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Internal Conflict and the Security Campus: The University at War and Peace

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“Beyond NYU’s Washington Square campus in Greenwich Village lies a whole world of NYU opportunity.”

—Web site of NYU’s “Global Network University,” <http://www.nyu.edu/global.network/>

The past few decades have witnessed an attempt to remake private universities in the image of both the neoliberal corporation *and* the neoliberal security State. The signs are well-known: corporate (vs. State) funding for research increases while the university is increasingly administered in the manner of a for-profit “enterprise”; the university itself builds, purchases, and is granted physical outposts on every continent and virtual Web portals; and a greater share of academic labor is performed on a contract basis, with more teaching done by

part-time, non-tenure track instructors.

What critics of the neoliberal university are less likely to note is the way universities have participated in *closing off* literal and symbolic spaces, a process that has gone hand in hand with the destruction of “barriers to trade.” In the world at large, a lockdown process accelerated *before* 9-11, in the late 1990s under Bill Clinton. Liberalization, free (unequal, neocolonial) trade, and the hyper-exploitation of labor abroad must be supported by military might, territorial borders, and disciplined labor at home. Likewise, the University’s own form of expansionism and casualization entails a lockdown of University-owned built spaces and the increasing surveillance and disciplining of academic speech.¹ Only if we think of both processes as equally relevant and operating in tandem can we understand the neoliberal university as a space that is not only *economically* divided but also—as the topic of this dossier challenges us to do—as a properly *political* space; that is, a space with a particular relation not only to the market, but to State power as well.

What follows are some reflections on the organization of social space at and in New York University, the site where I work and study and, of course, where *e-misférica* is published. As a prototype of the open, “city” campus, NYU is a good case study for observing how the university campus functions as what Henri Lefebvre referred to as a “representational space”: “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols,” or “the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (39). “Securing” and visibly policing the university produces and enforces the notion of a university “community” newly grounded in the principle of shared, yet “private” property. I offer these comments with an eye toward concrete questions of strategy, and here again the situation at NYU is instructive: in 2005-2006 it was the site of a strike by graduate employees unionized as a local of the United Auto Workers. Drawing on my own experience as a participant in the strike, I will argue that the strategy pursued by organized labor failed because it operated through and in accordance with spaces of campus, press, and State organized from above, rather than forming nodes of disruption built around the specific space-time of work stoppage from below.

Secure space and private property on NYU’s Campus

Since the mid-90’s, NYU has been at the forefront of the corporatization of University education. This movement reached new heights under current President John Sexton, a tireless advocate for the creation of a “common enterprise university”—a process that involves a combination of austerity measures, capital investment programs, and structural changes planned and enacted in order to improve both the university’s financial position and its rankings (see Sexton 2003a). All of this is expected to generate, as Sexton puts it in stunningly discordant language, “a symphony of discovery and learning, (through which) we will witness the development of new kinds of players, with each addition enhancing the overall product in some way” (Sexton 2003b: 9).

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In New York City, the university has expanded its real estate holdings over the entire downtown and midtown sections of the city and is now among the top three private real estate holders in the city. For years it has saturated the transit system and the airwaves with advertising for its School of Continuing and Professional Studies. It has also led the way in marketing its product globally, attracting tens of thousands of students/customers to its online learning site while partnering with institutions such as the American University in Paris and the London School of Economics, sending undergraduates to an ever-expanding list of study abroad programs.

Simultaneously, the university—“a private university in the public service”—has revamped its physical presence in Greenwich Village by constructing visually imposing buildings and by enhancing its security apparatus, blocking entrance to its buildings with added technology and labor. Exhibit A: the towering, pale yellow Kimmel Center, built in the face of widespread community protest and opened in 2003. The center’s only public entrance consists of a street-level glass façade reinforced by a row of the same permanently polished stainless steel card-swipe turnstiles installed in Bobst Library. Comparing Kimmel to a “bunker,” “corporate office building,” and “imitation... court house,” a mildly apocalyptic but observant *Village Voice* article warned in 1999 that, in contrast to the edifice that it would replace, “plans for Kimmel— with its soaring glass-and-granite facade—appear to send a different message: Keep off our lawn” (Todaro).² The Kimmel “style” is repeated across the University, as guards enforce ID-check requirements at the doors (and face sanction if caught not doing so).

