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## Toward An Eco-Egalitarian University

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# Toward An Eco-Egalitarian University

## **Abstract**

This article argues for a political transformation and reorganization of the university so that it is capable of challenging the "hierarchy of power in a neoliberal society." Faculty democracy, administrative accountability to faculty, and the education of students to become critical, thinking citizens would be a major part of this reorganization.

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## **Keywords**

University politics, reform, faculty governance

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## Toward an Eco-Egalitarian University

Neoliberal university presidents, corporate trustees, military research contracts, super-rich donors, the gang of five on the Supreme Court, hyper-professionalized administrators, the Republican Party, Fox News: the university faces a constellation of reactionary forces today. Such a neoliberal machine, with additions and subtractions depending on the target, has gone after organized labor, the news media, cities, racial minorities, the extant distribution of income and wealth, and now the university. The idea is to fold the university into an anti-intellectual agenda that disparages liberal arts research and teaching as it prepares students to forfeit critical skills and become cogs in a machine. There are forces within some universities that resist this machine. The recent rebellions at New York University, the University of Virginia, Johns Hopkins, and [the University of Texas](#) are cases in point. These constituencies are to be celebrated, because the machine is primed to make us both discount their actions and forget them as soon as possible. Recently, for instance, nonacademic employees at Hopkins won an impressive wage settlement, but we have yet to hear the administration publicize or celebrate this sweet union victory.



There are also [critical intellectuals in and around the academy](#) who point out how neoliberal policies accentuate inequality, create horrible exclusions, foster disciplinary society, and create economies punctuated by periods of crash and burn. They also show how those who do not initiate such irrational policies are set up to become the victims after each crash. They see how



neoliberalism has retained hegemony for over thirty years as states ignore the authority structure of firms, enact neoliberal policies, generate legislative vetoes of new ventures when neoliberals officially hold a legislative minority, and draw authority from the gang of five on the Supreme Court. There are many faculty and students prepared to resist the intrusions of the neoliberal machine into their colleges and universities, whenever the latter act as if the administration has a natural right to manage students and faculty and they have an obligation to obey blindly. We must thus celebrate those who have fought off coup attempts from the top, even winning sometimes. And we must laugh off attempts by reactionary faculty and administrators who pretend after each of victory that this or that change was in the cards all along, even without staff, faculty or student activism. Such propaganda is designed to deactivate senior faculty, demoralize students, and discourage younger faculty from joining the fray when the forces of anti-intellectualism, top-down rule, authoritarianism and vindictiveness intensify. Divide, demoralize, and depoliticize the rank and file to create maximum room for political rule from the top.



Resistance, then, is indispensable. But is it enough? Note that the neoliberal/corporate/administrative machine has a well worked out agenda to enact. Perhaps, then, we need to articulate a positive agenda too, one that links critical intellectualism to an eco-egalitarian organization of university life. One in which universities and colleges become vibrant



