

## Under Siege in New Detroit

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*The world we live in is ruled by insiders... one of the first things said to me by a very high ranking American official.. when I was minister... you have a choice. You can be an insider or an outsider. If you are an outsider you'll retain your right to say anything you want, whatever you believe in but know that you're going to be persecuted, you're going to be vilified and you'll be jettisoned. ... On the other hand, you can chose to be an insider, to play the game... if you chose to be an insider you'll be given information that outsiders don't have, you'll be given... an opportunity... to make some... small tiny changes within the inside, but the one rule that you must respect, is that insiders do not tell outsiders the truth, and they do not turn against other insiders.*

-Yanis Varoufakis, SYRIZA Minister of Finance,  
speaking in Brussels, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

On July 31st of this year, the Twitter account belonging to Wayne State University's chapter of the American Association of University Professors tweeted that "lowering Black student enrollment by 40% is nothing to celebrate!" and that the Wilson administration had moved the university "away from its mission to serve our community in Detroit".<sup>2</sup>

At that time, Detroit Will Breathe had been marching in the city for 65 days, and protests nationwide in response to police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black Americans remained in full swing. Throughout the news media and academia, discussions about race and equity had taken on a new dimension as well, with institutions, publications, and organizations reflecting on how they could become more diverse internally, meet their institutional diversity directives with a greater sense of urgency and accountability, recognize the contributions of Black members, make their leadership more diverse, and so on.

At first glance, then, the observation that Wayne State was structurally excluding Black students as a means of raising its Black graduation rate (and by extension, we can safely assume, its overall graduation rate) seems not only astute, but also part and parcel of a larger conversation. This is to say that if Wayne State University was performing a shell game wherein it raised its Black graduation rate by shifting to exclusionary admissions standards instead of putting resources into programs which support Black students, it stands to reason that exposing and condemning this dynamic would be timely in 2020.

As I reflected on the post later that evening, however, another problematic seemed to take shape in my understanding of the networked connections between Wayne State University, Detroit's Black communities, and the city's other institutions. By any reasonable metric, a public university in an 80% Black city, one which primarily serves commuting students from the surrounding area, cannot claim any modicum of institutional success or service to its local community if only 21% of matriculating Black students ultimately graduate.

As a member of Wayne State's faculty, a current Wayne State student and employee, and an alumnus twice over, I can promise that no quarter of that institution would begin

to entertain my continued presence on campus if I achieved 21% of the work I was tasked with. If I had completed 21% of my coursework in my first semester at Wayne State University, it is extremely unlikely that I still be there today in any capacity. Even now, if only 21% of the students I teach passed a given course, it is likely that someone would notice, and I would at the very least get a talking to. How, then, can an institution with this kind of performance not only continue to exist, but claim such a strong ethos, as well as maintain such a vast amount of power over a not insignificant portion of the city?

This is not to say that Wayne State's performance in terms of its Black graduation rate has gone totally unnoticed. In fact, this statistic has achieved national attention on numerous occasions, placing the university in the sights of various larger governing bodies, including many which are otherwise no friends of Black communities or students.<sup>3,4</sup> The rhetoric applied to Wayne State and other similarly situated institutions often seems connected to the same sleight of hand the right uses to defund and attack public schools. The specters of accountability and tough love for under-performing schools utilize bad faith appeals, claiming to protect the rights of vulnerable communities while dismantling public goods. The easiest examples here are of course No Child Left Behind and the exponential proliferation of charter schools and "school choice", both of which have done demonstrably little to improve public education in the United States.

