



Network of Concerned Academics

A clearinghouse for tracking threats to and victories for academic freedom globally.

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COVID-19 and Higher Education

A collection of commissioned responses from individual scholars and exemplary institutional responses from universities and scholarly societies.

We posed the following questions to individuals across the higher education sector:

- Will moving to on-line communication increase the possibilities of unwanted surveillance?
- Will on-line teaching become a more permanent and far-reaching feature of higher education and what would that mean? What about academic freedom?
- International research communication?

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The following are responses we've received. This is an ongoing conversation. Please contact us if you would like to contribute: admin@networkofconcernedacademics.org.

Joy Connolly, President, American Council of Learned Societies

Three thoughts are weighing on me. First, the switch to online teaching last week was an emergency measure, carried out at the university level by deans and provosts with good intentions, for the most part with little or no meaningful faculty input or debate. This was a big step in the decades-long systems decay of faculty governance — this time over the historically sacrosanct area of faculty control over curriculum. How are we all defining success? As we start to prepare for the fall, how will faculty and administrators assess next steps?

Second, the new online landscape is shaping up to be a gig economy. Where do full-time jobs fit in?

Third, thinking of the classroom in particular and the college in general as a site of intellectual, political, social, and personal change and evolution, how will faculty be able to model styles of life and thought in real time, not as custodians or arbiters or moderators of knowledge but as human beings that students come to know and take seriously as pursuing alternative ways of being in the world? I've often thought that the most useful minutes I've spent in classrooms both as a student and as a teacher are the ten minutes before and after the "official" class -- those moments when student and teacher connect as human beings.

Catherine Rottenberg, University of Nottingham; Neve Gordon, Queen Mary University of London

UK Universities in Time of Corona: Will the Experiment Succeed?

When the coronavirus hit, 74 universities in the UK were in the midst of a historic 14-day strike whose goal was to protect our pensions, decrease our workload, push back against the casualization of labor, and demand an end to the gender and race pay gap. In a show of unity—unlikely to occur in the US—permanent faculty stood together with their fixed term colleagues (adjunct professors) on the picket line, protesting the marketization of the universities and the incessant imposition of corporate managerial models into academic life.

During this latest wave of industrial action, we learned that Catherine's teaching assistant in her American Literature Survey course was being outsourced to a temp agency. Because the PhD student is employed by UniTemps and not the university, he could not strike. While we have spent years fighting for the insourcing of cleaning staff and other service providers, and are thus well acquainted with the endless push to streamline institutional costs at the expense of vulnerable populations, the discovery that academic labor was being outsourced to temp agencies still came as a shock. It was yet another indication that UK universities—25% of which are in deficit due to an unsustainable funding model—are at the forefront of the global neoliberalization of higher education.

Indeed, even before the corona pandemic, UK universities were already pressuring faculty to "lecture capture"; namely, to record lectures and make them available to students. In many classrooms, "capture" is now the default and, if you prefer not to be recorded, you have to actively opt out. The argument is that this will enable students—and particularly those with learning disabilities—to hear the lectures more than once.

There is little doubt in our mind that the universal transition to on-line teaching precipitated by corona will serve as an experiment that is likely to have a dramatic and devastating impact on higher education, particularly in light of the looming economic crisis. Whether the changes will be carried out via a Chilean-style shock doctrine approach once the pandemic is contained or (more likely) integrated in a gradual fashion, we suspect that the outcome of this experiment will lead to the end of academia as we have known it.

Corporate managers—particularly those working in deficit struck universities—may already be thinking that distance learning is the way to go. Class recordings will enable them to reduce the number of permanent positions, while those who mark student essays and exams can be hired through temp agencies. With the possible exception of a group of elite universities whose social, cultural and financial capital sets them apart, over time, more and more courses will likely be purchased from vendors, while the few remaining permanent faculty members will then be asked to focus on assessing and evaluating the "products" sold to students. Moreover, with fewer students on site, some universities might also decide to sell their lucrative real estate, allowing those located in central London, for example—University College of London, SOAS, Birkbeck, King's and the London School of Economics—

to reap substantial profits.

This, to be sure, is a dystopian prediction. But without active resistance on the part of faculty, it will become a reality. For those of us who still believe that intellectual pursuits are worthy in and of themselves and that classroom settings—whether discussion groups or even lectures—are unique sites of learning, where people get together to discuss ideas and cultivate critical thinking, a future of virtual learning, motivated by market factors and assessed by market metrics, is a very frightening prospect. One way of rendering this future less likely is by ensuring that the current experiment, however practical it may seem during the current crisis, does not succeed in the longer term.

Robert Post, Sterling Professor of Law, Yale Law School

Some (Speculative) Consequences of the Coronavirus

The sudden brutal switch to online learning is the most obvious consequence for higher education of the pandemic. Everyone now accepts online teaching because everyone regards it as necessary to reduce serious health hazards. But after the pandemic recedes, it is likely economic forces will seek to keep online learning in place, because it is far cheaper than education before the pandemic.

We should acknowledge that online learning is an effective and efficient medium for the transmission of information. But the goal of higher education is far greater than this. Its mission is to inspire in undergraduates a mature independence of mind. Of course a mature mind is well-stocked, so the acquisition of information is essential. But it is not sufficient. Students must also be empowered critically to assess and use the information they have acquired. This involves not merely standards of thought, but also dimensions of character. Students must learn to suppress the urgent desire for wish-fulfillment and to exercise the virtues of rigor and intellectual self-discipline. This involves internalizing the practice of mature critical self-reflection. Humans only learn such practices when they are motivated to watch and imitate others. This requires the human magic of cathexis, which is the essence of mentorship, and which thrives only in face-to-face relationships.

If during their late adolescence students are not encouraged to identify with those whose goal is to teach them practices of rigor and self-discipline, they are more likely eventually to identify with those whose goal is produce gratification. A long-term consequence of the pandemic may thus be the undermining of democracy. We have long known that democracy requires a flourishing educational sector. But when higher education is pushed into a virtual mode, it may produce a demos that possesses information but that is more inclined to fantasy and less able to learn from experience. We all know where that can lead. We've seen it before; we're seeing it now.

All the more reason, therefore, to push back hard against those will try to transform these emergency conditions into a new status quo for higher education.

Michael Roth, President, Wesleyan University

I am concerned with 3 main issues: health of students and university faculty and staff; economic viability of many institutions; whether online education will compromise core educational values.

1. Health concerns for me are very real. Wesleyan has roughly 3,000 students and a few hundred of them have medical conditions that put them at risk. Given the contagion intensity of residence halls, we asked 90% of the students to leave. I worry about their health, even if they are no longer on our campus. A higher percentage of those working at the university are at risk because of their own medical histories. How can we best serve them, especially in the absence of coherent national policy? If this is the first of a series of viral surges, how can a residential university pursue its educational mission?
2. There are probably hundreds of colleges and universities at severe economic risk. They don't have a lot of room for error, and this crisis is going to force many of them to cut faculty, staff or other dimensions of their organization. The famous places will be fine, but the ecosystem of American higher education is coming under intense strain. Some institutions will disappear.
3. Online education offers opportunities and perils. It allows one to reach many more people over great distances, but it also can create a homogenized experience that results in reduced learning. Many students will be less likely to "bring their whole selves" to class in an online environment. We must struggle to overcome that rather than defaulting to a transactional online experience that ignores the whole person (and the whole professor). Online education doesn't have to be reductive in this way, but it is easy to allow it to become a thin reflection of the empowering liberal education we want from our colleges and universities.

