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REVIEW ESSAY

BEYOND CRISIS: HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY AND TOMORROW

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FOREWORD

I was originally asked to review *Austerity Blues* (Fabricant, Michael & Brier, Stephen, 2016) but as I engaged with the authors' arguments, I developed a more extensive commentary on the state of higher education, particularly public higher education in the United States. The paper became a review essay in which I have analyzed the premises of the authors and argued with some of their conclusions.

When I first submitted this paper, in August 2019, I thought it was very relevant to current issues in higher education. Since then, the pandemic has upended the status quo and revealed the fault lines in all aspects of our economy and society. Before and after COVID-19 are different countries. I thought about withdrawing this paper as past its time. However, I have decided to let it stand as a marker of the issues of higher education and discussion of a possible future at a time before that future became radically different.

The conditions and problems of institutions of higher education in 2019 are significant for the re-building that will take place later. As different as the future will be, it will be built on the past because there is no place else to stand. Ignoring that past, trying to recreate it, or refusing to acknowledge and investigate its problems will only lead to fossilization.

It is too early to see the forms that will develop post-pandemic. Some changes may be developed from the decisions that have already been made to cope with the emergency. How we go forward now, struggling to resume even while there is neither cure nor vaccine, will affect the future. How we understand and interpret the conditions we thought of as "crisis" for higher education before the pandemic will influence how we think and work in re-building.

I hope this essay can serve to describe the problems of higher education in 2019, and to define some of the causes of those weaknesses. In the Afterword, I will highlight some current issues and point out some possible directions as plans are developing for re-opening in fall 2020.



THE VIEW FROM 2016 TO 2019

Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Education by Fabricant and Brier (2016) is one of a number of volumes in the genre of "critical university studies," which was defined in an article by Jeffrey J. Williams (2012) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. According to Williams, critical university studies began in the 1990s and quickly developed into a field of study with articles by scholars in a number of disciplines. Literary and cultural criticism were part of the arena, as well as education, history, sociology and labor studies, all focusing on problems and causes of difficulties facing higher education. The source of the problem has varied over the years: at first, attention was on ways in which business and corporate models influenced traditional faculty procedures. This was followed by concern with broader economic issues, such as the decline of the American middle class as well as institutional financial problems like student debt and increased employment of part-time faculty. In the current decade, the scope and diversity of the studies have increased, with attention to the dominant role of administration, the effort to use technology to supplant live teaching, and an awareness of the global nature of the problem and the struggles it has engendered. Despite the wider view, three aspects of most studies in this field are: (1) a view of the university as an institution in crisis; (2) nostalgia for a golden age of the university that was marked by adequate funding, faculty governance (by the tenured full-time faculty) with administrators who came from the ranks of the tenured faculty, and small classes for well-prepared students with low/no student debt; and, (3) plans and programs for restoring the university to that ideal form. In *Austerity Blues*, Fabricant and Brier follow this pattern with a focus on the impact of neoliberalism on the public university systems in California and New York City and State.

The book's first chapter, "Public Assets in an Era of Austerity," describes neoliberalism as their key analytical concept. The authors state six key propositions that place their study of the university in the larger sphere of "the reconstitution of the state" (p. 20).

Proposition 1: We are faced with an epic economic crisis of global capital (p. 20).

Proposition 2: The crisis of capital was used to promote intensified rationing and growing inequality in the distribution of public or state resources (p. 21).

Proposition 3: Intensified socioeconomic rationing has had a profound impact on the content and structure of public goods and the social reproduction of the labor force (p.24).

Proposition 4: The reassembly of the welfare state and its social reproduction processes are tightly aligned with the effort to legitimate the capitalization of public assets during a moment of economic crisis (p. 29).

Proposition 5: The starvation of public agencies and the reallocation of public resources to privatized experiments results in dramatic disinvestment in poor and working-class citizens of color and their communities, effectively defining these population as disposable (p. 31).

Proposition 6: As wealth and income gaps grow and uneasiness about potential social and political turmoil spreads there is an increased public and private investment in surveillance, control, and outright repression (p.33). [Italics in original]

Fabricant and Brier see "austerity" as the chief problem affecting not only public higher education, but also other social issues, like health care and the environment. They see the decrease in funding public universities as part of an "attack on the purpose and functions of the state as a drag on the market" (p. 14). They conclude that "[t]he combination of fiscal crisis, the financial sector's search for profit-making sites, globalization, emergent forms of technology, and restoration of American competitiveness are cohering and pointing to higher education as locus for massive reassembly and monetization" (p.39).

Seeking to situate their work in a wider view, Fabricant and Brier assert that they will use "...the policy silence about ecological degradation as both a metaphor and a policy referent to help understand our present course of action regarding public higher education." (p.15). A few pages later, they promise to "...examine the transformative changes presently sweeping through higher education as a window on broader currents of state policy responses to emergent crises." (p.19) However, they never follow through on these ambitions, except in more general references to neoliberalism.



For Fabricant and Brier, neoliberalism is the source of the problems creating a university crisis today: neoliberalism is blamed for generating massive cutbacks in this area because, in the authors' words, higher education is "the public good most susceptible to globalizing trends" (p. 37). Their focus on neoliberalism as the central causative factor is, in my opinion, a significant weakness of their argument because neoliberalism is too blunt a tool for deep analysis of institutions embedded in specific time and social conditions. While it is true that the conservative right has attacked public education, it was because education was one part of the broad array of all public benefits they wished to eliminate. Furthermore, much of the right's fury was directed against the prestigious private colleges that they accused of teaching the liberal creed, rather than the public universities that are the particular focus of Fabricant and Brier. Conservatives supported chairs for conservative economists and historians, created institutes and think tanks to teach their own ideas, such as the Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University, both funded by the Koch brothers as Mayer (2016) has discussed at length (pp. 149–150). As far as public education was concerned, the plan was to privatize the lower grades and cut funding for higher education, as part of their overall approach described by MacLean (2017) to decrease all public services while reducing taxes on the wealthy (p. 68).

