, and dozens of leftists who were fired just before and after World War II, including the sixties, represents a glaring indictment of a history that is being repeated. As a number of intellectuals such as Robert Lynd, I.F. Stone and others have pointed out, it is hard to overlook the morally and politically poisonous role that liberals such as Schlesinger, Reuther, almost the entire group of “New York Intellectuals,” as well as most universities, unions and liberal organizations, played in suppressing dissent in a wide variety of fields.

The hidden notion of politics that fuels this market-driven ideology also informs a more Western-style form of neoliberalism in which the autonomy of democratizing institutions are under assault not only by the state but also by the ultra-rich, bankers, hedge fund managers, and the corporate elite. In this case, corporate sovereignty has replaced traditional state modes of governance and can be seen in attempts by powerful corporate elites to both undermine the common good and dismantle higher education's democratizing influence on American society. As the South African Nobel Prize winner in literature, JM Coetzee, points out, the new power elite "reconceive of themselves as managers of national economies" who want to turn universities into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy" (Coetzee, 2013). Viewed as a private investment rather than a public good, universities are now construed as spaces where students are valued as human capital, courses are determined by consumer demand, and governance is based on the Walmart model of labor relations. For Coetzee, this attack on higher education, which is not only ideological but also increasingly relies on the repressive, militaristic arm of the punishing state, is a response to the democratization and opening up of universities to a more multiracial, diverse, and empowered spectrum of working and middle-class students that reached a highpoint in the 1960s all across the globe. In the last forty years, the assault on the university as a center of critique and democratization has intensified, just as the reach of this assault has expanded to include intellectuals, campus protesters, an expanding number of minority students, and the critical formative cultures that provide the foundation for a substantive democracy.⁴

In the United States and England, in particular, the ideal of the university as vital public good no longer fits into a revamped discourse of progress, largely defined in terms of economic growth. Under the onslaught of a merciless and savage financialization of society that has spread since the 1970s, the concept of social progress has all but disappeared amid the ideological onslaught of a crude market-driven fundamentalism that promises instant gratification, consumption, and immediate financial gain. If dissident intellectuals were the subject of right wing attacks in the past, the range and extent of the attack on higher education has widened and become more insidious. As Ellen Schrecker (2010, 3) succinctly notes:

⁴ For an excellent analysis of the conservative reaction to the growing democratization of the university from the sixties on, see Newfield, 2008.

“Today the entire enterprise of higher education, not just its dissident professors, is under attack, both internally and externally. The financial challenges are obvious, as are the political ones. Less obvious, however, are the structural changes that have transformed the very nature of American higher education. In reacting to the economic insecurities of the past forty years, the nation’s colleges and universities have adopted corporate practices that degrade undergraduate instruction, marginalize faculty members, and threaten the very mission of the academy as an institution devoted to the common good.”

Memories of the university as a citadel of democratic learning have been replaced by a university eager to define itself largely in as an adjunct of corporate power. Civic freedom has been reduced to the notion of consumption, education has been reduced to a form of training, and agency has been narrowed to the consumer logic of choice legitimated by a narrow belief in defining one’s goals almost entirely around self-interests rather than shared responsibilities of democratic sociability. Education is increasingly reduced to a form of instrumental rationality that kills the imagination, and exorcises any attempt to connect pedagogy to the goal of educating students to be thoughtful, civically courageous, politically engaged, and complex critical thinkers.

