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# Reflections on Universities, Politics, and the Capitalist State: An Interdisciplinary and Intergenerational Discussion with Clyde W. Barrow

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## Abstract

Since its publication in 1990, Clyde W. Barrow's book, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928*, has been a touchstone text for generations of scholars studying higher education. This



conversation between Barrow, Heather Steffen, and Isaac Kamola examines the book's legacy in order to explore how the interdisciplinary study of higher education has changed over the past three decades. In doing so, they examine the space and place of academic knowledge and academic labor, offering an interdisciplinary discussion of critical praxis within the university.

### Keywords

University studies, capitalism and higher education, academic labour

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### Introduction

Clyde W. Barrow's *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* offers a historical and sociological account of the American university during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It documents how the origins of the corporate university can be traced back to a corporate-liberal political agenda first articulated by finance capitalists during the American Progressive Era. The structure and processes of the corporate university were established from 1894 to 1928, and these institutional structures established the social form of the ideological state apparatus in the United States, based on a concept of academic efficiency. For example, during this period, industrial capitalists expended considerable effort, often through their philanthropic organizations, to encourage the numerous small parochial colleges to adopt practices of scientific management and standardization. Boards of trustees, once populated by clergy and local political and business leaders, became the terrain of the corporate class. Through a theoretically informed historical analysis, Barrow demonstrates the ways in which the university became both site and stake in a class struggle for control of the material means of mental production.

When it was published in 1990, *Universities and the Capitalist State* was reviewed favorably in at least 13 journals, including leading journals in political science, history, sociology, and education, and it was selected for an author meets critics panel at the American Educational Research Association. The book is what Louis Althusser (1978) would call a theoretical intervention into the practical struggle for control within one element of the ideological state apparatus. And, in this context, it helped set the stage for the development of a body of scholarship that examines the relationships between universities and capitalist accumulation.<sup>1</sup> In the decades since its publication, the critical study of the university has changed considerably, while remaining a largely interdisciplinary area of academic study. (See

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the interdisciplinary, critical scholarship published on American higher education in the years since *Universities and the Capitalist State*, see: Slaughter (1990); Readings (1996); Slaughter and Leslie (1997); Aronowitz (2000); Newfield (2003); Ohmann (2003); Donoghue (2008); Shumar (2013).

the end of this article for a working bibliography marking some of the major contributions to this field of study.)

Barrow updated the major themes of *Universities and the Capitalist State* in various publications about the ongoing restructuring of U.S. higher education within the context of economic and cultural globalization, including the co-authored book, *Globalization, Trade Liberalization, and Higher Education in North America*. This book concluded that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was facilitating the export and triumph of the U.S. market model in higher education by treating higher education as just another industry to be traded on international markets (Barrow, Didou-Aupetit, and Mallea 2003; also: Barrow 2003).

In 2018, Barrow published *The Entrepreneurial Intellectual in the Corporate University*, in which he elaborated the concept of the entrepreneurial intellectual as an anti-thesis to the corporate university. By continuing to claim that the university is somehow special or unique—indeed, even sacred—rather than just another business, professors cut themselves off from the recognition that their demands as faculty are the same demands being made by other workers for workplace democracy, profit-sharing, and cooperative or worker ownership. The reconquest of the university must ultimately be part of a wider movement for economic democracy, a movement that begins inside the university with the actions of individuals and small groups, who may form the nucleus of a new syndicalist university.

Heather Steffen and Isaac Kamola met at a series of conferences hosted by graduate workers at the University of Minnesota (“Re-thinking the University: Labor, Knowledge, Value” [2008], “Re-working the University: Visions, Strategies, Demands” [2009], and “Beneath the University, the Commons” [2010], co-organized with Amy Pason, Matt Stoddard, Eli Meyerhoff, John Conley, Morgan Adamson, Lucia Pawlowski, Steven Koskela, Elizabeth Johnson, Noah Ebner, and others). Steffen and Kamola were also part of a study collaborative, the University Research Group Experiment (URGE), a group of graduate students whose dissertation research focused on the university and who asked together what it means to try to get a job in the institution you have dedicated your academic work to critiquing, even organizing against.

