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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics of Exclusion: Repressing Protests on US Campus¹

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ABSTRACT: The first months of the second Trump’s presidency have been characterized by brutal episodes of repression of pro-Palestine protests which build upon attacks on education – through cuts and suspensions on research funds and threats against entire fields of academia – and the harassment of migrants and ethnic minorities. While they appear to be the first step in an authoritarian coup taking place in the United States, these moves have long been in preparation, and not only in the US. Since October 2023, defunding, disciplining and policing have been the main response of a number of governments to pro-Palestinian protests. In this article, I propose identifying three mechanisms of repression, namely: policing, disciplining and stigmatization. While all three of these mechanisms tend to interact with one another and can be perpetrated by different actors, the way in which they function changes: policing represses through the use of force by the state in order to restrict the use of certain forms of protest; disciplining represses through the use of regulatory power, in order to discriminate against social movement organizations and activists; stigmatization represses by negatively labelling forms of protest, organizations, and activists. Having presented a novel theoretical model for the analysis of repression, the analysis of the moral panic campaigns that have taken place in the United States will reveal both the similarities and differences in the dynamics and actors involved. In what follows, I will first briefly introduce to the pro-Palestine solidarity protests that followed on from 7 October 2023. Based on desk research of documents, databases, scientific reports and media coverage, I will then single out some forms of repression that took place in the country and locate them within a social and institutional context, while also considering the main moral panic entrepreneurs involved.

KEYWORDS: Repression, protest, social movements, pro-Palestine solidarity, moral panic

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Introduction

On 4 March 2025, the day of his inaugural speech to Congress, President Donald Trump posted a statement on Truth Social: “All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School or University that allows illegal

¹ I wish to thank Sidney Tarrow and Lesley Wood for precious comments on a previous version of this paper

protests. Agitators will be imprisoned/or permanently sent back to the country from which they came. American students will be permanently expelled or, depending on the crime, arrested. NO MASKS!”. A few days later, on 10 March, a student activist named Mahmoud Khalil, who had served as a lead negotiator for the Gaza solidarity encampment at Columbia University, was abducted by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on the grounds of Columbia University, without any specific charges being made against him. Khalil, who grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, is a permanent US resident with a green card. He had been under investigation by a Columbia committee that “has brought disciplinary charges against dozens of students for their pro-Palestinian activism”. The university had stated that under “exigent circumstances” ICE can access “university buildings or people without a warrant”.² As Trump wrote, “Following my previously signed Executive Orders, ICE proudly apprehended and detained Mahmoud Khalil, a Radical Foreign pro-Hamas Student on the campus of Columbia University. This is the first arrest of many to come. We know there are more students at Columbia and other Universities along the Country who have engaged in pro-terrorist, anti-semitic, anti-American activities and the Trump Administration will not tolerate it”.

On the day of Khalil’s detention, the Education Department sent letters to 60 US universities, including Columbia, Harvard and Yale, threatening them with cuts in federal funding if they did not address allegations of anti-Semitism on campus. Among the many civil right organizations who protested, calling on universities to defend the rights of their students, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union defined Khalil’s detention as a “targeted, retaliatory, and an extreme attack on his first amendment rights”, which was reminiscent of McCarthyism. The student workers union at Columbia University declared that “By allowing Ice on campus, Columbia is surrendering to the Trump administration’s assault on universities across the country and sacrificing international students to protect its finances.” In contrast, the Columbia Jewish Alumni Association, together with other pro-Zionist associations, praised Trump’s action as “exactly what needs to happen to restore order to campuses like Columbia and our country”. The following day, a federal judge in New York City ordered a court hearing on the case for the following Wednesday. As Kahlin wrote in a letter in which he spoke as a “political prisoner”,

My unjust detention is indicative of the anti-Palestinian racism that both the Biden and Trump administrations have demonstrated over the past 16 months as the US has continued to supply Israel with weapons to kill Palestinians and prevented international intervention. For decades, anti-Palestinian racism has driven efforts to expand US laws and practices that are used to violently repress Palestinians, Arab Americans, and other communities. That is precisely why I am being targeted. While I await legal decisions that hold the futures of my wife and child in the balance, those who enabled my targeting remain comfortably at Columbia University. ... Columbia targeted me for my activism, creating a new authoritarian disciplinary office to bypass due process and silence students criticizing Israel. Columbia surrendered to federal pressure by disclosing student records to Congress and yielding to the Trump administration’s latest threats. ... The Trump administration is targeting me as part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent³

In the meanwhile, on March 13th, the Trump administration sent a letter with a list of required policy changes for Columbia University in order to restore the \$400 million cut from the federal funding and maintain a “continued financial relationship.” Among the nine bullet point requests, to be met by March 20 in order for negotiations to be opened, are: “the abolition of the University Judicial Board, the implementation of a mask ban, and the granting of ‘full law enforcement authority, including arrest and removal of agitators’ to public safety officers”. The letter also required the university to “complete disciplinary proceedings for students involved in the April 2024 ‘Gaza Solidarity Encampments’ and occupation of Hamilton Hall”, adding that “meaningful discipline means expulsion or multi-year suspension.” In fact, “On Thursday, the University Judicial Board issued expulsions, multi-year suspensions, and temporary degree revocations for students

² https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/10/palestinian-activist-mahmoud-khalil-reactions?fbclid=IwY2xjawI9XNFleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHVcJtZpheG95vidjACReq7cFOp1OE-2qB8mcSh6Z4CMjtO5rfm7Xn_7-Lw_aem_zaJjxnE9ERPLI3JDfUZYjA

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/19/mahmoud-khalil-statement>

involved in the Hamilton occupation”. It also ordered that the University “centralizes all disciplinary processes under the Office of the President,” empowering it to suspend or expel students. The letter introduces also the request that Columbia Public Safety officers have “full law enforcement authority, including arrest and removal of agitators.” It added that “Compliance would also require that the University begin the process of placing the Middle East, South Asian, and African studies department under academic receivership—a process that requires an outside chair to run the department—for a minimum of five years”. Moreover, “It further demands the implementation of ‘time, place, and manner rules,’ including a ‘plan to hold all student groups accountable,’ and ‘a plan for comprehensive admissions reform’” as well as “the adoption and promotion of a formal definition of antisemitism”.⁴

On March 21, the administration of Columbia university issued a statement, somewhat paradoxically titled “Fulfilling our commitments” in which practically all president Trumps’ requests were met. Among the commitments made in the attempt to get federal funds back is the expansion of means for the repression of protests and the policing of entire fields of knowledge. Not only individual freedoms but also the university autonomy is forfeited through the establishment of a police body with authority to make arrests, the denial of protest rights and the strict political control on Middle East studies.⁵ Academic freedom is invoked to de-facto give up on freedoms of teaching and research as well as on extramural freedom, with the university expanding its direct So we read in its section on “Advancing Our Mission and Principles”:

Interim President Armstrong and her team have focused on grounding all decisions in our mission, principles and values. These include academic freedom and free expression, open inquiry and respect for all. For Columbia and great universities like it, nothing could be more sacrosanct than academic freedom and free expression. These core tenets are the necessary preconditions for the discovery and discourse that enable us to push forward the frontiers of knowledge and deepen our capacity for understanding, and they have guided and defined our university for 270 years. Through centuries of lively debate, disagreement, and productive discourse, our commitment to free inquiry remains the cornerstone of our community and an indispensable foundation for our academic mission.

