

Liberated Zones: Making the Public University in the Time of Fascism

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, we have endeavored to build a liberated zone within our university. The UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy is a tiny (but we think mighty) center that undertakes research and scholarship for the purpose of dismantling structures of inequality and creating reparative public goods. We do so by accompanying social movements and communities on the frontlines of dispossession and displacement through practices of research justice. In May 2025, we invited Naomi Klein to deliver the Institute's Distinguished Lecture in Ideas and Organizing because she embodies the ethos of the Institute. Klein's magisterial text, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, published in 2007 and translated into scores of languages, has given us all unprecedented insight into how world-ending activities are made profitable. It demands that we take seriously the crises wrought by the unending emergency that is racial capitalism and the capitalization of such crises in the form of disaster capitalism. But equally important, the long arc of Klein's scholarship demands that we create new narratives and understandings of each crisis and mobilize to ensure that such shocks serve as openings for progressive change. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein calls this the people's reconstruction and it goes to the very heart of the work we do as an Institute here in Los Angeles. In the closing lines of the book, Klein (2007: 466) writes: "These are movements that do not seek to start from scratch but rather from scrap, from the rubble that is all around." Indeed it is from amidst the rubble of evictions and encampment sweeps, from Echo Park Lake to El Sereno, that poor people's movements create insurgent ground in the city of angels. They teach us how to struggle for liberated zones and thereby how to strive to make the public university.

Keywords

liberated zone; fascism; genocide; occupation; disaster capitalism; shock doctrine; racial capitalism; Gaza; climate change

Commentary at a Critical Juncture

We write this commentary at a distinctive juncture in Los Angeles. The city is under occupation by the Trump regime with ICE raids terrorizing working-class communities of color. Charred remains of homes, cars, and restaurants still line the Pacific Palisades coastline and the Altadena foothills, an eerie reminder of the seemingly natural disaster that befell the city at the start of 2025. With the Olympics looming on the horizon, Trump has created a security task force for the event which he himself will head, promising

military might and [ensuring “sex-testing” for athletes](#). In yet another [executive order](#), one that revives Jim Crow vagrancy laws, Trump has instructed states and municipalities to shift “homeless individuals into long-term institutional settings for humane treatment” and to thereby decisively address “crime and disorder on America’s streets.” Taking aim at UCLA as the country’s leading public university, the Trump administration, in retaliation for Palestine solidarity protests, has frozen federal grants and is [demanding \\$1 billion in an “anti-discrimination” settlement](#).

While much of this might feel like an invasion, it is the liberal polity that has facilitated fascist rule. Sanctuary jurisdictions have long been a hollow promise. Liberal cities have criminalized homelessness through punitive ordinances and carceral shelters. The LA28 brokers have pandered to Trump, welcoming the securitization of the games. The unmaking of public universities has been in the making for nearly a half century (Newfield, 2011) but has now been accelerated by university administrators who have acquiesced to the framing of pro-Palestine speech, assembly, and pedagogy as antisemitic acts. As a new round of fires explode in the Los Angeles region, it is worth remembering what Clyde Woods (2017: 216), Black studies scholar and alumnus of the UCLA Urban Planning PhD program, in writing about Katrina termed the “disaster before the disaster.” By this Woods meant not just neoliberalism but rather its “roots” in systems of “plantation economics” and accompanying political regimes.

We are now in the starvation phase of the Gaza genocide. Our departments, universities, and academic organizations continue to maintain what planning scholar Libby Porter (2021) has called “world-killing silence.” But it is not just the silence that concerns Porter. Planning and planners, Porter (2021: 112) notes, “are actively engaged in any number of world-ending activities.” Universities have become proficient in DEI symbolism, mainstreamed land acknowledgements, and elevated community engagement to their strategic plans. Yet they guard their stolen land, defend their enmeshment in circuits of policing and militarism, and “plunder” the cities and communities in which they are located (Baldwin, 2021).

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A few weeks before her lecture at UCLA, Naomi Klein authored an op-ed with Astra Taylor, co-director of The Debt Collective alongside Hannah Appel. Titled "[The Rise of End Times Fascism](#)," the op-ed analyzed the carving up of the world into bunkers by those undertaking and profiting from world-ending activities. It was also strangely uplifting, insisting that we combat the end times fascists by building "an unruly open-hearted movement," one "not of separation and supremacy, but of interdependence and belonging." Her brilliant lecture, which we urge you all to watch in its entirety, made a similar argument. It inspired questions and reflections from each of us and we share these here as a homework of sorts for those engaged in critical planning scholarship and practice.