After leaving Minnesota shortly after the Great Recession, Kamola held a series of visiting scholar and postdoc positions, living in five states in five years. His book, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (2019), examines how relationships between universities, the American state, philanthropic organizations, and international financial organizations shape the reproduction of academic knowledge about the world as global. Kamola now works at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he teaches and researches the political economy of higher education, including efforts by right-wing donors to influence higher education (Wilson and Kamola 2021).

Steffen’s dissertation (2015) was largely inspired by Barrow’s book, which drew her to investigate theories of academic labor that emerged and were naturalized during the “age of the university” (1890s-1930s) in faculty writing. Alongside this research, Steffen was developing and teaching first-year writing courses on the corporate university debate,

Millennial college students, and the meaning of the university as a graduate instructor, as well as writing on graduate student labor and undergraduate internships. Having worked as a lecturer in the UC Santa Barbara Writing Program and as a postdoc in the UCSB Chicano Studies Institute and Department of English and in the Rutgers University Center for Cultural Analysis, she is now an adjunct professor/instructor in the MA Program in Engaged and Public Humanities and the Writing Program at Georgetown University. Steffen's current research and writing has two focuses: In her book project, "Useful Work: Imagining Academic Labor in the U.S. University," she contends that U.S. scholar-teachers have developed four models of academic labor over the past century (professionalism, unionism, vocationalism, and entrepreneurialism) and that these models serve as behavior-shaping ideologies and rhetorical resources for academic labor organizing and critique. In a collaborative project with Kamola and Rana Jaleel, as well as in her current teaching, Steffen is working to map the current terrain of U.S. university studies by analyzing the relationships between critical, abolitionist, and decolonial approaches to higher education.

During this interview—which took place over Zoom on September 1 and 10, 2020—Barrow, Steffen, and Kamola discuss the writing of *Universities and the Capitalist State*, its reception, and the current state of scholarship about and organizing within higher education. Other excerpts from the interview have been published in the *Journal of Academic Freedom* (2021).

**Heather Steffen:** Thanks for taking the time to talk with us about *Universities and the Capitalist State*.

**Clyde Barrow:** I must admit I was a little shocked when you told me it was the thirtieth anniversary of its publication. I still remember it like yesterday.

**Isaac Kamola:** In returning to the book I was once again so impressed by your deep archival research. Reading *Universities and the Capitalist State* was like being transported into a different time, a different era, and a completely different logic of higher education. On the cusp of the universities that we inhabit now, but still not there yet.

**Barrow:** I actually spent a month in the National Archives researching the book. Trotting in there every day, pulling out boxes. And in some respects, I was lucky, because the U.S. Bureau of Education archives—the section they were in at the National Archives—caught fire at one point and a whole swath of those documents were destroyed. So, in a sense, there was just enough there to be relevant to me. But I suspect there was a lot more if it hadn't been for the fire.

**Kamola:** Your training as a political theorist really comes across in this book. The narrative of the book is historical, empirical, and institutional but also deeply theoretical.

**Barrow:** The political theory we were doing at UCLA in those days was very much driven by people like Richard Ashcraft. It was Marxist political theory. It was historicist political

theory in which you looked at how ideas were embedded within history, within social and economic frameworks. Anybody who took political theory in those days had probably also taken courses on political economy with Karen Orren, and they had taken courses on political sociology in the sociology department. They might have taken history with Bob Brenner or Perry Anderson. We had a really dense network of Marxists at UCLA at that time across the disciplines, and we were all interacting with each other, so it gave you a different kind of political theory training than you would have received at most universities.

**Steffen:** Did you have any mentors there who were working on university history in particular?

**Barrow:** No, nobody was researching higher education. The one real mentor in terms of that component of the work would have been Karen Orren, who was a specialist in American politics. She was one of the leaders of the new institutionalism at that time, and she's the one who would have been pushing me in that direction.

What I was really trying to do was document that intellectuals had never been autonomous precisely because the university had never been autonomous. That, in fact, we were and always had been participants in a class struggle, that we were either allies or opponents of a capitalist class or allies or opponents of a working class. I wanted to really reconceptualize the university as a political institution because we often forget that universities are parts of the state. They are part of the state apparatus. Even private institutions have very strong ties to the state, whether through financial support, research support, or a variety of other things.

