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Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education, by Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier

The Left are busy looking back instead of devising laws to address inequalities, says Danny Dorling

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Four decades ago The City University of New York charged no tuition fees, and all its students were taught by full-time staff. Today, fees cover half of all teaching costs and half of professors are part-timers. At [Arizona State University](#), Michael Crow, the president, who is ridiculed throughout this angry, sometimes despondent and frequently eye-opening book, has proclaimed himself a “knowledge enterprise architect” – a sure sign that we are entering the end times.

Like bank robbers of old, investors turn to students “because that is where the money is”. The banks no longer have money in their

vaults. The vaults are empty; the money has already been lent many times over. Today, if you want to make money, you prey on the hopes and dreams of the young. Lend them their tuition fees, pay them as little as possible as they work part time while studying, and fail more black and poor students than you used to, so that they have to try, and pay, again and again. Be sure to exploit your own children less.

The Left and Right have swapped roles. Now the Right describes itself, however mendaciously, as progressive, and on the side of working people. The Left harks back to earlier days, aiming to conserve what was previously achieved as it laments the passing of time. In the US, the Right complains of low completion rates and soaring tuition costs. It blames a lack of corporate entrepreneurship in the management of public universities, arguing that it would ensure competition, drive down costs and drive out inefficient professionals.

Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier blame austerity for many ills. The metrics of accountability. Outsourcing to the private sector. The inexorable move towards “killing all state support” in Arizona. Surviving on tax-deductible handouts from the rich at [Princeton University](#). Threats to end tenure in Wisconsin. Raising tuition fees by 5 per cent every year in New York State while churning out an ever greater number of graduates every year with no thought of what they will actually know or be able to do. From Trump University to Trump America, almost everyone can have a degree, and almost everyone can be put in more debt.

This is just a small selection of the “austerity blues” that the authors list on just two pages of this, their call to help fight for the soul of higher education. That soul was born in the decades leading up to Richard Nixon’s America. Today, the Right no longer sends soldiers to kill unarmed students, as it did at [Kent State University](#) in Ohio in 1970. At [Ohio State University](#) more than 45 years later, “everything is for sale”. The university’s parking lots went to an Australian investment firm in a \$500 million (£396 million) deal set to last 50 years and cover 37,000 parking spaces. That’s less than a dollar a day per slot, but students and academics will be charged a great deal more than that to park. Someone has to pay for wealthy Australians to live the life of Riley in future. For half a century no one will be able to alter how car-dependent Ohio State will be – not unless they change the law.



Source: Alamy
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot: ‘everything is for sale’

Austerity Blues does not talk much about law. It is US law that declares that students cannot go bankrupt and must repay their loans. It is US law that prevents the re-nationalisation of property and prevents investment funders being told that their services are no longer required and compensation cannot be afforded. It is US law that allows the nation's rich to pay less tax if they get their name put on a university building just by funding it – not by having done anything worthwhile. It is the law that needs to be changed, but instead the Left laments its losses because it cannot imagine changing the law.

This isn't just happening in the US. All is not well across Europe either, as Lorenza Antonucci laid bare this year in her valuable and timely study *Student Lives in Crisis: Deepening Inequality in Times of Austerity*. The Left and Right have swapped roles on this continent, too.

The Right now claims that massive open online courses will open up access and increase participation. The Left lists the failures of online learning schemes that left a trail of dead Mooc websites in their wake. It also warns that encouraging free-market “creative destruction” will leave students stranded in the institutions that fail. Millions of others now languish in the majority of universities that sit on the edge of the abyss, staffed by the itinerant professor handing out the worthless degrees.

Those on the Left have to stop complaining and start planning. Planning for when the bankruptcies begin and the debt is not repaid, and for when Ohio State's parking lots are needed for a better purpose than parking cars. What should we be dreaming for now? It cannot simply be a return to conserving the past. What laws need to be rewritten to take back control?

We can wait until the system breaks, until the credit ratings of entire countries (such as the US and UK) are downgraded as it is realized that their student debt cannot be repaid, or can only be repaid by increasing other debts, such as in housing. Or we can point out now to "investors" that the risk they are taking is higher than they think and watch them pull out. This book describes the problems, but if we are to save the soul of higher education, we need to offer more solutions.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, [University of Oxford](#), and author of [*A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier* \(2016\)](#). A low-resolution free PDF can be [downloaded here](#).

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