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Towers in the Park

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About two months ago, a visit from my partner's parents was the occasion for the 4 of us to attend a screening of Fanny Liatard and Jeremy Trouilh's *Gagarine*, a semi-based-on-a-true-story film in which a French housing project named for the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin is slated for demolition. Some of the complex's resident's resist the demolition, others accept the demolition as inevitable and prepare for their relocation to new homes. Without revealing too much of the story, one young man in particular sets out to construct an improvised spacecraft, and the bulk of the narrative follows his efforts to do so. Leaving the film, it was immediately clear to me that the complex, officially named Cite Gagarine by the French Communists who designed and built it, is taken by the film to be one of many grand 20th century social projects around the world, not unlike space travel, the eradication of diseases (ironic today), and so on. Thus, the ambition of the world's superpowers to travel to space, leaving our earthly home through sheer force of will and scientific progress, is the same ambition which led them to construct massive social housing complexes like Cite Gagarine, New York's Queensbridge Houses, my own city's Frederick Douglass Homes (known colloquially as the Brewster Projects), the Techwood Homes in Atlanta, and to an extent the entire city of Brasilia.

Foreclosing on space travel, then, is not too much unlike the ways in which societies like the United States has foreclosed on earlier dreams of clean, affordable, and safe housing for its urban inhabitants. As last year's reimagining of 1992's Candyman reminds us, social housing has, in so many words, been a failed experiment. As the story goes, the huge public housing complexes of the 20th century soon decayed into hotbeds of crime and social disintegration, separating their residents from better opportunities and greener pastures elsewhere. Of course, the real story is more complicated. Advocates of social housing often note that the complexes were inadequately funded from the start, and that trends like white flight and suburbanization exacerbated ongoing issues in American cities which impacted the social housing in those cities. In the European context, France especially, urbanists have made the point that the intentional location of the cites away from urban centers contributed to the social marginalization of their residents and diminished access to economic and educational opportunities. Nonetheless, since the 1980s and the days of "There is No Alternative" and "There is no society, only individuals", the conventional wisdom has been clear. The wealthiest and most "advanced" societies in human history simply cannot provide safe and clean housing to all of their citizens, and it is both disingenuous and somehow morally outrageous to suggest otherwise.

Of course this attitude is not limited to public housing. When it comes to education, healthcare, wages, any meaningful response to the possibility of human extinction posed by climate change, a reform or end to policing, and certainly all levels of education including universities, the consensus amongst the adults in the room is clear that the social projects of the 20th century were not only failures, but cautionary tales of what horrors could befall us if we try again. Thus, we demolish our own *Cites Gagarine*, and prepare for venomous "how dare you" outbursts if and when we dare to suggest that Pete Buttigieg and Kamala Harris may not in fact have the answers we need. To make matters worse, any criticism of Bernie Sanders' voting record or the weak points of electoral socialism invokes more or less the same response from his supporters that they themselves complain about receiving from "liberal Democrats". In a sense, the metaphorical Cite Gagarine marks the limit of the furthest solution from the status quo a given person is willing to entertain. This, while scientists stretch the limits of the English language to try to explain how much worse the latest batch of climate data is than the one before.

It would be fair to say that my own personal Cite Gagarine is the idea of free and accessible higher education for everyone who wants it. My scholarly and professional commitments constellate around the question of how larger issues of race over-determine questions of access to public universities, particularly in terms of "remedial English" courses and support services for underrepresented students. At present, my primary teaching appointment is in my university's Center for Latino/a and Latin American studies, in which my students are united in a cohort program not necessarily by their ethnic background (Latinx not being a race or even an ethnicity but something of a structural position in the context of US empire) but rather by their interest in Latino/a/x and Latin American studies and their desire to contribute to Latino/a/x communities after graduation. Of course, many of the students come from or have family connections to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and other Latin American countries, but still some do not. In this way, the Center embodies the spirit of "radical generosity" underpinning the intellectual traditions of Third World Studies and Ethnic Studies as social projects. I am, to perhaps understate the case, a major beneficiary of this spirit of generosity, as I have essentially made my career on my affiliation with the Center in the short time that I've had one.

