

## FORUM



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

## Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

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*Challenged academy: Engagement after neoliberalism*

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## Challenged academy

### Engagement after neoliberalism

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**ABSTRACT:** Market-driven educational policies and advances in information technology may assure greater accountability in public universities; however, the trend toward increased standardization strengthens the “machine’s” ability to appropriate the task of teaching. The challenge for college faculty is to sustain student-centered teaching and learning methods in the face of neoliberal reforms.

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Neoliberal reforms took hold in North American public universities during the 1980s, through market-driven educational policies and the public-private partnerships; although evidence of this framework appeared at the University of California, Berkeley, the “quintessential Cold War megaversity”, according to historian Eric Foner (1998: 290), at the time of the Free Speech Movement (FSM), there, in 1964-1965. The FSM agenda included civil rights, anti-war and academic freedom concerns, and its leader, Mario Savio, was clearly ahead of his times (Cohen 2009). Savio’s vision of participatory democracy was forged through experiences in Catholic social action projects in Mexican slums, in labor protests in San Francisco where he was jailed, and during the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Savio was able to integrate Catholic social justice, civil rights and union-based political rhetoric in his speeches. During this time, more working class youth were admitted to public research universities. Many were raised in union households politicized during the Great Depression and by post-war union movement cultures that endorsed working people’s rights, union organizing, and labor actions. These students, often the first in their families to gain access to higher education, voiced a style of political rhetoric heard on public university campuses at this time. Their parents understood that college was their children’s way out of the factory, and of serving time in the rice paddies of Southeast Asia. FSM student protesters viewed their university as a “bureaucratic machine,” and

characterized their education as a form of mass production, within an impersonal and alienating “knowledge factory,” seeing the IBM punch cards adopted by university administrators as part of mass higher education’s control revolution as symbolic of the new information technology (IT) that would, over time, regulate higher education. There is much to reflect upon this half-century trajectory of bureaucratization and commodification of public higher education, *and its discontents*.

Henry A. Giroux’s (2007) characterization of the contemporary “university in chains” goes beyond Max Weber’s “iron cage,” indicating the increased rationalization of social life in Western capitalist societies, specifically large scale public and private enterprises that are at once hierarchical, impersonal, specialized and efficient. Military and corporate appropriation of higher education through open and clandestine research, and the production of quasi-private data for government and corporate sponsors, has led to a diminishment of transparency. These trends support graduate and post-doctoral science programs, and move the undergraduate curriculum away from broad, critical thinking and reflection – the hallmark of the liberal arts – toward skill-based approaches that students believe help them to enter competitive graduate and professional degree programs, or gain entry level positions in the corporate world. The military is clearly on a recruitment mission, as the Reserve Officers’ Training Program (ROTC) reappears on elite campuses; low-income youth are also recruited during their last years in high school, with promises of college scholarships, and more. Many academics nearing retirement came into their tenure track jobs after military service in the late sixties and early seventies and found ways to reproduce the military’s hierarchical arrangements in their work lives. At that time, administrators sought to restore the stability experienced before 1964, when student-led movements created chaos at state-funded public campuses like Berkeley, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The infusion of well-behaved men of “the silent generation” on to the tenure track and into administrative positions assured that the campuses would be “quiet” and under increasing surveillance. Colin Powell’s peacetime army during those years provided a safety valve for poor Southern and Southwestern men and women of all ethnic persuasions, but predominately African Americans, white Southern Mountaineers and their kin in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Texas, and recruits from the Plains states.

An agricultural metaphor may have come to supplant the industrial metaphor coined a half-century ago. The public university continues toward becoming a “knowledge plantation” economy – resembling California Cen-

