

## **What Now? Preliminary Thoughts on the University in a Time of Pandemic**

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### **Perfect Storm**

The surreal experience of following public news while “sheltering in place” or strolling through bustling city parks intensifies by the day. So many of us are living in a state of suspended animation. Everyday life is derailed as we consume news of accelerating infection rates, collapsing medical infrastructures, and mounting death tolls. Yet for many, these realities, even, if unfolding blocks from our homes, as is the case in New York City, still seem remote, abstract, not quite real. At the same time, just as we gradually internalize the very real scale and stakes of this multifaceted emergency, which will snowball over untold months, the president of the United States declares, as if God himself, that Americans will be back to work and the churches packed by Easter, less than three weeks away.

Surely, the mass dread in and beyond the U.S. about this pandemic is not only about the scale and severity of the public health crisis. It is compounded by the nightmarish situation in which it has appeared and that it will surely create. The basics of this perfect storm are painfully clear, even if the way in which it will unfold are not. Decades of neoliberal policies supported by both political parties have hollowed out the state and privatized former sources of social provision. The result will be more suffering and death, social dislocation and public misery than otherwise would have been the case. Under these emergency conditions we can now see the devastating price so many will pay for gutted public health departments and defunded social services, for surrendering medical care, hospital systems, health insurance, and pharmaceutical provision to private actors driven by market logics, for creating a precarious workforce in which so few have job security, paid sick leave, health insurance, personal savings, access to affordable child or eldercare, or access to the internet so their children can continue to learn. The contradictions of mass incarceration and burgeoning homelessness, compounded by the absence of an adequate substance abuse or mental health infrastructure for those without means, will become evident.

Of course, the severity and effects of this pandemic will be immeasurably worse at this particular moment in the US, when we have an autocratic, plutocratic, and xenophobic nationalist government in power. We have seen President Trump refuse to undertake essential preparations, inform the public about the reality of the situation, or lead an adequate emergency response. On the contrary, he is willing to imperil the lives of millions for the sake of corporate profits and a rising stock market.

There is little doubt that the commercial shutdowns required by this public health crisis will lead to a severe economic crisis characterized by mass unemployment. The existing neoliberal state and this anti-democratic administration will respond to the intersecting health, economic, and social crises in ways that will reinforce its underlying causes and amplify its

immediate wreckage. This is already evident in the ways that congressional Republicans have used the massive stimulus package to transfer enormous sums of money to parasitic corporations with minimal conditions or oversight attached. There is no surprise that insufficient funds are being allocated to unemployed or informal workers and state governments, let alone a plan for conducting presidential elections while social-distancing in November.

The election! There are strong reasons to worry about several possible scenarios. This authoritarian administration may find a way to cancel or suspend the presidential election and institute some form of emergency rule. Or it may simply refuse to create opportunities for remote balloting. The public's reluctance to congregate at polling places in a time of pandemic would intensify long-term Republican voter suppression efforts; it would lead to the kind of low turnout that would favor Trump being reelected. The Democratic Party establishment and corporate media (fueled, we are told, by suburban women and older African Americans) have preemptively anointed Joe Biden as the party's presidential nominee. On the eve of economic calamity for masses of working people, this incompetent and out of touch New Democrat will be perfectly capable of losing the election on his own. If he wins, he is likely to follow the odious pathway that he has long championed, emphasizing "fiscal responsibility" over social services, corporate benefits over worker protections, Wall Street before Main Street, guarantees of suburban comfort over minimal living conditions for the urban and rural poor. A neoliberal Biden administration is unlikely to address the long and short-term forces that will have turned this public health and national economic crisis into a decisive social and political crisis. The result will not only be more pain for more people for a longer period of time. It will further consolidate our plutocratic order, weakened public sector, and severe social inequality. In other words, it will seed the possibilities of future health, environmental, and economic catastrophes. It will erode federal, state, and local government's ability to respond to them adequately. It will further attenuate the necessary conditions for any substantive democracy.

Regardless of the election outcome, the liberal establishment and Democrat Party are doing nothing to suggest to either Trump's electoral base or to Bernie Sanders' grass-roots movement that a Biden government would meaningfully address the pressing concerns of ordinary Americans whose well-being has declined under elitist Democratic as well as plutocratic Republican administrations.