As a teacher at Columbia observed, with its huge endowment, capitulation was however not a necessity

it’s especially important for strong institutions to stand up, to set an example and to insulate those who have fewer resources or are more vulnerable. Columbia has a huge – nearly \$15bn – endowment. It could have withstood the withdrawal of federal funds. Columbia’s leadership could have chosen to say “see you in court” rather than “yes, sir”. Some principles are so central to an institution’s purpose that to betray them should be unthinkable. ... And a university – which stands for academic freedom, for freedom of thought, speech and expression, including the right to peacefully protest – cannot buckle to demands to undermine those principles. Sadly, that’s what Columbia did, even going so far as to put an entire academic department under highly unusual supervision, and to empower beefed-up campus police to detain, remove or arrest students for various supposed offenses.⁶

These brutal episodes of repression follow on from attacks on education – through cuts and suspensions on research funds and threats against entire fields of academia – and the harassment of migrants and ethnic minorities. While they appear to be the first step in an authoritarian coup taking place in the United States, these moves have long been in preparation, and not only in the US. Since October 2023, defunding, disciplining and policing have been the main response of a number of governments to pro-Palestinian protests. This can be seen, for example, in Germany, where moral panics developed as a repressive mechanism during the global wave of solidarity with Palestine (della Porta 2024). In many countries in the Global North accusations of anti-Semitism, based on a new and contested definition, have been used as an instrument of repression against progressive and anti-racist actors. Migrants and citizens with migrant backgrounds have been particularly targeted as potential or actual folk devils.

⁴ <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2025/03/14/trump-administration-issues-list-of-demands-columbia-must-meet-to-maintain-federal-funding/>

⁵ <https://president.columbia.edu/content/fulfilling-our-commitments>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/22/columbia-university-trump-demands>

While this trend had already been underway prior to the events of October 2023, it has subsequently escalated as the Israeli war in Gaza triggered a broad mobilization in support of a ceasefire and in solidarity with Palestine, which has been the target of repression in many countries. In October 2024, in light of research carried out across 30 countries, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, Gina Romero, decried that “the brutal repression of the university-based protest movement is a profound threat to democratic systems and institutions”, which “risks alienating an entire generation, damaging their participation and perception of their role in democratic processes, in addition to failing the responsibility to prevent atrocity crimes and to contribute to peace.”⁷ Denouncing what she termed “a widespread hostile environment for the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association,” she issued six recommendations for academic institutions, urging them “to recognise and respect the importance of youth meaningful and free engagement, and their valuable contributions for human rights, dignity, peace, and justice, including through exercising their public freedoms” and to “immediately cease the stigmatization and hostilities that silence members of the academic community and discourage the exercise of their rights”.

The repression of groups and individuals who have criticized Israel and expressed solidarity with Palestine has been a frequent phenomenon in the Western world during the war in Gaza, as governments have rallied around Israel as the defender of Western civilization, providing both strategic and military support. From the United States to the United Kingdom, France to Canada and from Austria to Italy, the repression of pro-Palestinian demonstrations has added an extra element to the already escalating policing of street protests and the promotion of moral panics in relation to “anti-Semitism”.⁸ Far-right groups and media outlets have often played an important role during these campaigns as a supposed “countermovement”, by embracing narratives of support for Israel as part of a wider anti-muslim discourse. Pro-Israel lobbies have been among the most active groups in the promotion of a moral panic based on a definition of anti-Semitism that tends to scapegoat migrants and absolve the Far Right. They have been joined in this narrative by governments and public institutions as well as the mass media and cultural institutions, who have come together in varying forms of coalitions that have had different durations depending on the specific context.

Without aiming at a systematic analysis of the second Trump’s presidency, this article aims to develop a number of initial reflections on the United States, considered to be a critical case of repression in a country that is characterized as a main ally of Israel. As the major provider of military resources to Israel – a commitment that has remained unabated during the war in Gaza – the United States also has a strategic interest in maintaining a special political and economic relationship with the country that it considers its main ally in the Middle East. Following the events of 7 October 2023, with European countries divided on the position they should take, the United States has remained a loyal supporter of the Netanyahu government, both bilaterally and in the international arena.

In this article, I will build on research that has been carried out on repression in social movement studies, expanding the focus from the policing of protest in the street to disciplining through the use of ambivalent regulatory powers, with the denial of the social, political and civic rights to entire groups of citizens (della Porta 2025). Indeed, this repression is not oriented towards behaviours that are considered to be a threat to law and order, but rather towards the exclusion of those who are considered to be a threat to Western civilization. Having presented a novel theoretical model for the analysis of repression, the analysis of the moral panic campaigns that have taken place in the United States will reveal both the similarities and differences in the dynamics and actors involved. In what follows, I will first briefly introduce to the pro-Palestine solidarity protests that followed on from 7 October 2023. Based on desk research of documents, databases, scientific reports and media coverage, I will then single out some forms of repression that took place in the country and

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2024/10/universities-must-respect-peaceful-activism-and-revise-repressive-policies>

⁸ In the UK, Seth Anziska, chaired the working group that stigmatized the exploitation of anti-semitism to serve as a trigger of new exclusions: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/jmrrn/past-events/defining-antisemitism-and-islamophobia-lessons-from-uk-universities/>

locate them within a social and institutional context, while also considering the main moral panic entrepreneurs involved.

Studying repression

This research addresses repression as a multiform process in which different actors participate in the development of a number of major repertoires of repression that work through specific causal mechanisms. Research in social movement studies has examined the use of repression as an attempt to reduce the resources available to movements through strategies ranging from the intervention of the repressive apparatuses of the state to the stigmatization of specific groups (della Porta and Reiter 1998). While much of the research on repression has focused on the policing of street protests, the role of countermovements has also been explored (della Porta 1995). Only occasionally has research also looked at the ways in which activists and organizations have been restricted in their everyday functioning and have been stigmatized as deviant in their social circles due to their ethical or political attitudes and behaviours.

Notwithstanding the relevance of repression for social movements, research on the topic has often addressed specific case studies, while the use of large N datasets has been oriented towards singling out either the characteristics of regimes that are more likely to engage in greater repression or the types of actors that are more likely to be repressed (Earl and Soule 2010; Davenport 2015). Comparative historical analyses looking into the mechanisms of repression have been less commonplace (della Porta 2013; 2017). In a review of the literature on the causes and consequences of repression, Jennifer Earl (2003) singled out three key theoretical dimensions of repression, specifically: the identity of the repressive agent; the character of the repressive action; and whether the repressive action is observable.