In terms of the kind of extant literature I had to draw on at the time, really all I had was Marx's *German Ideology* (1978 [1845-46]), Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (2015 [1918]), Upton Sinclair's *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education* (1923), and a few other things. This is one of the reasons *Universities and the Capitalist State* is such a deeply historical and empirical work, because I was really having to construct this history from a very skeletal framework.

**Steffen:** For folks in Isaac's and my generation your book has been so incredibly influential, but what kind of a response did it get when it was first published?

**Barrow:** When I went to do interviews for political theory jobs, they were, like, "Huh? So you're not a political theorist." That was the reception in political science. There was no debate about higher education, I think, until Isaac came along. I don't know of anybody else who was studying it in political science. I would argue that there's actually a certain antipathy to viewing the university as a political institution, even among political scientists. Once you do that you're implicated in the political process, and it becomes very difficult to maintain this official myth of value-free scholarship that's politically neutral. The discipline has a built-in screen to prevent it from actually looking at itself politically.

That being said, the book was well reviewed in all the disciplines—history, education, sociology, political science. But its best reception was certainly among people who were in education. Strategic planning was just taking off at this time, and people saw a direct theoretical link between strategic planning and scientific management. That link was real, in terms of personnel and thinking.

The place the book got the most attention when it came out was in Mexico. Mexico was undergoing its own process of neoliberalization, followed very quickly by NAFTA. A lot of Mexican scholars looked at the book and said, “What’s happening to us now is exactly what happened in the United States a hundred years ago.” They almost looked at it as a roadmap to the trajectory they were now on. So, I spent a lot of time giving talks in Mexico during the 1990s and working on projects where I collaborated with people in both Mexico and Puerto Rico. That led me into stuff on NAFTA, the WTO, and globalization. But it definitely set me on an interdisciplinary trajectory where I was spending more time going to conferences in disciplines other than political science.

One thing the book also did, because of having to reframe that introduction around state theory to make it legible to political science, was to put me on that trajectory. My second book was *Critical Theories of the State* (1993). So, I actually ended up with my political science persona as a state theorist, although at the time state theory was going into hibernation and nobody was interested in it any more. So I didn’t do myself any favors.

**Steffen:** I know the feeling. I’ve found that studying the university can result in inhabiting a weird interdisciplinary island of misfit toys. Following the university conferences at Minnesota in the late 2000s a few of us formed a little group for a few years called the URGE, the University Research Group Experiment, where our overall question was, are we committing career suicide by writing dissertations critical of the institutions we’re expecting to have hire us later? I’m not sure exactly how the experiment has worked out, but I think Isaac is the only one of us who has a tenure-track job.

**Kamola:** Yeah, and I kind of cheated. I framed my dissertation as a study in “globalization,” not the university. Globalization was hot back then. And, as a graduate student, no political science conferences were accepting my papers on the university. But as soon as I added globalization, they started to get accepted.

**Barrow:** That’s interesting because I can remember, after my book came out in the 1990s, I started working on NAFTA and higher education, which became “Globalization, Trade Liberalization, and Higher Education in North America” (2003). Over and over people would ask me, what are you working on? I’d say I’m working on NAFTA and higher education. And they’d respond, “What does NAFTA have to do with higher education, it’s a trade treaty?” I’d say, higher education is an industry under a trade treaty, just like any other industry. They just couldn’t wrap their heads around that idea.

**Steffen:** This goes back to your earlier point about how extraordinarily well entrenched the idea is that the university is not a political institution, even for those who spend all day every day in it.

**Barrow:** It's a mythical ideology that has an immense power, even as they deal with the actual reality every day of their working lives.

**Kamola:** Yeah. It's crazy to me just how bad political scientists in particular can be at understanding politics. One is happy to talk about failed states, or to compare governmental forms, or measure the likelihood of wars. But we still can't figure out how to ensure that the adjunct professor or administrative staff member in the next office over is making a living wage. What business do we have talking about how other countries should structure their constitutions when we can't get that simple question right?