Gary Wilder, Graduate Center of the City University of New York

What Now? Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus

Perfect Storm

The surreal experience of following public news while "sheltering in place" or strolling through bustling city parks intensifies by the day. So many of us are living in a state of suspended animation. Everyday life is derailed as we consume news of accelerating infection rates, collapsing medical infrastructures, and mounting death tolls. Yet for many, these realities, even, if unfolding blocks from our homes, as is the case in New York City, still seem remote, abstract, not quite real. Yet, from the other flank, just as we gradually internalize the very real scale and stakes of this multifaceted emergency that will snowball over untold months, the president of the United States declares, as if God himself, that Americans will be back to work and the churches packed by Easter, less than three weeks away.

Surely, the mass dread in and beyond the U.S. about this pandemic is not only about the scale and severity of the public health crisis. It is compounded by the nightmarish situation in which it has appeared and will surely create. The basics of this perfect storm are painfully clear, even if the way in which it will unfold are not. Decades of neoliberal policies supported by both political parties have hollowed out the state and privatized former sources of social provision. The result will be more suffering and death, social dislocation and public misery than otherwise would have been the case. Under these emergency conditions we can now see the devastating price so many will pay for gutted public health departments and defunded social services, for surrendering medical care, hospital systems, health insurance, and pharmaceutical provision to private actors driven by market logics, for creating a precarious workforce in which so few have job security, paid sick leave, health insurance, personal savings, access to affordable child or eldercare, or access to the internet (so their children can continue to learn). The contradictions of mass incarceration and burgeoning homelessness, compounded by the absence of an adequate substance abuse or mental health infrastructure for those without means, will become evident.

Of course, the severity and effects of this pandemic will be immeasurably worse at this particular moment in the US, when we have an autocratic,

plutocratic, and xenophobic nationalist government in power. We have seen President Trump refuse to undertake essential preparations, inform the public about the reality of the situation, or lead an adequate emergency response. On the contrary, he is willing to imperil the lives of millions for the sake of the (stock) market.

There is little doubt that the commercial shutdowns required by this public health crisis will lead to a severe economic crisis characterized by mass unemployment. The existing neoliberal state and this anti-democratic administration will respond to the intersecting health, economic, and social crises in ways that will reinforce its underlying causes and amplify its immediate wreckage. This is already evident in the ways that congressional Republicans have used the massive "stimulus package" to transfer enormous sums of money to parasitic corporations with minimal conditions or oversight attached. There is no surprise that insufficient funds being allocated to unemployed and informal workers and state governments, let alone an emergency plan for conducting presidential elections while social-distancing in November.

The election! There are strong reasons to worry about several possible scenarios. This authoritarian administration may find a way to cancel or suspend the presidential election and institute some form of emergency rule. Or it may simply refuse to create opportunities for remote balloting. The public's reluctance or refusal to congregate at polling places in a period of pandemic would intensify long-term Republican voter suppression efforts leading to the kind of low turnout that would favor Trump being reelected. The Democratic Party establishment and corporate media (fueled, we are told, by suburban women and older African Americans) have preemptively anointed Joe Biden as the party's preferred nominee. On the eve of economic calamity for masses of working people, this incompetent and out of touch neoliberal New Democrat will be perfectly capable of losing the election on his own. If he wins, he is likely to follow the odious pathway that he has long championed, emphasizing "fiscal responsibility" over social services, corporate benefits over worker protections, Wall Street before Main Street, guarantees of suburban comfort over minimal living conditions for the urban and rural poor. A Biden administration is unlikely to address the long and short-term forces that will have turned this public health and national economic crisis into a decisive social and political crisis. The result will not only be more pain for more people for a longer period of time. It will further consolidate our plutocratic order, weakened public sector, and severe social inequality. In other words, it will seed the possibilities of future health, environmental, and economic catastrophes. It will erode federal, state, and local government's ability to respond to them adequately. It will further attenuate the necessary conditions for any substantive democracy.

Regardless of the election outcome, right now the liberal establishment and Democrat Party are doing nothing to suggest to either Trump's electoral base or to Bernie Sanders' grass-roots movement that a Biden government would even recognize let address the pressing concerns of ordinary Americans whose well-being has declined under elitist Democratic as well as plutocratic Republican administrations.

We should keep in mind that this medical-economic-social-political crisis is unfolding on a global scale. Any response to the immediate situation and any attempt to manage its many ramifications - whether by governments, central banks, investors, corporations, political parties, or popular movements - will be limited, buffeted, and shaped by innumerable intersecting responses world-wide. Thus far, government responses world-wide have favored nationalism and xenophobia over communication and coordination. We have seen border closings, scapegoating of foreigners, and an obscene competition among national states to be the first to develop serology tests and vaccines for "their people" that can then be monetized on the global market. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director of the World Health Organization, has spoken clearly and urgently about the reality of the threat and the kinds of large-scale responses that are needed. But he has been largely treated as a lone voice in the wilderness rather than an authoritative leader. The pandemic has revealed just how far even a semblance of internationalism has eroded in this dawning age of national populist and authoritarian statist capitalism.

In the United States, this volatile situation is further compounded by the fact that large sectors of the middle and upper-middle classes that lived in relative comfort and regarded their life-situations as secure are suddenly beset by fear and helplessness. They are now confronting the immediate possibility of contagion, hospitalization, and the death of loved ones. Their retirement savings are vanishing; their house values will plummet. Many are facing the prospect of unemployment. Their children's educational and career trajectories may be knocked off course.

One likely response will be a desperate wish to 'return to normal.' A wide range of ordinary Americans will likely support the familiar figures who promise such normalcy. They will internalize the normal commonsense about fiscal responsibility, good business climate, austerity, consumerism, private debt, hard work and personal sacrifice. This, of course, is the very logic that led us into the current mess. Present pain and fear about an uncertain future will reinforce the "tried and true," however self-defeating. It is also possible that sectors of this frightened population may become more sympathetic to the exclusivist appeals of America-first nationalism. As chilling as Trump's belief that flat consumer demand would be worse for the country than mass death was his early declaration to the press that: "this really shows — this experience shows how important borders are. Without borders, you don't have a nation. Our goal for the future must be to have American medicine for American patients, American supplies for American hospitals, and American equipment for our great American heroes."

I do not believe that the Marxist geographer David Harvey is being glib when he outlines "the ultimate irony" whereby "the only policies that will work, both economically and politically" to weather the coming economic storm and "save capital and the world from riot and revolution" may be "far more socialistic than anything that Bernie Sanders might propose and these rescue programs will have to be initiated under the aegis of Donald Trump, presumably under the mask of Making America Great Again." In such a scenario, Harvey warns, "the ruling oligarchy will doubtless move to ensure" that these policies "be national socialist rather than people socialist."

There is no telling what might happen. But we can expect the forces on the right, high and low, to instrumentalize this crisis, instability, and widespread panic to further reactionary agendas under cover of necessary emergency actions. This, of course, is what happened after 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis. This counter-revolutionary mechanism of neoliberal counter-revolution mechanism, which Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism," has followed crises around the world throughout the neoliberal era. Now, however, it may be pursued all at once on a global scale at a moment of when the powerful capitalist states are increasingly authoritarian and national populist.

In the United States, within the course of only a few weeks, we have already seen the lineaments of this strategy. Economically, there has been a government sanctioned wealth transfer to the business sector, further easing of corporate taxes, suspension of certain collective bargaining regulations on large employers, waiving of FDA rules on equipment and drug approval, and proposals to further roll back financial regulations. Legally, we have seen unilaterally border closings, proposal to suspend constitutional rights to a speedy trial, automatic deportation of asylum seekers without legal process, suspension of abortions in Republican-led states, the suspension of various EPA regulations etc. Politically machinations for mass voter suppression are at work and press conferences meant to inform the public about the government response to the health, economic, and social crises have been degraded into a self-serving political circus. At the level of political discourse, there is the familiar drumbeat: racializing and scapegoating China as a vector of disease, xenophobic nationalism, contempt for international organizations and coordination. In everyday life, hate-crimes and community discrimination, at all class levels, against East Asians and the treatment of service workers as a disposable population to whom no medical or economic responsibility is owed. At the same time, we can see glimmers of mass social discontent as members of this latter group refuse to sacrifice themselves and their families for the sake of corporate profits or provisioning the more well-to-do. There have been wildcat strikes by workers in Amazon warehouses and internet food delivery services. There have been work stoppages among nurses and nursing-home workers. Skilled medical

workers, including doctors, are being fired from their jobs for speaking to the public, whether through media outlets or in self-produced YouTube videos about their lack of resources, the true scale of the health emergency, and the way they are forced daily to risk their lives by caring for the sick in ways that could have been avoided.