Coetzee’s defense of education provides an important referent for those of us who believe that the university is nothing if it is not a public trust and social good; that is, a critical institution infused with the promise of cultivating intellectual insight, the civic imagination, inquisitiveness, risk-taking, social responsibility, and the struggle for justice. Rather than defining the mission of the university in terms that mimic markets based ideologies, modes of governance, and neoliberal policies, the questions that should be asked at this crucial time in American history concern how the mission of the university might be better understood with respect to both developing and safeguarding the interests of young people at a time of violence and war, the rise of a rampant anti-intellectualism, the emerging specter of authoritarianism, and the threat of nuclear and ecological devastation. What might it mean to define the university as a public good and democratic public sphere rather than as an institution that has aligned itself with market values and is more attentive to market fluctuations and investor interests than educating students to be critically engaged citizens? Or, as Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis (2013, 139) write: “how will we form the next generation of...intellectuals and politicians if young people will never have an opportunity to experience what a non-vulgar, non-pragmatic, non-instrumentalized university is

like?" Even worse, how can students become critically engaged agents if they constantly subjected to the effective spaces of neoliberalism which promote a immobilizing hedonism, suffocating narcissism, culture of glitter, the endless commodification of everything, and a tawdry privatization. Under neoliberalism's regime of affective and ideological management, youth are inducted into the cultures of Wall Street, silicon valley, and the idiocy of celebrity culture where all the young men and women wear what Richard Rodriguez (2014) calls "an astonishing vacancy." What role will higher education play in fighting against the disavowal of democratic and egalitarian impulses and the denegation of public values, goods, and the promises of a radical democracy?

With the advance of a savage form of casino capitalism and its dreamworlds of consumption, privatization, and deregulation, not only are democratic values and social protections at risk, but also the civic and formative cultures that make such values and protections intelligible and consequential to a sustainable democratic society. As public spheres, once enlivened by broad engagements with common concerns, are being transformed into "spectacular spaces of consumption" and financial looting, the flight from mutual obligations and social responsibilities strengthens and has resulted not only in a devaluing of public life and the common good, but also in a crisis of the radical imagination, especially in terms of rethinking the purpose, meaning, and value of politics itself (Kurlantzick, 2013). Moreover, not only have academic fields become financialized but so has time and space. Students now labor under time constraints marked by the speeding up of time to pay off debts, the choosing of spaces and spheres of labor that offer quick returns – all done in the name of an indentured form of citizenship predicated on consuming and going into debt. And the consequences far exceed the more volatile examples of the violence waged by police on student protesters.

Another index of such a crisis, as Mike Davis point out, is that we live in an era in which there is a super saturation of corruption, cruelty, and violence" that fails any longer to outrage or even interest" (cited in Fisher, 2009, 11). Moral outrage has been replaced by the shouting and screaming that is symptomatic of talk radio and television shows whose purpose is to replace critical dialogue with a cartoonish spectacle in which evidence and argument dissolve in opinions expressed in deafening volume. This type of celebrated illiteracy finds its counterpart in university commencement speeches often delivered by business icons such as Bill Gates, or more problematically, celebrities who confirm

the triumph of anti-intellectualism consumerism over thoughtfulness, social responsibility, and the ethical imagination. Rarely are students in such commencements exposed to writers, journalists, artists, and other cultural workers who believe in the public good, fight against injustices, and dare at the risk of their jobs, and sometimes their lives, to hold power accountable.

Needless to say, the crisis of higher education is about much more than a crisis of funding, an assault on dissent, the emergence of a deep-seated anti-intellectualism, or its service to the financial elite, it is also about a crisis of memory, agency, and politics. What Mike Davis is suggesting is that politics has been emptied out of its political, moral, and ethical registers – stripped down to a machine of social and political death for whom the cultivation of the imagination is a hindrance. Commerce is the heartbeat of social relations, and the only mode of governance that matters is one that mimics Wall Street.