**Steffen:** This is especially true given that universities have historically been places where new relations of capitalism and state power have played out. More recently this discussion has focused on neoliberalism, but in *Universities and the Capitalist State* the focus is corporatization. How do you understand the difference, Clyde?

**Barrow:** If you go back to the turn of the 20th century, the corporatization strategy laid the foundations for neoliberalization. They didn't use the term neoliberalization, but they certainly envisioned a future higher education marketplace. And so I think the two go hand-in-hand.

Corporatization includes the profoundly expansive rise of administration and professional staff, and the parcellation of faculty labor. We used to advise students. We don't do that now; we have advising centers. But I think neoliberalization goes even deeper than that. I would even call it the rise of artificial non-intelligence. We're starting to see these companies that sell software packages, like PeopleSoft, and there's many, many others. It's come to the point that the software makes the decision. How many times have I had to listen to "PeopleSoft says we can't do that" or "PeopleSoft demands that we do it this way"?<sup>2</sup> That's a way to slough off responsibility for the decisions that are being made. But it's almost as if nobody's in control and nobody's in charge. It's just this machine that keeps going, all in the name of efficiency.

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<sup>2</sup> PeopleSoft is now a widely used software platform in higher education. It purports to offer integrated Student Information Systems (SIS), Financial Records Systems (FRS), Personnel Recruitment (PeopleAdmin), and Human Resources Management, where various information systems can be cross-referenced to provide administrators with enhanced "data-driven" decision-making capabilities. It purportedly gives campus-level and system-level administrators the ability to "drill down" into department/unit-level micro-data and to compare that data across units for enhanced efficiency and the ability to see inside academic units. Barrow's first encounter with PeopleSoft began in 1991, when the newly created five-campus University of Massachusetts System discovered that the various campuses utilized three different financial software systems that prevented system integration and



**Kamola:** How about you, Heather? What is the state of the debate in English departments? Is it “neoliberalism,” “corporatization,” “academic capitalism”?

**Steffen:** I haven't seen people talking about corporatization in the humanities much lately. I see the humanistic study of the university as going from a focus on corporatization to neoliberalization to white supremacy and racial capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

What's interesting about the way we're talking about it here is that I think each of us would agree that it's important to have both corporatization and neoliberalization as frameworks for analysis simultaneously, because it's not like corporatization went away just because we started talking about a fuzzy thing called neoliberalism. And then thinking the history of the institution through a critique of white supremacy or racial capitalism, we need to think about how corporatization and neoliberalization of higher education are distinct but overlapping logics with those as well.

This discussion, however, is raising a question for me: how do we understand the interdisciplinarity of the study of higher education outside of education schools? In the three decades since the publication of *Universities and the Capitalist State*, a large academic literature on universities has grown up, written from many different disciplines. How does this interdisciplinarity strengthen or threaten this growing field of study?

**Barrow:** I think it's a strength of critical university studies, but it's also a weakness in that, I think, everybody exists in a silo. Ten years ago I did a response to something written by Theodore Lowi in the journal *New Political Science*. In his piece, he writes something like, “What we need is more analysis of higher education as a political institution by political science. There's not a literature out there.” My response was, “There's a huge literature out there. It's just not by political scientists, and that's why you haven't read it.”<sup>4</sup> I've even been guilty of this. As you know, people are writing in this field from anthropology, from English, comparative literature, history, economics, take your pick. It's hard to bridge all those disciplines and to keep up even with the literature that's interesting to you.

**Kamola:** If you study the university—and take seriously Wallerstein's analysis that the social science disciplines of economics, sociology, and political science all emerged within the same late-nineteenth-century university as a means to study the increasingly

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centralized system management, monitoring, and control from the President's Office in Boston. After a great deal of debate, and in the midst of a financial crisis, the university agreed to purchase PeopleSoft software for \$150 million. See: Olsen (1990), Leibowitz (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Williams et al. (2021); Harris et al. (2019); Ferguson (2017); Bhattacharya and Gillen (2016); Wilder (2013); Henderson (2012).