Mere reference to neoliberalism as cause will not suffice. More is needed: specific details and arguments, such as found in works like those of Mayer and MacLean cited above. Their studies provide detailed reports and analyses of the ideology and actions of the radical right to control the minds of Americans and to develop the mechanisms of taking over education to do so.

The attacks by the conservative right, although they damaged higher education, were not the only factors leading to the decline in funding. As Suzanne Mettler (2014) argues:

Other present-day policies that would appear unrelated to higher education have influenced funding for it through 'lateral effects.' Medicaid and prisons, for example, have imposed heavy and growing financial burdens on state budgets, and lawmakers have funded them at the expense of public universities and colleges. Revenue policies, along with restrictions that make it difficult for public officials to raise taxes, such as the TABOR provision in Colorado, have also undermined higher education spending. Plutocratic governance at the national level has therefore been mirrored by many states as they have in effect shifted costs from affluent citizens to students at public universities (p. 113).

Education has special problems in the arena of public funding, as Dar (2012) pointed out in her paper, "The Political Dynamics of Higher Education Policy."

"...the complexity of the higher education sector, as a provider of both public and private goods [e.g. scientific research as well as individual degrees], funded by public and private sources, and often presenting barriers to entry based on academic merit or socioeconomic status, is a source of instability in political coalitions and produces ideologically inconsistent combinations of policy preferences (p.787).

Other studies, such as those by Hacker (2010) and McCarty and Poole (2016) considered the effects of the political polarization of the nation, a factor that prevents consensus on such topics as education spending. This is a topic far beyond the scope of this paper, but it is raised here to indicate the over-simplification of reliance on neoliberalism as the principle explanation for the stresses on public higher education. "Neoliberalism," as Tejaswini Ganti (2014) has written, "is a polysemic concept with multiple referents". Writing as an anthropologist, Ganti said "...as an analytical framework, neoliberalism can also obscure ethnographic particularities and foreclose certain avenues of inquiry." (p.89). It is my contention that neoliberalism has been used in *Austerity Blues* in ways that obscure other factors, and I will discuss this in some detail in reviewing the section on CUNY in the period of the 1970s and beyond. Finally, the emphasis on neoliberalism as the causative factor for today's problems in higher education leads directly to two other weaknesses of *Austerity Blues* that are discussed in detail later in this paper: nostalgia for the past, and the single-minded effort on restoration.

The University as Institution

The heart of *Austerity Blues* is an analysis of the development of public universities in California and New York State and City—the three largest public higher education systems in the United States—from expansion after World War II to retrenchment in the years following the fiscal crisis of 1975. This study is, in my opinion, the strongest part of this book, as the authors present the history of these institutions in detail as a way to clarify the issues now confronting public universities. Chapter 2, "The State



Expansion of Public Higher Education," reviews the factors that led to the creation of these important institutions of public higher education.

Between 1862 and 1890, the extent and aims of public higher educations were transformed by the Morrill Land-Grant Acts, enacted to support the development of colleges for agriculture, engineering and other practical subjects "in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes." Several of the historically black colleges were founded by the 1890 expansion of the Acts. Thus the Morrill Acts extended higher education to a broad range of the population as well as establishing the role of the federal government in providing land and funds to the states. It was left to the states to decide how to use the federal resources, and California and New York developed very differently. While New York used its money and land grants to support the development of private institutions and to provide scholarships to enable poor students to attend them, California developed a system of public higher education. These differences became even more defined with the growth of federal interest in and funding for public higher education after World War II, the period in which the university in its modern form was created.

As the War drew to a close, government officials began to consider how to transition to a peace-time economy. There was no wish to repeat the memories of the "Bonus Army" of World War I veterans that had marched on Washington and encamped there until violently expelled in 1932. In addition, it was clear that the nation would have to undertake a major effort to redesign an economy that had been intensely concentrated on the war effort and that would require educated and skilled workers. The War itself had led to major technological developments that would form the basis for the expansion of the peacetime economy. The Draft had revealed a very low level of education among millions of young American men, and the demands of a rapidly developing economy and technological change would require a workforce that could respond to new needs.

The first issue was that of providing benefits for the 15 million young men who were being demobilized, and this was accomplished by the passage of the GI Bill, which included payments for housing, living expenses, and tuition for veterans to attend high school, college, or technical schools. Fabricant and Brier point out the significance of the GI Bill's educational provisions: "...the United States was unique during the post-war era in making access to a college education *broadly* available to its citizens, and especially its veterans" (p.45). One result of the GI Bill was to create new opportunity for a broad population who would not previously have had access to higher education, as Fabricant and Brier note: "The GI Bill had a leveling effect politically and educationally, albeit one stratified by race and, to a lesser extent, gender. The bill opened higher education to many demographic groups whose previous access was either severely restricted or entirely blocked" (p. 45).

Although most of the credit for the post-war expansion of higher education is popularly attributed to the GI Bill, it was the Zook Commission's work that determined the forms that expansion took and shaped higher education as we know it today, 72 years later. Their six-volume report was published under the title "Higher Education for American Democracy" (Zook, 1947) thus indicating the Commission's vision of higher education not only in economic terms, but also as a basic factor in citizenship rights and democratic participation. Fabricant and Brier stress the Commission's position in the context of the period: "This support for the development of an inclusive postwar public higher education system was erected on the foundations of the New Deal's broadly social democratic ethos and the federal government's perceived commitment during the war to defend and extend democratic rights" (p. 47).

The Zook Commission's report not only established a permanent role in higher education for the federal government, but it also sketched out the expansion of institutions that were needed to benefit the numbers and the varied needs of the new students. In his dissertation on the work of the Zook Commission, Aranguena (2011) describes the postwar student body: "Campuses with a veteran population had a diverse student body that included married veteran couples, disabled veterans, and more diverse demographics. Also joining the new college students were veterans of "older age," many in their late 20's and beyond" (p. 16). They had a wide range of educational needs and vocational goals, and the Commission recommended several steps to accommodate them: expansion of local community colleges to assist students not yet ready for four-year colleges; financial assistance, through lowering costs of public institutions and by providing grants and scholarships; programs aimed to eliminate the kinds of discrimination that limited opportunities for all students, not just veterans, to achieve a college education (Aranguena, 2011, pp. 23-26). Also developed were changes to the curriculum to include new majors, like City Planning and Public Health, while maintaining a common core of studies. The focus on higher education included not only access to jobs as the post-war economy rebounded, but it was also a factor in creating the broad "middle class," whose collapse and disappearance is one of the most disturbing aspects of contemporary American society. Christopher Newfield (2008) described



the goal of this expansion of higher education: "This vision was of a full political, economic, and cultural capability that would be in reach of more or less everyone through higher education and related public services" (p. 3).

