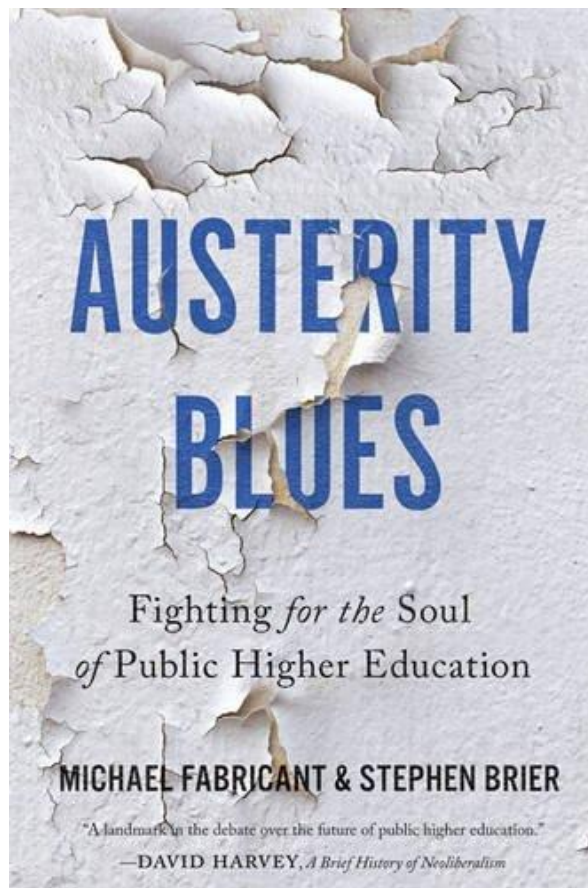


RADICAL TEACHER

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Review
Austerity Blues:
Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education
By Michael Fabricant and Steve Brier

Reviewed by Susan G. O'Malley



Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education
by Michael Fabricant and Steve Brier
(John Hopkins University Press, 2016)

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Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Education is a useful book for teachers and students in Critical University Studies and for those engaged in public higher education organizing both in governance and academic unions. What makes it useful is its situating of the erosion of the funding of public higher education in the neoliberal agenda of devaluing the public sector and its reviewing of the history of the City University of New York and State University of New York and the California State and University systems. Too often those of us in higher education forget that the steady decreases in higher education budgets are not unique to us but part of a larger plan of austerity throughout the public sector. Learning the history of previous struggles in the two largest public university systems in the United States helps us to imagine and strategize how to strengthen public higher education and counter the neoliberal agenda. How did student occupations of campus buildings and faculty and student strikes at Brooklyn College and CCNY cause open admissions to start in fall 1970, five years before it was planned to start? And how were the SEEK and College Discovery programs put in place to help students who had not been prepared in high school for college? And how was free tuition essential to CUNY's mission for most of its history? And how does this connect to the free tuition movement today, particularly given the decreases in state funding? And how were these innovations slowly eroded? Knowing about past organizing with its victories and setbacks pushes back against the feeling that the neoliberal agenda is inevitable.

A number of years ago, when I was Chair of the CUNY University Faculty Senate (22 campuses), I was arguing with a member of then Chancellor Goldstein's senior management. He stated, "But there will never be an increase in state appropriations for CUNY. That is the way it is now." I fought against his pronouncement, but he was adamant: accept budget cuts and look to philanthropy and technology to make up for the lost money. Chancellor Milliken, the current Chancellor, also has not pressured Albany for increased money but hopes to save money through more on-line courses, as he discussed at the University Faculty Senate meeting on 7 February 2017. To explain this, Fabricant and Brier state, "Neoliberal advocates see the privatization [and monetization] of all things public as part of a naturalized landscape without alternatives" (30) or "the new normal" (203). "New market-based reforms" become "a viable alternative to an expanded public sphere" (17). Often faculty and students internalize this and believe what is public is inferior and

that the decline of public higher education is inevitable. Using *Austerity Blues* in the classroom, whether at CUNY or other public universities, could encourage students to learn the historical struggles in their universities and how student and faculty movements influenced and can continue to influence change in their universities. The Professional Staff Congress (PSC), CUNY's Union, has established Teach CUNY days during which faculty focus on the history and funding of CUNY, including adjunct salaries. On May Day 2017 many CUNY faculty taught "Teach Trump," analyzing Trump's policies and higher education.