We should keep in mind that this health and economic crisis is now unfolding on a global scale. Any response to the immediate situation and any attempt to manage its many ramifications – whether by governments, central banks, investors, corporations, political parties, or popular movements -- will be limited, buffeted, and shaped by innumerable intersecting responses worldwide. Thus far, the global governmental response has favored nationalism and xenophobia over communication and coordination. We have seen border closings, scapegoating of foreigners, and an obscene competition among national states to be the first to develop serology tests and vaccines for "their people" which can then be monetized on the global market. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director of the World Health Organization, has spoken clearly and urgently about the reality of the threat and the kinds of large-scale responses that are needed. But he has been largely treated as a lone voice in the wilderness rather than an authoritative leader. The pandemic has revealed just how far even a semblance of internationalism has eroded in this dawning age of national populist and authoritarian statist capitalism.

In the United States, this volatile situation is compounded by the fact that large sectors of the middle and upper-middle classes that lived in relative comfort and regarded their life-situations as secure are suddenly beset by fear and helplessness. They are now confronting the immediate possibility of contagion, hospitalization, and the death of loved ones. Their retirement savings are vanishing; their house values will plummet. Many are facing the unexpected prospect of unemployment. Their children's educational and career trajectories may be knocked off course.

One likely response will be a desperate wish to 'return to normal.' A wide range of ordinary Americans will likely support so-called voices of moderation who promise such normalcy. They will internalize the existing commonsense about fiscal responsibility, good business climate, austerity, consumerism, private debt, hard work and personal sacrifice. This, of course, is the very logic that led us into the current mess. But present pain and fear about an uncertain future will reinforce the "tried and true," however self-defeating. It is also possible that sectors of this frightened population may become more sympathetic to the exclusivist appeals of America-first nationalism. As chilling as Trump's belief that flat consumer demand would be worse for the country than mass death was his early declaration to the press that: "this really shows — this experience shows how important borders are. Without borders, you don't have a nation. Our goal for the future must be to have American medicine for American patients, American supplies for American hospitals, and American equipment for our great American heroes."

I do not believe that the Marxist geographer David Harvey is being glib when he outlines "the ultimate irony" whereby "the only policies that will work, both economically and politically" to weather the coming economic storm and "save capital and the world from riot and revolution" may be "far more socialistic than anything that Bernie Sanders might propose and these rescue programs will have to be initiated under the aegis of Donald Trump, presumably under the mask of Making America Great Again." In such a scenario, Harvey warns, "the ruling oligarchy will doubtless move to ensure" that these policies "be national socialist rather than people socialist."

There is no telling what might happen. But we can expect the forces on the right, high and low, to instrumentalize this crisis, instability, and widespread panic to further their reactionary agendas under cover of necessary emergency actions. This, of course, is what happened after 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis. This mechanism, which Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism," has followed crises around the world throughout the neoliberal era. Now, however, it may be pursued all at once on a global scale at a moment of when the powerful capitalist states are increasingly authoritarian and national populist.

In the United States, within the course of only a few weeks, we have already seen the lineaments of this strategy. Economically, there has been a government sanctioned wealth transfer to the business sector, further easing of corporate taxes, suspension of certain collective bargaining regulations, waiving of FDA rules on equipment and drug approval, and proposals to further roll back financial regulations. Legally, we have seen unilateral border closings, proposals to suspend constitutional rights to a speedy trial, automatic deportation of asylum seekers without legal process, limiting of access to abortions, and the suspension of various EPA

regulations. Politically, machinations for mass voter suppression are at work, press conferences meant to inform the public about the government response to the health, economic, and social crises have devolved into a self-serving political circus, and dissent is quickly punished. Government discourses followed the familiar rhythm: racializing and scapegoating China as a vector of disease, xenophobic nationalism, contempt for international organizations and coordination. In everyday life, there has been a rise in hate-crimes and community discrimination, at all class levels, against East Asians and service workers, not to mention the homeless, the incarcerated, and those in assisted living situations, are being treated as a disposable population to whom no medical or economic responsibility is owed. At the same time, we can see glimmers of mass social discontent as many such workers refuse to sacrifice themselves and their families for the sake of corporate profits or to provision the more well-to-do. There have been wildcat strikes by workers in Amazon warehouses and internet food delivery services. There have been work stoppages among nurses and nursing-home employees. Skilled medical workers, including doctors, are being fired from their jobs for speaking to the public, whether through media outlets or in self-produced YouTube videos about their lack of resources, the true scale of the health emergency, and the way they are forced daily to risk their lives by caring for the sick in ways that could have been avoided.