The increased federal funding for higher education, like that of the Morrill Acts, was distributed to the states to use in developing their programs, and it was during this period that the institutions of higher education took on their modern form. In the case of California and New York City and State, the differences in their educational systems grew even further apart. California had a well-developed public university system in place by this period, with three University of California campuses, nine state colleges, and 38 junior colleges. According to Fabricant and Brier, "California already possessed arguably the most robust public university system in the country on the eve of World War II" (p. 50).

In New York State, private colleges, overseen by a Board of Regents, dominated. In the pre-war era, New York was the only state without any kind of public university system. As a result of the post-war demand, the Regents established scholarships for New York State residents to help pay tuition at private colleges, and created 22 new junior colleges. In 1948, Governor Dewey, over the opposition of the Regents and private universities, signed a bill creating the State University of New York (SUNY) and new community colleges. SUNY did not undergo any expansion as an institution, although the following years saw a number of state measures to increase scholarships for students and state aid to private institutions. New York City, on the other hand, had developed tuition-free, publicly supported higher institutions since the establishment of The College of the City of New York in 1847 and Hunter College in 1870, later adding colleges in Brooklyn and Queens. In addition, New York City, unlike the State, continued to fund public higher education through tax dollars both before and after World War II, delaying tuition charges until the opening of three community colleges in 1955, while maintaining the tuition-free status of the four-year colleges until 1976.

New York and California attempted to maintain their original higher education structures while also accommodating larger enrollments. California planned to develop the junior colleges for vocational and credential programs, the state colleges for technical and engineering professional studies, and the University of California system for higher-level research and professional credentials. The New York system was not so demarcated, with community college graduates able to move on to four-year colleges, and with undergraduate as well as graduate study in the senior colleges.

By 1960, both New York and California had not only generated significant increases in public higher education and public debt to sustain it, but they had also committed themselves, as indeed most Americans had committed themselves, to a role and a vision for public higher education as the road to middle class life as well as a greater good in the creation of an informed citizenry in a national enterprise of democracy and plenty. In that year, Fabricant and Brier point out the California Master Plan had anticipated a 23% increase in enrollment only to find that new students numbered almost twice that estimate (p. 62). In New York State, Governor Rockefeller, introduced a plan in 1961 that dramatically increased the size of the SUNY system. In both states, the strains of increased enrollment as well as demographic, economic, and social changes began to affect the educational system.

Many universities had benefitted from the Cold War years which had brought great increases in government work and research grants. Graduate work in both science and the humanities (in programs like area studies and Russian institutes) received government funding as well as support from nonprofit foundations. These sources provided money for the maintenance and expansion of the universities. However, the prioritizing of research over teaching led to decisions that relegated teaching of undergraduates to adjunct faculty and graduate students. This was particularly marked in California where the university system had become a "multiversity" with the research and professional programs at the top of the pyramid while at the bottom the undergraduates complained of being processed in factory-like conditions. As Gusterson (2017) noted in his presidential address at the American Ethnological Society, the divisions between research and teaching resources created grievances that would spark the California student protests of the sixties (p. 438).

A University in Crisis

The third chapter of *Austerity Blues* is titled "Students and Faculty Take Command" in reference to the upheavals at California and CUNY in the 1960s and 1970s. It is difficult to justify this very positive view because for most of these years, no one was in command: administrators were reacting to student demands and to fiscal and political decisions outside their control, faculty were struggling to keep up with changing academic requirements and the needs of an enlarged student population, and students, many of them unprepared for college, were doing their best to take advantage of new opportunities. Where Fabricant



and Brier see students and faculty in command, an assessment of the period by the Mayor's Task Force (1999) saw "An Institution Adrift."

The greatest transformation of CUNY in this period was the introduction of "open admissions." Beginning in 1964, the university had committed itself to improving opportunities for poor and minority students and developing programs to identify and provide academic assistance for them, with the goal of providing every New York City high school student with a place in a community college by 1975. The impetus behind this plan was the recognition of the greatly changed demographics of New York City. A study of this period in New York City's history by Phillips-Fein (2017) reported: "In 1940, less than 7 percent of New Yorkers were nonwhite; by 1970, more than one-fifth of the city's population was black and 16 percent was Latino" (p. 22). These population changes meant corresponding ethnic redistribution in the city's public schools, but they were not reflected in the student body of CUNY. The disparity was particularly noticeable at the City College of New York (CCNY) an institution of 91 percent white students located in the 98 percent black community of Harlem, in a city where black and Puerto Rican students made up 40 percent of high school students (Stephen Steinberg, 2018).

Racial disparities drove protests in New York City in ways that were very different from California, where it was the "multiversity," top heavy with research funding that left the undergraduate students feeling ignored. Fabricant and Brier see the 1964 Free Speech Movement uprising at Berkeley as a reflection of "simmering discontents among students and supportive faculty members about the nature of the contemporary public university" (p. 77). They also stress the ways in which the student upheavals were responses by students and faculty to the social, economic and political tensions of the period as well as opposition to the existing conditions and goals of the public education system.

In New York City, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the fear of race riots led to the decision to introduce open admissions much earlier than the planned 1975 start date and without the support and remedial services that were needed. As Fabricant and Brier write, "These tensions flared and exploded [...] across the multicampus CUNY system in 1969 as it became one of the nation's primary battlefields in the decade-long fight for the soul of public higher education" (pp.71-72).

