



24 September 2009: UC Berkeley faculty and student walkout in protest against budget cuts, fee hikes, layoffs and furloughs. Photo courtesy of [Indybay.org/Labor Video Project](http://Indybay.org/Labor)

## The Master Plan

Patrick Anderson | University of California, San Diego

The drama is a ritual enactment in an enclosed space into which fifty or more people are staring. They are all more or less patiently waiting for something: the Reversal, the Discovery, the *deus ex machina*, or even the final curtain. Settled numbly in the evening, they accept whatever interim diversions the stage can provide: tramps in bowler hats, for instance (Kenner 1967:107).

When it became clear, in the vernal months of 2009, that the drastic measures undertaken to “save” the University of California from near-certain financial doom would include hiring freezes, layoffs, pay cuts, and furloughs, the faculty grew concerned. Where in previous years the ongoing divestment in higher education by the state legislature sparked, with a few notable exceptions, only passing widespread concern, now that the “budget crisis” was becoming a more intimate component of U.C. faculty life—reduced administrative staffing, larger classes, and

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(perhaps especially) shrinking paychecks—expressions of panicked alarm began to grow louder, echoing through once-placid conference rooms and corridors like the incessant tolling of a grandfather clock, or an electrocardiogram, or the late-night drip from a faucet that no one can fix. Suddenly the rate of email exchange increased exponentially with missives from colleagues who had heard the latest, direst news; or with forwarded transcripts of interviews with University administrators; or with unnerved calls for solidarity and collective action often lacking a coherent sense of common concerns. The furloughs seemed, from the tone of most texts, the greatest threat to the University's mission "to serve the greater good," a mission that was prototypically evoked as countless colleagues asked, "How can we live comfortably in California if paid 7-10% less than we receive now?"

I do not mean to suggest that concerns over U.C. compensation plans for faculty and (especially) staff are misguided. For years, U.C. faculty members have accepted salaries well below those offered at comparable institutions. More pressingly, U.C. staff—particularly those who perform the most fundamental and essential services, including cooking and cleaning—are especially poorly compensated in take-home wages, and many subsist with salaries below the poverty line. But there is great irony in the pairing of "greater good" ideals and faculty household income, an irony that we might more rigorously track as representative of a neoliberal strategy of social organization that privileges the individual and familial units above all other modes of, on one hand, *action*, and, on the other, *belonging*. That irony is deepened by its timing—after eight years of the general campus depressions that characterized the anti-intellectualism of the Bush era, we were suddenly enlivened to evoke what could have been the battle-cry of Bush's particular version of the neoliberal: *Leave My Paycheck Alone*. One wonders if the outcry from faculty quarters would have been as impassioned as it has if faculty furloughs had never been proposed; one fears that the answer is *no*.<sup>1</sup>

As time has passed—and as the crisis has grown increasingly dire—such articulations of alarm have matured beyond the immediate panic over having less disposable income. (Simultaneously and unfortunately, the stark poverty of the U.C.'s lowest-paid workers has been all-but forgotten in pleas to "save the university.") These shifts are due, in no small part, to the formidable demonstrations staged by students on every U.C. campus (those at U.C. Berkeley, U.C. Los Angeles, and U.C. Santa Cruz have received the most media attention; but sit-ins, teach-ins, and walk outs have been organized on each of the ten campuses) and to the many ways in which the energy of contraction has jumped scale (from furloughs to canceled faculty lines and staff positions, to departments under consideration for closure, to entire schools and divisions whose operating budgets have been slashed, to the tragically misguided calls from colleagues at my own U.C. San Diego that whole campuses be shuttered). The panic is no less present now than it was in July; but as time has passed, the focus of various faculty contingencies has concentrated more on the structural problems facing public education and less on the individualized difficulties of "making do" with less income.

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I open with this particular gesture in order to suggest that the current trajectories of criticism, focused entirely on university administrators, the Regents, and state legislators—all of whom deserve a skeptical look, by the way—might benefit from a healthy dose of self-regard. That is, at the same time that U.C. faculty groups are organizing to contest the strategies of steady divestment that have landed the U.C., C.S.U., and Community College systems in such dire straits, we might simultaneously attend to our own complicity—or, at worst, active engagement—in detaching our work from the publics—and, for that matter, counterpublics—to which it ought to be attentive. To be clear, this is not a call for purely “applied” research, or for a lethal (particularly for the arts and humanities) calculus of “outcomes” that privileges positivistic *results* above all else. Nor do I mean to suggest that our teaching and research ought to be directly accountable to the majoritarian politics that would cast aside minoritarian pedagogies and discourses, clearing room for the resurrection of disciplinary canons (and, indeed, stoic “disciplines”). Nor, finally, do I mean to invoke Aristotelian aesthetic ideals in any way, shape, or form. But it does seem to me that the “public” of our higher education is a multi-directional route, requiring not only the fiscal and political support of our legislators, but also our own firm and impassioned investment in the peoples, groups, and communities that call any and all Californias “home.”