Chapters 1- 4 ("Public Assets in an Era of Austerity," "The State Expansion of Public Higher Education," "Students and Faculty Take Command," and "The Making of the Neoliberal Public University") in *Austerity Blues* are a good antidote to the passivity and the feeling of helplessness that neoliberalism evokes in students and faculty.

Looking at CUNY's struggle for open admission once again (Chapter 3) is important because it came out of the community-led struggles to improve public schools in working-class neighborhoods and the political activism of the late 1960s. From 1969 to 1975, after open admissions was passed, CUNY's enrollment increased 55 percent and went from 78 percent to 30 percent white (84); that accounted for much of the push-back against open admissions. CUNY has had a 40 percent drop in state funding per student between 1992 and 2012 (92); college tuition has risen 112.5 percent after adjusting for inflation at four-year public universities (92). Many public universities such as Minnesota, Illinois, and Ohio State receive less than 10 percent of their operating budget from public dollars (92). One might ask, when does a public university cease to be public? Consequently, education is rarely thought of as a public good but as a commodity to be bought and financed. We need to use the increased activism today in reaction to Trump's policies to educate people about the cuts in funding public higher education and organize to have it properly funded.

Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Education is a useful book for teachers and students in Critical University Studies and for those engaged in public higher education organizing both in governance and academic unions. What makes it useful is its situating of the erosion of the funding of public higher education in the neoliberal agenda of devaluing the public sector and its reviewing of the history of the City University of New York and State University of New York and the California State and University systems.

Chapter 5, "The Public University as an Engine of Equality," provocatively states that "the conjunction of fiscal austerity, imposition of a neoliberal business model, and consequent institutional restructuring has resulted in public higher education becoming an active agent in the growth rather than reduction of social inequality" (118). Examples of this in CUNY are the reduction in SEEK and College Discovery to prepare and support students for college courses, the increasing tuition that causes students to have to work and attend part time and, therefore, not qualify for TAP (Tuition Assistance Program), the need for more full-time faculty to teach upper-level courses required for graduation (students often have to postpone graduation because of being shut out of sections of required courses), and the reliance on contingent faculty who do not have the time to advise students because they have to work on several campuses. The pressure on colleges to graduate students in four years has also led to a weakening of the basic education requirements at CUNY, as demonstrated in Pathways, an administration policy to streamline basic education. Austerity is also reflected in the money spent on a student's education: In 2006 colleges with low selectivity spent about \$12,000 per student with the most selective colleges spending about \$92,000 per student (129). From 1975 to 2008 the number of administrators in the California State University system grew from 3800 to more than 12,000 while faculty positions remained essentially the same (121) with many administrators paid significantly more than faculty and hundreds of times more than contingent faculty. In 2009-2010 ten public university presidents made between \$750,000 and \$2 million (154).

To attract the middle class, CUNY has spent a lot of money on the Macaulay Honors College, initially funded by a \$30,000,000 grant that admits high performing students and provides them with free tuition, a computer, and a cultural passport that gives them access to cultural events and travel. There are fewer students of color admitted to Macaulay than there are in CUNY's general population; many have a more middle-class background. Governor Cuomo's new free tuition plan for CUNY and SUNY is a plan to attract the middle class because students must attend college full-time and take 15 credits. Because no money is provided for books, transportation, housing, or food, most working-class students need to work and have difficulty going to college full time and passing their courses while working.

Because of concerns about accumulating debt and the perception that private colleges are better than public colleges, many working-class students have turned to for-profit colleges. There have been intense advertising and promises of loans and grants such as the GI Bill and Pell grant. In 2010 eighty-six percent of taxpayer money for higher education went to 15 publicly traded for-profit education companies (141). At for-profit colleges there is often not enough academic support for students unprepared for college work or sufficient counseling, so graduation rates are very low. Faculty is primarily part time and cannot devote enough time to their students, and the accumulation of debt has caused students to drop out without a degree. Fabricant and Brier discuss this in several places in *Austerity*, although they do not mention

that students who default on their student loans cannot declare bankruptcy and are not allowed to refinance their debt for a lower interest rate but must attempt to pay it off throughout their lives. (The loan may be paid off by borrowing money at a lower interest rate, but it is unlikely that they will find a bank to loan them money.)

Chapter 6, "Technology as a 'Magic Bullet' in an Era of Austerity," recounts the history of using different instructional technologies outside of the classroom to educate large numbers of students while making money. Beginning with the first correspondence course in 1892 and progressing through film, radio, television, and finally digital technology, all promised to revolutionize education and get rid of the traditional classroom. At first I puzzled why this chapter was included in *Austerity Blues* – do we really need all this detail? – but the chapter is a fascinating account of the false promises of different technologies that all use the same rhetoric of salvation.