This view of Fabricant and Brier, that open admissions was not just a policy for expanding admissions for students of poor and minority backgrounds but somehow reflected a "fight for the soul of public education," reflects their intense personal investment in the principle of open admissions. I submit that their commitment prevents an impartial, scholarly assessment of the period. In addition, their use of neoliberalism as explanatory principle for the problems of the university leads them into another difficulty because, as Phillips-Fein (2019) wrote, "...the concept seems to be too uncritical of the liberal economy of the post-war years. It runs the risk of setting the post-World War II era apart as some kind of 'golden age' or ideal economic order..."(p.357).

Fabricant and Brier sum up the period of open admissions thus: "Despite many immediate challenges, open admissions was indeed a triumph. It transformed CUNY into the most open and perhaps most envied higher education system in the country in the early 1970s" (p.85). It was difficult for me to understand the authors' uncritical and wholly positive view of this difficult time. I finally concluded that a large part of their enthusiastic perspective was based on nostalgia, both for the events of the period and for their own roles in it.

Nostalgia is implied in the very title of the book, with its reference to the blues, a musical form of longing and loss. The subtitle of *Austerity Blues is Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*, and the phrase reveals the authors' vision of the significance of the public university as a core institution of American society as well as the depth of their personal experience of public higher education as a defining element in their own lives. In their Introduction to this book, they describe themselves as sons of working-class families who saw college as a door to the middle class. They found the educational experience to be such a defining influence on their minds and spirits that they went on to become professors, committing their lives to service of the institution and their students (p.1).

Nostalgia is a complex emotional state, as described in the title of Annika Lems' (2016) article, "Ambiguous longings: Nostalgia as the interplay among self, time and world." The object of nostalgia is not just a particular time or place, but it involves one's sense of oneself as an actor in that time or place. Philosopher Edward S. Casey (1987) saw it as "...a world, a way of life, a mode of being-in-the world," such that "[i]n being nostalgic, what we seem to miss, to lack or need, is a world as it was once established in a place" (p. 363).



The nostalgia that Fabricant and Brier evidence here is based on their recollection of involvement in the changes at CUNY in this period as well as their deep commitment to the principles acted out in the student demands. It is my contention that Fabricant and Brier do not fully take into account the background of the 1975 crisis and its implications for CUNY. Their vision is too narrow and focused only on the university as an institution. Their theoretical viewpoint, which prioritizes conservatism and neoliberalism as root causes, is inadequate for a deep understanding of the problems of higher education then or now.

A City in Crisis

Fabricant and Brier applaud the introduction of open admissions: "CUNY had thus put itself at the forefront of national efforts to make tuition-free public university education available to any high school graduate who wished to attend, a long-deferred dream..." (p. 84). A 1999 study of open admissions prepared for the Mayor's Advisory Task Force on the City University of New York commented on the policy differently:

... CUNY had effectively delegated its admission standards to the New York City Board of Education. Yet CUNY apparently did not realize what level of preparation a non-Regents diploma represented until they administered assessment tests to the Fall 1970 freshmen; CUNY administrators were reportedly 'shocked' to discover that 25 % of students tested were reading at or below a 9th grade level, and an additional 40% scored between the 9th and 11th grade levels" (Renfro & Armour-Garb, 1999, p. 25).

The gulf between these two positions is too great to be bridged by references to "conservative politicians and business leaders" as Fabricant and Brier try to do (p. 88). Their theoretical position is incapable of teasing apart the layers of contradictions and issues involved in these changes to CUNY. To understand what was happening requires a more precise, in-depth investigation of events and actors. Fabricant and Brier fail to provide such a specific study, opting instead for statements that reflect their own experiences and attitudes and, in the course of doing so, they overlook or fail to address some important factors.

We should look carefully at their arguments here in the larger context of the City, State and the United States in this period. Thus, reflecting on events in California in the sixties, they note that Ronald Reagan justified cuts to public higher education as a reaction to out-of-control intellectuals and students, and they generalize from this moment:

It is no coincidence that the antitax austerity politics Ronald Reagan rode to national political prominence and that has maintained its iron grip on national and state policy four decades later had its origins in the/attack on public higher education in California at the end of the 1960s. It is difficult to overstate how central this ideological confrontation was in triggering the sustained erosion not only of the public university but also of basic state functions, as well as the rise of austerity policies in America" (pp. 79-80).

Although there is validity in this argument, I contend that Fabricant and Brier overstate the role of neoliberal economic theory because the tax cuts can also be seen as popular steps to undermine and punish the student "counterculture" movements of the period.

Can one blame an ideology of neoliberalism for events at CUNY? Unlike California, where the aeronautics and space industries had prospered during the post-War period, New York City was already deep in a process of decline that would culminate in near bankruptcy in 1975. Although Fabricant and Brier do reference the worldwide economic recession of 1973-1974 (pp. 86-87), they do not take account of the long decline of New York City that had begun in the 1950s. The City was not in a position to finance the expansion of numbers and needs demanded by CUNY students, because New York's economy was sliding towards a catastrophe that went largely unacknowledged until the end.

As described in *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*: "The collapse of New York in the 1970s stunned the nation because for so long, the city had embodied a kind of government and society whose success seemed unassailable (Phillips-Fein, 2017, p. 15). New York City was the very symbol of a model modern city, in the forefront of public transportation, public health, public education, with free museums and libraries, beautiful parks, and, crowning it all, the City University of New York. The foundation of the city was industry, small workplaces with blue-collar jobs in fields like garment manufacturing, electrical supply, and printing, in addition to the many jobs on the docks. The tax base produced by these companies supported the benefits enjoyed by the workers and their local, small business employers.



This was a system in equilibrium, but the balance was destroyed by changes beginning in the 1950s. New York became a destination for southern Blacks and Puerto Ricans seeking economic opportunity. At the same time, however, New York's economy was beginning to lose many of its traditional jobs for newcomers as cheaper labor (without unions) in the South or offshore began to draw small manufacturers. The piers lost business to new technology and larger cargo ships that required more space for off-loading. Real estate developers and financial services became powerful as thousands of workers in manufacturing lost their jobs: "between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, half a million jobs disappeared from the city" (Phillips-Fein, 2017, p. 21). Communities were destroyed and longtime residents displaced by policies of "urban renewal" and transportation expansion like the Cross Bronx Expressway. "White flight" drove an increasing number of more prosperous New Yorkers to the suburbs, their movement facilitated by federal tax incentives for home ownership and the new highways that opened up Long Island for development. The tax base in the City could not keep pace with the growth of demand for social services, nor were the users of public services primarily the same people paying the taxes.