We live in the age of a new brutality marked not simply by an indifference to multiple social problems, but also defined by a kind of mad delight in the spectacle and exercise of violence, permanent war, militarism, and cruelty. America is sullied by a brutality that is perfectly consistent with a new kind of barbaric power, one that puts millions of people in prison, subjects an entire generation to a form of indentured citizenship, and strips people of the material and symbolic resources they need to exercise their capacity to live with dignity and justice. Academics who speak out against corruption and injustice are often censored and sometimes lose their jobs, proving that dissent has become a dangerous activity. At the same time, the Obama administration criminalizes public servants who expose unethical behavior, the violation of civil liberties, and corruption. One egregious and symptomatic case reported by Morris Berman took place in 2011 when “environmental activist Tim DeChristopher was sentenced to two years in prison for his repeated declaration that environmental protection required civil, i.e., nonviolent disobedience” (Berman, 2012). As Berman points out, one wonders if the judge that sentenced DeChristopher to prison “would also have put Rosa Parks and Mahatma Gandhi in jail, had he been around their lifetimes” (ibid). If democratic political life is emptied out by the rise of the national security apparatus, the increasing criminalization of dissent, and the ongoing militarization of everyday life, it is equally devalued and threatened by modes of public pedagogy, circulating in Fox News, for example, that trade in lies, ignorance, and a full-fledged attack on reason and critical thought.

In this instance, the new barbarism produces and sanctions a civic illiteracy and retrograde consumer consciousness in which students are taught to mimic the economic success of alleged “brands” such as the reality TV star, Kim Kardashian. Her celebrity is promoted around a kind of idiocy, as exemplified in the publicity surrounding the publication of her new book, *Selfish*, the unique selling feature of which is that it contains 2,000 selfies. The challenge for higher education in this debacle goes beyond refusing to produce modes of agency that embrace this kind of deadly anti-intellectualism and rabid individualism, but to enable students to critically interrogate what stands for public engagement, and how this debased mode of being in the world gains prominence in the public sphere. More importantly, what obligation does a university have to teach students to judge the character of their society not by the lives of celebrities, new technologies, or the endless production of needless consumer goods, but by its intellect, reason, compassion for the poor, social investment in young people, and its willingness to provide economic support and social provisions for all, including those marginalized by race, class, gender, and sexual orientation? How we treat those considered vulnerable says much more about the state of a democratic society and the institutions that support it than how we treat the rich, celebrities, and those who either trivialize democracy or intentionally undermine it for their own benefit. There is no way to escape the relationship between education and power, pedagogy and social justice, knowledge and the production of the ethical and civic imagination. These neoliberal agendas have sought ways to mystify and undermine these connections.

As the corporatization of higher education intensifies, there is little talk in this view of higher education about the history and value of shared governance between faculty and administrators, nor of educating students as critical citizens rather than potential employees of Walmart. There are few attempts to affirm faculty as scholars and public intellectuals who have a measure of autonomy and power. Instead, faculty members are defined less as intellectuals than as technicians and grant writers or they are punished for raising their voices against various injustices. Students fare no better in this debased form of education and are treated as either clients, consumers, or as restless children in need of high-energy entertainment—as was made clear in the 2012 Penn State scandal and the ever increasing football scandals at major universities, where testosterone fuelled entertainment is given a higher priority than

substantive teaching and learning – to say nothing of student safety and protection.

Precious resources are now wasted by universities intent on building football stadiums, student dorms that mimic resort hotels, and other amenities that signal the Disneyfication of higher education for students and the Walmartification of labor relations for faculty. For instance, High Point University seeks to attract students with its first-run movie theater, ever present ice cream trucks, a steakhouse, outdoor hot tubs, and dorms with plasma-screen TVs” (Matlack, 2012). Such modes of education do not foster a sense of organized responsibility fundamental to a democracy. Instead, they encourage what might be called a sense of organized irresponsibility – a practice that underlies the economic Darwinism and civic corruption at the heart of a debased politics of consumption, finance, and privatization. When one combines the university as a Disneyfied entertainment center with labor practices that degrade and exploit faculty the result is what Terry Eagleton recently calls the “death of universities as centers of critique” (Eagleton, 2010).

Governance under higher education is being stripped of any viable democratic vision. In the United States, college presidents pride themselves on defining their role almost entirely in a vocabulary that mimics the language of Wall Street and hedge fund managers. With few exceptions, they are praised as fund raisers but rarely acknowledged for the quality of their ideas. Moreover, trustees have not only assumed more power in higher education, but are largely drawn from the ranks of business, and, yet as in the Steven Salaita case, are making judgments about faculty that they are unqualified to make.

