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The Academy Under Siege

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In a recent article—“Academe’s Coronavirus Shock Doctrine” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 12, 2020)—Anna Kornbluh brilliantly reads our current coronavirus crisis in terms of Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), explaining how “disaster capitalism” has a way of exploiting even justified public fears and leveraging temporary crises for long-term economic gains and power advantages. On Kornbluh’s reading, academic institutions that are jumping on the online wagon for temporary relief in order to ensure the safety of their students, faculty, and staff may stay on that wagon longer than necessary. Kornbluh’s article warns about the opening of four problematic fissures that faculty should be wary of:

First, faculty are asked to transform their pedagogy to produce online courses under duress and without extra compensation;

Second, those transitions are dictated from above rather than decisions being made under the best practices of shared governance (see AAUP Handbook);

Third, universities could cull course content for later use under the rubric of institutional ownership of intellectual property;

And fourth, some courses cannot and should not “migrate” to the online sphere for pedagogical reasons.

As a preliminary comment, we should recall that the critique of ideology promises insights during times of crises, whether in the capitalist framework or that of totalitarian regimes; in short, crisis is accompanied by belief—that we can do better. Sometime in the second part of the previous century, crises became opportunities for the consolidation of power and the transformation of life as we know it; in short, crisis became a playground for cynics and opportunists (as even Rahm Immanuel declared when he was President Obama’s chief of staff). The Age of Trump has brought previously unimaginable cynicism, with its evisceration of government regulations and public protections and the administration’s benighted refusal to heed science. The outbreak of COVID-19 has illustrated how Mutual Aid Networks, individual and community outreach, and the mobilization of local efforts might counteract or offset the failures on the part of the Federal government.

We agree with the spirit and the letter of Kornbluh’s critical comments and would like to emphasize four other related issues.

“Remote Learning”

First, in recognizing the trap of “remote learning,” we must also recognize the radical, though often overlooked, differences across academic institutions, which remain unmentioned in the neoliberal universalizing guise that one (critical) size fits all. According to Josh Moody, “Of the 4,298 institutions [listed by NCES \[National Center for Education Statistics\]](#), there were 1,626 public colleges, 1,687 private nonprofit schools and 985 for-profit schools in fall 2017. The data divide the institutions into categories such as four-year

colleges and universities and two-year schools, often known as community colleges” (*US News*, February 15, 2019). And, as Matt Brim’s recently published *Poor Queer Studies* (2020) emphasizes, *where* one works and studies within the academy has strong predictive powers in terms of how faculty conduct research, what is taught and studied, and for undergraduates, whether or not they will complete their education. Obviously, private elite colleges have more financial resources to weather crises than state universities have. In the neoliberal state, money matters so much that starved state universities receive less than 10% of their funding from the state. Cost-saving measures on many such campuses have for some time tended toward the elimination of all possible in-class courses so as to curtail the need for classrooms, labs, offices, and parking. As Kornbluh notes, when faculty are asked to move to online instruction, it amounts to an experiment for a new normal: we fear that “successful” transition will be used as evidence against faculty who wish to return to face-to-face instruction. If dorms are not cost-effective, they will not be reopened; if cafeterias are losing money, why continue operations? In short, the pandemic offers many opportunities to cut campus costs in the name of public health safety and the neoliberal focus on the individual.

Precarious Faculty

A second concern has to do with precarious faculty. Given that most public universities offer more than 70% of their instruction by non-tenure-track faculty (full- and part-time instructors and lecturers), and given that online instruction can be handled more easily by few faculty in large and multiple-section courses, where lectures are taped, Power-Point presentations are uploaded to Canvas, and grading is automated with AI (even for essays), why not consolidate positions by moving courses online? Why not pay an extra thousand or two to monitor courses rather than actually teach them? Even better, why not outsource them altogether? No personal contact or health insurance needed, and no long-term contracts either. Unlike the fate of MOOCs, whose completion rate was abysmal, regular degree courses are coveted, especially from reasonable state universities rather than for-profit scams. Even the Ivy Plus are relying more on precarious faculty employment because it saves money and they have the advantage of a reserve army of (underemployed academic) labor ready to conform to whatever conditions of employment prestigious institutions demand.

Budgetary Smokescreens

A third cause for alarm has to do with budgetary smokescreens. We know little about the budgets of our academic institutions, public and private alike, except where faculty unions are savvy negotiators. Justification for the disproportion of expenses at the top administrative levels are never offered, while faculty are asked to ensure that they carry the weight of their salaries. Have you taught enough students to pay for your salary and benefits? Brought in enough grant money? Small seminars are increasingly rare and low-enrollment courses routinely cancelled; new shiny objects are introduced in the name of innovation or because external funding has initiated them; consulting firms are engaged in the name of expertise, while the know-how of those who teach is ignored. One wonders why faculty

must go through annual reporting if administrators do not recognize their work. None of this is new. What *is* new is that under the “Shock Doctrine,” we must be wary of permanent budgetary consolidation.

Graduate Students and Programs

The fourth point of vulnerability concerns graduate students and graduate programs. As recent strikes and picketing have shown on various campuses, the status of graduate students remains confused and confusing. Are they scholars-in-the-making or are they cheap, exploitable labor? How the academy answers this question will determine, first, if these two issues can be separated and, second, if they can, how the academy might handle the difference. As it stands, this muddled reality exacerbates the vulnerability experienced by graduate students. On the material register, graduate students need the financial wherewithal to survive the decimated social safety nets of the neoliberal state, given that they cannot count on health care, food security, or adequate shelter, and are constantly made to prove they are not lazy or incompetent. The heavy reliance on graduate students to teach lower-level courses turns apprentices into employees whose labor deserves respect for its intellectual and economic values. Yet, because neither universities nor their students are fully subsidized by the state (regardless of their value to the state), precarious faculty and graduate students are financially squeezed and often pitted against one another. As this pandemic demands adaptation in conditions already sorely strained in the Trumpian age, one wonders in what form the academy will survive.

Academic Freedom and Negotiation

We ought to worry about academic freedom and freedom of expression. However, freedoms without sustainable material conditions are freedoms in name only; when meaningful at all, they remain at the disposal of the privileged few. The structural damage to already starved institutions of higher education will continue to marginalize some and discriminate more brazenly against those already suffering. What can be done, then, in this crisis? Since the Reagan years, young Americans have been told not to trust government, as *it is* the “problem.” And indeed, successive administrations have given us every reason to mistrust the state. Distrust of leadership has sunk even deeper into the collective psyche since the inauguration of Trump, so it stands to reason that faculty and students do not trust their academic administrators.

It’s time that faculty and students together seize the moment and negotiate fair work conditions across the board and establish new criteria for measuring academic “success,” such as contributions to the intellectual public commons rather than grades and salaries. The heyday of American capitalism (as Thomas Piketty demonstrates) happened between the 1940s and 1970s, when marginal tax rates were more than twice as high as today, income inequality was half of what it is today, and social safety nets, however unevenly distributed and extended, were the law of the land. We’re in a different age now, and our public institutions don’t seem up to the task. Have we given up on evidence-based arguments? Have we lost hope in the life of the mind?