Political leaders failed to cope with the changes in the city and resorted to borrowing great sums of money to maintain the old style of life. This is not the place to discuss those decisions, but their result was undeniably devastating. By 1975, New York City faced bankruptcy, as the banks and the federal government refused to lend money or to do anything to avert the impending disaster except to force the city to accept a damaging series of cuts in all areas of public services. Education was not singled out as a special target—there were layoffs of hundreds of police, firemen, sanitation workers and hospital employees. In May 1976, when CUNY did not have enough money to meet its June payroll and was forced to shut down for two weeks, New Yorkers were already coping with so many cutbacks in essential services that the closing of the colleges went almost unnoticed. Paul Blumberg (1976) described his experience as one of the CUNY faculty in applying for Unemployment Insurance. The experience was strange and unsettling to colleagues in the line, but it did not cause a ripple in the life of the City.

Although everything at the university was disrupted—final examinations, grading, graduation, summer school, grant applications pending, important undelivered mail locked up—in a sense nothing was disrupted because the public was completely unaffected. The closing of an institution of 270,000 students and 25,000 faculty and staff made scarcely a ripple in the ongoing life of New Yorkers. (p. 102)

The immediate effects of the layoffs on CUNY were severe: when CUNY re-opened, it was no longer tuition free. The impact on the staff was grave, with 5,000 employees terminated (Phillips-Fein, Kim, 2017, p. 253). The effect on the full-time faculty was limited--none of the tenured professors lost their jobs, but a number of tenure-track faculty were let go. The union, the Professional Staff Congress, managed to blunt some of the impact, especially for tenured faculty. In his dissertation, Tirelli (2007) stated "For full-time faculty, the economic packages offered during the mid-to-late 1980s were the best in the period from 1975-2000 with relatively strong salary gains . . . even though it was a period of a declining overall number of full-time faculty" (p. 290). However, the part-time faculty, also members of the union, did not fare as well during this period, nor have their salaries benefitted from the across-the-board salary increases in subsequent contracts.

The long-term effects on CUNY were more serious. When open admissions was adopted, CUNY was already overcrowded with three new campuses not due to open until 1970. In addition, both the City and the State had deprived CUNY of the financial resources needed for expansion. This was a full five years ahead of schedule, and the preparations of facilities and faculty were not in place, resulting in shortages of classroom space, long lines at registration, and needs for special classes to overcome the lack of academic preparation of many high school graduates.

Fabricant and Brier emphasize one particular reason for the serious problems faced by CUNY after open admissions: the adjunct faculty who were hired to meet the needs of the large increase in student numbers. "CUNY never fully recovered from this diminishment of its full-time instructional workforce" (p.88). They find severe staffing problems in the fact that "[b]y 1974, adjunct faculty already comprised one in three CUNY instructors" (p 86). They note that "[t]he use of adjunct faculty was more pronounced at the new senior and community colleges in CUNY than it was at the older senior college campuses in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, which had many more senior, tenured faculty" (p.86).

"These fault lines and tensions on CUNY's increasingly diverse campuses intensified as city, state, and national budgets were further constrained by public-sector decision-making," (p.86). It is difficult to understand what "fault lines" and "tensions" the authors are describing. It would seem from the previous paragraph that it has something to do with the presence of more



adjunct faculty at the newer colleges. This perspective reflects the “fault lines” and “tensions” within the PSC, in which full-time and part-time faculty have been in uneven and uneasy alliance since their two unions were merged in 1972.

A pamphlet, *Crisis at CUNY*, was published by a group of younger, untenured faculty, calling themselves the Newt Davidson Collective (1974), in which they analyzed the situation at CUNY as part of larger political and corporate efforts to re-structure the public university. Writing as the University approached the 1975 shutdown of CUNY, the Collective described the weakness of the union in opposing administrative initiatives. “It [the union] reflects and perpetuates the current academic hierarchy imposed by management, and—except on economic issues—is relatively acquiescent to administration policy” (p. 102).

Thirty-seven years after *Crisis at CUNY*, the inability of the union to counter administrative decisions was further revealed when the administration unilaterally imposed a new curriculum, Pathways, upon the university in 2011. The Professional Staff Congress, outraged by this refusal to recognize shared governance, led a vote of no confidence in which, as Fabricant and Brier state, Pathways met with “staunch faculty resistance” when “[o]f the seventy-two hundred full-time faculty at CUNY, more than forty-three hundred voted, and 92 percent voted no confidence” (p. 106). What they do not mention is that the part-time faculty were not permitted to take part in this vote. These disenfranchised, dues-paying union members teach most of the introductory courses affected by Pathways. In the May 2013 newsletter of one group of adjunct faculty, CUNY Contingents Unite (CCU), Sandor John wrote: “A real fight against Pathways would require a genuine revolt by both ‘full-’ and ‘part-time’ faculty, staff, and students against the two-tier labor system and the anti-democratic structure of the university itself” (p. 1). The PSC has never willingly engaged in organizing the adjuncts. Indeed, Fabricant and Brier never seem to see the part-time faculty as anything other than a problem to be resolved by hiring more full-time faculty.

Nevertheless, the reliance on part-time faculty continued to increase. “The number of full-time faculty slipped from 11,000 in 1975 to just under 5,600 by 1999” according to The CUNY Master Plan of 2012-2016 (p. 16). It is clear that something happened even after the reopening of CUNY following the 1974 shutdown to create this loss of faculty, but instead of addressing the changes in detail, Fabricant and Brier describe this period in an inadequate and overly general ideological summary that does not provide a real explanation:

CUNY’s decline would continue for two more decades as conservative politicians and business leaders used neoliberal arguments to malign its contributions and further cut public investment in its operating budget. These political attacks reached a fever pitch in 1999 under the Giuliani administration with the formal end of remedial instruction at the CUNY senior colleges (p.88).