In response to the coming economic crisis we are sure to see aspects of what has happened in the past. This will include policies that protect creditors first, ensure a good business climate, ease regulations, and further defund government. It will likely mean that workers' rights, social provisions, and left movements will be attacked in the name of fiscal discipline, institutional austerity, and personal responsibility. Once again, short-sighted neoliberal policies and corrupt mismanagement will have led to a severe socioeconomic crisis through which the government incurs massive debt that is used primarily to help business interests. The "cure" will deepen economic polarization, social inequality, and the hold of capital over the political process. The resulting budget deficit will justify an austerity regime, whether Democratic or Republican, that will condemn proposals for adequate public spending for social well-being as irresponsible, extravagant, unrealistic, and impossible.

In sum, we might expect a cascading process through which a public health emergency creates an economic crisis with regressive social and political implications that will unfold over an extended period of time. Left attempts to contest these developments will likely be blunted not only by the right, but by mainstream liberal opinion, corporate media, and establishment Democrats in the name of personal sacrifice for public health and social order. We will be told to be "realistic" about immediate expectations, to moderate demands, so we can get back to 'normal.' We might expect this new normal to entail not only more precarity for great numbers of people and an even tighter monopolistic hold by the surviving corporations over our lives. It will also likely be marked by more intensive and invasive forms of security and surveillance, profiling and exclusion, detention and deportation – whether by agent of the state (police, national guard, border patrol) or anonymous algorithms. It is one thing to sacrifice individual liberties and suspend collective practices in the midst of a public health emergency. It is another to surrender both indefinitely in the service of state security order and unfettered capital accumulation. This is the difference between solidarity and subjugation.

Against all such possible developments, progressive forces will have to be resolute in holding their ground.[1] This will include those of us who work within the university, whose fraying institutional fabric will be further assailed. In the midst of such large-scale calamity, it may seem absurd and petty to speculate about the pandemic's possible impact on the academy. Yet, navigating the new normal will require us to remain mindful of the larger historical situation when we evaluate and respond to what will be presented as neutral bureaucratic and budgetary directives about the implications of this crisis for higher education and the university workplace. Holding ground and fighting for change in countless spheres and sectors, in simultaneous and coordinated ways, might contribute to a mass movement for of structural changes at a societal level without which any imaginable future will be bleak for all, even if the harms will be unevenly distributed.

The University in Peril

Much of the discussion among university administrations and academic departments has understandably focused on technical and logistical challenges. How to best use digital platforms to deliver our goods and services to off-site students? What are the intellectual limitations of on-line teaching? But it is also important to reflect on the possible structural and political implications of the (fallout from this) pandemic that will cut across a university already in peril. I will raise these issues under four rubrics that move roughly from immediate to longer-term challenges. These notes can only be preliminary, provisional, and speculative.

Precarity

In the coming recession-depression, we can expect more already-enrolled college students to be unable to afford tuition to complete their degrees. They will either drop out or assume an unmanageable debt burden. Those students who hang on will have been knocked off what had been 'normal' educational and career trajectories that often include study-abroad programs, summer research or travel opportunities and internships. They will be graduating into a severely depressed labor market with fewer opportunities to make the kind of lives they had expected. Many will have to accept dead-end jobs for which they are overqualified in order to try to make ends meet while servicing their debt. The value of a college degree in a depression economy may be called into question by many young graduates who will be unable to be self-sustaining.

The already existing two-tier system that divides heavily and lightly indebted (or debt-free) college graduates likely intensify, with more young people expectedly discovering that they are in the former category. This will further sort college graduates into those forced to accept whatever dismal work is available and those able to pursue potentially meaningful careers. Declining prospects for college graduates will place additional pressure on colleges to become more vocational, adjusting curriculum to market demands (see below).

The public health emergency and ensuing economic crisis will also intensify the (already significant) precarity of graduate students and adjunct teachers. The path and time to degree for several cohorts of doctoral students will be significantly disrupted. Their fellowships are calculated according to a certain timeline. At the very least it looks like those who were about to begin dissertation research will have to wait at least one but likely more semesters before they can do so (whether due to travel restrictions, need for social distancing, the closing of archives and laboratories, the pausing of all those processes that scholars tend to study). This will force them to spend down fellowships that were supposed to be available to them after their research so they could complete their dissertations. Those who do manage to complete dissertation research, will have a difficult time surviving financially in the final stretch of their training after they have pre-spent funding that was supposed to serve this purpose. Students just behind them will have an even more difficult time securing resources for their research. Major funding agencies whose endowments have plummeted and who are reluctant to take responsibility for students to do research in potentially contagious areas have already announced plans to suspend or drastically reduce grants that will be offered to graduate students. All over the country, job searches that were already in progress, have been suspended or cancelled. As the professional pipeline jams, an already competitive job market with an ever-declining number of proper tenure-track jobs, will become even more fiercely so. We can expect a reserve army of under- or unemployed Ph.D.s to grow. Many of them will have incurred debt to make it through their degree or while waiting out several job application-cycles after graduating. They will be compelled to self-exploit through underpaid adjunct and contract positions. On a macro-level, this situation will put downward pressure on adjunct salaries, which are already insufficient for instructors to make ends meet. It will allow universities to continue to pursue "efficiencies" by relying on such contract labor to staff more and more of their classes. In the context of general economic crisis, this dynamic may be exacerbated by falling college enrolments or the need to lower tuition through which college and university budgets would shrink.

The virus-depression will further accelerate and intensify disparities between tenure-track faculty and exploited academic labor for hire.

Austerity

It is easy to see how a virus-propelled economic crisis would further reinforce the corrosive austerity logic that has already seized hold of decision making in so many American colleges and universities, whether public or private. The health emergency and economic crisis will lead to large reductions in state budgets and massive losses in private endowments. There will be more pressure to raise tuition, increase enrollments, further expand cash-cow MA programs, and hire fewer permanent faculty members. There will be a relentless pursuit of "efficiencies" across the system by bureaucrats and accountants. We can expect hiring freezes, salary stagnation or cuts, reduced funding for students, budget cuts across all departments, and the elimination of more and more programs deemed inessential to the basic imperatives of information transfer, certification by

degree, and institutional reproduction.

To the extent that the current experiment in online teaching and digital libraries are successful, we may expect initiatives, driven by incentives to cut costs, to move the university further in those directions.

Following the lead of the UK-led Commonwealth university system there will be more and more emphasis on auditing, reporting, oversight, evaluation, and ranking according to bureaucratic and market logics.

The logic of scarcity and ensuing competition will command faculty and programs to justify themselves in ever more instrumental and measurable terms. Researchers will be increasingly evaluated in terms of quantitative output and numbers of times their work is cited, regardless of the quality of the work or those citing it. Teaching will be increasingly keyed to, because evaluated according to, how well it serves the labor market (i.e., how many and which jobs graduates get). An economic recession will reinforce the idea that numbers and types of jobs for college graduates will be the metric of educational success. Mass unemployment will guarantee endless failure according to these terms. Such failure will create even more pressure to reorganize teaching along vocational lines and to discipline teachers who do not fall in line.