With regard to the identity of the actors, in social movement studies attention has often focused on *state* repression, defined as "any actions taken by authorities to impede mobilization, harass and intimidate activists, divide organizations, and physically assault, arrest, imprison, and/or kill movement participants" (Stockdil 1996, 46). Broadening the scope of those considered as repressive actors, Charles Tilly usefully conceptualized repression as "any action by another group which raises the contender's cost of collective action" (Tilly 1978, 100). In their work on the Far Right in the Netherlands, Linden and Klandermans (2006) distinguished between repression carried out by different actors: state repression in the form of the prohibition of events, meetings, and demonstrations, or court cases against individuals and organizations; confrontations with countermovements, such as counterdemonstrations, counter-publicity, or attacks and blockades on meeting places; and more subtle forms of repression, such as exclusion from one's social and political environment.

In relation to institutional actors, Earl (2003) outlined that, "First, repressive agents may be state agents who are tightly linked to national political elites (and hence more subject to their control), such as military/police agencies in authoritarian regimes or national police agencies in democratic countries. Second, repressive agents can be state agents who are only loosely connected to national political elites, such as local police agencies in the United States. Finally, repressive agents can be private citizens or groups such as vigilantes or countermovements". Aside from state action, in my own work on protest policing (della Porta and Reiter 1998), I have also highlighted the importance of the formation of law-and-order coalitions, which bring together politicians, the mass media, and countermovements. Looking at the actors involved in this form of soft repression, attention needs to be focused on actors other than the institutions of state control, and in particular on the role of societal actors, which includes civil society (Max Ferree 2004). As Boykoff (2007) observed, "For a full explanation of how the state engages in repression, one must consider the ways in which the state sometimes works directly with friendly sources in the media and occasionally works indirectly with the media–

through the norms and values that structure newsmaking— in order to inhibit dissent”. Both civil society and personal circles encompassing relatives, friends and colleagues can intervene in some form of everyday repression (Max Ferree 2004).

In this sense, there has been a call to move beyond state repression and to instead address different moments of social control. As Earl (2003, 7) has suggested:

Protest control may be occurring long before insurgency is evident. In fact, protest control may play an important role as a switchman, effectively preventing protest mobilization around some grievances and ineffectively allowing some troubles to boil into protest. . . . Protest control arguably affected: (1) the construction of grievances . . . (2) capacities for handling grievances . . . (3) formats for handling grievances; (4) organizational formation and maintenance; (5) recruitment, micro-mobilization and retention by altering the costs of movement participation; (6) strategic and tactical decision making; (7) movement survival through the creation of excessive costs for activism; and (8) movement outcomes. . . . Protest control occurs at all points across a movement—it does not just affect in-progress protest; it affects whether movements form, how they mobilize, and then the extent to which they mobilize.

In this article, I propose identifying three mechanisms of repression, namely: *policing*, *disciplining* and *stigmatization*. While all three of these mechanisms tend to interact with one another and can be perpetrated by different actors, the way in which they function changes: *policing* represses through the use of force by the state in order to restrict the use of certain forms of protest; *disciplining* represses through the use of regulatory power, in order to discriminate against social movement organizations and activists; *stigmatization* represses by negatively labelling forms of protest, organizations, and activists.

With regard to *policing*, repression involves coercive attempts by state actors to quell activism by violence, harassment, and surveillance (Davenport 2015). Social movements have been seen as challengers of public order as they direct their demands to institutions mainly through forms of protest. Their very use of unconventional forms of action involves the state, not just as a counterpart in negotiating the movement’s objectives, but also as the guarantor of public order. Accordingly, one important aspect of the institutional response is protest policing; namely, the police strategy aimed at controlling protest (della Porta and Reiter 1998). Research carried out on police has stressed the fact that the organizational imperative is to keep control of the situation, rather than to enforce the law (Rubinstein 1980). Indeed, police officers enjoy a high degree of discretion in their encounters with citizens. However, they must also maintain the support of the authorities and the public (to different extents). Research has singled out different styles of protest policing. Della Porta and Reiter (1998) have identified coercive strategies, such as the use of coercive force and/or weapons to control or disperse demonstrations; persuasive strategies, such as all attempt aimed at controlling protest through contact with activists and organisers; and information strategies, which involve the gathering of information as a preventive element in the control of protest. Gillham (2011) singled out incapacitation as a specific form of police control based on attempt to block protest.

In relation to *disciplining*, coercion is not only implemented by the police in the streets, but rather involves administrative forms of disciplining, with or without the oversight of the legal system and the courts. Alongside coercive forms of repression that involve “shows and/or uses of force and other forms of standard police and military action (e.g., intimidation and direct violence)”, Jennifer Earl (2003) identified what she termed channelling, which involves “more indirect repression, which is meant to affect the forms of protest available, the timing of protests, and/or flows of resources to movements”. In this direction, research has been carried out that considers repression imposed on social movements in the form of regulation by the state, through hindering the financing of organizations or restricting their access to public spaces (Tin-bor Hui 2020). Repression is often oriented towards reducing resources and creating threats for activists and social movement organizations by mobilizing the regulatory power of both public and private institutions. In his analysis of the memos from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) against

the New Left between 1968 and 1971, Cunningham (2003) noted that the aims of the operation were to "expose, disrupt, and neutralize" its targets.

Research on *stigmatization* has looked at forms of control used against individual activists through the spread of negative personal assessments that disrupts their everyday life. The concept of "soft repression", in particular, has been singled out by Myra Max Ferree (2004, 87) in her work on women's rights activists. As she noted, "Whereas hard repression involves the mobilization of force to control or crush oppositional action through the use or threat of violence, soft repression involves the mobilization of non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas". In her analysis, "The distinguishing criterion of soft repression is the collective mobilization of power, albeit in non-violent forms and often highly informal ways, to limit and exclude ideas and identities from the public forum". The concept, therefore, addresses "the non-violent uses of power that are specifically directed against movement collective identities and movement ideas that support 'cognitive liberation' or 'oppositional consciousness' (ibid.).

The research presented here will also highlight the interaction between mechanisms of repression. In her work on repression in the US, Boykoff (2007) singled out four mechanisms of repression: resource depletion, stigmatization, divisive disruption, and intimidation. As she suggests, these mechanisms converge in what she defines as a constellation of isolating mechanisms, which "whether operating individually or combinatorially, on the individual or on the group, serve to isolate social movement groups as well as the individuals who comprise them". The decisional mechanism of emulation operating at the individual level thus prompts the demobilization of individual dissident. In the cases presented in this article it can also be seen that the various mechanisms singled out tend to interact with one another.

By looking at repression as a complex field, with the involvement of various actors, it is possible to take into account the dynamic of repression. In this direction, the concept of moral panic is a useful contribution to the analysis as it refers to a widespread and somewhat exaggerated fear that the culture or well-being of a society is under attack from some evil individual or force. Moral panic entrepreneurs – from journalists to politicians, opinion leaders to lawmakers – trigger and steer the feeling of panic, with the potential consequences of bringing about new laws that increase control over society itself (della Porta 2024). As Stanley Cohen (1973, 9) noted in his *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*: "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to". This is usually done to "exaggerate the seriousness, extent, typicality and/or inevitability of harm". As part of this process, folk devils are stigmatized as deviant, considered to be outsiders *vis-à-vis* mainstream societal values and represented as posing a threat to them as they are responsible for what comes to be defined as a social problem. Unsettled periods are often subject to moral panics as they "gather converts because they touch on people's fears and because they also use specific events or problems as symbols of what many feel to represent 'all that is wrong with the nation'" (Cricher 2017).

