

Tanya Domey: Hi, this is Tanya [Domey 00:00:03]. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research. Informing New Yorkers and the world.

Stephen Brier is a Professor of Urban Education and Founder of The Graduate Center's Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Program. He teaches courses in the history of public education and his research interests include race, class and ethnicity in US labor and public education history. He is co-author of *Austerity Blues, Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*, John Hopkins University Press, 2016, which explores the negative impact of neoliberal policies on public higher education since the 1980s. Welcome to The Thought Project, Professor Brier.

Stephen Brier: Delighted to be here.

Tanya Domey: You are a highly respected academic in the field of urban education, but in recent years, you yourself have been established as a really strong spokesperson and advocate on the issue of inadequate funding of public higher education. You helped lead a mayoral task force on the future of CUNY that issued a report this past spring, and just in the past few days, you were quoted about the New York State Excelsior Tuition-Free Assistance program in CUNY and SUNY schools as saying, "It's ridiculous how much Governor Cuomo is trying to take credit for something that has delivered so little, so far." Has the Governor of the State of New York misled New Yorkers and oversold this highly touted tuition free education?

Stephen Brier: I think he has absolutely done that, Tonya. I feel very strongly that he over promised what the Excelsior Scholarship program would deliver. As you know, there was some discussion of nearly a million students, something on the order of 940,000 students would be eligible ...

Tanya Domey: Correct, yes.

Stephen Brier: ... for this program once it was fully implemented. It started with a family income base of 100,000. It's gone, this year, up to 110,000 annual income, and it will soon, by 2019, go to 125,000. It's really, in fact, a program designed very much for the middle class of New York State, much less for the working class and the poor of New York City and other areas in New York state. I think he's overrepresented it, and what it can accomplish and what it will accomplish. The proof of that, in the first two years of the program, there are no more than about 20,000 students you've qualified, 64,000 qualified all together and only 20,000 statewide have actually received support. In CUNY, that number is even smaller than it is in SUNY, it's something on the order-

Tanya Domey: Right. SUNY's like ... CUNY's like a couple of thousand students?

Stephen Brier: Yeah, 3,300 in the senior colleges and less than a thousand ...

Tanya Domey: 820 students ...

Stephen Brier: ... in the community college.

Tanya Domey: ... in the [crosstalk 00:03:41]-

Stephen Brier: Think about that. We have 275,000 undergraduates at CUNY, and just a tad over 4,000, which by my calculation is about 1.5% qualify for this supposedly broad based free tuition program.

Tanya Domey: Right. Two thirds of the applicants were denied.

Stephen Brier: That's correct.

Tanya Domey: I was struck by the fact that you have to carry 15 hours load, which is more than full-time. 12 is essentially full-time. You have to carry 15 to qualify, and it doesn't even take into consideration that as you said, people who are working class or even poorer, they have to work to support themselves and they can't go to school full-time.

Stephen Brier: That's correct. It's designed on an old model of higher education, which is the model 18 to 20 year old, 22 year olds are the college students. The 18 year olds come out of college, their parents send them to college, they go full-time, which in this context is 15 credits a semester. They accumulate 30 credits a year and in four years they get 120 units of credit and they graduate in four years. That is so not our student population. Our student population is considerably older, and 60 to 70% of our students in CUNY proper, the whole 275,000 undergraduates, 60 to 70% of them come from families with less than \$30,000 in annual income.

Tanya Domey: Dollars income. Yeah.

Stephen Brier: This program is not at all designed for them, and I think the governor really ... it was a smoke and mirrors kind of program. I would say in the worst case, they knew how few people would actually be eligible and would apply, and would qualify for Excelsior. That's the worst case.

Tanya Domey: You think it was really calculated.

Stephen Brier: Or they were willfully ignorant about what was gonna happen. Either way, it's a damning indictment of the Cuomo administration for using it as, frankly, a political prop that he has put forward as part of his reelection campaign. Now he claims he's not gonna run for president. I'll believe that when I see it. I think he really has larger aspirations.

Tanya Domey: Think he's positioned himself. When you think about this, you actually point out, well they did this to great fanfare. This was after the 2016 presidential election where student loan debt became a huge issue. Today, approximately 1.48 trillion dollars in student loan debt in America, affecting 44 million people and student loan delinquency rates are escalating. He did this to great fanfare, he had a big press conference. He had Bernie Sanders at his side.

Stephen Brier: Exactly.

Tanya Domey: It looked like Andrew Cuomo was ... he was adroitly navigating this political issue, and in the end, it's really barely spit in a bucket.