We might expect to see tighter control over faculty work weeks. We may be required to account more directly for how working time is spent and be expected to organize working days in ways that are more aligned with non-academic workplaces. This could include expectations to be in on campus on a 9 to 5 schedule and to be on-the-clock during summer breaks or lose summer salary. There will likely be less money available for individual conference and research related travel and less funding, generally, for conferences and symposia. Based on recent trends and despite supposed budgetary restrictions, we might expect, more mid-level administrative positions to be created. A growing cadre of bureaucrats will be charged with inventing, imposing, and overseeing this austerity regime. Their high salaries, of course, will further drain the pool of money available for faculty and students, education and research. This, in turn, will call for and justify further austerity measures and overseers.

We might expect an assault on tenure as an institution. Like healthcare and pensions, it will be challenged as an outmoded fetter on institutional efficiency, an unnecessary drain on budgets, and an unfair benefit that ordinary workers don't enjoy. Tenure will be denounced as a charter for laziness and lack of productivity without accountability.

In such a situation, it will be difficult to distinguish real budgetary constraints from the way administrations will instrumentalize the crisis to accelerate already existing tendencies toward further bureaucratization and monetization. We might expect these new logics to be embraced by faculty themselves, whether out of fear or belief. There will be a culture of increased competition among faculty confronted by constant evaluation and among programs in a climate of (manufactured) scarcity. We will constantly be told that the (never-ending) emergency requires personal sacrifices and tempered expectations. Dissenting views will be denigrated as selfish, unrealistic, and dangerously extravagant. Portions of the university will be pitted against each other: administrators vs. faculty, faculty in one division vs. those in another, students (and their paying families) vs. faculty, all of the above vs. service staff. The message will be any funding for academic labor (new hires, higher salaries, research funding, public intellectual events) will be at the expense of student aid or graduate fellowships.

In such a situation, many faculty members themselves will become passive or active vectors of this austerity logic.

Individual and collective demands for resources, improved working conditions, or structural change will likely be preemptively dismissed as being out of place - disrespectful, opportunistic, inappropriate, extravagant, naive - in the midst of such an emergency. Labor actions, such as the wildcat strikes among graduate assistants that spread across the University of California system on the eve of the pandemic will be more strongly repressed.

The already existing divide between elite universities, in which academic life may go back to something resembling the old normal, and the rest will intensify.

Democracy

It would be misguided to think that such emergency-fueled austerity regimes will not negatively affect the content of curriculum, quality of education, substance of faculty research, and character of intellectual discourse.

Insofar as the entwined public health emergency and economic crisis empower austerity regimes, democracy within and beyond the university will be further eroded.

Academic freedom will likely be further compromised in a situation defined by precarious workers, shrinking budgets, increased oversight and evaluation according to quantitative metrics (keyed to market and organizational logics), not to mention a weakened tenure structure. Emergency induced austerity regimes empower funders and administrations (bureaucrats, accountants, lawyers) over faculties. The former will be more able to make unilateral decisions without transparency or accountability. Their actions will be more keyed to market and organizational than to intellectual and educational logics. Academic freedom, faculty governance, and department autonomy over curricula may be regarded as inappropriate under emergency conditions as expectations about salaries, funding, and working conditions. As in the larger society, surveillance, repression, and narrower limits on acceptable speech (in and beyond classrooms) will be justified through discourses of small sacrifices for the greater good at a time when the old freedoms can no longer be abided.

Shrinking budgets and growing competition will impel more scholars and research centers to seek funding from, or orient their scholarly work towards, the immediate needs of, outside sources. The latter will be increasingly private, corporate, and profit driven. Universities will be drawn more deeply into, and contribute more directly, to the kind of societal commonsense that they are uniquely positioned to call into question.

The peculiar status of colleges and universities as relatively free spaces of agonistic exchange and sociopolitical dissent will be at stake. This may have long-term consequences for colleges and universities as well as the broader society.

Solidarity

Precaire, austerity, and declining democracy may have an especially negative impact on the fabric of social and political solidarity within and beyond the university.

Divisions between faculty and staff may become more evident. Conflict within faculties may become more pronounced: tenured vs. untenured, those with outside grants and those dependent on university funding, professional vs. academic units, natural vs. human sciences, social sciences vs. humanities, traditional departments vs. interdisciplinary programs and centers. Among the latter, marginalized programs oriented around the study of marginalized peoples (e.g., ethnic and racial studies, gender and women's studies, queer studies, area studies focused on parts of the Global South) will be especially vulnerable to being identified as inessential and expendable. It is less likely that disciplinarily defined departments will fight as hard to sustain them.

Solidarity between elite and other universities will continue to diminish. Insofar as fiscal crises and austerity directives make all universities less diverse

(economically, racially, culturally), solidarity between relatively more privileged student majorities and more precarious minorities (however defined) will intensify.

These tendencies will be exacerbated by the pandemic-propelled imperatives to identify and discriminate between, on the one hand, faculty, student, or staff who have been certified as “immune,” and, on the other hand, those who are not. This division will be mediated by distinctions between those who have access to health care and testing and those who do not, those who have safe places, social support, and cash reserves during quarantine and those who do not.

On all of the above fronts, international students will be subject to particular challenges that will affect institutional and interpersonal solidarity with them. These include travel restrictions, visa restrictions, absence of social and familial support networks during future shutdowns, and the possible stigma of being from certain places at a moment when public and popular discourses work to racialize disease and contagion.

Doubling Down

These dystopian speculations on how this pandemic (and the ones to follow) may ramify for and through the world of higher education in the coming years may be way off the mark. Moreover, the areas of concern I identify are nothing new for colleges and universities. My only wager is that the mutually reinforcing public health and economic crises will work, indeed by leveraged, to accelerate these deplorable tendencies under conditions in which they will be more difficult than ever to resist (on financial, organizational, or ideological grounds). Regardless of how this unfolds for universities, I would guess that various intra-university struggles will be waged, and ground will have to be held, on the terrains of precarity, austerity, democracy, and solidarity. I also believe that our critical analyses of the situation in the university and strategies for responding will be more effective if understood in relation to broader societal developments, contradictions, and conflicts. Likewise, a broader struggle against encroachment and for change will need to be waged in concrete ways on innumerable fronts among which the university is as important as any other.

Many critics have rightly analyzed the increasingly corporate and neoliberal character of the current U.S. university system. This seems to be the direction in which even public universities are moving. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the university is one of the few remaining social institutions of this scale and significance that is not wholly organized around a market logic. The knowledge we produce is not yet wholly commodified and monetized (despite, for example, efforts by publishing and database corporations to enclose, capture, and profit from our research). The aim of our labor is not only, or primarily, to valorize value. Other critics have rightly pointed to the chilling of academic discourse in an era of right-wing trolling, harassment, and persecution of dissident voices. Yet, the norms of surveillance and dissent are much less repressive than most other comparable workplaces. Despite real and worsening constraints, the university remains a realm of relative intellectual freedom. It is more culturally diverse, polyglot, and international than most institutional spaces in American society (even if it fails to live up to its potential on all of these fronts). Academic life may be one of the few vectors of non-commercial internationalism remaining in the United States (even if this internationalism may also reinforce all manner of economic, institutional, intellectual, and national hierarchies). It affords invaluable possibilities for international dialogue, collaboration, and cross-fertilization. Through a variety of formal and informal practices, many academics participate in international networks through which knowledge of seemingly distant analyses, situations, and struggles may circulate.

Whether the impact of Corona inflicted crises confronts us dramatically or infiltrates insidiously, we should be prepared to hold our ground. Fully employed academics have the opportunity and responsibility to resist attempts, justified by emergency discourses, to diminish our work conditions, compromise our classrooms, or undermine the quality of our research and the character of our debates. It will be especially important to contest the self-fulfilling austerity logic which acts as if reactionary institutional choices are necessary and reasonable responses to externally imposed forces. Above all, we should challenge the call, whether by administrators or colleagues, for short-term sacrifices in the service of being able to get back to “normal.”