In response to the coming economic crisis we are sure to see aspects of what has happened in the past. This will include policies that protect creditors first, ensure a good business climate, ease regulations, and further defund government. It will likely mean that workers' rights, social provisions, and left movements will be attacked in the name of fiscal discipline, institutional austerity, and personal responsibility. Once again, neoliberal policies and corrupt mismanagement will have led to a severe socioeconomic crisis through which the government incurs massive debt through manufactured capital that is used primarily to help business interests. This "cure" will in turn deepen economic polarization, social inequality, and the hold of capital over the political process. The resulting budget deficits will justify future austerity regimes, whether Democratic or Republican, that will condemn proposals for adequate public spending for social well-being as irresponsible, extravagant, unrealistic, and impossible.

In sum, we might expect a cascading process through which a public health emergency creates an economic crisis with regressive social and political implications that will unfold over an extended period of time. Left attempts to contest these developments will likely be blunted not only by the right, but by mainstream liberal opinion, corporate media, and establishment Democrats. This will be in the name of personal sacrifice for public health and social order. We will be told to be "realistic" about immediate expectations, to moderate demands so we can get "back to normal." We might expect this new normal to entail not only more precarity for great numbers of people and an even tighter monopolistic hold by the surviving corporations over our lives. It will also likely be marked by more intensive and invasive forms of security and surveillance, profiling and exclusion, detention and deportation -- whether by agents of the state (police, national guard, border patrol) or anonymous algorithms. It is one thing to sacrifice individual liberties and suspend collective practices in the midst of a public health emergency. It is another to surrender both indefinitely in the service of state security order and unfettered capital accumulation. This is the difference between solidarity and subjugation.

Against all such possible developments, progressive forces will have to be resolute in holding their ground.\*This will include those of us who work within the university, whose fraying institutional fabric will be further assailed. In the midst of such large-scale calamity, it may seem absurd and petty to speculate about the pandemic's possible impact on the academy. Yet, it will be important to keep this larger political situation in mind when we will be presented with supposedly neutral bureaucratic and budgetary directives about the implications of this crisis for higher education and the university workplace. Holding ground and fighting for change in countless spheres and sectors, in simultaneous and coordinated ways, might contribute to a mass movement for of structural changes at a societal level without which any imaginable future will be bleak for all (even if unevenly distributed).

\*A longer essay would point to opportunities for transformative social visions and emancipatory social movements that might be opened through this suspension of business as usual.

## **The University in Peril**

Much of the discussion of the pandemic among university administrations and academic departments has understandably focused on technical and logistical challenges. How to best use digital platforms to deliver our goods and services to off-site students? What are the intellectual limitations of on-line teaching? But it is also important to reflect on the possible structural and political implications of the (fallout from this) pandemic that will cut across a university already in peril. I will raise these issues under four rubrics that move roughly from immediate to longer-term challenges. These notes can only be preliminary, provisional, and speculative.

### **Precarity**

In the coming recession-depression, we can expect more already enrolled college students to be unable to afford tuition to complete their degrees. They will either drop out or assume an unmanageable debt burden. Those students who hang on will have been knocked off what had been 'normal' educational and career trajectories that often include study-abroad programs, summer research or travel opportunities, and internships. They will be graduating into a severely depressed labor market with fewer opportunities to make the kind of lives they had expected. Many will have to accept dead-end jobs for which they are overqualified in order to try to make ends meet while servicing their debt. The value of a college degree in a depression economy may be called into question by many college graduates who will be unable to be self-sustaining.

The already existing two-tier system that divides heavily and lightly indebted college graduates will likely intensify; more young people will unexpectedly discover that they are in the former category. This will further sort college graduates into those forced to accept whatever dismal work is available and those able to pursue potentially meaningful careers. Declining prospects for college graduates will place additional pressure on colleges to become more vocational, adjusting curriculum to market demands (see below).

