Austerity Blues: The Fight for the Soul of Public Higher Education

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“For, while the tale of how we suffer and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.” James Baldwin, Sonny’s Blues

Inspired by James Baldwin, Austerity Blues is a volume produced in two dialects: the story of the systematic assault on public institutions and the story of the sparks of creativity, dedication, desire, desperation, and collective conviction that a vibrant public higher education system—like clean air and clean water—is essential to the health and soul of the city and the nation.

This book will focus on public higher education in an era of starvation and monetization of all things public. The austerity regime confronting public higher education in the present moment is not unique to universities; it affects all levels of social and public services and the very quality of citizens’ lives. That said, as a public good, higher education plays a unique role in American society, including: developing a productive labor force able to meet the challenges of a global economy; creating critical thinkers committed to citizenship and the expansion of rights within a democracy; enlarging equality of opportunity and access for the poorest students of color; and encouraging often unpopular ideas that help stimulate economic, social, cultural, and political progress. Each of these historic goals of public higher education is threatened by the continuing debasement of the college experience brought on by a steady withdrawal of public funding and the out-sourcing of educational functions to the private marketplace. This book will identify the historical, economic, and political forces prompting these transformative changes, their impact on academic policy and practice, as well as suggest alternative ways of reimagining and restructuring public higher education in the future.