Protesting for ceasefire and a free Palestine

Since the very beginning of Israeli war in Gaza, protests in solidarity with the Palestinian people have been mounted in the US – especially in universities – peaking with the encampments that spread across the country and beyond in the Spring of 2024. During this period, 120 pro-Palestinian encampments were established all over the country. The main claims of these protests included the disclosure of and disinvestment from firms and institutions that support the occupation of Palestine. All across the country

the encampments had similar layout, with small tents erected in circle and the display of Palestinian symbols. In the encampments “Students held teach-ins, slept in tents, created art together, ate, and prayed in these makeshift societies—some for hours or days, others for entire weeks or months”. During the protest wave, one in ten students are estimated to have participated in a protest regarding Israel’s war in Gaza (Hurwitz 2024). The Crowd Counting Consortium at Harvard University confirmed the intensity of the protests, stating that the new wave of protests that began at the start of Autumn 2024 has “taken forms meant specifically to probe or push the limits of newly imposed restrictions. In this way, they honor and extend a long tradition of creative adaptation and transgression in protest movements worldwide”.⁹

Indeed, following 7 October, the movement in support of Palestinian liberation has experienced a historic juncture. As far as US academia is concerned, recent research has noted that:

On the one hand, we are witnessing the largest student protests for Palestine in US history. Unprecedented numbers of faculty are publicly supporting Palestinian rights and the academic freedom to criticize Zionism and the Israeli state. ... The brutal Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza that escalated during the 2023–2024 academic year, and the concomitant increase in Israeli settler-colonial violence in the West Bank, have solidified Palestine’s place at the center of interlinked anti-racist, anti-colonial, feminist, anti-capitalist, and queer movements for liberation... On the other hand, the assault on this movement has reached epic levels. Over three thousand student protestors and dozens of faculty members have been arrested and/or disciplined. Students, faculty, and staff have faced brutal doxing, slander, and libel, sometimes leading to rescinded job offers, firing, or suspension (Deeb and Winegar 2024).

In contrast to Germany, in the US, a movement in solidarity with Palestine has been traditionally embedded in anti-war waves of protest as well as in international movements for the liberation of oppressed peoples (Eyerman 2024). Various moments have seen “Black, brown, and Middle Eastern students and their allies forming solidaristic ties with one another and supporting one another in various protest actions against US imperialism, colonialism, and Black and brown racism”. In particular, movements in solidarity with Palestinians increased their ties with other movements during intense waves of protest from the movement against apartheid in South Africa to the Black Lives Matter campaigns (Deeb and Winegar 2024). Indeed, the spread of pro-Palestine support after 7 October 2023 was rooted in a preexisting network of organization, which included Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), founded in 1993 and in 1996 respectively, as well as grassroots campus’ based organizations. The protests were also able to mobilize different generations of student organizations, which had been built on waves of protests in support of civil rights, against the Vietnam war, against apartheid in South Africa or during the Black Lives Matter campaign.

In 2024, the student encampments represented a further deepening of ties with global allies, being described as “not only enactments of solidarity for the cause of Palestinian liberation and protest against the Israeli occupation and apartheid regimes that culminated with the genocide in Gaza”, but also tests of the potentials and limits, possibilities and impossibilities of free speech, academic freedom, public space, and more broadly, political life in the heart of the empire” (Aciksoz, Appel, Slyomovics and Jayram Venkat 2024). During the encampments, intersectional ties developed further. As one activist at UCLA recalled: “The encampment was a space of beauty, creativity, self-organization, and education, militantly peaceful in contrast to the vitriolic self-proclaimed Zionists who came every evening to taunt and shout slurs from beyond its borders” (Nersessian 2024). In fact, at UCLA as elsewhere, the encampments were defined as prefigurative spaces:

Student-led encampments created space for new forms of learning and transmission. ... Faculty hung out at an information table, stocked books for the “Edward Said” library, and in the same fluid allocation of camp spaces, participated in study groups and attended Muslim and Jewish prayer services. A mask mandate was implemented to protect vulnerable members. There was free food, water, sunscreen, and medical care for everyone, stocked

⁹ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/akademischer-antisemitismus-hierarchien-des-hasses-felix-klein-19531381.html>

with supplies donated by the larger community of support, one that extended far beyond the edges of the encampment into the sprawling geographies of southern California. The encampment was a site of prefigurative politics. It was university life as it could be, one that was structured through principled learning and struggle, mutual aid and mutual education, rather than the neoliberal logics that have taken over higher education. It was not only a rejection of the politics of the university—a tear in the fabric of the order of things—but a temporary experiment with a utopian alternative. It was exemplary of how things could be otherwise” (Aciksoz, Appel, Slyomovics and Jayram Venkat 2024).

In this spirit, activists at Columbia University stated that "We set up an encampment of around 50 tents. We are going to be creating our version of the university because we no longer recognise the university that we joined because of the repression and the severe encroachment of academic freedom".¹⁰

The protests on campuses were followed by heavy repression, which took various forms. During an official visit to the US in May 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Farida Shaheed, warned about the “erosion of intellectual freedom and democratic principles within educational settings”, stating that she was “deeply troubled by the violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators, arrests, detentions, police violence, surveillance and disciplinary measures and sanctions against members of the educational community exercising their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.”¹¹ She also expressed concern about the 307 policies and educational gag order bills introduced in the US since January 2021, including book bans and restrictions on curricula, and called on federal and state authorities to acknowledge education as a human right.¹² In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, two NYU professors denounced the fact that “At universities across the country, any criticism of Israel’s policies, expressions of solidarity with Palestinians, organized calls for a cease-fire or even pedagogy on the recent history of the land have all emerged as perilous speech... the atmosphere at college has become downright McCarthyite.”¹³

The mechanisms of repression

Repression took various forms, both hard and ‘soft’. From 7 October to 31 December 2023 alone, Palestine Legal received a total of 1,037 requests for legal support, including 908 reports from people targeted for their pro-Palestine advocacy (against 214 reported incidents in the whole of 2022). Of these, 478 were related to universities while 383 reports addressed employment concerns, with 124 cases involving the termination of contracts. As one report singled out;

Doxing and harassment of students and faculty across the country has reached unprecedented levels with billboards and trucks displaying photos and email addresses. Job offers have been rescinded, students suspended or expelled, and employees censured or suspended. Campaigns to harass and intimidate by circulating petitions calling for the firing of tenured faculty members have continued unabated. Between October 16, 2023 and June 13, 2024, the Middle East Studies Association’s Committee on Academic Freedom sent 35 letters to university administrators in the US, demanding that they uphold the free speech and academic freedom rights of their faculty and students. The violations these letters address include: suspending Students for Justice for Palestine groups (and at least one Jewish Voice for Peace group); applying draconian disciplinary measures against students exercising their free speech rights; failing to defend faculty under vehement attack because they criticized Israeli actions or supported Palestinian liberation; arresting peacefully protesting students; cancelling a student’s valedictory commencement address; banning screenings of the documentary ‘Israelism;’ suspending faculty for teaching material on Gaza, expressing their views, or protesting for Palestinian rights; asking faculty to remove readings related to Palestine from their syllabi; arbitrarily dismissing teaching assistants who expressed concern for their students due to the war on Gaza; cancelling an exhibit of the works of a Palestinian

¹⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/columbia-university-students-stage-vietnam-style-anti-war-encampment-gaza>

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/education/statements/20240510-stm-eom-sr-education-usa.pdf>

¹² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149616>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/05/opinion/free-speech-academic-freedom.html?searchResultPosition=1>

artist; and suspending a tenured faculty member for allegedly making a clerical error in the paperwork scheduling that exhibit (Deeb and Winegar 2024).