NYU’s private security apparatus (which partners with the New York Police Department and private security firms) encourages students to adopt a colonialist mentality—an eagerness to “take advantage of the city’s opportunities” while simultaneously feeling besieged by it. Meanwhile, however, this security apparatus is mobilized in times of crisis (and as exploitable labor itself) not so much against invasions of undesirable “outsiders” but against dissident students and employees.³ Yet the security apparatus also serves another function. On the level of daily life, it becomes integral to linking together what is so often referred to as “the NYU community.” The practice of security enforcement ties the spread-out, urban campus together as a physical space: showing NYU ID to enter a building not only confirms my affiliation with the institution, but also quite literally traces—as I move, say, from my Department to the classroom to the library throughout the day—a connected “University-wide” arena that I share with other individuals undertaking the same self-identifying activity. The very mechanism that connects the university’s dispersed “campus” also confirms this connection in terms of private access to private property. Qualitatively different experiences in differentiated spaces are brought together within a singular logic of consumption that is not only enforced, but also reinforced and reproduced, by the practice of “security.”

This logic is precisely that of the “Global University”: a grid of “NYU opportunity,” infinitely extensive but visibly closed to those unable to gain admission, is laid over the geographically-defined planet; the political division of nation-states, regions, and cities; and

the material and conceptual division between onsite and online education. At the same time, the spatialization of commodified pedagogical activity also serves as the material expression of one of the most intriguing fantasies of the Enterprise University: the contradictory notion that while manufacturing an “enhanc(ed) overall product,” those who teach perform no actual, value-producing labor. NYU President John Sexton, for instance, explicitly imagines monetary compensation as supplementary to the relationship between the “common enterprise university” and its faculty, adjunct and tenure-track alike:

In my lexicon, an adjunct professor is someone selected because he or she, while forswearing a full time academic life, comes into the classroom as an exemplar of the application of knowledge creation in the world outside the gates. (Sexton 2003b: 14)

But now we must ask: if a university demands so much of faculty will it compromise its ability to secure the talent it seeks? The answer, based on my experience, although perhaps counterintuitive, is that creating such a social contract of obligation will make the common enterprise university irresistibly attractive to some of the finest scholars—because a good number of those who are drawn to the life of the mind derive joy not so much from material reward—although those rewards must be sufficient—but from a stronger sense of vocation. Many of the best, although concededly not all, are attracted powerfully and primarily to the satisfactions of unfettered inquiry, the serious and at times even playful exchange of ideas.” (Sexton 2003b: 8)

These statements are more than simple rhetorical flourishes in praise of faculty commitment. What they appeal to is a seemingly utopian notion of faculty labor (and most importantly, *teaching work*) as thoroughly un-alienated. Whereas the old, classical ideal of academic work as a disinterested pursuit of ideas may have chiefly served to reinforce a claim to objectivity for the knowledge produced and transferred within the university, its neoliberal variant recasts teaching through the logic of consumption: rather than working to add value to a product, the ideal instructor “enjoys” it alongside the customer-student. Understanding teaching as labor would force us to divide classroom time along antagonistic lines; teaching (and learning)—as- enjoyment, on the other hand, takes place in an uninterrupted, undifferentiated, “empty” time.

Strategies and tactics: Labor time and spatial resistance

The production of this empty pedagogical time conceals the fact that in becoming a “common enterprise university,” NYU has also become a player in the cross-industry battle between capital and labor. In recent years in New York City, this battle—a “one-sided class war”⁴—has been both managed and championed by the State in the form of budget cuts to social services and the winning of concessions in pay, benefits, and working conditions at the bargaining table from public sector unions such as those representing teachers and transit workers.

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NYU's most significant contribution to this effort was its success in crushing a six-month strike by graduate student employees, which began on November 9, 2005. In the wake of a 2004 National Labor Relations Board ruling that graduate employees at private universities are not workers with the right to unionize, the Graduate Student Organizing Committee/United Auto Workers' Local 2110 sought to force the university to renew a contract that guaranteed fixed health care costs, job stability, and an external grievance procedure. For its part, the University—while denouncing the action—clearly pushed the union to strike. In doing so, it seized an opportunity to clear away remaining “barriers” to profitability and to administrative (vs. student/union/faculty) control over resource allocation. The strike's defeat, moreover, would be felt as a blow to organized labor citywide and put a damper on all forms of future student opposition.

From the perspective of organized labor, the strike had two distinct underlying objectives. For one, a successful campaign would have reaffirmed the ability of a large industrial union (the United Auto Workers) to capture more marginal sectors of the labor force even as it negotiated away the living standards of its base.⁵ More importantly, however, the strike would test the ability of collective, direct action of organized workers to win concessions from an employer *without* the formal legal support of the State. Graduate instructors and assistants at a private university thus found themselves in a position most often occupied by public employees who are legally prohibited from walking off the job.