For those of us who believe that education is more than an extension of the business world marked by a new brutality, it is crucial to address a number of issues that connect the university to the larger society while stressing the educative nature of politics as part of a broader effort to create a critical culture, supportive institutions, and a collective movement that supports the connection between critique and action and redefines agency in the service of the practice of freedom and justice. Let me mention just a few.

First, educators can address and make clear the relationship between the attack on the social state and the transformation of higher education into an adjunct of corporate power. The attack on higher education cannot be understood outside of the attack on the welfare state, social provisions, public servants, and democratic public spheres. Nor can it be understood outside of the production of the neoliberal subject, one who

is atomized, unable to connect private issues to larger public considerations, and is taught to believe in a form of radical individualism that enables a fast withdrawal from the public sphere and the claims of economic and social justice. As Stefan Collini has argued, under the regime of neoliberalism, the “social self” has been transformed into the “disembedded individual,” just as the notion of the university as a public good is now repudiated by the privatizing and atomistic values at the heart of a hyper-market driven society.⁵ Clearly, in any democratic society, education should be viewed as a right, not an entitlement. This suggests a reordering of state and federal priorities to make that happen. Much needed revenue can be raised by putting into play even a limited number of reform policies in which, for instance, the upper 10 percent and corporations would be forced to pay a fair share of their taxes; a tax could also 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, and this is only one egregious example, the 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” (Snyder, 2013).

In addition, academics can join with students, public schools teachers, unions, and others to bring attention to wasteful military spending that if eliminated could provide the funds for a free public higher education for every qualified young person in the country. Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies has done extensive research on military spending and the costs of war and states that as a result of the Iraqi war alone “American taxpayers will ultimately spend roughly \$2.2 trillion on the war, but because the U.S. government borrowed to finance the conflict, interest payments through the year 2053 means that the total bill could reach nearly \$4 trillion” (Armbruster, 2013; Watson Institute, 2013). While there is growing public concern over rising tuition rates along with the crushing debt students are incurring, there is little public outrage from academics over the billions of dollars wasted on a massive and wasteful military budget and arms industry. As Rabbi Michael Lerner of *Tikkun* has pointed out, 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.⁶ There

⁵ These two terms are taken from Collini, 2014, 1-2.

⁶ For *Tikkun*’s Marshall Plan, see http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/?page_id=114

is nothing utopian about the demand to redirect money away from the military, powerful corporations, and the upper 1 percent.

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” (George, 2014). The greatest threat posed by authoritarian politics is that it makes power invisible and hence defines itself in universal and commonsense terms, as if it is beyond critique and dissent. Moreover, disposability has become the new measure of 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. 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 resources could be used to fund public and higher education. As Ferguson makes painfully clear, the police have become militarized, armed with weapons from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan (Balko, 2013; Nelson, 2010). The United States prison system locks up more people than any other country in the world, and the vast majority of them are people of color (Alexander, 2010). 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 (Giroux, 2012). The punishing state is a dire threat to both public and higher education and democracy itself. The American public does not need more prisons; it needs more schools, accessible, low cost health services, and a living wage for all workers. This type of analysis suggests that progressives and others need a more comprehensive understanding of how politics and power are interrelated, of how different registers of oppression mutually inform each other and can be better understood in terms of their connections and deeply historical and social relations. This suggests that educators and other progressives need to develop a more comprehensive view of society and the mutually informing registers of politics, oppression, and political struggle. There is a noble and informing example of this type of analysis in the work of

theorists such as Stanley Aronowitz, Angela Davis, and the late Martin Luther King, Jr., who drew connections between militarism, racism and capitalism as part of is call not for reform but for a radical restructuring of American society.