The public health emergency and ensuing economic crisis will also intensify the already significant precarity of graduate students and adjunct teachers. The path and time to degree for several cohorts of doctoral students will be significantly disrupted. Their fellowships are calculated according to a certain timeline. At the very least it looks like those who were about to begin dissertation research will have to wait at least one but likely more semesters before they can do so (whether due to travel restrictions, need for social distancing, the closing of archives and laboratories, the pausing of all those processes that these students tend to study). This will force them to spend-down fellowships that were supposed to be available to them after their research so they could complete their dissertations. The means that those who do manage to complete dissertation research will have a difficult time surviving financially in the final stretch of their training. Students just behind them in the training cycle will have an even more difficult time securing resources for their research. Major funding agencies whose endowments have plummeted and who are reluctant to take responsibility for students to do research in potentially contagious areas have already announced plans to suspend or drastically reduce grants offered for doctoral research. All over the country, job searches that were already in progress, have been suspended or cancelled. As the professional pipeline jams, an already competitive job market with an ever-declining number of proper tenure-track jobs will become even more fiercely so. We can expect the reserve army of under- or unemployed Ph.D.s to grow. Many of them will have incurred debt to make it through their degree or while waiting out several job application-cycles after graduating. They will be compelled to self-exploit through underpaid adjunct and contract positions. On a macro-level, this situation will put downward pressure on adjunct salaries, which are already insufficient for instructors in many urban areas to make ends meet. Lower salaries for contract teaching will allow universities to continue to pursue “efficiencies” by relying on such labor to staff higher percentages of their classes. In the context of general economic crisis, this dynamic may be exacerbated by falling college enrolments or the need for colleges to lower tuition (whether because families can no longer afford the exorbitant fees or because they will refuse to pay them for some version of distance learning). This would could lead their budgets to shrink further

The virus-depression will further accelerate and intensify disparities between tenure-track faculty and exploited academic labor for hire.

## **Austerity**

It is easy to see how a virus-propelled economic crisis may further reinforce the corrosive austerity logic that has already seized hold of decision making in so many American colleges and universities, both public and private. The health emergency and economic crisis will lead to large reductions in state budgets and massive losses in private endowments. There will be more pressure to raise tuition, increase enrollments, further expand cash-cow MA programs, and hire fewer permanent faculty members. There will be a relentless pursuit of “efficiencies” across the system by bureaucrats and accountants. We can expect hiring freezes, salary and benefits stagnation or cuts, reduced funding for students, budget cuts across all departments, and the

elimination of many hard won programs now deemed inessential to the basic imperatives of information transfer, certification by degree, and institutional reproduction.

To the extent that the current experiment in large-scale online teaching and digital libraries are successful, we may expect initiatives, driven by incentives to cut costs, to move the university further in those directions.

Following the lead of the UK-led Commonwealth university system, there will be a greater emphasis on auditing, reporting, oversight, evaluation, and ranking according to bureaucratic and market logics.

The logic of scarcity and ensuing competition will command faculty and programs to justify themselves in ever more instrumental and measurable terms. Researchers will be increasingly evaluated in terms of quantitative output and citations, regardless of the quality of the work or the scholarship that cites it. Teaching will be increasingly evaluated according to, and therefore reoriented to, serving the labor market (i.e., how many and which jobs graduates obtain). An economic recession will reinforce these quantitative labor market metrics of educational success. Of course, mass unemployment will guarantee that teachers will failure in these terms. Such failure will create even more pressure to reorganize teaching along vocational lines and to discipline teachers who do not fall in line.

We might expect to see tighter control over faculty work weeks. We may be required to account more directly for how working time is spent and be expected to organize working days in ways that are more aligned with non-academic workplaces. This could include expectations to be in offices and on campus on a 9 to 5 schedule and to remain on-the-clock during summer breaks or lose summer salaries. There will likely be less money available for individual professional and research related travel. There will be less funding, generally, for faculty to organize conferences and symposia at their institutions. Based on recent trends and despite supposed budgetary restrictions, we might expect, more mid-level administrative positions to be created. A growing cadre of bureaucrats will be charged within inventing, imposing, and overseeing this austerity regime. Their high salaries, of course, will further drain the pool of money available for faculty and students, education and research. This, in turn, will call for and justify further austerity measures and overseers.