tral Valley agricultural enterprises with their part-time seasonal farmworkers – as long as it hires large numbers of contingent employees and scores of lab techs to keep the “farm” running. Faculty and students become the new class of “technopeasants,” or “hyperserfs” (Wiscomb 2017) as universities reinvent themselves as corporate-funded knowledge *Latifundia*. In these worlds, “techies” rock! The farmworkers, themselves, may not necessarily be exploited by IT, which routinely operates in agribusiness enterprises; however, those in the fields work with the byproducts of biotechnology, including the toxic chemicals that are sickening them and their children (Nash 2004). Contingent faculty *work relations* are analogous to those of farmworkers. Patron-client ties operate across social classes and occupations, from farms and factories to corporate offices, as do scientific management practices. *Neo-Taylorism* of human service occupations took place in the post-Fordist decades (Braverman 1974; Crowley et al. 2010); by comparison, *Taylorism* was practiced in California’s farming areas since the 1930s (Stoll 1998: 167). There are analogies between the conditions experienced by farmworkers and the pathogens they encounter in the fields, with the pathologies that many experience within university departments. One frequently hears that increasing exploitation and bullying are making academic workers ill, and many die early as a result of stress; others suffer from sick building syndrome (Redlich et al. 1997), resulting from exposure to toxics and pollutants present in older academic buildings.

The challenge, then, is to sustain the student-centered teaching and learning methods of John Dewey (2016) and Paulo Freire (1970) in the face of IT domination, which is clearly administratively controlled and sanctioned. Many have seen their classes and seminars double in recent years, and still find ways to engage students and let their voices be heard in the classroom. Beyond *PowerPoint* slides and “clickers” (classroom response system devices) that promise to hold the attention of the *millennials*, deeper learning methods such as collaborative work, self-directed and project-based learning help develop critical learning and reflective processes, even in larger classrooms. However, textbook publishers have found ways to seduce the novice, and even the experienced teacher, with a box of “instructor resources,” including slides, manuals, test item files, software, even course design materials so that a syllabus follows closely to the text. Pressure comes *from above* as well to uphold the primacy of both the text and the corporate-influenced professional voice. There are even multiple levels of review to assure that “student learning objectives” in the university catalog are not only stated on the syllabus but also embedded within it.

Moving forward, the IT “revolution” may assure greater accountability; however, the trend toward standardization also increases the “machine’s” ability to appropriate the task of teaching, as standardized texts and syllabi can be readily put online, with TA support, and minimal professorial oversight. IT is a disruptive innovation in every occupation, and college teaching is no exception. Administrators, whose work lives are governed by computer-generated models, manage new model university routines, through computerized learning platforms in retooled college classrooms, especially on blue-collar campuses. It’s “pay to play” for students at elite campuses; otherwise one learns via “machine.” As Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are pushed forward, the response to skeptical academic laborers is “deal with it.” The question remains how to push back, when large numbers of contingent faculty, and those on the tenure track, tow the administrative line by accommodating to the ongoing *Taylorism* of their occupational lives on behalf of keeping their jobs.

As Giroux indicates, neoliberalism in higher education devalues the teachers as workers and the students as objects of “schooling.” College life is thereby transformed, with students and contingent labor *passing through*, and regarded as objects to which any unfortunate turn, sent down *from above* by administrators, from reduced salary and benefits to the acceptance of rank bullying is to be borne without so much as a word. So, while the institution is valued, upward, as a capitalist profit center, the life worlds of those within are devalued, with students viewed as the source of tuition-based funding or residence hall fees, and with teachers as labor that provides increased value. All of this is controlled *from above*, serving to diminish the value of students and faculty as persons involved in learning encounters, relative to the increased value of the institution and its administrators, whose salaries are skyrocketing. Universities are conduits for: hundreds of millions in federal student loans; textbook publishers and computer software manufacturers; food and linen service suppliers; residence hall beds at capacity throughout the calendar year. The worth of these neoliberal universities is staggering; consider the billion-dollar capital funding campaigns these systems initiate to remain competitive.

Amid this largesse, many students struggle not only to pay increasing tuition and living costs, but, after graduation, to land jobs that will help pay off student loan debt while providing a living wage. Faculty members witnessed this sea change for more than a generation, and some have attempted to resist through struggles for unionization and on behalf of benefits for teaching



assistants and contingent faculty (Entin 2005). To the broader question about solutions, the progressive professorate appears not to have found a satisfactory answer. Nonetheless, accessible mass higher education remains one of the best ways to cultivate the critical consciousness necessary for an informed citizenry to sustain a reasonable quality of life—one that includes an inner life relatively free of economic and political anxieties.

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