Third, academics, artists, journalists and other young people need to connect the rise of subaltern, part-time labor – or what we might call the Walmart model of model of wealth and labor relations – in both the university and the larger society to the massive inequality in wealth and income that now corrupts every aspect of American 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” (DeGraw, 2011). Senator Bernie Sanders (2014) provides a startling statistical map of the massive inequality at work in the United States. In a speech to the U.S. Senate, he states:

“Today...the top 1% owns 38% of the financial wealth of America, 38%. And I wonder how many Americans know how much the bottom 60% own. They want people to think about it. Top 1% own 38% of the wealth. What do the bottom 60% own? The answer is all of 2.3%. Top 1% owns 38% of the financial wealth. The bottom 60% owns 2.3%. Madam President, there is one family in this country, the Walton family, the owners of Wal-Mart, who are now worth as a family \$148 billion. That is more wealth than the bottom 40% of American society. One family owns more wealth than the bottom 40% of American society...That’s distribution of wealth. That’s what we own. In terms of income, what we made last year, the latest information that we have in terms of distribution of income is that from 2009-2012, 95% of all new income earned in this country went to the top 1%. Have you all got that? 95% of all new income went to the top 1%, which tells us that when we talk about economic growth, which is 2%, 3%, 4%, whatever it is, that really doesn’t mean all that much because almost all of the new income generated in that growth has gone to the very, very, very wealthiest people in this country.”

Democracy in the United States is has been hijacked by a free-floating class of ultra-rich and corporate powerbrokers and transformed into an oligarchy “where power is effectively wielded by a small number

of individuals" (McKay, 2014). At least, this is the conclusion of a recent Princeton University study, and at the risk of being charged with hyperbole, the report may be much too moderate in its conclusions.

Fourth, academics need to fight for the rights of students to get a free education, 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. Many countries such as Germany, France, Denmark, Cuba, and Brazil post-secondary education is free because these countries view education not as a private right but as a public good. Yet, in some of the most advanced countries in the world such as the United States and Canada, young people, especially from low income groups are being systemically excluded from access to higher education and, in part, this is because they are left out of the social contract and the discourse of democracy. They are the new disposables who lack jobs, a decent education, hope, and any semblance of a life better than that of their parents. They are a reminder of how finance capital has abandoned any viable vision of a better future for young people. Youth have become a liability in the world of high finance, a world that refuses to view them as important social investments. And the consequences are terrifying. As Jennifer M. Silva points out in her brilliant book, *Coming Up Short*, coming of age for young people "is not just being delayed but fundamentally dismantled by drastic economic restructure, profound cultural transformations, and deepening social inequality" (Silva, 2013, 10) The futures of young people are being refigured or reimaged in ways that both punish and depoliticize them. Silva writes that many young people are turning away from politics, focusing instead on the purely personal and emotional vocabularies of self-help and emotional self-management. As she (*ibid*) puts it:

"...this emerging working-class adult self is characterized by low expectations of work, wariness toward romantic commitment, widespread distrust of social institutions, profound isolation from others, and an overriding focus on their emotions and psychic health.... [They] are working hard to remake dignity and meaning out of emotional self-management and willful psychic transformation."

Finally, though far from complete, there is a need to oppose the ongoing shift in power relations between faculty and the managerial class. Too many faculty are now removed from the governing structure

of higher education and as a result have been abandoned to the misery of impoverished wages, excessive classes, no health care, and few, if any, social benefits. As political scientist Benjamin Ginsburg points out, administrators and their staffs now outnumber full time faculty accounting for two-thirds of the increase in higher education costs in the past 20 years. This is shameful and is not merely an education issue but a deeply political matter, one that must address how neoliberal ideology and policy has imposed on higher education an anti-democratic governing structure.

We may live in the shadow of the authoritarian corporate state, but the future is still open. The time has come to develop a political language in which civic values and social responsibility—and the institutions, tactics, and long-term commitments that support them – become central to invigorating and fortifying a new era of civic engagement, a renewed sense of social agency, and an impassioned international social movement with the vision, organization, and set of strategies capable of challenging the neoliberal nightmare that now haunts the globe and empties out the meaning of politics and democracy.

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