<sup>4</sup> See exchange in: Waismel-Manor and Lowi (2011a); Barrow (2011); and Waismel-Manor and Lowi (2011b)

complex modern capitalist world—then all of a sudden it makes sense to speak across disciplines because the long histories of those disciplines actually follow from the same moment in the reorganization of capitalism (Wallerstein 2004, 1-22). If the goal is to produce ideas that tackle important political questions, then studying the university is a good way to engage important questions of state power and capitalist accumulation. If the goal is changing the world, not merely academic disciplines, then making universities the object of study makes a lot of sense to me.

**Steffen:** I agree wholeheartedly with what you've both said so far. I just want to add that part of the challenge with interdisciplinarity, especially interdisciplinary collaboration, in the study of the university or elsewhere, is that it takes work and it takes time. It takes work and time that I think a lot of people are enthusiastic to put toward it. But it's work that doesn't produce something that can be measured on point scales for promotion and tenure. I learned from working on a large, multidisciplinary project about metrics in higher education that interdisciplinary collaboration takes a lot of time talking and checking understandings of concepts and vocabulary, a lot of work to build a common language before things can get done.<sup>5</sup> So part of the problem is that it's very hard for this work to get funding when your project is going to have a year or two potentially with no measurable outcomes.

This becomes compounded by the fact that interdisciplinary studies of universities are taking place within an institution that is itself changing.

**Kamola:** When I first read *Universities and the Capitalist State* in the mid-2000s it seemed like new labor organizing in the university was pretty novel. There was the graduate worker organizing at NYU, the occupations at the New School and the UC system. At Minnesota we tried and failed to form a union.<sup>6</sup>

Today I'm much more optimistic in terms of the labor organizing, especially contingent faculty unionization, that seems to be much more radical, much more aware of faculty as workers than when I was in graduate school. I'm seeing a whole generation of new faculty leaving graduate school and stating, "Of course, we're workers." But this radicalism is also tempered by a deep existential fear that's out there, both in terms of economic fear as well as manufactured right-wing attacks.

**Steffen:** I'm also heartened that things are improving for undergraduates, at least in the realm of public awareness and consciousness of the realities of undergraduate students' lives. We now have national discourses around free college and around student debt, and the damage that student debt can do. Certainly a few years ago, there was this

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<sup>5</sup> See Newfield, Alexandrova, and Johns (2022).

<sup>6</sup> For works on academic labor and unionization at the University of Minnesota, see Pason (2008); Kamola and Meyerhoff (2009). At other institutions, see: Rhoades (1998); Berry (2005); Krause et al. (2008).

mobilization around campus sexual assault that I think brought a lot of stuff to the surface, that universities have had a really vested interest in hiding for a long time, a really long time. I kind of see that movement about campus sexual assault as being almost a precursor to the #MeToo movement. And I think there's also a lot more awareness of things like homelessness and hunger among undergraduate populations. I think that our country has a much more accurate view of who college students are, what kind of vulnerabilities they have, and the kind of long-term problems that need to be addressed to improve undergraduate life at this point. I'm constantly disappointed at not seeing that awareness translate into real policy changes or culture shifts on campuses. But I do think that's a big positive trend for me, that we're better about undergraduates than we used to be.

On the disheartening side, I think we're about to see bibliometrics and impact factors and software like Academic Analytics being used much more extensively, and not just for day-to-day HR, but for actual decisions about hiring, promotion, tenure, funding, resource distribution, all of that. If we look to the UK as a model, or to the rest of the Commonwealth, I think it's coming for us and it's going to be a big deal.<sup>7</sup> How much are impact factors used in political science?

**Barrow:** I think it varies widely from department to department and type of institution. I think everybody looks at them, but with a grain of salt. You know, Immanuel Kant would have had a terrible impact factor because his stuff didn't have an impact in the first two years after it was published. I actually think people are looking at other kinds of things, like Google Scholar citations and stuff like that. And I think there's pros and cons to that. I think the pros include how you can invert the system to your own advantage. Nobody beyond the chair reads what you write. They just count what you write. And there's no such thing as a plus or a minus sign beside a citation. Doesn't matter whether you were criticized, you still got a citation for it. So you can work all that to your advantage if you want to pursue a nonmainstream sort of trajectory.