Stephen Brier: I think that's a fair way to characterize it. What's interesting to me is to see the ads he's running on television as part of his reelection campaign. One of the key ads that he runs is with a disabled African American woman who, understandably, for whatever particular personal reasons was very positively affected by the Excelsior program, but that becomes a kind of cynical description that everybody who sees that ad takes away. "Oh, he's doing this for poor and minority population to get them into college." The reality is, it's having the exactly opposite effect. The program is very much geared where it's been successful at all, which is upstate New York, it's very much geared to middle class families. That's very constant with Cuomo's politics and program.

Tanya Domey: This is against, also, let's also make sure everybody understands, this followed two years of cuts, I mean, more than two years of cuts to CUNY and SUNY, and increases in tuition. This is really, and just this past fall, tuition was increased as well at CUNY.

Stephen Brier: Another \$200. That's correct.

Tanya Domey: Right. This really hits people, I think, really hard. It's there, it's aspirational, the bright, shiny object of this possibility, but when you read the details, it just really doesn't come through for people.

Stephen Brier: In a fundamental way, I think that's exactly the case. It delivers far less than it promises, and I think the one thing for people to be aware of is the tuition, and the fact that it's free or not, it's not the least important thing about what our students face at the City University, but it is in, as part of a long list of obstacles that our students have to get over. They have problems with food insecurity, they have problems paying their rent, they have problems with paying for transportation to get to CUNY to take their classes. Free tuition, under Excelsior, also is just a top up program. What I would say is most of our students, particularly our poor ones are eligible for tuition relief through the TAP and Pell Program. Many of them have almost already free tuition, and so, which is not so true at SUNY, but it certainly is at CUNY.

Tanya Domey: [crosstalk 00:09:25] CUNY. Yeah.

Stephen Brier: But CUNY doesn't ... There are other major issues that our students face about affordability and admission at CUNY that go far beyond what they have to pay in tuition, whether it's through TAP or Pell, or even if they manage to get a little bit of a top up in the Excelsior program, the few thousand who have, they still face a range of other insecurities about going to school.

Tanya Domey: In your role as the Co-Chair of the New York City Mayoral Taskforce on Affordability, Admissions and Graduate [inaudible 00:10:01] at the City University of New York this past year. You co-chaired this task force, it was established through a law, passed by the city council, and you and your colleagues issued a report in June, which was really about six months late after the report was done with 21 recommendations. Some of the things that you mentioned here, like free Metro Cards was one of the recommendations, but ultimately, one of the things you and your colleagues advise is that the city should provide free tuition. What happened? What happened?

Stephen Brier: Well, that's an interesting question. I mean, the city council passed a law at the end of 2016, in fact, and the task force was not put together, pulled together, and let me be clear, it wasn't just a mayoral taskforce, it was a mayoral city council and public advocates taskforce.

Tanya Domey: Okay, thank you.

Stephen Brier: Each of those political leaders or groups got to appoint members of the task force. The Mayor, I believe, had 10, the city council had 10, and the public advocate had five. I can't remember the exact [crosstalk 00:11:11].

Tanya Domey: Sure.

Stephen Brier: It might've been a little bit smaller.

Tanya Domey: There were several ...

Stephen Brier: There were several agencies that were involved. It was a city council law that was passed that mandated that this task force examine those three areas. Affordability, admissions, and graduation rates. When we pulled the task force together, I had just finished Austerity Blues, which was a book that I wrote with my CUNY colleague Michael Fabricant ...

Tanya Domey: Fabricant. Yeah.

Stephen Brier: ... which had a strong section on CUNY history that I did the research for and wrote, and in effect, I argued to my colleagues on the task force that we needed to see these issues in historical perspective and understand that the issue of free tuition, which is what motivated the creation of the task force in the first place, led by Ines Baron, who's the Chair of the Higher Ed Committee of the City Council. She pushed the law through. She herself had gone to CUNY in the mid

1960s tuition free, and she was puzzled as to why that couldn't happen again. And so, we met as a task force and one of the things I was elected co-chair, and one of the things I really insisted that we need to do was move beyond simply looking at the free tuition issue and much more explore the question of what are the obstacles to CUNY students' success in this period of time. One was, of course, affordability, the free tuition issue, but all the other issues that I've raised about Metro Cards and ...

Tanya Domey: Right. Like emergency funds.

Stephen Brier: Emergency funds and all the things that student ...

Tanya Domey: Yeah, rent, food.

Stephen Brier: ... who are insecure have to deal with, one. Two, that you can't talk about higher education, public higher education, without talking about the faculty members who are delivering that education. In a system which is increasingly relying on adjunct contingent labor underpaid, overworked, and exploited.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Stephen Brier: One of the things we have to get back to is an idea of hiring full-time faculty so that the faculty piece of this was, if you will, the second leg of the stool and the third leg of this stool was the decaying infrastructure across the CUNY system.

Tanya Domey: The capital infrastructure.