So, in fact, it is not so much that Wayne State and other public institutions of higher learning have faced no consequences or received no negative attention for their failure to serve Black students and communities. In fact, some deeply noxious actors have taken note of these statistics, and used them as a rationale for policies which only deepen and extend the problem through defunding, union busting, closing institutions, calling for an end to remedial or developmental programs, moving towards privatizing education, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

This puts educators like myself and others who are concerned explicitly with access to higher education, equity within it, and the larger social mission of education, in quite a difficult position. Namely, we know that our work and our students will bear the burden of external "accountability mechanisms" applied to our institution, or even worse, that the consequences of such neoliberal austerity measures will dramatically reshape the institutions themselves. Now that I have finally resorted to buzzwords, I have some explaining to do. Beyond that, I will have to explain exactly how and why institutions like Wayne State University, the Detroit Police Department, the Detroit Medical Center, and other institutions can continue to preserve and extend their power despite their repeated failure and refusal to be accountable or transparent to their Black constituencies.

When we speak of neoliberalism and austerity, it is crucial that we clarify our terms. There was a time where these terms had some semblance of consensus as to their meaning, but nowadays it appears that any man with a cycling cap is content to be against them, without thinking too deeply beyond his discontent. Fear not, dear reader, I will explain what I mean. For the purposes of this exercise, I will define Neoliberalism as a larger pattern throughout the industrialized world in which social spending is cut, social goods are privatized, and the state moves away from a role as the body that guarantees health, welfare, social security, housing, clean water, etc.<sup>6</sup> Some have suggested that the state has shrunk in the shift to neoliberal governance, but evidence suggests that this is not so.

Rather than shrinking, the state has changed from the guarantor of social goods like education, to the guarantor of security and property rights. What I mean here specifically is that state security forces grow in number and power, more and more prisons are constructed, borders are militarized and secured, etc. We will return to this later, and will also note that the American state at least has never been a guarantor of any rights or welfare for all of its subjects. For now,

we will speculate on the effects of neoliberal governance on powerful institutions both public and private, and how the internal logic of institutions has changed in ways that cement their posture toward their constituencies. We will call this logic *austerity*.

In the summer of 2019, we at Hamtramck Free School embarked on a four-week study of the concept of austerity, and how it reproduces itself across all aspects of our lives. The core of the study was one participant's observation that austerity was listed in the dictionary as a stern or severe attitude, whereas intellectual types like me seemed to think it was a way of doing politics. At first, we said "oh, it's both", then "well one engenders the other", finally concluding that the form of governance and the affective formation bearing the name were fully imbricated. This is to say that austere attitudes and austere policies are one in the same, and that an austerity measure imposed on an institution (a university, for example) will then make that institution more austere in its posture, prompting it to create or carry out its own austerity measures. For an example, we return to Wayne State's faculty union's condemnation of Wayne administration's strategy to raise its Black graduation rate. Under neoliberalism, austerity measures are those "tough love" measures applied to institutions which fail to meet certain benchmarks. The guiding assumption is that the institution is failing because of internal mismanagement, possibly due to too many resources and not enough "grit",<sup>7</sup> or "pioneer spirit" etc.

Thus, in the case of threats of defunding or other measures against a school like Wayne State, in response to its failure to meet certain quantitative benchmarks, the notion that the university needs more money is totally out of the question. Given that universities have endowments, receive public funds, and so on, they are typically assumed to be more financially solvent than a business, and the idea that they need more money seems wrong. Especially given Wayne State's administrative bloat, it is difficult to make a case to a hostile legislature that it needs more money in the guise of

state appropriations. If the school is itself subject to austerity, under the current system the logical choice is to improve its statistics by any means necessary.

This is what I term the logic of austerity, the logic that makes raising the Black graduation rate by lowering the presence of Black students make sense. The university itself takes on an austere posture, assessing which students are likely to graduate in 4 years, likely to need additional resources and support, likely to go on to high paying careers, etc. From here, we arrive to a cultural logic wherein institutions deem themselves under threat from within and without, and begin to focus on maintaining and extending their own power and influence, not at the expense of serving their constituencies, but, paradoxically, as a means of continuing to serve them. This particular circumstance has had two major consequences:

1. Institutions which are increasingly resistant to any transparency or accountability to outsiders, including the constituencies they ostensibly serve.
2. A larger culture of insiders and outsiders, where in order to achieve any agency within an institution (including the power to change it), one must accept the premise that their primary responsibility is the maintenance and extension of that institution's power.