As in the German case, forms of repression included incapacitation policing, but also went beyond this to include the disciplining of individuals through cancellations and defunding.

Incapacitation policing

Similar to the German case (della Porta 2024), the policing of the pro-Palestinian protests has also been characterized by harsh forms of repression with a tendency towards incapacitation policing. One of the most well-known examples of this is the dismantling of the encampment at Columbia University. Along with the involvement of the terrorist-fighting Strategic Response Group, “On a single night, the NYPD cleared encampments at Columbia University and City College of New York, arresting an estimated 300 people, injuring 46 Columbia students, including fracturing eye sockets and concussions” (Gowayed 2024). The President of Columbia University, Minouche Shafik, had called on the New York Police Department to dismantle the camp and arrest all those taking part in what was an entirely peaceful protest in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Her decision was met by a faculty walkout in support of the students. After students were suspended, the Sociology Department called on the university “to immediately reverse the suspensions and allow the affected students to return to their dorms and their courses”. Teachers also stated they would keep their courses and exams open to the suspended students. Similarly, “At NYU, hundreds of cops arrived in riot gear and arrested 130 students and 20 faculty. ... Faculty and students were both charged with the criminal offence of ‘trespassing’ on their own university campus”¹⁴.

At the University of Texas in Austin, the administration called in local and state police, some of whom were on horseback, to violently clear a student encampment on campus, arresting at least 50 people.¹⁵ A student from the University of Chicago recalled the police intervention to clear the encampment on their campus as follows:

The university sent in dozens of police officers to the sit-in. They locked down Rosenwald Hall, the admissions building that we were in. We didn’t get any engagement with any of our demands. We just had the deans on call and the police warning us, *If you don’t leave, you will be arrested*. Most of us didn’t leave. Some people couldn’t stay, like international students, but 20-some students and two faculty stayed. The faculty, by the way, were just observers. They weren’t protesters, and they made that clear. The university also denied access to legal observers. We were all arrested and then released. After the sit-in, we did the encampment, which was up for eight days. The president and provost finally panicked on the third or fourth day and met with us. ... Our president on the basis of institutional neutrality and that *some people might disagree*, wouldn’t even admit that universities in Gaza had been destroyed. He never even mentioned the encampment by name. He refused to say the words “Palestine” and “Palestinians.” They suspended the negotiations on the sixth day. We got multiple tips on the seventh day that there was going to be a raid by the UCPD. People were starting to get really tired and paranoid. And then, at 4 a.m., there was a raid by about 50 UCPD officers in riot gear. They terrorized the students, they smashed all the art, they smashed the encampment and pushed people out.¹⁶

More than 3,100 students have been arrested during the protests.¹⁷ Arrests of students and faculty also hit activists at University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Dartmouth College, Northwestern University, and Chicago University, among others. In November 2023, at the University of Michigan, more than 40 students were arrested following the occupation of the Administration building, after occupants had been denied food, water, and access to the bathroom and delayed access to medical help. At the University of Washington in April 2024,

¹⁴ <https://www.counterfire.org/article/the-whole-world-is-watching-us-campus-in-revolt-for-gaza/>

¹⁵ https://www.democracynow.org/2024/4/25/student_protests_us_campuses_gaza_war

¹⁶ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/us/pro-palestinian-college-protests-encampments.html>

12 arrests and 3 suspensions were the response to a sit calling for divestment.¹⁸ Twenty members of Jews for Ceasefire Now were arrested at Brown University.

As in Germany, police interventions were especially brutal with regard to people of colour, which in the US saw the use of potentially lethal tactics and instruments. A student recalled his personal experience as follows:

My friend, a Morehouse man, was tackled by the police and put in a chokehold. I was tear-gassed, and we were kettled. When one of my friends was getting arrested, I saw police pin him to the ground, handcuff him, then tase him. A bunch of students came to the encampment just as onlookers and were detained. It's important to mention that they were visibly Black, visibly Muslim; they were detained until they could prove they were Emory students. There were about 28 people arrested, a majority of whom are Black and Brown students. ... The administrators rely on the Atlanta Police Department (APD) at our protests to threaten us. ... It's a little bit twisted because we are Black students. Any interaction with the police, even in the most casual terms, puts our lives in danger. For them to employ that shows the recklessness and lack of care they have for their students.¹⁹

In contrast to the German case, policing was conducted by a number of different police forces, including both public and private forces. Thus, during the protests, "the distinctions between campus administrative and security offices and off-campus police forces have collapsed. College officials have mobilized the otherwise internal disciplinary processes as extensions of state force."²⁰ Campus safety officers have also been involved in repression and called in to react to student solidarity encampments. In some cases the Strategic Response Group, the heavily militarized police unit employed against the BLM,²¹ was also employed. According to the testimony of a student at the City College of New York, spirals of repression followed on from protests against repression:

The encampment ended April 30, and students have felony charges from it. ... On May 13 we had a protest to ask our school to drop the felony charges and the disciplinary charges against students. I got a letter that day saying that I'd be suspended if I didn't leave the protest. Nobody left. And it seems like none of the suspensions have happened. ... I've been called a terrorist. I've been spat on, I've been told that I was a child rapist, all this really horrific stuff, by people at school. This has happened in front of campus safety. They did absolutely nothing. They just looked.... On May 15 we also did a sit-in at CCNY, and they called the Strategic Response Group (SRG). They weren't deployed onto the campus, but they were around the corner, ready to come in. But the school was willing to send SRGs, who are very brutal; there's a lot of evidence of them being brutal at different campuses [in New York City], including ours.²²

As one student outlined, the devolving of the policing of events at campuses to multiple bodies has resulted in the most intimidating forms of punishment:

We entered at 9 a.m. on March 26. The sit-in ended at 6 a.m. on March 27. At the sit-in, the police department was in full force. We have an armed police department, the Vanderbilt University Police Department, which also houses multiple security units. There's a community service officer unit and there's Allied Universal, which is a third-party unit. There's a lot of security on campus. We were inside for more than 20 hours and not given the opportunity to go to the bathroom or to allow food into the building. We had snacks, so we were able to eat, but when it came to going to the bathroom, we had to get resourceful. It's clear that the university uses the police to remove our humanity from us.²³

Similarly, at the University of Chicago, one activist warned that the university "has dozens of heavily armed, militarized police officers whom the trustees and administration are willing to deploy to crush a popular