Thus Fabricant and Brier refer to “political attacks” and ignore the serious analysis and discussion of the 1999 report of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee, “City University of New York: An Institution Adrift.” The Task Force found that the New York City public schools were not preparing students for college and that the necessary remediation at CUNY was not only costly but had become a burden on the standards of the university. They found that CUNY was not “...the institution of choice for New Yorkers. On the contrary, for most of them CUNY is simply the institution of last resort. Very few of the graduates of the City’s high performing high schools elect to attend CUNY, while CUNY receives a very large share of graduates of the most troubled schools” (p. 44).

The Task Force accepted the conclusions of a report prepared for them that had acknowledged that “[t]hirty years after the implementation of open admissions, CUNY has not yet established valid and reliable remediation tests (...) nor has it promulgated systematic and valid standards to determine when students may exit remediation” (Renfro and Armour-Garb, 1999, p. 7). The Task Force affirmed its commitment to college opportunity for every graduate of the New York high schools while setting forth “recommendations for college level and to ensure that CUNY’s senior colleges admit only those students who are prepared to succeed in college-level work” (p. 36).

Fabricant and Brier do not acknowledge the problems of the open admissions period. They perceive all critics of the policy as “a staunch conservative opposition,” (p. 84) and they include in that group those who openly discussed the problems, saying that the “...emergence of conservative voices was soon amplified by breakdowns in the implementations of open admissions across CUNY” (p. 85).



Criticism of open admissions did not come only from opponents. James Traub, a journalist, spent 18 months observing the remedial classes at CCNY (The City College of New York) which had been the starting point for the sit-ins and demands of the students that resulted in open admissions policy. Traub (1994) wrote that

City College is a stage on which the dilemma of the affirmative action idea is enacted every day. [...] what you feel, acutely, if you spend any time there, is the desperate struggle of the students to exploit the opportunity they've been given, and [...] the struggle of the college to make that opportunity real without compromising its own commitments to excellence (p.viii).

Even those academics who supported the goal of expanding access to a wider ethnic and economic population of students, like Theodore Gross, Dean of Humanities at the City College of New York, were highly critical of its implementation, especially the lack of remedial support and what they considered inadequate response to the problems by the administration. While faculty struggled to teach the skills their students needed to succeed in college, the lack of sufficient resources devoured the attention of administrators. Gross (1980) wrote:

The university could not seem to meet the needs of the new learners and shape an education that brought them into the middle class. In the room where the deans convened, everyone studied flow charts and data and bickered with one another about the few dollars remaining after salaries had been paid and heat and electricity bills settled (p. 80).

Fabricant and Brier do not address the very real struggles of students and faculty in the 1970s, nor do they offer any specific solutions for the difficulties faced by CUNY in 1999. A broad ideological view suffices as they move on to the next section of their book: "It is widely acknowledged that CUNY and other New York City public services and institutions were canaries in the coal mines of the global neoliberal offensive launched in the mid 1970s. . . . It is to that larger national story that we now turn" (p. 88).

The National View

At this point, Fabricant and Brier largely abandon direct attention to CUNY to turn their attention to more generalized discussion in Chapters 4-6, a section titled "The State of Austerity" (pp. 91-199). They do use some specific examples from CUNY in their fourth chapter, "The Making of the Neoliberal Public University," where they quoting statistics on the decline in state funding, the increase in student debt, and the increased exploitation of an underpaid and marginalized contingent faculty. However, these issues are true of public higher education in general, and they have been covered in many other studies, as listed in the lengthy bibliography of *Austerity Blues*. Fabricant and Brier's chapters in this section, on "The Public University as an Engine of Inequality" (pp.117-157) and "Technology as a 'Magic Bullet' in an Era of Austerity" (pp. 158-199) do not add anything original to the discussion. These chapters largely abandon the authors' focus on California and New York State entirely, while retaining only marginal attention to CUNY in a superficial analysis of specific problems under cover of theoretical discourse on neoliberalism. This view of the problems of the higher education is an abstraction in which the university is seen only as an institution.

The focus on the institution stops at the bricks and mortar; it does not take into account the many factors that make up the university. In calling for a more holistic account of the university, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2017) wrote

. . . .the ensemble of anthropological writing on the university largely, if not entirely, leaves out: administrators, university presidents, trustees, faculty, graduate students (currently in the US news for their attempts to unionize), academic journals, financial aid bureaucracies, accreditation practices, professional academic societies, curricular debates, the social organization and content of research, janitors and food preparers, and the role of social class in university life (p. 438).

Although Gusterson is speaking as an anthropologist and describing a whole body of literature here, his point also applies to the genre of university crisis literature in general. We have seen in the discussion of crisis at CUNY that Fabricant and Brier did not fully discuss the roles of public officials, especially the city politicians who were closest to CUNY. In the same manner, they overlook any discussion of the role of the faculty union, university administrators, or trustees as actors and agents in the struggles. In lieu of such analysis, they rely on broad phrases about "conservative politicians."



Proposed Solutions

The final chapter of *Austerity Blues* is titled "Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education" (pp. 203-48) and it forms the third part of the book, "Resistance Efforts and the Fight for Emancipatory Education". In this section, Fabricant and Brier describe their plans for overcoming the "Austerity Blues". Their desire for a return to the golden age of public higher education is apparent. They call for "an exclusive siting of public higher education governance, financing and instruction under the aegis of state or local governments" (p. 215). It is difficult to see how this could occur, given the deep involvement of the federal government through many programs and much legislation than can hardly be dissolved in one pen stroke. A recent report by the Rockefeller Institute of Government (Schultz & Cummings 2019), revealed that New York State ranks as number one among the states in sending more money to the Federal government than it receives back in aid, which was -\$35.6 billion in 2017 (p. 6). Perhaps Fabricant and Brier contemplate a system of state and local control of federal funding, such as that used in the earlier support of public higher education. However, they do not go into specific detail on the exact ways in which such funds would be raised and distributed.