Within the university, as in the larger society, all such promises of (new) normalcy are suspect. To call or seek a return to normal is to cling to the very logics and arrangements that will have allowed an economic crisis propelled by medical emergency to become a social and political catastrophe. This pandemic has revealed the contradictions and fault lines upon which the “normal” university is founded by which are typically obscured. We will be told again and again that the emergency requires us to suspend demands, defer ambitious projects, and temper expectations. I would suggest that this is precisely the time to double-down on a critique of existing contradictions and an insistence on ambitious structural changes. Now more than ever, it is evident that higher education must be free; students should not mortgage their futures through debt to banks. Now more than ever, it is imperative to untether teaching and learning away from instrumental, vocational, and market logics. Now more than ever teachers and scholars have a responsibility to further democratize the university as space of relative freedom and maximum diversity that interrupts invidious tendencies in the larger society. In so doing it might serve as one among many nodes in the struggle for a different kind of world.

[1] A longer essay would point to opportunities for transformative social visions and emancipatory social movements that might be opened through this suspension of business as usual.

Raphael Sassower, Crisis-driven Structural Changes in Higher Education

In the present pandemic crisis, Wendy Brown’s words about critique’s etymological Greek origins of *krisis* ring loud once again (2005). Her plea for the importance of critique in times of crisis were prescient then and remain useful guides for academics today. Her critique of neoliberalism (Brown 2015) mixed with Naomi Klein’s analysis of the neoliberal “Shock Doctrine” (2007) offer sharp intellectual weaponry with which to study the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Sitting back and waiting for the dust to settle, to have a better perspective with which to analyze the present situation, or acknowledging with Hegel that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the fall of dusk, would suggest that it’s too early to offer a critique, to engage in the still unfolding saga of this particular crisis. Indeed, as Brown laments, critique is always considered to be too early or too late, always “untimely.” In the meantime, we have endured the knee-jerk reactions from the Left and the Right about biopolitics and the limits and excesses of the neoliberal, at times fascist nation-state claiming for itself, in Giorgio Agamben’s rendering, a “state of exception.” We can do better than that, or at the very least attempt to do so, especially when it gets to our own institutions of higher education, where campuses have been emptied and learning is confined to online platforms.

I wish to offer two observations, both more in the political economic register than within the pedagogical register of the institutions of higher education. The first has to do with the trend, already begun in the Great Recession of 2007-2010 (dates are still debated about the length of that recession), of the demise of many of these private and public, small and large institutions. Dan Bauman and Brian O’Leary (2019) list some 1,234 institutions of higher education that closed between 2014 and 2018. That is an average of more than 300 per year. Michael Horn reports as well that “Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen consistently turns heads in higher education by predicting that 50% of colleges and universities will close or go bankrupt in the next decade” (2018). Given that there are over 4,000 such institutions, with a consolidation and/or closure of about 300 per annum or the decimation of 50% of them in a decade (2,000 over ten years is a more “benign” rate of attrition of 200 per annum), higher education is in deep trouble. Speculations about the “causes” of this ongoing trend abound. Some are related to the loss of billions of dollars in the wealth of donors (since the Great Recession), others have to do with the limits on available personal wealth to pay tuition, and still others are related to the fear of student loans that can never be forgiven (unlike other debts that bankruptcy eliminates). Moreover, as Laura Camera reminds us, “Scholars estimate that nearly 2.3 million fewer babies were born between 2008 and 2013, which, when combined with an expansion of higher education offerings in the decades preceding that, mean

too many slots compared to the number of applicants" (2019). However one dissects this multi-causal explanation about the demise of higher education as we know it, the realities have brought to the fore the precarious structural foundations of colleges and universities. The likes of billionaire Peter Thiel should be added to this narrative because of his avowed dislike of higher education and his ongoing awards to those who will not attend them. In my mind, this harkens back to an American tradition that predates the republic and that Richard Hofstadter has called anti-intellectualism.

This, though, is a general statistical overview of the condition of higher education, one that need not be repeated, except in times of crisis, when fear and shock undermine clear thinking and reliance on evidence or, dare one say, scientific data. What has become more apparent since the Great Recession is the way in which conservative, neoliberal, and Republican ideology, based as it still is on the Reaganite legacy of distrust in the state and a push for small or no government interference, still carries the political agenda. The irony of the government bailing out big financial institutions with taxpayers' money has been lost on the Bush and Obama administrations. This ideology justifies the split of the 1% from the other 99%, justifies greater income and wealth inequalities, and forswears using the tax code for income and wealth redistribution and instead (see the 2017 Tax Reform bill) redistributes them from the bottom to the top (see Joseph Stiglitz 2012). This ideology is evident in higher education institutions, where elite colleges and universities have large endowments (e.g., over \$40 billion at Harvard) while state universities have seen their state support steadily decline to less than 10% of their annual budgets. Given the false belief that the only way to shrink governments (federal and state alike) is by collecting as little money as possible through taxes, and given that services are routinely outsourced (once again, public subsidies for private enterprises), it is no wonder that state universities are financially starved out of existence.

So, one point worth emphasizing in the current crisis is that it is a continuation of previous economic policies from previous crises no matter how different the present conditions. I do not wish to argue that the global coronavirus pandemic is the same as the mortgage bubble that led to global financial ruin, or that the loss of human life now is similar to the human suffering and suicides that resulted from the Great Recession. This would be a false equivalence. Rather, I wish to suggest that every economic crisis, the present one included, lends a gentle and supportive hand to the logic of late capitalism, where financial inequalities are retroactively and prospectively justified and where these inequalities manifest themselves in all spheres of life, from environmental discrimination and food deserts to health care provision, subsidized housing, and public transportation. Education, from K-12 to university, is no exception. In fact, the blatant inequities that are emerging with the temporary closure of campuses remind us that the 1% (perhaps the 20%) can weather disruptions much better than the rest; that there is much more wiggle room for the wealthier among our students and professors and staff than for the more precarious, those who live paycheck to paycheck, those who have to juggle the loss of their jobs while attending university, those whose jobs have become even more precarious in the neoliberal university because they have no job security or tenure. In short, the current crisis exposes the neoliberal fault-lines and boundary conditions even more clearly than during moments of relative economic calm and glimpses of prosperity.

The second structural point relates to the first but is more particular to technological innovations whose role in the academy cannot be limited to the infamous Schumpeterian refrain about "creative destruction" (or disruption). What I have in mind is the ongoing pressure, at least in universities like mine, to offer more online courses regardless of the pedagogical appropriateness of these offerings. The pressure is from the top: elected regents, system-wide president, and campus chancellors. The carrots seem tempting and enormous when full-time instructors need to rely on parental help, food stamps, and shared expenses with partners to render their lives bearable. Who can resist a stipend, new laptop, or paid conference trip when their annual salary is less than \$40,000? Who can think about intellectual property when rent and food are paramount? Or, who has the luxury to think about academic freedom and free speech when one's position is at stake? We, collectively, have become quieter and more compliant--yes, in the Foucauldian sense that we each experience it individually--under the financial threats of our institutions. For me, this is a saga that has repeated itself for more than thirty years. Decreased budgets because of decreased state support or because of decreased enrollment or because of increased building maintenance costs has been the norm. I'm sure everyone in public institutions has experienced in one form or another this neoliberal narrative, one, mind you, that oddly seems to affect the very top administrators' salaries much less. Their excuse, as good apologists of late capitalism, is the marketplace with which they feel compelled to compete. Really? This argument rings hollow when you think of all of us who chose the academy as a vocation and not as a place to enrich ourselves, a choice to pursue the life of the mind rather than the mighty dollar. One wonders how many of these administrators or business school professors would earn as much in the "real world," where their jobs could be terminated at any moment.