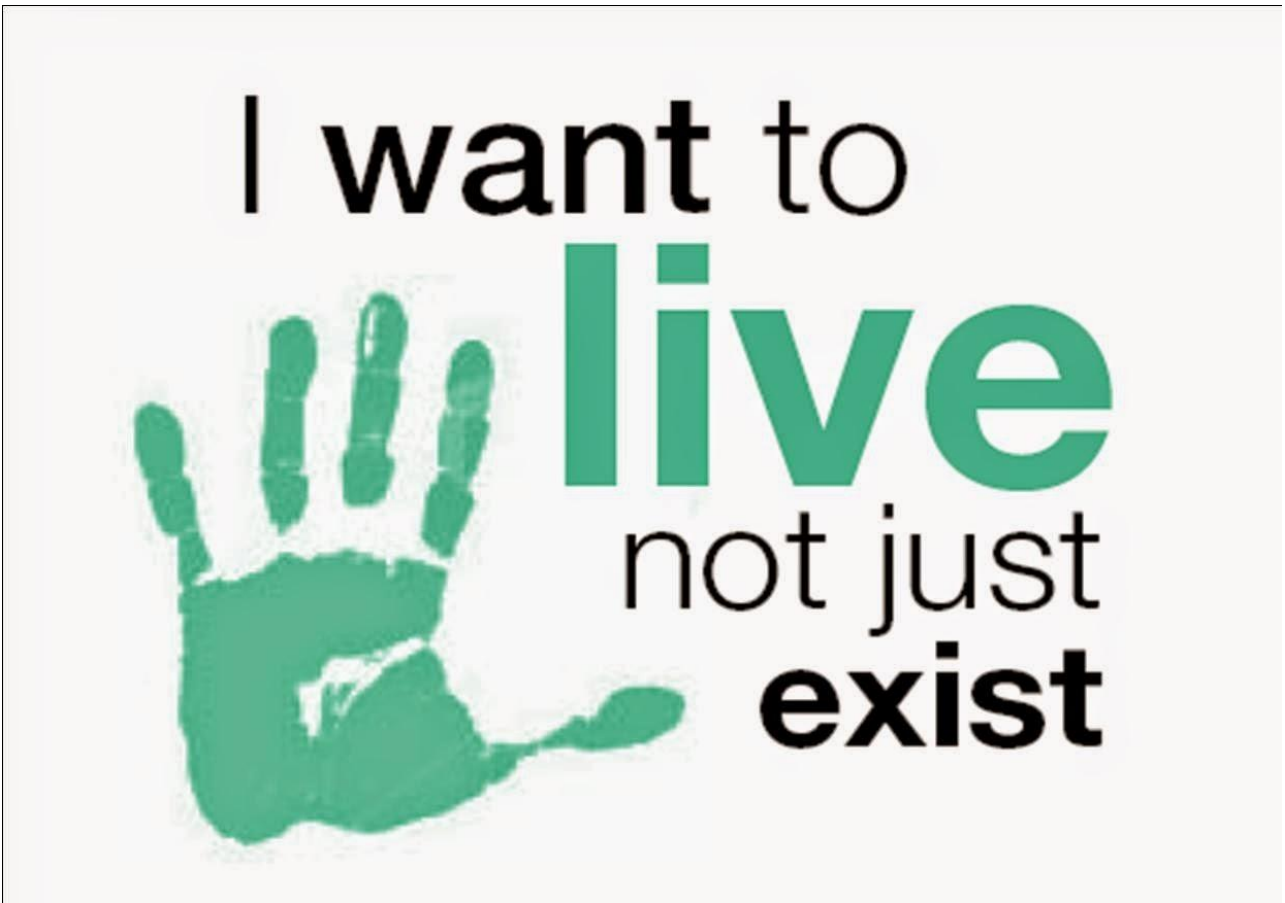
centers that challenge the neoliberal machine by their very mode of organization. Today I focus on the economic organization of such a university.



Start with the adjunct world. The more adjunct faculty there are the fewer full time appointments are available to young scholars and the fewer faculty there are to be independent voices in the life of the school. The more the adjunct model threatens tenure the less willing some younger faculty members are to take risks in their research, teaching and college participation. The weaker tenure is the more powerful the neoliberal machine becomes. These are some of the reasons budget cutbacks have been used to create the world of the adjunct. So the university will gather together adjunct positions and create a smaller number of tenure track positions out of them, inviting existing adjunct faculty to become candidates and drawing upon the records they have already achieved in considering them for the new positions.