In a brief "Epilogue" (pp. 249-256), Fabricant and Brier indicate some signs that they consider very hopeful for the future they envisage for CUNY in their analysis of the 2015 struggle at CUNY to obtain a contract after working without one for five years. They point to the support of "an emergent alliance of community residents, students, and other New York City union members to defend CUNY in a moment of crisis" (p. 254). They see this support as an example of future coalitions that may be able to reverse the politics of austerity and secure adequate funding for public higher education.

Nevertheless, the problem is deeper than funding, as critical as the financial problems of education are. Like other "university crisis studies" Fabricant and Brier focus, not on the process or ends of higher education so much as on the institution of the university. This "crisis consensus" as it is termed by Boggs & Mitchell (2018) leads to "an analytical predisposition toward rescue and restoration...ill-equipped to contend with the structural paradoxes of the institution itself in a thoroughgoing way..."(p. 436). For Fabricant and Brier, the main avenue to change is a call for "a political struggle joining students with faculty to press for a redistribution of resources sufficient to [...] assure [...] a high-quality education" (p.226). While such a grassroots movement to obtain many improvements in social services, including quality health care and affordable housing among other necessities for a decent life for all Americans, is something many of us would support, I argue that even this political change would not be sufficient to achieve the reforms needed in public higher education. A nostalgic view of smaller class sizes and more full-time faculty available to advise students is not a plan that will suit the needs of today's students or today's economy. That ideal university was created 70 years ago, in the aftermath of a World War that dramatically changed American social life, economy and demographics. We are now living in a very different economy and at the edge of a major generational change.

CONCLUSION

There is an education crisis that is much bigger than a "university crisis." The education crisis starts in the privatization of public education through charter schools (and it is fair to blame the radical right for that). The degradation of public education is compounded by low salaries for teachers, segregation in the public schools, and school boards that censor textbooks. The students get moved along to public high schools that fail to prepare them for college. Finally, the education crisis culminates in colleges, underfunded by the states, and top-heavy with highly paid administrators, where the adjunct faculty who make up a majority of their teachers exist precariously. The university crisis is more than a crisis for the institution as it is now, or as it is recalled nostalgically.

This is a time for the third great configuration of higher education in the United States. The land grant colleges were created by the Morrill Acts at time when the American economy was on the verge of a massive change, one based on new applications of science and invention and in the context of a post-slavery society that would emerge from the Civil War.

War and technological change were the impetus for the re-invention of higher education as the end of World War II. With the influence of the Zook Commission, the system of higher education was expanded to meet the changed economy as well as the needs of this new generation of students. Today the demographics and the economy have changed so that the current higher education system is facing new demands and must change to meet the new needs.

The 2018 report, "Freelancing in America," indicates increasing numbers of Americans who are freelancing—56.7 million people now, which is up 3.7 million since 2014. The report also shows that freelancers highly value skills training over formal education, with many college educated freelancers seeking skills training beyond college (Upwork, 2019,)n.p.).



New forms of postsecondary education in addition to traditional four-year colleges are now needed. We recognize that the economy has changed from one in which manufacturing is dominant to one based on technology and service positions, but we are slower to come to terms with the idea that many people will have two or three different careers (not just different jobs) in their working lives. A four-year college education and a BA are not enough for a lifetime. It is clear that something beyond more funding to recreate the institutional ideal at the heart of so many university crisis studies is needed. The federal government already provides some funding for states to develop programs in career and technical education; in 2018, Congress passed the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century (Perkins V) Act, which provides about \$1.2 billion in federal funding for programs. In private enterprise, Amazon, Google and other tech companies are offering online postsecondary credentialing programs. While there are issues to be raised about the value of these programs, as Paul Fain points out in his article, "Employers as Educators," (Fain, Paul, 2019), the investment made by the companies in these programs indicates a need for this kind of training. Whether universities want to be part of this transformation of higher education is an issue far beyond the scope of this essay, but it is one that should be seriously considered. The current crisis of the university can be an opportunity to develop expanded institutions of post-secondary education that will be able to provide students with the abilities for full and productive lives in a democratic society.

AFTERWORD

As noted in the Foreword, this review essay was written before the pandemic and it is presented as an analysis of that period. I have made no attempt to bring it up to date, which would be a futile effort right now. Heraclitus is said to have taught that "all is flux, nothing stays still," an apt observation for this moment. It would be foolish to attempt to predict the future, but we can make some observations about the current early plans for the Fall 2020 semester and consider how they reflect (or don't reflect) attention to problems identified in this paper.

The schools want to reopen as quickly as possible both to reduce the students' educational disruption as well as the financial losses of the institutions. It is notable that there have not been any after action reviews of how the schools handled the shutdown or the interim period. What is even more remarkable is that there seems to be an institutional consensus that the aim should be eventual restoration of the status quo before the emergency.

We have already noted the nostalgia expressed in *Austerity Blues* for the days in which students were better prepared, classes were small, and there was shared governance between the fulltime faculty and administration. In today's context, the "blues" seem even more out of place, although the austerity will be intensified. Cuts in budgets and staff are already taking place. At CUNY, departments have been required to plan pre-emptive cuts in courses and staff, in anticipation of steep reductions in public funding. An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education identifies 162 institutions that have reported layoffs, furlough, or contract nonrenewal for 44,368 employees, which the author of the article considers to be a "significant undercount." He cites statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that 19,200 fewer workers were employed in March 2020 than in February 20 (Bauman, Dan, May 13, 20)

For the re-opening of colleges, there is a variety of plans, ranging from in-person to on-line to hybrid classes and a number of institutions are still undecided. The most significant observation about all the plans is that the decisions seem to be made by administrators. Television news channels and the press report statements made by Deans and Presidents. While one could say that it is normal and customary for the top administrators to be the public face of the institutions, I would argue that the detail and the confidence with which these plans are being announced take no notice of other important factors, such as the willingness of students and faculty to return to campus, given the absence of a vaccine or successful treatment. The ability of students and parents to pay for college will be severely restricted in many families as a result of loss of employment, declining stock values, and costs of illness.