The Center, like many similar programs and initiatives in American universities, was created as social project by a coalition of actors dedicated to improving access to higher education and other facets of society for Black and Brown communities in metropolitan Detroit. Similar efforts were underway across the country, from the Third World Liberation Front in the Bay area to Onyx and the BPRSC in New York City. The bulk of these efforts were successful, and at the risk of oversimplifying the case these protests had two major impacts on United States higher education: a policy known as "open admissions" and the creation of autonomous academic units dedicated to studying the experiences of racialized communities, along with that of women and the Indigenous peoples of this continent. It would be dishonest to paint this process as part of a larger social vision of mass higher education by American elites. Similarly, it would be dishonest to imagine that the social movements which changed our universities were primarily concerned with university education or helmed by people of college student age. Rather, the protests which created, for example, Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, were part of a larger wave of protests based on the observation that the midcentury social projects devised by technocratic elites in fact excluded and marginalized a great deal of people in our society, and that every social system would only allow them access if forced to do so. In a sense, then, systems like open admissions and the creation of academic departments dedicated to the experience of racialized communities, then, were a concession granted in the face of increased radical political activity. Open admissions, which in the first instance was a policy that any student with a New York City public high school diploma would be granted admission to any CUNY, resulted in a widespread sense amongst CUNY faculty that these students, henceforth euphemistically labeled "open admissions students", lacked the basic literacy skills necessary to succeed in college, and needed additional instruction. Thus, an additional composition course named Basic Writing was born, with an attending academic field which researched the most effective ways to bring students up to speed, so to speak. As the story goes, teachers and administrators would, with a little know how and compassion, be able to "remediate" the students who needed it, who then would go on to succeed in college and participate in society in the ways a college degree might enable them to.

I have never heard anyone argue that the social projects I'm affiliated with have achieved their purpose, which is to say that I have never seen anyone argue that United States higher education has achieved equity in terms of race, gender, Indigeneity, and so forth. It seems clear that everyone agrees that higher education, public or private, continues to be wracked with inequality. The point of dispute, then, is whether anyone should continue to try. The American right has been resolute since the origin of these projects themselves that the answer is no. Indeed, an extensive popular and scholarly body of literature arose simultaneously to Open Admissions and Ethnic Studies, arguing since its very inception that these twin dragons had laid waste to American higher education at every level. James Traub wrote an entire book on the subject, claiming that Open Admissions had destroyed the quality of education in the CUNY system, and that well meaning but misguided faculty and administrators had done all students a disservice, including those the policies were intended to help. By, as the story goes, segregating them into "Black Studies" and "Puerto Rican Studies" departments and remedial classes, CUNY had essentially foreclosed on their own academic achievement or capacity to participate in higher education. For Taub, then, the answer was clear, to tear down the Cites Gagarine which CUNY had constructed.

This debate, despite the dismantling of countless open admissions policies and ethnic studies programs, is not over. Decades after Allan Bloom first argued, in The Closing of the American Mind, that radical Black students posed the same threat to American universities that the Nazi brownshirts had posed to their German counterparts, there are still plenty Cites Gagarine in our public universities for the right to tear down along with their efforts to dismantle public schools, any modicum of public health policy, any notion of environmental protections, and so on. As evidenced by Daniel Patrick's promise to eliminate tenure in all of the state of Texas' public universities, the American right is willing to destroy the public university itself in order to eliminate the social projects still standing in its interior. The ongoing effort of reactionary forces to eliminate progressive projects in higher education, especially those which have served as points of access for racialized communities and students, has placed their advocates in a state of contradiction. I do indeed disagree that any student needs additional preparation in order to belong in college, and I contend that issues of race, gender, sexuality, and Indigeneity belong at the center of the college curriculum, rather than situated at its margins where they can be removed from campus without drawing too much attention. Eliminating these compromises, however, simply eliminates the aspects of these social projects which we might support, without solving the problems to which they were intended to serve as solutions. Thus, here I stand in front of the proverbial bulldozer.

Returning to Gagarine for a moment, it seems important to call the reader's attention to the main character's mission to build a spacecraft from the wreckage of the housing complex. This is to say, that in the face of the impending demolition of Cite Gagarine, the character named Youri for the famous cosmonaut finds pieces of the complex and makes something new and different, rather than accepting his fate and going quietly. What if we took the film's lesson as a blueprint for what to do when we fail, and the towers in the park come down?

It seems clear, inarguable even, that we will have to if we are to survive. If we accept, as a society, that we simply cannot provide clean water, housing, education, and food to everyone, we don't need a dystopian film to show us the consequences. Everyday life in Detroit and any other American city shows us already the outcomes we essentially accept as inevitable if we foreclose on these ideals. If I myself were to foreclose on Toni Cade Bambara's "Dream of a Black University", I must then quietly accept a 40% decline in Black enrollment at my university in the last few years, along with a decline in Black enrollment in United States colleges which some calculations mark as high as 20% since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, we either accept these things or we don't. If we refuse to accept these outcomes, and fail anyway, we must try again, perhaps in the guise of an improvised spaceship. In a sense, rather than sober minded realism, the notion that the social projects of the past were failed experiment is in and of itself the most failed experiment of all.

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