Ananya Roy:

In the discussion that followed Naomi Klein's lecture, Hannah Appel asked Klein to reflect on the long arc of fascism, rooted in European colonialism, and to do so in relation to the question of Palestine. Klein's response moved me deeply. She noted her late arrival to anticolonial scholarship, much of it by non-white scholars, and its role in undoing the exceptionalism in which she had been schooled and in allowing her to understand the replication and repetition of ethnic cleansing.

At the heart of Klein's response is what she called the "mantle of whiteness." In 2017, as the first Trump presidency took hold, [I argued](#) that a key task for educators was to name and challenge white supremacy. This is even more urgent now as multiculturalist white supremacy—Dylan Rodriguez's (2020) term—is being attacked by white nationalism. The Palestine question plays a central role in the current re-formation of whiteness, of whiteness as grievance, and in the liberal mediation of fascism. But, as Klein pointed out, "the encampment generation" is reading colonial histories. They understand the workings of what Toscano (2022) calls "the returns of racial fascism." It is my hope that such practices of reading will permeate the fortified enclaves of planning. I see this as the essential task of breaking world-killing silence, refusing world-ending activities, and making the public university during end times fascism.

Kian Goh:

End times fascism abounds in allusions to somewhat contradictory freedom cities – libertarian outposts on floating designer islands—and fortified states—like the battened down settler colonial nation. I suppose they need both. But these spatial imaginaries are important, for us, for how we think about our political work and our planning work. A key part of what Naomi Klein offers us is how we resist with [a better story about better times](#). It's about how we see ourselves in the world—staying with the beauty of the Earth, however messy and under siege, whoever we are, wherever we may be. How is this actualized in contexts of deep difference, across separated and divided spaces?

One divide we often hear about is between urban and rural. Urban supposedly progressive, rural supposedly conservative; increasingly, urban supposedly environmentally friendly, rural supposedly climate denialist. But such an easy explanation masks the fact that there might be political alignments across urban and rural spaces (see, e.g., Gilmore, 2008; also Angelo et al., 2025). And that it is largely income, and not settlement form, that determines environmental impact (Jones & Kammen, 2014). We see this kind of struggle over space and environment playing out in Los Angeles after the wildfires. With UCLA PhD alumna Hilary Malson, I'm looking at how a just response to the wildfires must include a historical and regional view. The primary initiatives, led by big tech, finance, and real estate, have been to rebuild as fast as possible. But that leaves many people out, including longstanding Black families in Altadena, who can't afford to do it that way. These families found their way to Altadena [because of and despite past histories of racial covenants, redlining, and freeway construction](#). They have built communities in spite of it all in this unincorporated area outside LA. They now face the

prospects of being displaced further beyond the urban core, to places like the Inland Empire, which is already facing housing precarity and acute pollution, and which, ironically, puts them further at risk of climate-exacerbated extreme heat, flooding, and more wildfires.

Climate change compels us to consider the shared demands for housing access and security and environmental wellness across different spaces, from South LA, Altadena, and the Inland Empire alike. The waves of migration of Black and brown communities in this country tell us as much the story about social and environmental justice as any kind of perceived urban and rural distinctions.

Hannah Appel:

The theme I want to end on is utopias. Both in the talk at the Institute and in recent speeches and writing, Naomi Klein has been foregrounding utopias. I'll name three. First, as in the case of the talk, Klein names eco-populism as an alternative to fascism. In other words, eco-populism is an affirmative vision of where we should, perhaps where we must, go. Second, in the [keynote to the *Still We Rise* gathering](#) in 2024, Klein offered another affirmative vision – reminiscent of the famous socialist phrase *no war but the class war*: “the war on want is the only war worth waging, and wage it we must. We either transform this death machine through the just and equitable redistribution of wealth within the boundaries of the earth’s limits – what many [at that gathering] referred to as ‘a Global Green New Deal’ – or this nightmare engulfs us all.” Third and finally, from Klein’s recent op-ed with Astra Taylor, we have a third affirmative, dare I say utopian vision—the yiddish concept of *Doikayt* or—“the right to “fight for freedom and safety in the places where they lived, in defiance of everyone who wanted them dead.” [Following Molly Crabapple](#), Klein translates this as “Hereness.” Hereness, Klein writes, “can be portable, free of nationalism, rooted in solidarity, respectful of indigenous rights and unbounded by borders.” In this way, Naomi Klein has consistently offered us affirmative visions worth struggling for—eco-populism, the redistribution of wealth, hereness—each of which, as she writes, insist on the wonder and beauty of this world. The question at hand for critical planning scholars and practitioners is whether they want to play a role in such struggles, in the making of liberated zones, and in collective futurities such as the public university.

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