We might expect an assault on tenure as an institution. Like healthcare and pensions, it will be challenged as an outmoded fetter on institutional efficiency, an unnecessary drain on budgets, and an unfair benefit that other workers do not enjoy. It will be denounced as a charter for laziness and lack of productivity without accountability.

In such a situation, it will be difficult to distinguish real budgetary constraints from the way administrations will instrumentalize the crisis to accelerate already existing tendencies toward further bureaucratization and monetization. Accordingly, we might expect these new logics to be embraced by faculty themselves, whether out of fear or belief. There will be a culture of increased competition among faculty confronted by constant evaluation and among programs in a climate of (manufactured) scarcity. We will constantly be told that the (never-ending) emergency requires personal sacrifices and tempered expectations. Dissenting views will

be denigrated as selfish, unrealistic, and dangerously extravagant. Portions of the university will be pitted against each other: administrators vs. faculty, faculty in one division vs. those in another, students (and their paying families) vs. faculty, all of the above vs. service staff. The message will be that any funding for academic labor (e.g., new hires, higher salaries, research funding, public intellectual events) will be at the expense of student aid or graduate fellowships.

In such a situation, many faculty members themselves will become passive or active vectors of this austerity logic.

Individual and collective demands for resources, improved working conditions, or structural change will likely be preemptively dismissed as being out of place – disrespectful, opportunistic, inappropriate, extravagant, naïve – in the midst of such an emergency. Labor actions, such as the wildcat strikes among graduate assistants that spread across the University of California system on the eve of the pandemic will be more strongly repressed.

The already existing divide between elite universities, in which academic life may go back to something resembling the old normal, and the rest will intensify.

## **Democracy**

It would be misguided to think that such emergency-fueled austerity regimes will not negatively affect the content of curriculum, quality of education, substance of faculty research, and character of intellectual discourse.

Insofar as the entwined public health emergency and economic crisis empower austerity regimes, democracy within and beyond the university will be further eroded.

Academic freedom will likely be further compromised in a situation defined by precarious workers, shrinking budgets, increased oversight and evaluation according to quantitative metrics (keyed to market and organizational logics), not to mention a weakened tenure structure. Emergency-induced austerity regimes will empower funders and administrations (e.g., bureaucrats, technocrats, accountants, lawyers) over faculties. Such administrators will be more able to make unilateral decisions without transparency or accountability. Academic freedom, faculty governance, and department autonomy over curricula may be regarded as inappropriate under emergency conditions as “outmoded” expectations about salaries, funding, and working conditions. As in the larger society, surveillance, repression, and narrower limits on acceptable speech (in and beyond classrooms) will be justified through discourses of small sacrifices for the greater good at a time when the old freedoms can no longer be abided.

Shrinking budgets and growing competition will impel more scholars and research centers to seek funding from, or orient their scholarly work towards, the immediate needs of outside sources. The latter will be increasingly private, corporate, and profit driven. Universities will be drawn more deeply into, and contribute more directly, to the kind of societal commonsense that they are uniquely positioned to call into question.

The peculiar status of colleges and universities as relatively free spaces of agonistic exchange and sociopolitical dissent will be at stake. This may have long-term consequences for colleges and universities as well as the broader society.

## **Solidarity**

Precarity, austerity, and declining democracy may have an especially negative impact on the fabric of social and political solidarity within and beyond the university.

Divisions between faculty and staff may become more evident. Conflict within faculties may become more pronounced: tenured vs. untenured, those with outside grants and those dependent on university funding, professional vs. academic units, natural vs. human sciences, social sciences vs. humanities, traditional departments vs. interdisciplinary programs and centers. Among the latter, marginalized programs oriented around the study of marginalized peoples (e.g., ethnic and racial studies, gender and women's studies, queer studies, area studies focused on parts of the Global South) will be especially vulnerable to being identified as inessential and expendable. It is less likely that disciplinarily defined departments will fight as hard to sustain them.

Solidarity between elite and other universities will continue to diminish.

Insofar as fiscal crises and austerity directives will make all universities less (economically, racially, culturally) diverse, solidarity between relatively more privileged student majorities and more precarious minorities (however defined) will intensify.