It is not especially difficult to find instances of institutions resisting accountability or transparency to their constituencies. Witness the University of Michigan's total refusal to develop a safe COVID-19 plan,<sup>8</sup> the State of Michigan's handling of the Flint water crisis,<sup>9</sup> Michigan State's treatment of the Nassar case,<sup>10</sup> and certainly the Detroit Police Department's posture toward activists and the communities it serves. In short, every institution is structurally compelled to defend and extend its own power first and foremost. The hidden factor though, is that these institutions and their insiders do not actually view this posture as existing in contradiction with the institution's stated missions.

Public institutions especially, such as universities, hospitals, police departments, as we noted earlier, exist in a constant state of potential siege, at any moment risking catastrophic budget cuts and other sanctions from the state. Given the percentage taken up by policing in most cities, it may sound ridiculous that police departments face defunding, but in a city like Detroit (ground zero for many neoliberal policies), the department has in fact been defunded over time, especially in terms of personnel costs.<sup>11</sup> I do not intend this as an argument against further defunding or demilitarizing DPD, but rather to say that its budget has been affected by the current style of governance, in a way which informs its outward facing posture.

This is all to say that all nonprofit institutions, especially those with some relationship to the state, experience themselves as existing in a state of precarity, possibly facing another accountability measure at any time. This is all to say that the “siege mentality” commentators have attributed to police officers, while certainly present in police, is also experienced by teachers, nurses, social workers, university faculty and administrators, and so on. In the present circumstances, any organization or institution which is subject to having its revenue cut or reorganized by the state finds itself living in what Hobbes termed “the war of all against all”.

It is this circumstance which motivates university administrations to buy and sit on real estate, a practice which has greatly contributed to gentrification in most university neighborhoods, Midtown Detroit being no exception. This is also why hospitals and nonprofits use every possible mechanism to depress wages and other costs, the arts sector comes to depend entirely on unpaid or “trust fund waged” labor, etc. If you ask any administrator of any not for profit organization (which is to say, any organization which does not ultimately control its revenue source), they will tell you that their institution or organization is underfunded. The institution may in fact be operating at a surplus relative to its

costs, but because funding can vanish at any time, the logic of austerity dictates that the institution must focus on extending and preserving its own power as a safeguard. As the story goes, obviously we cannot fulfill our mission if we run out of money and have to close, or if we lose political power, or if we are “cancelled”, and so on. Thus, a siege mentality in the face of external threats becomes necessary to fulfill the institution’s mission. This is how we arrive at a logic wherein Wayne State University, in the service of its urban mission, violates that same mission by systematically excluding Black students.

When we speak of “getting some adults in the room”, we do not refer to nefarious businessmen who chomp cigars and gloat at the misfortunes of the downtrodden. No, the adults in the room are those who understand the state of affairs I’ve described. I have certainly been in that chair, maybe you have too. As noted in the epigraph I began with, exposing this state of affairs doesn’t change what happens at the Health Department. Depending on the circumstances, it primarily changes whether or not a given whistleblower has a job (or their life, or their freedom, etc.).

Is this to excuse any police department or university’s actions, or their posture toward outsiders and their constituencies? Certainly not. Further, I do not intend to deny the role of anti-Blackness, settler colonial property relations, transphobia, and other interlocking structures in terms of how they structure policing, hospitals, education, etc. I would also move things a step forward and recall that the actual social function of an institution is not synonymous with its stated mission. This is to say that while the university ostensibly exists to serve the community in various ways, produce knowledge, etc, it is well documented that its primary purpose is the production of human capital, knowledge production in the service of the state and corporations, etc.<sup>12</sup> Hospitals, while they do heal the sick, are also disciplinary institutions which enforce any number of oppressive

systems. The same can of course be said of the police, an institution which has its beginnings in slave patrols, and of course primarily serves to enforce property rights and the rule of law, with authorization to use lethal force in this pursuit.