On 14 September 2009, coincidentally just two weeks into the first month of the above-named U.C. faculty furloughs, Michael Bérubé published an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called “What’s the Matter with Cultural Studies?” (et al. 2009) Bérubé begins with a provocative question, “What kind of impact has cultural studies had on the (U.S.) university as an institution over the past 20 or 25 years?” and then settles, several paragraphs later, on an equally provocative claim: “Cultural studies hasn’t had much of an impact at all” (or, as he later invokes, “you might as well be asking about the carbon footprint of unicorns”).<sup>2</sup> For the bulk of the essay, Bérubé traces a distinctly patrilineal genealogy for Cultural Studies, attending exclusively to the philosophical and institutional legacies (beginning with the U.K.’s Birmingham School) of the field and, indeed, suggesting that those “legacies” aren’t really legacies at all, but failed promises. He takes particular umbrage at what he sees as a tendency to equate Cultural Studies with the study of popular culture, citing a remark made by Stuart Hall in a recent interview as “speak[ing] for itself”: “I really cannot read another cultural-studies analysis of Madonna or *The Sopranos*.”

Bérubé’s folly, at this particular moment in the essay, is to imply that popular culture is “merely” a “fun” pursuit, not up to the standards of Cultural (or other) Studies-as-serious-scholarship. But in the interview from which Bérubé cites (unattributed in the *Chronicle* piece), Hall continues, “Of course we studied those things [at the Birmingham Centre], but always because of how [they] interconnected with wider formations” (Colin 2007:29). Hall’s emphasis here—admittedly, perhaps undergirded by a weariness with the disproportionate attention paid to *some* forms of “popular culture” over and above many others—is on the *interconnections* of cultural production and political economy. He does not seem to be retrospectively bemoaning the very real turn Cultural

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Studies initiated, to attend to the seemingly pedestrian but profoundly significant artifacts of public (and counterpublic) life and lives. (My late mentor, Dwight Conquergood, used to reference such artifacts as “the mountains of Wales,” invoking Raymond Williams’ autobiographical description of his journeys from his working-class childhood home to Cambridge.) As the students, faculty, and staff of U.C. Davis’ Cultural Studies Graduate group wrote in response to Bérubé:

We [...] do not recognize cultural studies as a field characterized by weak treatments of television shows and pop stars. Our field, as we know it, addresses such topics as the “war on terror,” nanotechnology, the visual culture of medicine, immigration, and asylum, the corporatization of the university, tourism, the cultural history of food and wine, the science and technology of textiles, environmental racism, psychic formations, transnational media, militarization, memory and genocide, the production of knowledge outside the academy, [and] histories of visual culture (Beauchamp et al. 2009).

My own recitation of Cultural Studies’ continuing academic relevance concerns precisely its insistence that what goes by the name of scholarship is profoundly interconnected with, and distinctly responsible for, the political economies of everyday life. In my graduate training, “Cultural Studies” was not a euphemism for “mere popular culture,” but *praxis*: the rigorous and sustained interweaving of scholarly attention and engaged action, particularly with and on behalf of subjects that otherwise existed, for one reason or another, under the radar of traditional scholarly, cultural, and political representation. In this sense, Cultural Studies represents what I would characterize as an eminently *ethical* field, in the broadest philosophical and most precisely materialist sense of that word. This, indeed, represents the most important overlap in the methods and goals of Cultural Studies and my primary disciplinary home, Performance Studies, one of whose primary interventions has been to embrace and articulate the intimate intersections of scholarly, aesthetic, and activist orientations in the work it generates and claims. Consider, for example, the work of José Esteban Muñoz on queer cabaret and nightclub performances and the communities they build and sustain; or by Shannon Jackson on the economic, cultural, and political work developed by and on behalf of immigrant communities in Chicago’s Hull House; or by E. Patrick Johnson on the life histories of Southern U.S. gay black men; or by Anna Deavere Smith on the uprisings in Crown Heights and Los Angeles; or by Dwight Conquergood on imprisonment and the death penalty. Such examples from Performance Studies exemplify not only how those within the academy can (and must, if we are to survive the current crisis) work across university walls, but also how the very notion of “public relevance” can and should be articulated in distinctly non-commercial terms.