These tendencies may be exacerbated by the pandemic-propelled imperatives to identify and discriminate between, on the one hand, faculty, student, or staff who have been certified as "immune," and, on the other hand, those who are not. This division will be mediated by distinctions between those who have access to health care and testing and those who do not, those who have safe places, social support, and cash reserves during quarantine and those who do not.

On all of the above fronts, international students will be subject to particular challenges that will affect institutional and interpersonal solidarity with them. These include travel and visa restrictions, absence of social and familial support networks during future shutdowns, and the possible stigma of being from certain places when public discourses work to racialize disease and contagion.

## **Doubling Down**

These dystopian speculations on how this pandemic (and the ones to follow) may ramify for and through the world of higher education in the coming years may be way off the mark. Moreover, the areas of concern I identify are nothing new for colleges and universities. My only wager is that the mutually reinforcing public health and economic crises will work, indeed be

leveraged, to accelerate deplorable tendencies under conditions in which they will be more difficult than ever to resist (whether on financial, organizational, or ideological grounds). Regardless of how this unfolds for universities, I would guess that various intra-university struggles will need to be waged and ground will have to be held on the terrains of precarity, austerity, democracy, and solidarity. I also believe that our critical analyses of the situation in the university and strategies for responding will be more effective if we relate them to broader societal developments, contradictions, and conflicts. Likewise, a broader struggle against encroachment and for change will need to be waged in concrete ways on innumerable fronts among which the university is as important as any other.

Many critics have rightly analyzed the increasingly corporate and neoliberal character of the current U.S. university system. This seems to be the direction in which even public universities are moving. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the university is one of the few remaining social institutions of this scale and significance that is not wholly organized around a market logic. The knowledge we produce is not yet wholly commodified and monetized (despite, for example, efforts by publishing and database corporations to enclose, capture, and profit from our research). The aim of our labor is not only, or primarily, to valorize value. Other critics have rightly pointed to the chilling of academic discourse in an era of right-wing trolling, harassment, and persecution of dissident voices. Yet, the norms of surveillance and dissent within universities are still less repressive than in most comparable workplaces. Despite real and worsening constraints, the university remains a realm of relative intellectual freedom. It is more culturally diverse, polyglot, and international than most institutional spaces in American society (even if it fails to live up to its potential on all of these fronts). Academic life may be one of the few spaces of non-commercial internationalism remaining in the United States (even if this internationalism may also reinforce all manner of economic, institutional, intellectual, and national hierarchies). It affords invaluable possibilities for international dialogue, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. Through a variety of formal and informal practices, many academics participate in international networks through which knowledge of seemingly distant analyses, situations, and struggles may circulate.

Whether the impact of pandemic-inflected crises confronts us dramatically or infiltrates our work lives insidiously, we should be prepared to hold our ground. Fully employed academics have the opportunity and responsibility to resist attempts, justified by emergency discourses, to diminish our working conditions, compromise our classrooms, or undermine the quality of our research and the character of our debates. It will be especially important to contest the self-fulfilling austerity logic which will act as if reactionary institutional choices are necessary and reasonable responses to an externally imposed force. Above all, we should challenge the call, whether by administrators or colleagues, for short-term sacrifices in the service of being able to get back to “normal.”

Within the university, as in the larger society, all such promises of (new) normalcy are suspect. To call or seek a return to normal is to cling to the very logics and arrangements that will have allowed an economic crisis propelled by medical emergency to become a social and political catastrophe. This pandemic has revealed the contradictions and fault lines upon which the “normal” university is founded by which are typically obscured. We will be told again and again that the emergency requires us to suspend demands, defer projects, and temper

expectations. For these reasons, this is precisely the time to double-down on a critique of existing contradictions and to pursue ambitious structural changes. Now more than ever, it is evident that higher education must be free; students should not mortgage their futures through debt to banks. Now more than ever, it is imperative to untether teaching and learning from instrumental, vocational, and market logics. Now more than ever teachers and scholars have a responsibility to further democratize the university as space of relative freedom and maximum forms of diversity that may interrupt invidious tendencies in the larger society. In so doing a community in struggle for a possible university might serve as one among many nodes in the struggle for a different kind of world.

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