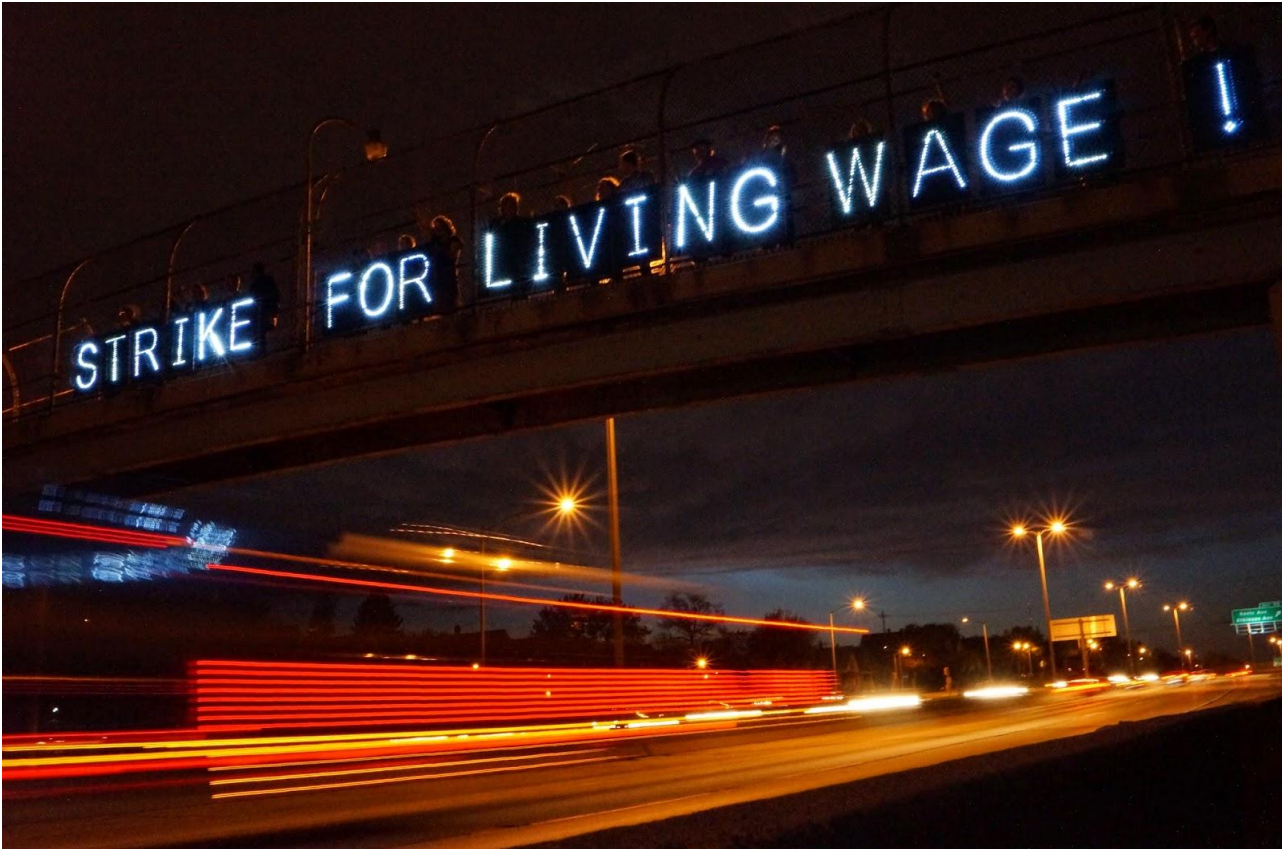


With respect to salary, all staff members in the university will receive a living wage, and their incomes and job security will grow as they continue to work. The faculty will initially be governed by a 2/2/1&1/2 model. The highest paid senior professor will make no more than two times the median salary of assistant professors; deans and provosts will make no more than two times the median salary of senior professors; and the president will make no more than 1 & ½ the median salary of deans. Perhaps this scale can and should be squeezed down even further. The key point is that with such a sliding scale a salary increase at any level will be marked by corollary increases at other levels. Equally important, a decrease at any level—to respond to a new budget crunch created by neoliberal adventurism and then passed down the line--will meet with corollary decreases everywhere else. After reducing the current proportion of administrators to faculty to an earlier ratio, any decrease in the size of the faculty will be matched by a corollary reduction in the size of the administration. As time goes by these differentials can be reduced further. The underlying idea, to paraphrase Rousseau, is that no one becomes so rich that they can buy another and no one so poor that they can be bought by another. Staff, faculty and administrators will all receive remuneration that enable them to participate effectively in the larger infrastructure of consumption. That means that [the larger infrastructure of consumption, too, will need to be reconstructed.](#)



