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One of World's Wealthiest Educational Institutions May Close Its Renowned Press

Stanford University Press is at risk—even though it costs scarcely more than the college football coach's raise.

By Michael Rothberg

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The Stanford University campus, highlighting its famous Hoover Tower.
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On April 19, the provost of Stanford University, Persis Drell, called a meeting of the chairs of humanities and

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social-sciences

departments. At the meeting, participants were sworn to secrecy, and Drell announced that she planned to deny a request from [Stanford University](#)

[Press \(SUP\)](#) for an extension of the \$1.7 million annual subsidy it had been receiving—a decision that could spell the end of the publishing house. She also allegedly described the 125-year-old press, which is renowned for strengths in Middle Eastern studies, Jewish studies, literary theory, and memory studies, among many other fields, as “second-rate,” and asked the chairs if they thought the money might be better spent on graduate fellowships. Despite the administration’s efforts to keep the decision quiet, [the story leaked](#), and the provost was forced to address the issue at a faculty senate meeting the next week. At that meeting, she pleaded austerity, suggesting that the payout from Stanford’s \$26.5 billion endowment was less than anticipated in the previous year.

A rapid mobilization followed on and off campus, and by the weekend, letters from thousands of scholars as well as many humanities and social-sciences departments at Stanford [poured in to decry the decision](#) and attest to the world-class caliber of SUP and its publications. Graduate students also mobilized and objected to the way they were being used by the provost: “Choosing between graduate funding and the SUP is not a choice at all,” [they wrote](#). “It’s an existential threat to humanities and social sciences doctoral students, now added on top of our financial difficulties involving health care and costs of living.” As the students recognized, “If Stanford, a world-famous,

prestigious institution with an untold abundance of resources, takes this step,” it would set a dangerous precedent for budget-cutting administrators across the country with clear implications for students’ career opportunities.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, humanistic disciplines that promote critical thought have been under pressure across the country as universities have steered funds toward more practical, preprofessional fields. The university is a fragile, interconnected ecology, and an attack on university presses, the students recognized, would reverberate across the landscape of higher education, with dire consequences for all those not plugged into STEM fields.

The voices of students and faculty produced surprisingly quick results: On April 30—just five days after the story became public—Drell announced a reprieve: She would grant SUP one-time funds for the coming fiscal year. Despite this turnaround, her rhetoric has remained consistent: The press needs “a business model” that is “sustainable,” and it needs to focus on its “strengths.” The fight to save SUP is far from over.

Why this outrage over a budget cut to one university press? There are several factors at play here. First, there is the obvious hypocrisy of one of the wealthiest educational institutions in the world pleading austerity. The annual subsidy SUP has received amounts to a fraction of a percent of the university’s \$6.3 billion annual budget—and doesn’t even register in relation to its prodigious endowment. To put this sum in context, consider that in 2015 Stanford football coach David Shaw received a raise almost equivalent to the entire SUP subsidy; that extra \$1.5 million brought his salary to over \$5.6 million for the year.

In addition, the high-handed and undemocratic manner in which the provost's decision was made aroused particular ire. Never did Drell consult with the press or its faculty editorial board—a clear violation of norms of shared governance. To make matters worse, the university has prevented the press from fund-raising and thus establishing an endowment. Other prestigious presses like Harvard's and Princeton's, in contrast, can count on endowments worth more than \$100 million to support their publishing programs. Even with its small subvention, SUP has been working on a shoestring budget in comparison with the presses with which it competes for authors.

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The greatest source of concern, however, is the signal that Drell's decision broadcast regarding the value of research in the humanities and social sciences on campus. (Drell is a physicist.) Scholarly publications sometimes turn a profit, but unlike trade publications, profit is not their primary reason for being. They are contributions to knowledge that illuminate matters of public concern. They cannot—and should not—compete according to the profit-driven dictates of the market.

SUP's scholarly contributions to the public good are legion, wedding concern for contemporary crises with deep theoretical reflection or historical contextualization. SUP is, for instance, the primary English-language publisher of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose studies of sovereign power and "bare life" became touchstones for

critics of the post-9/11 War on Terror. Series such as Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures and Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture are global in scope—and in terms of authorship—and have revolutionized their respective fields by foregrounding what University of Chicago professor Orit Bashkin called “new voices and silenced histories, often of marginal and marginalized groups.”

For authors like me, a book published with a scholarly press is the outcome of years, sometimes decades, of work. That investment of time and life energy becomes worthwhile because of the editorial guidance, peer-reviewed validation, production values, and global distribution that university presses offer. Our contributions, in turn, help shape public debates—as when I was recently invited as an expert on collective memory to consult on plans for commemorating lynching victims in Alabama.

Stanford’s proposed cut strikes such a nerve because it exemplifies a larger problem that has bedeviled institutions of higher education in recent decades: the triumph of a neoliberal logic that subordinates humanistic learning, scientific research, and critical thinking to corporate values. This logic is by no means limited to the United States. The quantification and monetization of academic research have spread like wildfire across continents in the last 20 years. There are also even darker forces at work. Last year the illiberal government of Hungary declared war on gender studies and—at the same time the crisis at Stanford became public—Brazil’s far-right President Jair Bolsonaro announced that he wanted to cut funding for philosophy and sociology because those disciplines are the home of an alleged left-wing takeover of federal universities.

While the Stanford administration does not frame its decision in such overtly ideological terms, it seems to share Bolsonaro’s belief that education must “generate an immediate return” on investment. With the university situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, Stanford’s threatened abandonment of its press seems to represent the triumph of technocracy and capital over culture, critique, and knowledge. As the literary scholar Cathy Davidson put it in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Technology by technologists for technologists, with no regard for the human and social implications, is what has brought the world to a fraught and morally vexed place.”

The fragile truce surrounding SUP remains cause for concern, but the scale and rapidity of the mobilization that rose up to defend the press is reason for guarded optimism. We who have dedicated our lives to the pursuit of critical knowledge about society and culture are not going down without a fight.

Michael Rothberg Michael Rothberg teaches English and comparative literature at UCLA. His book *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* will be published by Stanford University Press in August 2019.

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