Stephen Brier: The absence of capital investment on the part of both city and state, in the fundamental infrastructure that you need to have a functioning college and university. Those three legs of a three legged stool, we argued in the task force white paper were essential to solve, and we came up with a raft of recommendations, maybe as many as 50. What happened is an interesting story. It doesn't seem like I'm a skill for Bill de Blasio against Andrew Cuomo, we submitted the report as we were required in December of 2018, 2017, to the Mayor's Office. December 23rd, 2017, and in effect, we heard nothing from them. They sat on it for six months, and then they announced to us they weren't gonna make it public, they never fully explained that what we learned reading between the lines was the Mayor's Office didn't like ... we were asking for too many things in a budget environment that they maybe thought that they couldn't handle it, and they sat on the report. And so, we called the press conference in June on the steps of City Hall to say we'd done this work, and we believed that this task force report needed to see the light of day. That's the last anybody's heard about it. It's never been officially released.

Tanya Domey: That's pretty unbelievable. It got some coverage.

Stephen Brier: It did get some coverage.

Tanya Domey: Some coverage.

Stephen Brier: It was pressed for that press conference at the City Hall steps.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Stephen Brier: But Gothamist, I think ...

Tanya Domey: The Gothamist, the Gotham Gazette, which of course, I read the background on it. I just think it's really kind of shocking in this day and age though, that the Executive Chief of the City of New York, the largest city in the country, with the third largest university system in the country essentially refused to release a report.

Stephen Brier: That he appointed people to. They were his ... in fact, it was staffed by mayoral office people. Our chief staff person was a mayor's officer person.

Tanya Domey: Yeah, the administrative staff.

Stephen Brier: The administrative staff was a task force.

Tanya Domey: Was provided by the office of the mayor.

Stephen Brier: Was provided by the mayor's office. One would have to ask Bill de Blasio or his Deputy Mayor as to why they chose not to release the report. I can't answer it definitively, to this day, I still don't know.

Tanya Domey: You mentioned your book Austerity Blues, and is it fair to say across the country, while it had been mostly republican governors. There's been a real attack on public education, K through 12 as well, up through universities, like in the state of Wisconsin, the university system there was under an onslaught by Walker, as just one illustrative example. While it's been mostly republican, it has included democrats like Andrew Cuomo. You may have other examples, which in recent-

Stephen Brier: Jerry Brown in California, before he got religion on this, and decided to raise some additional money for the University of California system.

Tanya Domey: That's true. Yeah.

Stephen Brier: It's not just conservative republicans, although they've led the charge. Mike Fabricant and I, in our book, Austerity Blues, Fighting For The Soul of Public Higher Education, really made the argument that this was a function of neoliberal politics.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Stephen Brier: Neoliberal politics are not just conservative politics, they're neoliberal for a reason. They're an argument that has increasingly taken hold since the Reagan Administration, since the ... basically the 1980s and it only intensified into our own time that says in effect, public institutions are corrupt, inept, and no longer deserve the support of taxpayer money, it's better to privatize. In public schools, you see that in the rise of the charter school movement.

Tanya Domey: Right.

Stephen Brier: In public universities, you see that in the growing use of contingent labor ... You're trying to cut budgets, you don't want the state to provide the level of support that it has, whether it's California or New York. And so, you find ways to resist that. You want to impose the use of instructional technology to cut cost, to save money, and so all of those are sort of neoliberal policies to what we were analyzing and trying to explain that the people who suffer most under that neoliberal regime, that approach to public funding and public institutions are poor people, especially of color, working class and poor people of color who pay the highest price for the imposition of those problems.

Tanya Domey: In many places, too, where you're in rural areas, poor white people as well. I mean, you're talking about Appalachia, places like that in the Midwest and the south where it's the poorest population. I would ask you, I was looking at your book earlier today, I was thinking, was this in fact a response, because when you talk about the '80s and you talk about Reagan, and that whole paradigmatic shift that came about, didn't Alan Bloom's book, *The Closing of The American Mind*, and how higher education has failed democracy, is your book really a book end on that? It sort of appears to me that way.

Stephen Brier: That's interesting. I would never think of myself in the same breath as Alan Bloom, given his politics.

Tanya Domey: Sure.

Stephen Brier: But what I would say is, we're sort of dealing with interesting questions about what's the purpose of higher education in a democracy. I think the challenge here, and Bloom was reacting against some of this, the challenge is, the entire orientation of public higher education is moved increasingly to job preparation, and job creation.

Tanya Domey: Not liberal education.

Stephen Brier: Liberal education.

Tanya Domey: Developing critical thinking.

Stephen Brier: All of that.

Tanya Domey: Research.

Stephen Brier: That's right.