The thing that worries me is a personal experience I had with this when I was still at the University of Massachusetts. I forgot the name of this database, but I think they're out of Maryland or someplace out there. They're trying to create this database of every faculty's publications in the whole country, and you can buy access to this gigantic database. We bought it at our institution, and it was just rife with mistakes and errors. When we brought this to the provost, his response was, "Well, yeah, but it all evens out across the institution." And we said, "Well, that's wonderful, except that you're not making decisions about the institution, but making decisions about departments and individuals. And the data is all wrong." But they take this data as if it was hard as a rock when it's just flimsy. The danger is you end up with people who really don't know what

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<sup>7</sup> Strathern, Marilyn, ed. *Audit Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2000.

they're looking at. Don't have the ground floor knowledge to understand what they're doing with this data. And it ends up creating catastrophic decisions.

**Steffen:** Yet another example of corporatization and neoliberalization working in tandem.

Isaac brought it up earlier, but thinking about the relationship between universities and politics I was wondering what you two think about unions? I would guess we all agree that unions are necessary, as a stopgap, to keep the worst impulses of the institution at bay. Unions are crucial, especially as we have more and more contingent workers. We need to keep wages up. We need to have benefits. We need to make the contingent not so contingent. We need to protect people from the most horrific abuses of academic freedom and attacks from external and internal entities. But what about the other concerns we raised?

**Barrow:** I agree with you. I think unions definitely have their place, and they have a constructive role to play in protecting faculty and improving their material working conditions. I think some of the structural problems that we have with academic unions right now—and others may disagree with me, depending on their experience—but in my experience of working with both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association was, when you get into these big teacher unions, K-12 is about 90 percent of the membership. So K through 12 dominates all the discussions of public policy. When I worked at an AFT institution, most of the organizers were not out of higher education. And the philosophy of the organizers was: organizing a union is organizing a union. They don't understand the difference between a university and a high school, that we do research, that we're more actively engaged in managing that institution. So that creates a real problem. Now, both those unions have separate higher education sections. But then you're overwhelmed by the community colleges who are also predominantly teaching institutions. So, I end up gravitating toward the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) as the, quote, "pure" professors' union.

**Steffen:** Yeah. I've had better experiences, having been in a UAW postdocs union and an AFT/AAUP faculty union, as well as organizing adjunct faculty with the United Steelworkers for a little. What I've found is that in the unions organized by the Autoworkers, the Steelworkers, SEIU, those kinds of problems are much less because those unions look at academe and they say, "Oh, these are not like people we have organized before, or maybe they're a little bit similar, but still very different." And in both the Steelworkers and Autoworkers, the staff and the organizers that were working with the academic unions were almost always former academics—people who left Ph.D. programs because union organizing was going to offer a much more stable career than academe. The more these other trade unions are involved, the clearer it becomes that being an adjunct is much more, in material ways, like other types of work than like being a tenure-track faculty member.

**Barrow:** You know, higher education is one of the most densely unionized sectors in this economy. More than fifteen percent of faculty are unionized, much higher than the ten percent national average. Not only that, it's a sector that has seen incredibly rapid growth in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

**Kamola:** This also seems to correspond to other classes of professionals showing greater interest in unionizing. Be they journalists or the editorial and content staff at web sites and media platforms. I think we're seeing an intellectual class increasingly interested in unionization. I've never been in a recognized union, as much as I've tried to organize one in graduate school. But even having an AAUP chapter on our campus has been a game changer. We were successful in ensuring that, during COVID, faculty were able to choose whether to teach on campus or online. That was because we had an organized AAUP chapter that pushed. It was a substantial labor victory.

**Steffen:** Who knew that this conversation was going to come down to "The answer is the AAUP"?

**Barrow:** Well, now. I wasn't going to leave it at that. I think what we agreed on is that those types of organizations are important defensive institutions, they protect you against the worst abuses by administrators, but they don't point us toward a different kind of future. We kind of end where we began, trying to answer: What is to be done?

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<sup>8</sup> See, Herbert (2016); Snideman and Mulvihill (2017); Herbert and Apkarian (2017); Herbert et al. (2020).

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