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Supposedly correspondence courses or film or radio or television or on-line teaching would revolutionize higher education and allow a university to teach the masses with fewer costs and fewer faculty; this ignores the fact that technology in its many forms may be used judiciously to improve teaching. So, yes, to technology when it is determined as pedagogically enhancing by faculty teaching in a face-to-face course as was demonstrated to me in Steve Brier's US Social History Project many years ago, and no to technology when it is used to shrink labor costs and generate profits. Academically challenged students need interactions with instructors to become successful learners (291). An example of CUNY's attempting to use on-line education to cut costs was when faculty were asked by the administration if we wanted to sell our course syllabi for \$5,000 a course. When one faculty member asked, "I include my research in my course. Does that mean you own my research?" the administration said, "Yes, we would own your research, but you would be allowed to teach the course for a number of years before we would let other people, presumably adjuncts, teach it." The faculty member refused to sell his course; many others, however, agreed to sell.

Austerity Blues concludes with a section on "Resistance Efforts and the Fight for Emancipatory Education" that includes Chapter 7, "Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education," and an Epilogue that envisions reinventing public higher education. Resistance efforts include the fight for free tuition in the U.S. (209-210); the struggle at the City College of San Francisco around access (239-241); organizing for progressive redistributive taxes to fund higher education, a fight against the Millionaires Tax Cut in California that ended in a compromise; the

resistance against diluting the curriculum to increase graduation rates as demonstrated in the fight against CUNY's Pathways Program (241-246); and the successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) (213) in which I taught.

Pathways was the CUNY's administration's plan to weaken basic education requirements by not requiring a lab science, foreign language, or history course in order for students to graduate more quickly using the false claim that students lost credits transferring (245). Essentially it was the administration's ploy to wrest control of the curriculum from the faculty, although faculty were told that they could determine what was taught in the courses, just not what was required for an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Faculty resistance was fierce, with the union and governance working together. This is the only time in *Austerity* that Fabricant and Brier mention governance being involved. Both governance and the union have historically been involved in the struggles at CUNY: the union contract makes the union stronger than governance, but governance has the power to educate and shame in its close contact with the administration. Ninety-two percent of the two-thirds of the faculty that voted in the referendum on Pathways were against. Although the struggle is still on going, the CUNY administration, pressed by their own "budgeting and accountability demands of austerity," (245) seem impervious to data.

Students in ASAP received free tuition, had to attend full-time, had excellent academic and personal counseling, and moved together through their classes in a cohort of about 25. They were required to attend full-time, but if they needed to work, their counselors would help them get jobs on campus or manageable jobs close to their homes and arrange their schedule to allow time for work. Many of the students were recent immigrants; all had passed the CUNY English skills test. After three years, "researchers at the Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. note[d] that 'at the three-year point, the cost per degree was lower in ASAP than in the control condition. Because the program generated so many more graduates than the usual college services, the cost per degree was lower despite the substantial investment required to operate the program'" (213). This program was discontinued because of cost. However, in my trolling around on various CUNY websites, I found that this program is being offered again in all CUNY community colleges.

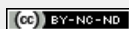
The concluding "Epilogue" puts forth a succinct and powerful vision of emancipatory education. Increased investment in higher education with the greatest increases for institutions with the most academically challenged students is called for. Adjuncts must be given job security, benefits, and increased pay, and public higher education must not be financed with student debt. New forms of technology should be used to enhance instruction, not to generate profit and shrink labor costs. Finally, the content of academic courses and what determines an academic

degree must be under the aegis of the faculty with students and administrators having input (250-251).

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Austerity Blues is an important book, although I wish it had had a better editor. There is a lot of repetition, and Fabricant and Brier have very different writing styles: Fabricant uses surprising word choices like "the private sector has cast its steely gaze upon public sector-resources" while Brier is more prosaic, working through a topic chronologically and thoroughly. That said, *Austerity Blues* is a must read for people engaged in public higher education and an important addition to Critical University Studies.

[For full disclosure I need to say that I am a friend of both of the authors. I worked with Stephen Brier in the development and teaching of CUNY's American Social History Project multimedia curriculum *Who Built America?* in the pedagogy seminar and co-taught the curriculum for two years with history and English high school teachers at Telecommunications and Paul Robeson High Schools. I also served with Mike Fabricant on the executive committee of CUNY's union, the Professional Staff Congress, for nine years.]



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