To return to the central concern of this brief missive from an embattled public institution of higher education—it is precisely this kind of work, I believe, that attends directly to the “greater good” our universities are expected to serve. Moreover, it is in part our *failure* to push such articulations to the core of our work within universities that has in part

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resulted in our loss of public support. In other words, the current situation facing the U.C. and so many other public institutions is not so much a “budget crisis” as it is a *political* crisis for which we faculty share some of the blame. We may very well, and for good reason, question and criticize the decisions made by our administrators and legislators, but we ought equally to ask ourselves to what extent we and our work have effectively served, in our Left Coast case for example, the people of California.

In 1960, the California Masterplan for Higher Education was passed by the state legislature and signed into law. Although the plan has undergone numerous changes during periodic reviews over the past five decades, its central tenants still hold: that the state commits to support the three-tiered structure of public higher education (the Community Colleges, the California State University system, and the University of California system), and that this system will be accessible by all California residents who meet certain qualifying criteria. As then-U.C. President Clark Kerr would later write in his memoir, the plan was essentially a “treaty” between institutions of higher learning and the state, including the following among its long list of provisions:

- - Placement for all high school graduates (“and all others equally qualified”) at a college or university; the U.C. would admit the top 12.5% of graduates, the C.S.U. would admit the top 33.3% of graduates, and the Community Colleges would admit all others.
- - Transfer opportunities between the three systems for qualified students.
- - Established Community Colleges “within commuting distance of virtually all residents of the state.”
- - State-sponsored Scholarships for students with demonstrated need. (Kerr 2001:182 84)

Such provisions boldly represent the *structure*—one might say, the *bones*—of California’s commitment to publicly accessible higher education. They say nothing of that commitment’s *musculature*, its internal and external relations of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and mutual interdependence—across disciplines, institutions, and municipal as well as county lines.

Contrary to popular citation, then-Governor Pat Brown and Clark Kerr were not the primary heroes of the Masterplan. It was championed by (and, though this designation is largely forgotten, posthumously named for) Dorothy M. Donahoe, an assemblywoman from rural Kern County. Indeed, after Donahoe passed away unexpectedly one night in April 1960, the legislature resolved its ongoing and at times virulent debate over the plan and passed it unanimously the following day (Rarick 2005:152). Donahoe’s legacy in the California assembly—she has received very little biographical attention—includes working on behalf of farmers and farmworkers in her home county; advocating for state support for people with disabilities, especially in the form of mental health services; and chairing the educational policy committee that first devised and then shepherded the Masterplan through the legislature. She

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was a model, that is, for both the broad, and the institutional ideals of public works. Though her own educational pedigree was capped with a high school diploma, she seemed to exemplify how work within a given institutional context (in her case, state government) could reach beyond itself, traversing and articulating multiple domains of the “public good.”

We might take a cue from Dorothy. At the same time that we engage in the profound value of staged demonstrations, we must attend to the ongoing institutional (and inter-institutional) project of serving the public good. At the same that we turn our critical gaze to those whose structural powers have direct consequence upon our professional and private lives, we must remain conscious of the (institutional and otherwise) roles we play in sustaining those structures of power and simultaneously forge new modes not just of “convincing” the public of our value, but also of expanding that value in essential even if unquantifiable ways. Otherwise—as in the epigraph for this note—while we wait for the dramatic reversal, the curtain will come crashing down.

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**Patrick Anderson** es profesor asistente en el Departamento de Comunicación de la Universidad de California en San Diego donde es también miembro afiliado de la facultad en Estudios Críticos de Género y Estudios Étnicos. Investiga la intersección de los estudios de performance y los estudios culturales, enfocando particularmente en el papel constitutivo de la violencia, la mortalidad, y el dolor en la producción de la subjetividad política. Con Jisha Menon, Anderson es co-editor de *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Palgrave-Macmillan) y autor de *'So Much Wasted': Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (de próxima aparición, Duke University Press), además de numerosos ensayos en revistas y capítulos en antologías. Actualmente, trabaja en un libro sobre enfermedades y remembranza, y sobre una investigación histórica de la interrelación entre arquitectura, oftalmología, y empatía.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I include myself within this aggregated object of criticism.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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