Such policies mean that we are all in this together rather than encouraging a few to impose their imperial will upon the rest of us. Savings that accrue can be deployed to help students reduce the crushing debt they currently face, and the university will now be in a better ethical position to press the state for more support to reduce those pressures further. Deans and Presidents will feel more tied to the faculty than to high rollers outside it. They will come from the faculty and can return to it with dignity rather than having to forfeit a life of royalty. They are thus apt to feel more closely tied to intellectual life and to act with courage against the neoliberal machine when necessary. If they are forced to resign while fighting for academic principles they will return to the faculty as heroes, presenting living models of how to be academic intellectuals. All this will help to modify the ethos of performance and governance in the university, pulling it away from subordination to the neoliberal agenda and toward a critical education and student/faculty participation in governance.





Of course, some faculty and administrators will depart when such policies are established. That is okay. They will be replaced by faculty members and administrators who prize intellectual life and seek to work in a place in which the faculty has a major voice in university life. The arrival of new recruits will further amplify support for the new university.





The university will also become a model of eco-experimentation, as it divests both from using carbon based power and making carbon based investments. It will encourage faculty in the humanities, social sciences and sciences to pursue eco-friendly research as it enacts several practical experiments itself. Again, all these things will require a shift in the internal governance of the school. In this way the university becomes a living model appropriate to the world of today and tomorrow, and some other institutions may even be encouraged to emulate it. We enact practices needed in the twenty first century.



No president will be allowed to milk donors for huge donations to be used for that president's "signature projects" and new faculty appointments, unless those actions have first gone through the relevant departments and faculty assembly for review and acceptance. Such practices are based on the sound understanding that the most creative, educational and socially useful innovations do not come from the top. They flow up from intellectual ferment by faculty and students. The top down myth is merely a neoliberal strategy designed to centralize power. It has no basis in experience. The new practices will thus reflect the realization that the neoliberal model of university governance has been an abject failure. It has been installed not because of its success, but because of the constellation of power and privilege it expresses.





There is much more to explore here. But perhaps we can close for now by posing an obvious question. Is not such a model of the university utopian? Yes it is. It is at odds with the existing hierarchy of power in a neoliberal society. But it is only utopian in that sense, not in the sense that the neoliberal project is utopian. The neoliberal model is utopian in that it can be imposed but has been proven to be top down, anti-intellectual, and at odds with teaching students to become critical citizens. That is, it is grounded in arbitrary power and privilege rather than speaking to the needs of university life and a democratic society. It is tethered to a boom and bust practice of economic life that repeatedly recoils back on low-income workers, urban areas, racial minorities, old people, schools, health, colleges, students, and universities, even though none of the latter have initiated these crashes. Presidents, administrators, trustees and faculty who still profess the neoliberal model should be ashamed of themselves.





Today the need is to move beyond the top-down utopia of the neoliberal academy as more faculty and students both become active inside the university and pursue alliances with workers, teachers, feminists, racial minorities, the unemployed, battle scarred and wounded soldiers, and other forces outside the university who have also been screwed over by the neoliberal agenda.



Does this mean, then, that we seek to politicize the university? No. That, my friends, happened a long time ago, though the neoliberal terms of politicization have not been publicized enough. Indeed, it is today considered insulting to the neoliberal machine to publicize this fact. It means that we must work hard to shift the terms of the politicized university.



Sometimes the thought of another possibility shakes up practical thinking, allowing it to fester and then to respond creatively to new threats, issues and opportunities as they arise. Make no doubt about it. The neoliberal machine has both eyes focused on the university today and we must have ours focused on the neoliberal machine.