It may appear that we have arrived at a contradiction, wherein I am suggesting that the state is increasingly defunding public institutions, and thus moving them away from their noble intended purposes, and also suggesting that their purpose is in fact nefarious in the first place. Is the state existing in contradiction, then, if the institutions tasked with regulating and administering “populations” are increasingly being defunded? Not exactly. Witness the rise of private prisons, for profit universities, private hospitals, private police (in Detroit specifically) and so on. It is not so much that their social functions are being defunded out of existence, but rather that even the aspects of the state and its extensions which we find most objectionable are subject to austerity logics along the same lines. Recall arguments that defunding police forces will lead to privatized police with even less accountability to the public, a hypothetical in New York City in Minneapolis but a current reality in Detroit.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that we should defend the police as part of a larger effort to defend public services (although it is amusing to witness socialists who would have taken this position 5 years ago struggling to cobble together a coherent politics now that such a position would be unpopular). At this late hour, I suggest that those of us dedicated to the development of an emancipatory future learn two lessons in light of these contradictions.

1. The crisis within the state and its extensions, where social goods and their shadow functions are privatized and moved out of the realm of public concern, presents strategic problems as well as strategic opportunities. It is to be observed in terms of how it informs our resistance, not as a reason not to resist.

2. We absolutely cannot reproduce the siege mentality and its insider/outsider logic within our own movements and affinity groups, unless we want to be pieces on the board in a game which has little to do with freedom or equality.

Examples of the above mentioned tactical blunder will not be difficult to recall for anyone who has spent time in the phantasmatic piece of collective performance art we call “New Detroit”. In a stage play consisting entirely of social insiders (depending on one’s perspective) there is always a deeper inside, another secret room to clout chase one’s way into. Friends get jobs at a trendy nonprofit and text back a little slower, others enroll at graduate programs at Wayne or Michigan and start spending suspicious amounts of time in New York.

You might be asked not to bring coworkers to a party because “they might harsh folks’ vibe”. The host of the party is later exposed as a millionaire real estate speculator as well as a couple other varieties of predator. His former associates perform an elaborate ritual in which they pretend to have never had any idea he was like that. Everyone pretends to believe them. Insiders never turn on other insiders. Insiders never tell outsiders the truth. So and so gets their own gallery show, such and such’s chapbook comes out, suddenly they’re a professor. The loudest campus activists never seem to get in any serious trouble, all their insurrections become line items on their CV. I’m not the first person to point these things out, and before anyone gets excited to point it out, I too am an insider.

The problem, then, is how to resist when every institution primarily exists to preserve and extend its own power, including those which are not intended to earn a profit, and even those with an ostensibly progressive mission. In order to continue to exist, they need property rights, and property rights require policing. Does this mean that all insiders are complicit? I’m afraid so.

By the time you get to any meeting where anything of substance is discussed, you've already signaled to dozens of people that you understand the way things are, and that you understand your core responsibilities. This is how Wayne State can fail its surrounding community so catastrophically and continue to claim to serve it, simply that anyone in a position to significantly impact its policies got into that position by demonstrating an understanding of their first priority. By the time you become an "adult in the room", you learn to read facial expressions and body language to determine who else has accepted their own first priority. Under the current state of affairs, the most radical people you can think of will end up growing up if they're not careful, and they'll end up writing a white paper about how this or that institution can improve outcomes for community stakeholders. They'll have the best of intentions, but still will understand that we cannot improve outcomes for the community if we lose our funding.

As I write this, Detroit Will Breath continues to march in the city, and all over the world, friends and comrades continue the work of imagining new logics and futures. Recent events have demonstrated the simple fact that while meaningful resistance is possible and necessary within institutions, those of us inside their walls must do the work of thinking outside their logics. For those on the outside, a siege mentality makes little sense, and an entire world is already taking place beyond the mentality of scarcity that austerity measures engender.

The real challenge, then, is learning to trust the future which is now taking place outdoors, to trust that future more than we trust the institutions which grant us momentary and conditional insider status. Some of us will find this more troubling.

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