

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/.

Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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Reclaiming the public university in Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT: This commentary discusses the shift to austerity in the University of Wisconsin System, in the context of Wisconsin's urban, public doctoral research university in the city of Milwaukee. Critical discourses based on "the Wisconsin Idea" insist upon the necessity for both academic freedom and public support to higher education.

In May 2016, a month or so after we issued invitations to participate in this collection of commentaries on anthropology in/of the neoliberal academy, faculty members across the University of Wisconsin System stepped forward to contest recent state reforms of public higher education. Four years after the controversial 2011 Wisconsin Act 10 removed the right of unionized collective bargaining and significantly reduced job benefits for most public employees including faculty, the state passed draconian budget cuts to higher education for the 2015-2017 biennium, while simultaneously removing principles of academic freedom that had been enshrined in state law for a century. Once it became clear that political appointees on the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents had failed to protect the primacy of tenure and shared governance as mechanisms ensuring that program decisions would be made on the grounds of academic concerns, rather than economic interests, symbolic statements of "no confidence" passed Faculty Senates first at the flagship campus in Madison, and then at several other campuses. At the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, the state's only urban, public, doctoral research institution, a full faculty meeting was called to discuss the resolution. It was the first full faculty quorum in two decades.

The May 10th meeting at UW-Milwaukee was organized by the elected University Committee, in collaboration with local leadership of the American Association of University Professionals and the American Federation of Teachers. While neither of the latter associations have authority to represent faculty in collective bargaining, the colleagues and graduate students working with them have volunteered their energy to help guide and coordinate faculty responses to changes in state higher education policy. So many faculty answered the call to lift their voices that the 124 members required for quorum was quickly established, and the 175-seat auditorium was filled far beyond capacity, with standing room only. News media reported there were nearly 300 faculty,

close to 40% of all Assistant, Associate and Full Professors on campus. The Secretary of the University was hunting for a room with more capacity when participants insisted on calling the meeting to order immediately. The Chancellor gave the floor to Rachel Ida Buff, President of the UWM AAUP chapter established in fall 2015. She made these remarks:

Colleagues,

We gather here today as bearers of a sacred trust. As stewards of the University of Wisconsin, we are the keepers of the Wisconsin idea: that crucial, democratic notion that the “beneficent influence of the University (should) reach every home in the state”... The Wisconsin Idea promotes educational democracy: the university is funded by and serves the public... But in the past eighteen months, our ability to carry out our stewardship of the Wisconsin Idea has been impaired by a legislative assault on shared governance and academic freedom. This political assault has been accompanied by unprecedented fiscal cuts, impairing our ability to educate and serve our students... By voting no confidence we protest the intentional destruction of our internationally recognized university system... (AAUP//UWM 2016).

Faculty members took turns reading paragraphs of the resolution from the floor. When fire marshals advised the Chancellor to move the crowd to another venue, the question was called without discussion and the resolution of “no confidence” passed unanimously. The resounding consensus filled the room in a voice vote. Following a year of many contentious governance meetings, budget forums, media chatter and constant worry, this moment of absolute, unified clarity brought tears to my eyes. One week later, the UW-Milwaukee Academic Staff Senate also gathered to enact its own “no confidence” resolution. It was the first and only staff body in the system to do so.

What inspired these historic precedents? Why does the “Wisconsin Idea”, a vision defined by progressives of the early twentieth century, continue to have so much resonance? When early drafts of the 2015 state budget tried to alter UWS Ch. 36, the University of Wisconsin System mission statement, removing «to serve and stimulate society», «to educate people and improve the human condition», and «the search for truth», while substituting the mission «to meet the state workforce needs» (Kertscher 2015), there was vehement public criticism. The “Wisconsin Idea” embodied in the UWS mission statement affirms higher education as a cornerstone of distributed prosperity (cf. McCarthy 1912). As wealth and income disparities in America reach shocking proportions today, this is an idea worth standing for.

Both the downtrend in overall public funding to higher education, and the rising inequalities between flagships and secondary campuses reflect a broader pattern emerging in the United States. Since the recession of 2008, state funding to public university systems fell by an average of 20%, while tuition and fees increased by an average of 29%, far outpacing the growth of median household income (Mitchell, Leachman 2015). Commentators note that flagship campuses cater increasingly to the economic elite, while student debt associated with the cost of education has become debilitating for those from modest backgrounds (see Goldrick-Rab 2014; Goldberg 2015; Hiltzik

2015; Konzcal 2015). In this context, talking about the vital legacy of the “Wisconsin Idea” unmasks economic austerity as an ideology that naturalizes racism and social inequality in higher education.

Structural disparities between campuses within public university systems impact the quality of access to education for minority and first-generation students, just as disparities in funding across fields may impact what they are able to study. Federal initiatives favouring STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) have already transformed the academic landscape. The liberal arts are particularly at risk, as austerity discourses in several states have targeted subjects including Gender Studies, Philosophy, French literature and Anthropology as areas of learning and research that should not be “subsidized” in public institutions. In Wisconsin, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos openly touted the agenda behind the Walker administration policy reforms when he said, «Of course I want research, but I want to have research done in a way that focuses on growing our economy, not on ancient mating habits of whatever» (in Johnson 2014). Recent state legislation makes it possible for university administrators to cut faculty and programs based on financial assessments and priorities.

Historically, the University of Wisconsin System has been celebrated for a much broader vision of research and academic freedom (Hansen 1998). This tradition is lately a target for the scorn of conservatives, who typically contend that universities are bastions of liberalism. Yet both major political parties in the U.S. contribute to the tide of rhetoric and reform that is changing America’s public universities from the inside out. Wisconsin’s “liberal” state representative, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, helped lead the “Manufacturing Universities” bill passed in June 2016. This bill «authorizes the Department of Defense to support industry-relevant, manufacturing-focused, engineering training at U.S. universities» (Baldwin 2016). A press release explains, «Institutions would be selected through a competitive grant-based process and would be required to better align their educational offerings with the needs of modern U.S. manufacturers» (*ivi*).

Urban research universities like UW-Milwaukee represent a fount of creativity and innovation, but also a necessary space for building social tolerance, critical thinking and democratic participation. These shared benefits are threatened when academics are belittled, subject offerings narrowed, and the students reduced to a mere “workforce”, effectively enslaved to the business sector. When faculty and staff challenge this by defending the Wisconsin Idea, they seek to reclaim the university as a public resource: not only a viable means of social mobility, but also a way to expand knowledge, speak truth to power, and strive for common good. This is ultimately about why our academic fields matter in the world, what we do for others, and what kind of work we will be able to do in the future.

Anthropologists have long recognized that our fieldwork is inherently tangled up with social, economic and political relations of power; we cannot ignore that our academic lives are unmistakably caught up in these relations too. We are well prepared to

grasp how neoliberal logics and audit cultures grow variously entangled with specific contexts and institutional practices. As we bring ethnographic methods and critical analysis to bear on our own experiences as university professionals, anthropologists can help understand the transformations taking place in higher education, and learn to shape them.

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