ROGUE SCHOLARS

Education in Ruin
It seems to me that the situation we are in, as educators, is that like most people we are having a terrible time taking care of ourselves and taking care of each other, in really really basic ways. The "crisis" of higher education is not really a crisis of education. It's the same crisis that's going off everywhere. It's the crisis of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" up to including the dispossession of the planet's ability to support and nourish life itself. We know this.

Our institutions are being ruined by this process, and we all know something about the power and potency of ruins. My question is, how do we thrive in the ruins together? I've actually started thinking about this as a form of honest piracy, or honorable body snatching. We're marooned together, here in the ruins of capitalism, on a devastated earth. We are in a situation of total war by the 1% against everyone and everything else. So let's not be naive about that. Let's not
think that this is a good moment to engage in "social entrepreneurship," or "social impact investing," nor, I think, is it a time to "build" anything. It's a time to learn to play and find sanctuary among the ruins. This is the only honest way to confront the reality of the situation, which is that there are massive, massive, MASSIVE stockpiles of wealth, energy, resources, capacities that are being hoarded and from which most people are being excluded. Then the very poverty and abandonment to which people are subject becomes a site of reinvestment, surveillance, control, domination, and further extraction. This is basically the situation of today's indebted college student.

The answer to all this is not more accountability, better assessment, more oversight, clarity, clearer "outcomes," or any of the other things being imposed on academic to try to make college look reasonable (it's just
participating in the insanity of derivative finance). We know this.

We know that education is not about outcomes. It's about inputs. It's not about what happens after we study but while we are studying. It's not about who the students become. It's about how scholars, teachers, wisdom keepers became who they are, and the way they are able to survive long enough to transmit, perform, and offer what they have received. It's not about the fruits. It's about the seeds and the seed carriers.

What educators need, what scholars need, is refuge, is sanctuary. And we simply need wealthy patrons—the equivalent of endowments—to directly support the livelihood of educators. Full stop. No questions asked.

All Cambridge University is, I realized when I went there, is some basic shelter and places to
eat together. That's it. And, literally, it's a bunch of ruined stones.

So this is it. We need to find wealthy patrons who will pay top dollar for intimate study sessions with us, which in turn will enable us to study with others for free. Period. That's it. There's no curriculum, no credentialing, no degrees. Just people studying together. The Rogue Scholars Sanctuary @ Incite Seminars. No social media campaign, no advertising. "For your father in heaven sees what you have done in secret, and rewards you." Secrecy, stealth, piracy. Exile, silence, and cunning. Peer to peer, word of mouth, honor among thieves as we plunder the surplus together.

Anyone who wants to study together should have access to the means of subsistence needed. Yes, we'll have to decide who needs what and who is able to do what. We can figure out how to do that as we go along. We don't have to
worry about scale until there is scale, and when it gets too large we can just STOP. We don't have to grow this web indefinitely. Other webs can be other webs. Anarchist principles at work. Mutual aid.

We can start with ourselves and a few others we know, with what we need. These can be people who want to teach who are in precarious positions within or without or on the margins of the academy, it doesn't matter. We can find wealthy patrons who believe in us. There are people who trust educators, who know firsthand what it is to study with us, who know that's what they want. That's where it starts. From there it can grow as little or as much as is needed.

Right now, I don't think we need new institutions. It think the minimal setup of Incite is great (maybe we can find some other spaces to do it in, but we really don't need much).
We need to figure out how to hide within and dance among the ruins as the earth renews itself in a process that is more catastrophic and more subtle than any of our perceptions can keep up with. Sure, we'll need more and other language than this to help the wealthy release the surplus they are hoarding. But hoarding hurts. They don't want to hoard, they want to give. And we can help them.

—Joshua Ramey

Here’s how I see it:

The basic function of sanctuary is to protect. What are we trying to protect here? It is not simply ourselves as teachers and philosophers and our bio-lives, though it is that for sure. It is also something less tangible, and perhaps in the end – who knows about ends these days? – more powerful: the deeper understanding and critical transmission of the high cultures of the world across time and space.
I am saying high cultures deliberately. What we do is not about popular culture, though that can be studied with profit and pleasure. Nor is it about the latest environmental research or the newest neuroscience or the most well strategized career path, though God knows these are legitimate fields of inquiry or at least legitimate concerns.

What we do is about the texts and bodies of knowledge, ancient and modern, that have generated the consciousnesses through which our world has been created and, yes, through which it has been brought to the edge of extinction. And we are here to critique those texts and knowledges and to generate new ones. Above all, we are here to “read, study and plan” if I may adapt a phrase from The Undercommons in the face of an unimaginable future, but one we intend to enter with power and grace. Nothing more, and nothing less.
To unpack that a little, we are here to read slowly, to study in company with others, and to discern a plan for going forward based on that reading and study. We are here for the joy of these activities as ends in themselves and also in the faith that out of them will come ideas and practices, both personal and social, that will help us to heal our minds and bodies, care for our families, and participate with grace and power in the “struggle which is ours against the powers and principalities, against the rulers of this world of darkness and the spirits of evil in high places” as the great prayer to St. Michael goes.

As we have said, we are not here to build new institutions, or develop more adaptive pedagogies, or open up new markets, nor to figure out more and more artful ways to collaborate with current power structures and economies. We are not even engaged, at least in this context, in the reactive process of finding
alternatives to these, or not directly. All of these are legitimate projects to one degree or another; they are just not ours here. We are here to think, and to think in the company of others of vision and eminence, past and present. And if I may make one other point, perhaps more sharply than needed, we are a not a democratic formation, though such may well be our politics in other contexts. We do not operate on monolithic egalitarian principles. We do not pretend that all that has been said or done in any domain is of equal value or equally worth our time, nor do we take the position, at least a priori, that every idea that arises is equally worth having. We are, in a sense, classicists. We look to engage only and exclusively with thought that is rigorous, engaged, original and productive. We read, study and plan in the full knowledge that time is short. We’d rather struggle with hard texts than ones that happen to suit our book, and we’d rather read what
challenges our understanding than what simply echoes it.

It is in the service of these ends and projects and these only, and in the light of our long-term commitment to them (and we all have skin in this game) that we claim both our authority as teachers and guides and our right to the respect and support, both material and affective, of our patrons, our students and our communities. We call in Socrates here, and others whose names are also too august to cite, to insist that we are not in service to the state, nor to the economy, nor to the private ends, egos and consumer needs of individuals, nor even to projects of social uplift per se, but only to the truth of what we have received, such as we at our best discern it to be, and of the critical thought we can generate from it for the repotentiation of our own lives and those of others.

—Cleo Kearns
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What do you need?
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