¹⁸ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

¹⁹ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²⁰ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²¹ <https://theintercept.com/2021/04/07/nypd-strategic-response-unit-george-floyd-protests/>

²² <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²³ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

movement as soon as it gets strong enough. And that intimidation and repression is reflected not only by brute violence but also by surveillance, by infiltration, by undercover cops, by implicit threat”.²⁴

One student activist, discussing policing in Spelman college in Atlanta, pointed to the ties with Israel in relation to police training, as “APD is sent to Israel to be trained. The Israel Defense Forces has this project over there called Little Gaza where they build miniature Palestinian villages to run drills in and figure out how to shut down resistance or oppress people as fast as possible”.²⁵

Countermovements also participated in the repression through violent attacks, which were often tolerated by the police. Violence by Zionist and far-right activists was especially extreme at UCLA, where students had set up a Palestine Solidarity Encampment at the end of April 2024. In this case,

Students, faculty, and staff in the encampment were brutally attacked by a mixed group of mostly men that included self-declared Zionists and Proud Boys in their ranks. Many faculty and students suffered injuries, including lacerations from pipes and projectiles as well as attacks with mace or pepper spray. The LAPD assembled behind the attackers and watched the events unfold for hours. Only one of the attackers was eventually arrested, months later, after a CNN investigative report. Charges were quickly dropped. Nevertheless, the attack became a convenient excuse for Chancellor Block to re-describe the peaceful encampment as a magnet for violence (the direction of the violence, *against* students, is irrelevant to his claim), thereby necessitating its removal. ... So, the UCLA encampment was dismantled by the police, that made over 200 arrests.

At a later stage, UCLA spent 12 million dollars on armed private security forces (Aciksoz, Appel, Slyomovics and Jayram Venkat 2024). Violent forms of repression by countermovements, as well as the clearing of encampments by the police, served to fuel further mobilization. At UCLA,

After beautiful days of teach-ins and discussions, seder and salat, and harrowing nights of escalating self-proclaimed Zionist aggression, 48 hours of horrifying Zionist, white supremacist and police violence cleared the encampment in the early morning hours of May Day. Eighteen collective statements in support of the encampment came out within the week, from the Departments of Chicana/o and Central American Studies, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Institute on Environment and Sustainability, UCLA Black, Latinx, and Native American (BLNA) Faculty Collective of the David Geffen School of Medicine, Mathematics Department, Political Science, Sociology, Labor Studies and others” (Aciksoz, Appel, Slyomovics and Jayram Venkat 2024).

Incidents of physical aggression against individual students were also recorded more often than was the case in Germany. “Palestinians and allies across the country faced a torrent of threats to their physical safety, ranging from anonymous online calls for violence to physical attacks, including several that resulted in hospitalization and one that resulted in death”²⁶. One of the most dramatic attacks that occurred happened in late November, when three Palestinian students from Brown University, Trinity College, and Haverford College were shot near the University of Vermont while wearing kuffiyehs and speaking Arabic. One of them was left paralyzed from the neck down.

Selective disciplining

As in Germany, repression was also targeted towards social movement organization and activists through the use of various disciplinary proceedings. Students were suspended or faced disciplinary charges for peaceful protests, including walkouts, sit-ins, and die-ins or even the sharing of social media posts with messages such as “Jews for Palestine” or “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”. A law student at NYU described as follows the repression he experienced as a pro-Palestine activist as a result of his use of terms such as apartheid and genocide:

²⁴ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²⁵ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²⁶ <https://palestinelegal.org/2023-report>

in October 2023 I sent out an email to law students about my solidarity with Palestinians and condemning genocide, apartheid, the military-industrial complex, I lost the job I had planned to take after graduation. As an interim measure, my dean prevented me from acting in my role as the student bar association president, and that kicked off my disciplinary action. That process was ongoing officially from Nov. 10, 2023, until March 2024. I was being accused of violating the anti-harassment policy. In March this was informally resolved but still resulted in a censure on my transcript and included a joint stipulation of fact and sanction, which basically was a statement of events and me agreeing to follow the conduct policies until graduation. I and others involved in the Law Students for Justice in Palestine also got accused of vandalism for writing on chalkboards in classrooms about our cease-fire sit-in.²⁷

Increasing controls on campus included intense surveillance, with check-point style stations set up and use of video-cameras, which allowed for these selective forms of punishment to be carried out. As one student activist suggested, repression concentrated on the wearing of certain items of clothing, such as *keffiyehs* or the hijab:

They know exactly who we are. They've recorded us, they've watched us, they walk behind us. I've seen the heads of public safety record all of us. They're not very subtle. They're making sure to get our faces. I don't know if it's to build a case later on or to use it for our suspension. But they do have videos of us... They militarized our campuses like crazy. Every gate is locked and has security at all times. You cannot do anything without the administration knowing. They all have walkie-talkies to keep public safety informed. I've heard them say, *Oh, there's this many students wearing keffiyehs here*. They always pay attention to students who are wearing hijabs.²⁸

Surveillance is a functional part of disciplining. Another student recalled how controls aimed to enact the most intimidating forms of punishment, through the immediate suspension of access to food and housing up to the highest form of permanent expulsion:

The Vanderbilt University Police Department was surveilling us through the cameras inside the building. The administration and the Vanderbilt University Police Department are one and the same. They were surveilling us to identify specific students, using these cameras for facial recognition. That's how they sent out the initial interim suspensions. And then for the final interim suspensions that they sent out the next day, they took pictures of people's Vanderbilt IDs while they were being escorted out of the building. After we received the suspensions, we were given until 5 p.m. to pack up anything we needed from our rooms and leave campus. We were not allowed to use our meal plans or stay in our dorms past 5 p.m. From there we found housing and stayed together as best we could. The next day we received notifications that we had a disciplinary hearing.... I was one of the first students to enter the building. I was placed under arrest, and now I'm being expelled and not allowed to graduate. I am not getting my degree.²⁹

At the University of Michigan, following the cancellation of a referendum called by TAHRIR (a coalition of 80 organizations asking for divestment from Israel), "Police have visited students' homes, once to seize electronics and sample DNA and another to retroactively issuing a trespass order for protesting the Honors Commencement".³⁰

Aside from individual activists, social movement organizations involved in the mobilizations on campus have also been affected by suspensions, especially (but not only) SJP and JVP as well as Muslim, Arab, and Asian American Student Associations (Zaremba 2024). Since 7 October, Columbia University has suspended Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace. On 24 October, following consultation with Governor DeSantis, the Chancellor of the Florida State University System ordered public universities in Florida to deactivate SJP clubs on their campuses. In December, Rutgers was among the first public

²⁷ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²⁸ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

²⁹ <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

³⁰ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

universities to suspend its chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, a decision that was successfully protested by 150 student organizations and dozens of community organizations.³¹ Suspension against SPJ also took place at Brandeis University, George Washington University and Rutgers-New Brunswick (Palestine Legal 2024).