The move to personal computers first and later to the Internet were supposed to be means, not ends in themselves. Like Power Point presentations and YouTube videos, they were intended, unless I missed the boat completely, to enhance pedagogy, not replace pedagogues. But, as Shoshana Zuboff (2019) brilliantly chronicles (in regard to surveillance capitalism), the seductive hand of neoliberalism lures us into playing its extraction game (human rather than production capital) with eyes wide open. We are complicit in our own surveillance, in letting digital technologies consume our minds, and eventually we demand that which will hurt us. Online instruction, now "temporarily" expected for our own good and the safety of our students, will become the new normal to an extent only university Chief Financial Officers could have dreamt about. It's a wish come true: no more pesky professors around, no more needy students asking for this or that, and no more unionized staff to contend with. Likewise, no more needs for "smart classrooms" or offices or parking. Instead, the Phoenix University of yesteryear promises to rise again as a model of remote education with hefty profits, but this time around with the legitimacy of state universities. Before they jump on that dangerous bandwagon, a quick fact check may be in order. Established in 1976, Phoenix University's peak enrollment was 600,000 in 2010; in 2015, it was 247,000. Since it is a for-profit university (a wholly owned subsidiary of Apollo Group, Inc.), one should note its stock price moving from \$60 in 2010 to \$26 in 2015. By 2020, its enrollment is 213,000 and stock price around \$20. This looks more like a steady decline than a rise from the ashes.

The appeal of online education is that it is cost effective. When considered as potentially outsourced instruction, since the university may own paid development of course materials (the legal debate is not over yet on this intellectual capital), the need for full-time instructors and tenure-track professors will no longer be the case. Promoters of online education commonly divide their arguments into two. The first has to do with outreach and the accommodation of students' needs. As many students have family obligations and work part or full time, it stands to reason that they would expect some flexibility for their schedules. Online courses offer this flexibility and therefore respond to student demand (still using the supply and demand argument of market capitalism). Another part of this set of arguments has to do with differently abled and neurodiverse students for whom this mode of instruction is more appealing. Add to that mixture students who are shy (gender biases in classroom behaviors are notorious as are ethnic ones) but feel comfortable participating on digital platforms. The second class of arguments has to do with instructors' preferences. Some claim that they can address more issues online than within the confines of face-to-face lectures. Others claim that student interaction can be encouraged in online forums better than in classrooms. Still others illustrate the richness of materials that are more readily available with online pedagogical techniques. Each instructor has a story to tell about their own experiences with online courses. I do not wish to follow here these two sets of arguments or debate the efficacy of online pedagogy. I want to close with an observation about the classical debate over the "democratization" of digital technologies. The present crisis, once again, exposes the differences between the haves and have-nots when it gets to Internet access, availability of personal computers (our library gave some students campus laptops), and the facility with which to shift from in-class to remote learning (not all home environments are conducive to privacy and concentration).

There is much more to say about what is happening in our institutions of higher education. Just as the Trump Administration is distracting our attention and clandestinely loosening the regulatory power of the EPA, for example, and shoring up the financial health of his large corporate donors, I want to make sure we are not distracted by the pandemic from what is still happening in every facet of our institutions. The worry about alt-right recording or secretly (digitally) eavesdropping on lectures that then can be edited (so that words are taken out of context) and broadcasted to harm lecturers is a real threat to academic freedom and the sanctity of the life of the mind in the academy. But let's not get distracted by this problem alone, as it comes about because our lectures are no longer delivered within the confines of a trustworthy classroom. Let us make sure that these physical spaces are still there after this crisis, that we return to campuses and meet with students and other faculty to exchange ideas (and not only money for the acquisition of skills), to argue and say uncomfortable things to each other. The privilege of uncensored speech, of trying out thoughts that are not fully formulated, of making mistakes, of arguing for the love of it, is a privilege we should cherish and model in the academy so that we can protect democratic principles and show

respect for the other, the one we disagree with. Remember the plea to get out of disciplinary silos? This plea was not simply a plea for producing a better workforce for late capitalism or even postcapitalism; it was structural as well. We cannot afford not to engage in critique in this crisis; its urgency cannot be overstated.

*Special thanks to Denise Davis of Brown University for helping me with this essay.

Hylton White, Senior Lecturer, Social Anthropology, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

On Sunday 15 March, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a state of disaster in response to COVID-19. Most universities immediately told students to stay at home on Monday (though one institution announced somewhat eccentrically, on Twitter, that the president's ban on meetings of more than a hundred people applied to "public gatherings" but somehow not to "academic activities" such as large classes). Since Tuesday all universities have gone into early recess.

As of when I am writing this, on March 24, we are still in the process of working out what this means for university education as we know it in South Africa. Over the Tuesday after the president's announcement I sent three sets of rolling updates to students in my classes. I started with advice on how to finish the last two sessions of the current term online. Then I heard that university residences were closing, so I announced a blanket extension for assignments due in the week. Then it hit home how many students would be in no position to work on their studies at all, so I suspended all deadlines until we have a clearer understanding of the picture. Some colleagues have been called into work, particularly in campus administration. Most of us have been asked to work from home. Academics are scrambling to prepare themselves for the coming months, balancing the call to work full days from home with the force of new realities such as home schooling and continuous childcare. Presumably this is the situation world-wide.

But we also face issues particular to South Africa. At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), in Johannesburg, very quick and very firm action has come from our Senior Executive Team (SET), which includes faculty Deans along with DVCs and the VC. Much of the planning is reasonable. Many of the steps taken so far are necessary. But there are aspects to the way this has all proceeded which might also leave us concerned about the future.

Following the University of Cape Town's lead on Monday, Wits students were given just three days from Tuesday to vacate all of the residences. In principle this seems to have been a sensible decision. We are told it was informed by close consultations with public health experts. In practice it means that the burden of disruption, forced travel, and loss of essential resources such as clean water, food, and not least of all, the internet, falls heaviest on black and poor students who come from townships and rural areas far away from campus. Given the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, our residence system has few people outside this category, precisely because they are unable to commute. Housing crises are routine for South African students, but now they have been generalized by fiat. Many students have taken umbrage, not least because of the lack of consultation with students themselves, which meant that for some this felt like a forced removal or an eviction - devastating experiences for black people in our national past, and even in our present. Some student leaders called for campus residents to defy the measure. Two Wits law students sought an injunction against the move, a call which the court dismissed the very next day.

There are many ways our leaders could have responded at this point. They could have said the evacuation of residences was necessary but they empathised with the fear, confusion and anger which our present situation has created. They could have acknowledged that in a society like ours the disruption of daily life falls hardest on those who are already most at risk. Instead the Wits SET sent out a statement on the court ruling in which they castigated the students who brought the case:

"We are very disappointed with the applicants and others that have tried to undermine the effective management of this pandemic. Their behaviour is self-indulgent and reckless, and contrary to the advice of leading scientists in the country. ... Individuals must be held accountable and we are disappointed that the Court did not award costs against the applicants in a context where their conduct has not only been frivolous and reckless, but resulted in the University having to expend unnecessary resources in legal proceedings when it could have been deployed elsewhere at this critical time. This is simply unacceptable and these individuals should be held accountable for their actions."

Reportedly the minority of students still in housing by Friday received a notice that vital services (water, electricity, the internet) were about to be disconnected, and all rooms locked. Academics who raised concerns about this have been told that the university is helping those most in crisis, on a case-by-case basis. We do not know how many of our students are aware of this. We do not know many will feel safe in asking for help after they were met with such hostility when they first raised just how hard this time would be for them. (By comparison, some other universities have arranged long-distance buses to take students home to areas in their own and neighbouring provinces.)