So what sort of resistance might be not only possible, but successful, within and against the spatial and ideological order of the neoliberal university?

Certainly one that uses to its full advantage the antagonisms generated by the reality of exploited productive activity on the campus. Against the neutral space of interchangeable buildings, fungible classrooms and disinterested, infinitely extendable customer service, our strike deprived students of all-too-quantifiable “classroom hours.” Hundreds of graduate employees participated in the strike at its inception, and this work stoppage—and the university's repressive response—laid bare the reality that the work of teaching produces a monetized value entirely independent of “knowledge and learning.”

However, the NYU strike didn't just place the university “in the spotlight,” so to speak. Rather, the strike was the result of calculated decisions on both sides of the struggle to play a momentarily central role in redefining the limits of organized labor's (fading) power. The union had a unique opportunity to appeal to different interests within the “university community” while *also* opening the space of the campus, the “University community,” and the “NYU experience” to forces beyond the control of the university administration and its security/discipline process.

Once the empty space of the university and its community—the campus—was broken open and its divisions made visible, the union had two spatial possibilities or strategies: it could close this

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gap (hopefully in our favor) by directing its appeals to a broader, abstract, neutral space of state authority; or it could insert our struggle into the conflicting networks of social antagonism that circulate through and constitute the lived space-time experience of both the city and the university.

The union bureaucracy opted for the former method, which involved creating maximum visible “disturbance” on the ground: a vibrant but solely symbolic picket line and a boycott of the campus space (supportive professors and invited speakers were respectfully requested to hold classes and talks “off-campus”), all linked to a polished and prolific publicity apparatus that matched the university press release for press release and interview for interview. These tactics rendered the university, its educational product, and the strike itself “public”—but on the same terms that it had previously been demarcated as private. The university was allowed to continue functioning (undergraduate students were promised that they would receive grades regardless of missed classes), though its injustices were “exposed”... to the eyes of the State (the City Council, the Governor, and the semi-legal “influence” of Senator Hilary Clinton). The hoped-for end of the strike was not a total stoppage of all labor on the campus; rather, NYU’s administration was expected to cave in the face of a political threat from without (likely, the threat of some city authority to deny the university building permits).

Was this strategy successful? The short answer is no.

The UAW’s strategy failed to address the fundamental complicity of NYU’s union-crushing project with a broader, State-led agenda (at both local and national levels) of budget-cutting, deregulation, and attacks on public-sector unions--which no important politician in New York City has ever substantially opposed. The university’s goals and its repressive tactics were entirely in keeping with those of the neoliberal State, particular politicians’ verbal support for our cause notwithstanding.

The UAW therefore sought to insert the campus into the City by using the strike to trump the rule of the university administration with the rule of the State. An alternate vision could have been to assert control of—and shut down—the university from below. This strategy would have involved utilizing an alternative spatial and temporal network based on the circulation of goods and services into, out from, and throughout the campus. The union could have demanded that students cease to attend class, mobilized sympathy strikes by other university unions, and pressured truckers to cease delivering supplies and retrieving garbage from campus. Most clearly, it could have insisted that faculty cease to teach rather than working for the university from a nominally exterior “off-campus” space.

Such a strategy would have thoroughly subverted the basis on which the university administration controls the campus space and activity within it. Rather than simply being “opened to the public eye” or “closed for business,” space on the campus would have been de-privatized in the far more radical sense of being reappropriated by those specific subjects

whose activity has always filled it with both meaning and value.

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¹ See the AAUP’s campaign “Speak Up, Speak Out: Protect the Faculty Voice” (<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/protectvoice/>) for recent developments.

² Kimmel, however, has served as anything but a “protected” space for either students or administrators. Rather, it has become a durable site of “special events” that move through it—corporate conferences, “invited guests” of renown, artistic spectacles, and Trustee meetings, but also activist gatherings and last spring, a student-led occupation, which the building’s phalanx of built-in physical barriers did little to impede.

³ Suicidal students are another risk to the Enterprise U: after a spate of suicides in 2003, NYU closed off the library stairway and interior balconies with floor-to-ceiling plexiglass, and the university has a widespread reputation (if not, perhaps, a standard practice) of sending potentially self-destructive students to mental health facilities or forcing them to take an extended leave of absence.

⁴ As UAW President Doug Fraser famously put it in 1978...a year before negotiating the notorious concessions at Chrysler, of course.

⁵ See the dissident labor publication *Labor Notes* for excellent coverage of the UAW contract with the Big Three auto companies and the response of rank and file opposition activists to the union’s strategy (see, for example, Slaughter 2003).

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