Journalists, artists, and activists – often racialized individuals – have also experienced abrupt event cancellations as a result of their activism in relation to Palestine, as “institutions such as universities, libraries, and bookstores shut down events featuring Palestinian and anti-Zionist scholars and advocates” (Palestine Legal 2024). Events on Palestine were cancelled, for instance, at the University of Arkansas, Barnard College, Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania. A student from Vanderbilt University described administrative repression through cancellation as follows:

By the first week of the spring semester, the university was already showing signs of repression. They canceled events from Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine. They denied room allocations for specific organizations’ meetings and events that were related to Palestine. Then over 20 organizations that were most vocal about supporting Palestine on campus formed a coalition. Students for Justice in Palestine started doing more direct actions — we put up an apartheid wall and had to hold a sit-in because the university threatened to remove it.... At that sit-in at Kirkland, students were given the most punitive consequences, which included expulsions, suspensions, and over 20 disciplinary probations.³²

As in Germany, repression included the censorship of language, with the outlawing of terms such as genocide, apartheid or settler colonialism, as well as of slogans such as “Free Palestine” or “From the river to the sea”. It was reported that several universities “are also prohibiting students and faculty from posting materials in support of Palestine on their office and dorm doors, and trying to ban departments from making ‘political statements’ (Deeb and Winegar 2024). At Swarthmore, an email from the president stated that the slogan “from the river to the sea” was a “direct threat against Jews”.³³ At Barnard College, which is affiliated to Columbia University, pro-Palestine language and symbols have been censored,³⁴ with at least 19 students facing disciplinary proceedings³⁵. Among others, four pro-Palestine students at Columbia were suspended and given eviction notices for their campus housing³⁶.

It is not only students that have been repressed. Faculty members have also been suspended, fired or have not had their contracts renewed because they used terms such as settler colonialism with reference to Israel or talked about the situation in Gaza during teaching. As a report by Palestine Legal (2024) summarized, “professors and graduate students were investigated for canceling classes in support of general strikes in solidarity with Palestinians, even where their institutions permit them to cancel classes without cause. Graduate students at several universities were fired or transferred out of teaching positions after making comparisons between topics covered in class and the ongoing genocide” (Palestine Legal 2024). In general, it has been noted that “The wave of politically motivated repression in the workplace has been the most severe in the country since at least the Vietnam War”, with media, publishing and even the medical sector particularly affected. In higher education specifically, “The number of contingent faculty whose contracts have not been renewed and tenure-line faculty suspended or banned from campus due to speech or protest related to Palestine are at an all-time high, as are the numbers of students expelled or suspended” (Deeb and Winegar 2024).

³¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

³² <https://hammerandhope.org/article/students-campus-repression-gaza>

³³ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

³⁴ <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2023/12/08/barnard-altered-its-policies-after-removing-a-solidarity-with-palestine-statement-from-a-departmental-website-faculty-are-calling-it-censorship/>.

³⁵ <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/01/31/the-trust-is-absolutely-broken-barnard-initiates-disciplinary-processes-against-students-after-unauthorized-protest/>

³⁶ <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/04/04/four-columbia-students-suspended-evicted-from-university-housing-following-unauthorized-resistance-101-event/>

The report by Palestine Legal mentioned that “In October, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, published an article titled, “Don’t Hire My Anti-Semitic Law Students,” calling on law firms not to hire students who have expressed solidarity with Palestinians” (Palestine Legal 2024). One of the many cases involved a professor at Columbia University, Abdul Kayum Ahmed, who received a letter of non-renewal after he was accused of “political indoctrination” in the classroom in an article published by the *Wall Street Journal*, due to the fact that he had labeled Israel a “colonial settler state.”³⁷

Also at Columbia University, Katherine Franke, Professor of Law with particular expertise on gender rights and Palestine, in January 2025 denounced a series of violation of her academic freedom as well as general restrictions of the right to teach, research and express political opinion through a series of action of harassment and disciplining. She so announced her leaving Columbia University as forced by the administration: “While the university may call this change in my status ‘retirement,’ it should be more accurately understood as a termination dressed up in more palatable terms”. She had been under disciplinary proceeding at her university after she had said in an interview, commenting on the aggression targeted towards Palestinian students by an Israeli student that had just come back from service in the IDF, that she feared that going straight from the military to the university could create stress. In her statement, she describes the campaign of defamation and harassment against her, ending up in what she define as forced retirement. As she stated:

the University has allowed its own disciplinary process to be weaponized against members of our community, including myself. I have been targeted for my support of pro-Palestinian protesters – by the president of Columbia University, by several colleagues, by university trustees, and by outside actors. This has included an unjustified finding by the University that my public comments condemning attacks against student protesters violated university non-discrimination policy. I have come to the view that the Columbia University administration has created such a toxic and hostile environment for legitimate debate around the war in Israel and Palestine that I can no longer teach or conduct research. Effective today, I have reached an agreement with Columbia University that relieves me of my obligations to teach or participate in faculty governance after serving on the Columbia law faculty for 25 years.³⁸

There have also been denunciations of are growing restrictions on syllabi and the topics addressed in class, which impinge upon academic freedom in terms of freedom of teaching. In a report published by Interceptor, based on 12 cases of university teachers “whose employment has been imperiled by their pro-Palestine speech” that have recently emerged, a senior program officer with the American Association of University Professor lists “violations of due process related to non-reappointment, to dismissal, to tenure award, etcetera”. According to this report, “The pattern is now familiar. Zionist groups like Canary Mission and Antisemitism.org, which have made a business of going after faculty and students online, single out those on campus with pro-Palestine views. Universities then face political and donor pressure to censure the targeted professors”.³⁹ Most of the cases covered address racialized individuals. A Middle East Scholar Barometer survey conducted in the aftermath of 7 October 2023 by Mark Lynch and Shibley Telhami revealed that 98% of assistant professors and 82% of faculty more broadly ‘self-censor when they speak professionally about the Israeli-Palestinian issue’ and that over 81% of this self-censorship involved curbing criticism of the Israeli state while only 11% was about reducing criticism of Palestinians (Lynch and Telhami 2023).

To contrast these forms of intimidation at work, the Faculty Association of UCLA developed an Unfair Practice Charge (State of California, 2024) against the University of California, seeking legal remedies through

³⁷ <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/04/10/mailman-professor-abdul-kayum-ahmed-receives-letter-of-nonrenewal/>

³⁸ https://academeblog.org/2025/01/10/statement-by-professor-katherine-franke/?fbclid=IwY2xjawH_dnBleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHVpf8lWHIwZGyMGw8n0JAVCPVhLWeiRiL2fewo5BXsPX8hrtvy1_aXTNA_aem_Fy3ShNz5b0_eXhXITw5joA

³⁹ <https://theintercept.com/2024/05/16/university-college-professors-israel-palestine-firing/>

the state of California's Public Employment Relations Board (PERB). The action was presented as a reaction against "new, ruthless administrative directives on faculty conduct during strikes - you cannot talk about the strike in your classroom; you cannot talk about the strike with academic workers - the contravention of which leads to consequential disciplinary actions threatening academic freedom." In particular, it was observed that for those who "research and teach on labor law, labor-capital relations, Israel/Palestine, anti-Palestinian/Arab/Muslim racism, university governance, socially responsible investment policy, imperialism, colonialism, and other related topics. UC's rules essentially make these topics off-limits. As such, on its face, the rule purports to dramatically curtail academic freedom" (ULP 2024, 12, in Aciksoz, Appel, Slyomovics and Jayram Venkat 2024).