While the public media is focused on official statements of re-opening plans, social media is the avenue through which adjuncts are discussing those plans and some of the less-publicized changes already underway. Although the Chronicle article does not break down details of the levels of faculty affected, we know from a number of posts on social media that adjuncts have been especially affected by the layoffs. At some CUNY colleges, all the adjuncts received notices of non-reappointment which were quickly retracted as "an error", to be corrected with a new round of notices later in May. Adjuncts are organizing to protest



these cuts, to require health insurance for all adjuncts as a condition of return to campus, to demand additional pay for hours spent in preparing classes and for the additional expense of their at-home internet service required to teach online.

There has been little news of efforts by the faculty unions of oppose the cuts or to support the demands of adjuncts. At CUNY, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) has issued statements to administration and trustees and Governor, imploring them all to restore funding to CUNY while at the same time warning adjuncts that any radical actions like withholding grades could be seen as a violation of the Taylor Act, bringing serious repercussions for individuals and the union.

While we cannot foresee the possible success or failure of the actions described above, we can observe that the various groups have remained in their usual roles. Administration, union, tenured faculty, adjuncts all seem to be trying to find ways to respond to this novel situation by various adaptations of their customary, isolated positions.

However, there is some news of other ways of organizing and reacting. The *Tallahassee Democrat* reports that United Faculty of Florida (UFF) which represents faculty and other professionals at many of the colleges and other educational units in Florida “has assembled a diverse cross-section of students, parents, health experts and professors to come up with suggestions it plans to present to the Governor on June 1 (Dobson, Byron, 2020).

The future of adjuncts is only one part of the coming changes in institutions of higher education. The pandemic has made visible the gaps and inadequacies of many social and political institutions. We have been forced beyond continued denial to a full view of the fault lines of class and race. When fault lines slip, there are earthquakes. We have not yet seen the extent of this earthquake and its aftershocks. Higher education and its institutions will not escape the upheaval.

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Response from the Authors of *Austerity Blues*

Dear Editor,

Authors usually don't spend too much time responding to positive or negative reviews of one's own academic work, especially a book that was published four years ago. But since Yvonne Groseil's critical review of our book, *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*, has been published in your journal we feel compelled to respond.

First and foremost, Groseil criticizes us for focusing too heavily on austerity and neoliberalism as analytical constructs to understand the contemporary crisis of public higher education in general and CUNY in particular. She argues that neoliberalism "is too blunt a tool" (a claim she never quite explains or offers an alternative to). She also criticizes us for two other flaws: nostalgia for the past and a commitment to "a single minded effort on restoration." We will, in this response, respond to the first two criticisms; the third one makes little sense to us and will not be addressed in these comments.

Neoliberalism is a product of the post-1970s political and economic consensus among mainstream Democrats and Republicans, corporate leaders, and cultural and intellectual opinion makers that has ruled the nation's (and the world's) political economy for the past four decades. From our perspective, it's hard to imagine a better analytical framework for understanding how and why the public sector has been so badly ravaged quite the way it has right up to our present moment of the pandemic and the



resulting economic dislocation it brought. Neoliberalism is not merely an “economic theory,” as Groseil argues, but rather is a *Weltanschauung* that encompasses politics, culture, history, philosophy and economics. Neoliberalism is a straw man for Groseil, which she repeatedly knocks down in her review. But she never offers anything close to an alternative analytical framework.

As for Groseil’s nostalgia critique: We both plead guilty to a strong belief that mass action by students and faculty in the 1960s did much to positively (though hardly perfectly) reshape American society and especially its university culture in the following decades. We actively and proudly participated in those struggles and think the public university is a better place, not only because struggles like the one for open admissions at CUNY positively transformed the demographics of the system’s student population but also contributed to a broadening and deepening of the university’s curriculum. As we argue in *Austerity Blues*, the fight for Black and Puerto Rican studies at CUNY in 1969 led inexorably to the creation of women’s and LGBTQ studies across our campuses a few years later, a victory that spread far and wide not only across the CUNY system, but also across the country in the following decade. We stand by our assessment of the importance of the Open Admissions struggle, which Groseil dismisses as an “uncritical and wholly positive view of this difficult time.”

Groseil counters our embrace of the positive outcomes of Open Admissions in the 1970s (before the 1976 fiscal crisis undermined it) by quoting in her review not once but three separate times from the reactionary 1999 Giuliani/Schmidt report “CUNY: An Institution Adrift,” which led to the ending of remediation instruction at CUNY’s senior colleges. Without getting into the weeds on this, we’re confident that if you compare *Austerity Blues*’s analysis of the positive impact of Open Admissions with the critical analysis of CUNY offered in “CUNY: An Institution Adrift”¹ our interpretation will prove far more accurate and appropriate, not only in terms of what happened to CUNY in 1976 and 1999, but also in the present moment.

Groseil, ironically, lapses into rank nostalgia herself in her loving description of NYC in the 1950s, which she says was “a system in equilibrium.” “This balance was destroyed,” she claims, first and foremost when Blacks and Puerto Ricans came to the city beginning in the 1950s seeking economic opportunity. That in-migration of nearly one million new New Yorkers of color was matched by an almost equal number of out-migrating white New Yorkers. We agree that the changing demographics of the city in the 1950s and 1960s helped spur the changes that ultimately ended up ushering in the 1976 fiscal. As we now know it was the city’s historic social democratic commitment to the broad provision of social services to its citizens, including the world’s largest public hospital system, generous welfare payments, and, last but certainly not least, free tuition at CUNY, that were the particular targets of neoliberal politicians and business leaders in both political parties after 1976 once the fiscal crisis was at hand. It’s no surprise that once the recipients of the city’s social capital became more Black and Brown, politicians of both parties were more than willing and able to pull the plug on ongoing public support. We don’t blame the victims of those neoliberal attacks, the city’s poor and working class citizens, for the reactionary policies visited upon the city CUNY in the years that followed the fiscal crisis.

By all means read and consider Groseil’s critique of our book. But we’d also encourage readers of *The Independent Scholar* to go to our original analysis in *Austerity Blues* as well before you draw any final conclusions about the importance of neoliberalism as a tool to help us understand the current moment of crisis we find ourselves and our institutions in.

Prof. Stephen Brier, CUNY Graduate Center

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¹ <http://home.nyc.gov/html/records/rwg/cuny/pdf/adrift.pdf>,