Tanya Domey: But basically, he made this assault on higher education in the book and now you're seeing across all these right wing, more or less right wing media portals, and thinkers of the right wing about how college is just oversold, and you really don't need it anymore. That you can just go get a trade, but the data shows, the Chetty Report, as an example, that CUNY has pointed to. Now, to college education is the single vehicle in America that allows and enables social mobility where people can, in fact, move out of their class. Part of the think tanks and the foundations that are supporting this, the Gates Foundation is really supporting this. College completion, many people may have seen the Southern New Hampshire University ads that are very emotional, but at the same time, this is the thing that Gates is really pushing, and [inaudible 00:20:54], some of these other foundations ...

Stephen Brier: That's correct.

Tanya Domey: ... about getting degree completion and not so much emphasizing liberal education, I might add, as well.

Stephen Brier: Quite the opposite. No, no, quite the opposite.

Tanya Domey: Yeah, yeah.

Stephen Brier: It's about learning a trade, not in the narrow sense of becoming a machinist, the way it would've meant in the 19th or early 20th century, but learning a skill, being trained in a university so you can go out and get a job. Computer programming being a good example of that.

Tanya Domey: Exactly. IT.

Stephen Brier: And so, our argument is that as you put it so well, it's sort of how do we get citizens in a democracy to think critically about their role in that democracy? That's the function of public education. It is encoded in the very DNA of the public education system that this country pioneered in the early 19th century. To be sure, there were always struggled around the issues of what was the larger purpose of public education? Should it be about getting ready to go into the job market, or were there other more important liberal arts kinds of questions? I would say, for me, I'm a total product of public education in the state of California from kindergarten to PhD, I never paid a dime in tuition, and who I am today as an academic, as an intellectual, as someone engaged in thinking about what democracy is about is a total function of what I learned and did in my public education.

My free public education in the California school system from kindergarten through my PhD in the University of California system. I want for my grandson, who's now nine, and I want for all young people, that opportunity so you don't have to go into massive mountains of debt to get a college degree, that that college degree should be something that the society embraces and makes available just as it was made available to me in the early 1960s.

Tanya Domey:

Right. The social compact that once existed. I would just also add that the idea of critical thinking, when we start seeing what is going on in the public discourse of this country, I shudder every day thinking about, "They must've missed this in education." I mean, the lack of critical thinking is so palpable and so present right now that it's frightening, and just speaking of this, I mean, Gates and people like Gates, they're trying to do what they think is right, and they want to improve America. I just looked at Bill Gates top 60 books that he's reading, and very few, minimal few discuss and address democracy and how citizens participate and make their views known and leverage the body [inaudible 00:24:08] to obtain policies like what we're talking about right now.

You can sit in a room somewhere and talk about how a four year degree is gonna be good so that you can go get a trade job. But the fact is, is that we have an incredible gap of knowledge about how the New York Government works. Somebody like you, Professor Brier, you not only have been in the academy, but you took your knowledge to leverage that and participate in the community life of this city, and in the country, and that's really what all citizens should have the opportunity to do.

Stephen Brier:

Absolutely. It's about having the opportunity to participate. What we're doing right now in this moment in history is we're closing down those options, and those opportunities. Or we're creating fictive programs that make us think we're opening up and making our system more democratically Excelsior Scholarship program, when in fact we know they are not. They're having the opposite effect, or they're limiting access rather than expanding access. That's one of the things we, you know, CUNY has always prided itself, excellence and access. I think we only do well when we do both things. There was an older CUNY system that was about excellence and it was a very narrow, selective institution in the 1950s, and early 1960s. Students and the communities of New York fought to open that system up in the opened admissions struggle in '69.

We had this wonderfully open, expansive representative democratic system from essentially 1970 until 1976, where CUNY grew to the size it is now, almost 250,000 students. It was broadly diverse in the early '70s, much more diverse than it was in the ... even in the mid 1960s because of the struggle for open admissions, and that got brought to a screeching halt by the fiscal crisis in New York City in 1976, '77. One of the arguments we make in Austerity Blues is you don't date neoliberal policies from the Reagan administration of the early 1980s dated directly to the [crosstalk 00:26:22] fiscal crisis in New York City [crosstalk 00:26:24] in 1976.

Tanya Domey: [inaudible 00:26:25].

Stephen Brier: That was the first instance of rollback, and what got rolled back? Free tuition at CUNY and open admissions at CUNY, ultimately, free hospitals ... We have the best public hospital system in the country, if not the world up to that point, that got rolled back as well and the city went into debt. The city we live in now is very much a product of that crisis, but we lost something as well as survived.

Tanya Domey: Well, we will pick this back up again. There's an election to be had. There's another presidential election facing this country. I want to thank you for being here with us today.

Stephen Brier: My pleasure, Tanya. Thanks for having me.

Tanya Domey: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Stephen Brier of the Graduate Center, CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domey. Tune in next week.