Similar trends are playing out in other domains of our campus life. Faculties have moved very swiftly to make contingency plans for the second half of the semester, and maybe even the rest of the year if campus stays physically shuttered that long. The emphasis is on taking courses online. Our own Humanities Faculty has started with an SMS survey to students to find out where they are and what internet-connected devices they have there. Again, this seems like a necessary step, which means that it is sensible to plan for it pro-actively. But after more than a week of discussions there is no matching detail yet on how we should plan for the thousands of students who will not have viable access to e-learning sites while they are isolated at home. Many students will at best have internet access on phones, not tablets or computers. And they are of course from the same demographic as those most affected by the closure of our residences. When colleagues raise this concern it is immediately acknowledged as legitimate. But the overwhelming weight of the actual planning so far is nonetheless for measures that will not work at all for the students who are most vulnerable. The latest message from our SET is that according to their data only a double-digit handful out of 38000 Wits students do not have mobile phones. Are they proposing that students complete a semester's work on a screen that is several square centimetres wide? Unless it is communicated swiftly that we plan to keep not some but every one of our students included, the majority of them will very likely read this yet again as a sign that our institutions are hostile to the poor, almost all of whom are black.

Colleagues are also worried about how quickly we have embraced the student-less campus as a reality. It might be that it is necessary under these circumstances. But how can we be sure as lecturers that all the efforts we put into making this work right now will not be turned against students, support staff and even academics in the future? How can we know that our leaders will allow us to bring back the kind of university we value - where teaching and learning are understood to be fundamentally social acts - and not entrench these measures because they advance external agendas both of budget and of security? Having watched how dissenting students have been treated, we are frankly scared to ask.

On Monday 24 March we received a message from SET: "Whilst we practice physical distance and social solidarity, this disruption also provides us with an opportunity to reimagine how we live, how we work and how we learn. It also allows us to exercise control over the aspects that we can change - and in this instance, how we can learn and work remotely." Now crises are often occasions for experiments in living. These experiments might open our eyes to new ways of creating solidarity and safety. But the early unfolding of COVID-19 here should give us worry that safety and solidarity are being subordinated to postures of security and exclusion. South African universities have been in a nervous condition since the student protests of 2015-16, which were shut down with a mix of violent repression and concessions on key issues such as fees and outsourced labour. Since then we have seen steady moves towards a more authoritarian style for running our campuses. People who dissent are labelled as enemies not just of campus security but

of our nation and its post-apartheid project. We are told that the growing adoption of surveillance and repression is the consequence of their recklessness. We are asked to expose and shun them. Anyone who has studied the 20th century will recognise this language. It is deeply concerning to hear it from some of the people who are now charged with the survival of our university system through this crisis. How can we trust them to make the just decisions, when their impulse is to see enemies to security in the form of their very own students, sometimes even their staff? What should we make of the fact that they are describing this event as an “opportunity”?

This year will be very difficult for universities everywhere. In South Africa, as in other unequal societies with histories of racist oppression, the burden of COVID-19 and our response to it will fall on the shoulders of those least who are least structurally advantaged to cope with the challenges. Once this is over, we shall have to try all the harder to make sure we that, when we re-convene, we do so at universities more democratic, more public, less hostile to the needs and to the politics of the poor.

Anonymous scholar, Turkey

1.

A few days after the announcement of the first Covid-19 case in Turkey, my university came up with a halfway solution. Classes with more than one hundred students would be broadcast online from the lecture hall but students could still attend in person. Smaller classes would continue as before. My class had about two hundred students.

My first online class felt ordinary. About one third of the students showed up. I quickly forgot about the online broadcast. I was talking about competitive authoritarian regimes. These are regimes that have some of the trappings of democracy, such as elections. Yet they are not democratic: incumbents abuse democratic procedures and state resources, and civil liberties are frequently violated. Right at the end of the class, one student asked which countries fit this description.

I then remembered that the lecture was online. I hesitated. “Russia, for one” I said, and added “Well, Turkey is characterized as such in the current literature”. Then, I caught the eye of one of the teaching assistants for the class. Perhaps because we’ve worked together for several years, I read him as saying “Go for it”. So, finally I said, “Turkey fits this description very well” and expanded on this point.

Once the lecture was over, came waves of shame. Shame before my colleagues in Turkey who have lost their jobs, have been legally persecuted and have to live in exile for standing up for their views; shame before the class’ TA’s for not setting a good example; shame also before my students for not trusting them.

2.

Then came puzzlement. I have taught this class for several years. At least since 2013, I have discussed Turkey as an example of competitive authoritarianism. While introducing the subject at the beginning of the class, I had made it clear that we were discussing this regime type to better understand Turkey. I had given examples from Turkey, though without being too explicit about it, when discussing various practices and policies one finds in this regime type. It should have been clear to any student who had been paying attention that Turkey fits the description and that I think that it does. So, why the hesitation?

It was, I think, a worry about providing someone a soundbite, something that could be distributed and reproduced across social media and pounced on by pro-government trolls and media. Like every academic in Turkey, who is critical of the government, I had reasons to worry. I remembered Zeynep Sayın Balıkcıoğlu who had lost her job after critical remarks she had made about president Erdoğan during a lecture-break, which were secretly recorded, were disseminated in social media and vilified by the pro-government press. I also remembered Barış Ünlü who received the same media treatment for having asked questions about Abdullah Öcalan’s writings in an exam and was indicted for it—he was later acquitted, but lost his job during the purge.

I am not a big fish, so I have less reason to fear. However, only going after big fish is not a good strategy for striking the optimal level of fear into society. That requires also sometimes, quite randomly, going after the little fish so that everyone watches what they say. Yet, one does adapt. You learn to say some things only in small classes, where you have gotten to know your students, and not in large classes. You refrain from giving concrete examples, or when you do give examples you resort to cases from other countries. You become less direct. You try to say more between the lines. After all, academic freedom is historically the exception and there is a long history of scholars finding creative ways to say what they mean while trying to protect themselves. One also gets acclimatized. Just as one doesn’t think much about the risks that come with living in a city when one steps outside, one stops thinking about these risks unless something out of the ordinary happens. This is not to say that there is no chilling effect. Just that while it never fully goes away, it does ebb and flow.

3.

There was an initial flurry of exchanges with friends about the switch to online teaching. (Can someone other than the host start recording a Zoom session? No. Can students use some other software to record whatever is on their computer screen? Yes, but when you think about it, it’s not that different from regular lectures: students could record the class without you noticing anyway.) Since then it has been the usual mix of (illusory) freedom and restraint in classes.

Reflection on academic freedom in an authoritarian regime invites the image of the intellectual speaking truth to power. Thinking about the question during the pandemic I have come to think that this image is one-sided. In order for someone to speak truth to power, the truth first needs to be discovered. That brings to mind a much duller picture. A community of inquirers doing meticulous research on significant issues in their stuffy offices.

The obsession with academic productivity even during a pandemic makes me worry that the problem of academic freedom is not limited to authoritarian societies. (The editor of the American Journal of Political Science, for instance, reports an increase of 27% in submissions in the past three weeks.) Academic freedom is a freedom enjoyed by academics for the sake of others. It brings with it the duty to do rigorous research on topics one believes are significant, to do original thinking, and to develop new ways of seeing the social and the natural world. That depends on not just freedom from censorship and retaliation but also freedom from various constraints to explore, to take one’s time to consider which questions are worth asking and to seek answers. Precarious academics who are under relentless pressure to pursue grants and to constantly publish are unlikely to be able to do justice to this duty. Given that the economic forces and the managerial culture that drives the current obsession with productivity will be stronger in the economic crisis that awaits the world and the fact that transition to online teaching will suggest new cost-cutting measures to university administrators I am not optimistic for the future of academic freedom or society, which is its true beneficiary.

Institutional statements and responses

This Dear Colleague letter was circulated at UCLA from the faculty senate and Executive Vice Chancellor. It includes important statements regarding the pandemic.

Dear Colleagues:

We wanted to write to express our deep appreciation for the incredible efforts that you are making to support our students and maintain academic continuity under these trying circumstances. We recognize that everyone on campus — faculty, staff, and students — is navigating a public health crisis that is causing significant temporary changes in both daily life and campus practices. It is important in such circumstances that we take care of ourselves and each other as we navigate this temporary crisis.

But we also wanted to reassure you of our deep and ongoing commitment to UCLA as an in-person, residential research university. Although we are moving to remote instruction to help secure the health of the university, this is a temporary response to an immediate crisis. UCLA has a long tradition of bringing faculty and students together to pursue knowledge in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and museums; to encourage the arts in performance spaces and studios; and to discover and disseminate new knowledge and techniques in clinics and hospitals. Moreover, we believe firmly that the residential setting allows for the informal creativity and sharing of ideas and arguments that help students, researchers, staff, and faculty thrive intellectually and personally.

We want to make one final point. UCLA faculty and staff have, for many years, been involved in exploring the possibilities of online teaching and learning. As those who have participated know, successfully mounting online courses takes a tremendous amount of labor, thought, and time. Our current online classes also have undergone rigorous Academic Senate review. Although we do not doubt the tremendous creativity of our faculty and graduate students, we want to assure everyone that we know that the remote courses that you will be offering this spring are not truly "online courses." No one can expect you to master all of the various technologies, suddenly transition to sophisticated document delivery, or skillfully lead 500 people in a Zoom discussion without appropriate preparation. We are asking that you do your best in thinking of ways to offer your students your course materials in alternative modes under trying circumstances for all.

The campus has been working hard to provide you with support as you move your classes into remote modes. Please seek out the help you need, but please remember that this situation is uncharted territory for the staff who are trying to help you to provide the best education that you can in this moment.

UCLA is a remarkable institution filled with remarkably creative and talented people. We will get through the disruption of COVID-19. When we do, we are committed to returning to the teaching and learning that has made UCLA such a distinguished educational environment.

A letter to the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) from President Joy Connolly

Dear ACLS Community,

As we continue to navigate the ever-changing landscape created by the current pandemic and our new normal of meeting on screens, we have started to find ways to make that form of connection work for us during these challenging times.

For example, the executive directors of ACLS Member Societies have inaugurated a weekly informal gathering to share strategies and solutions, commiserate, and celebrate with their colleagues over a quarantini or quarantine. On Monday we hosted a webinar for Member Societies on important fundraising and communications best practices during times of external crisis. About 30 executive directors joined Mary Richter, Director of Philanthropy, Heather Mangrum, Director of Communications, Sandra Bradley, Director of Governance and Society Relations, and ACLS board member [Carl Pforzheimer](#) for a discussion on how best to reach and engage members and donors in the current context. Last Friday, Engagement Manager Desiree Barron-Callaci organized a brown bag lunch via Zoom for Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows during which [Ashley Bowen F'18](#) of the Science History Institute led a talk on "Public Philately." While Zoom will never replace the experience of in person meetings, we are finding these virtual opportunities have proven a wonderful way to stay connected and continue sharing with and learning from members of our community right now.

We are also encouraged by the passing of the historic CARE Act, which will provide much needed relief and assistance to many of our member organizations, as well as our fellows. While there is still much to assess in the 900-page bill and understanding it is not perfect, we are thankful for the progress. [Our summary of provisions impacting our community](#) also includes links to helpful resources from the National Humanities Alliance, American Society of Association Executives, and National Council of Nonprofits that will have updates on potential additions to the package, as well as attaining SBA loans for eligible non-profits.

With crisis comes also opportunity for support and change for the better in academia. Our learned society executive directors are issuing [persuasive calls](#) for humane consideration in the process of evaluating faculty for tenure, promotion, and re-appointment, on the grounds that faculty who have focused their energies on their students, rapidly switching to remote teaching, have lost time they anticipated spending on research. Fair, equitable treatment of contingent faculty and extended financial support, whenever possible, for graduate students whose dissertation research is delayed are also prominent themes in the [societies' discussions](#), which ACLS is proud to endorse.

In the coming weeks we will continue to share awards announcements for our fellowship and grants programs. In addition to celebrating the outstanding scholarship projects being taken on by these new fellows, we want to highlight recent accomplishments of past fellows. [Please share](#) news about any new books, articles, appointments, or other recent achievements so that we can share them with the rest of the ACLS community.

As I read hopefully about new treatments being tested for COVID-19 and remember the medical staff risking themselves to save others, I turn to Erasmus Darwin, poet of empirical and experimental science.

"The Loves of the Plants," Canto II
Erasmus Darwin

So when Contagion with mephitic breath
And withered Famine urged the work of death;
Marseilles' good Bishop, London's generous Mayor,
With food and faith, with medicine and prayer,
Raised the weak head and stayed the parting sigh,
Or with new life relumed the swimming eye —
— And now, PHILANTHROPY! thy rays divine
Dart round the globe from Zembla to the Line;
O'er each dark prison plays the cheering light,
Like northern lustres o'er the vault of night.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) Executive Council issued the following statement on COVID-19 and Academic Labor, which was endorsed by twenty other organizations.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has created extraordinary challenges for faculty members, students, and staff members at colleges and universities around the world. The mandate for social distancing for the purpose of safeguarding public health has sent students home (or to temporary quarters) and instructors online, as courses have made an unprecedented shift to "remote" or "distance learning" platforms.

This abrupt move to distance learning, in many cases for the remainder of the academic year, has upended the traditional face-to-face model of pedagogy and student development in higher education and challenged faculty members to redesign course work and content delivery, while also prohibiting or limiting access to offices, libraries, and research facilities for students as well as for faculty members.

While the full impact of this crisis and the demands that it now makes on faculties, students, and scholars will not be fully known for some time, the MLA calls on colleges and universities to implement practices that will ward off disastrous consequences for graduate students; contingent faculty members, including adjunct, postdoctoral, non-tenure-track, and graduate instructors; untenured faculty members; and international scholars and students.

There is no one model of best practices in place to guide teachers under these circumstances, and we call on institutions to exhibit the very flexibility and compassion that they are asking their faculty members to demonstrate in the midst of this transition. Specifically, we join with other professional organizations in requesting that institutions pause the tenure clocks of junior faculty members and time-to-completion measures for graduate students; extend existing coverage of health insurance, housing, and other benefits and provide health insurance or subsidies for those who are currently not covered by existing policies; extend graduate student funding or term-limited contracts for those whose employment prospects have been further dimmed by the crisis; and reimburse faculty members who are paid by the course for the time required of them to adapt those courses, including any connectivity and equipment costs incurred in the shift to distance learning platforms now and henceforth, should the pandemic continue.

In addition to these material supports, we call on institutions to eliminate student and peer evaluations from considerations of contract renewal, tenure, and promotion for the current term and for any future terms where remote instruction and related conditions continue.

Finally, we ask that institutions provide legal and other material support to international students and scholars in the United States and Canada, in their countries of origin, or in any other international location.

In sum, we call on institutions to act with ethical imagination and commitment in response to both the individual and shared challenges facing our communities during this unprecedented pandemic.

Endorsements:

African Studies Association
 American Academy of Religion
 American Anthropological Association
 American Folklore Society
 American Philosophical Association
 American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
 American Society for Theatre Research
 American Studies Association
 Association for Asian Studies
 Executive Committee of the Association for Jewish Studies
 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies
 Association for Theatre in Higher Education
 Latin American Studies Association
 Medieval Academy of America
 Middle East Studies Association
 Modern Language Association
 National Council of Teachers of English
 Organization of American Historians
 Society of Architectural Historians
 Society of Biblical Literature
 World History Association