Stigmatization through doxing

Individual intimidation of activists – including spying and the disclosure of social media activities – was particularly widespread in the US context, where it was rooted in forms of repression that were already in place against pro-Palestinian solidarity before 7 October 2023. Doxing, which has been a long-standing technic of repression of pro-Palestine activists, increased exponentially after 7 October: as many as 268 of the reports received by Palestine Legal between 7 October 2023 and the end of the year involved this form of intimidation:

there was an enormous spike in the number of students, professors, employees, and activists who were doxed—meaning their private or identifying individual information was published with malicious intent—for their support of Palestinian human rights ... In addition, there was an aggressive escalation of doxing tactics by news media sources, online blacklists, and other actors ... Activists' posts on social media were screenshotted and circulated online with the username visible, leading to the doxing and subsequent harassment of these individuals via threatening texts, phone calls, and emails. Media outlets like the New York Post and Fox News ran stories targeting individual activists for posts in support of Palestine, further amplifying the harassment (Palestina Legal 2024).

Moreover, the techniques used for doxing became more sophisticated, with doxing trucks adding up to online targeting. Once again, according to the Palestine Legal report (2024), the intimidation especially targeted people of color:

Accuracy in Media, a nonprofit organization behind the doxing trucks, sent trucks to Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and other schools, displaying the names and faces of students. Despite the fact that many white and Jewish students made statements in support of Palestine, the doxing trucks almost universally targeted students of color. ... On October 11, a truck displaying students' names and faces arrived on Harvard's campus, with a link to a website listing the names of student groups, all of which represent either Black, Arab, Palestinian, or other students of color. On October 23, a truck displaying the names and faces of Columbia students began driving around Columbia's campus. Numerous students found their names and faces plastered on the side of a truck proclaiming them to be "Columbia's Leading Antisemites," with a link to a website listing the names of various students and student groups... Accuracy in Media sent a truck to Yale's campus on November 16, mirroring the tactic used at Columbia and Harvard. The doxing truck arrived on campus after students and others had signed onto a statement in solidarity with Palestine. Many of the students doxed on the truck were students of color.

In these doxing attacks, the choice of targets revealed racist motives as they "not only target Palestinian, SWANA, and Muslim scholars and students, but also Jewish and white allies, and especially allies of color. Zionist blowback also disproportionately targets gender studies programs and scholars, as well as scholars in ethnic studies programs, because their efforts to suppress anti-colonial and anti-racist critique dovetail with conservative efforts to curtail teaching on gender and race in parts of the US" (Deeb and Winegar 2024)

The semi-legal basis of repression

In the US, as in Germany, repression built upon a proliferation of semi-legal instruments, with administrative regulations acquiring political value. The weaponization of antisemitism claims included allowing “student demands to ‘feel safe’ in the classroom to mean the suppression of perspectives that those students may disagree with, as well as the enabling of violent physical attacks against students protesting for Palestinian rights by both police and counter-protestors. Zionist students’ feelings regarding safety have, in other words, fomented actual unsafety for Palestinian students and those supporting Palestinian rights” (Deeb and Winegar 2024).

Also in the US, repression spiked after the adoption by the US Department of State of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism in 2016, which two years later was also adopted by the Department of Education in the enforcement of the Title VI Civil Rights Act, prohibiting identity-based discrimination in education. In 2019, President Donald Trump issued an Executive Order on Combating Anti-Semitism, which also used the IHRA definition. A bill passed in the House of Representatives on 1 May 2024, incorporated the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism into federal law (Deeb and Winegar 2024). Following 7 October, “the Department of Education opened investigations into alleged violations of the Title VI Act—specifically focused on antisemitism as defined by the IHRA—at multiple universities” (Deeb and Winegar 2024). In January 2025, Harvard University officially adopted the IHRA definition for the internal disciplining of student and faculty. This happened in a context in which, as *The Guardian* reported—“Trump and fellow Republicans have warned that they will attempt to strip universities of federal funding if the protests continue on their watch”.⁴⁰

Since 7 October, new federal and state level bills and resolutions have targetted advocacy for Palestine, with 82 being introduced in 2023 alone. Much of this legislation “mimics past defunding bills, antisemitism redefinition bills, or anti-BDS bills, with some developing trends. Anti-Palestinian racism is evident in such legislation, much of which unabashedly calls for the criminalization of and harsh measures against Palestinians and their allies” (Palestine Legal 2024). Between May and September, in particular, over 30 colleges and university systems—representing about one hundred campuses—tightened the rules governing protest on their property. In this process,

Many schools have banned camping on their grounds. Some have required that anyone wearing a mask on campus—whether for health reasons or otherwise—be ready to present identification when asked. Others have banned all unregistered student “expressive activity” (a euphemistic phrase that generally covers a range of public demonstrations including protests, rallies, flyering, or picketing) gatherings over a certain size. Still others have banned all use of speakers or amplified sound during the school week (including, in one case, the use of some acoustic instruments)⁴¹.

Aside from registration, the time, duration and location of protests has been restricted. Camping is often banned. Prohibited paraphernalia include masks, speakers, “illuminated signs”, non-battery-operated candles and amplified sound. Some universities started to allow protests only in designated public forum areas, while the use of tents is often prohibited or limited to a few hours duration (e.g. at University of Virginia) (Harwitz 2024).⁴²

Freedom of speech has been further restricted. To give just one example, the updated Guidance and Expectations on Student Conduct of New York University conflates anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the school’s non-discrimination and anti-harassment policy and procedures for students (NDAH). These revisions make Zionism a TITLE VI protected class on NYU’s campus, where “speech and conduct that would violate the NDAH if targeting Jewish or Israeli people can also violate the NDAH if directed toward Zionists” (Zaremba 2024). As the code of conduct states, “Using code words, like “Zionist,” does not eliminate

⁴⁰ https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jan/21/harvard-antisemitism-lawsuit-settlement?fbclid=IwY2xjawH_eTlleHRuA2F1bQIxMAABHWK706GkWX4bNBS5ouXaVeVXLt-Zr8DG_ufhdMO6Z1-B_LHL2hP1J4XOLw_aem__xfnkqfXCpnFijxRCsbZgA

⁴¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/09/new-university-rules-crack-down-on-gaza-protests/>

⁴² <https://www.blackagendareport.com/new-university-rules-crack-down-gaza-protests>

the possibility that your speech violates the NDAH Policy. For many Jewish people, Zionism is a part of their Jewish identity. Speech and conduct that would violate the NDAH if targeting Jewish or Israeli people can also violate the NDAH if directed toward Zionists”.⁴³

The new rules restricting protests on university campuses follow the advice of the risk and crisis management consulting companies that have promoted investment in surveillance technology, including license plate readers and AI classification tools, as well as in deepening ties with law enforcement agencies, with over 100 colleges and universities equipped with military surplus gear. As part of this process, it was observed that

The integration of SWAT teams and paramilitary gear into campus life, along with its own system of ID checkpoints, embodies the ambitions of war-profiteering university trustees who envision higher education as an extension of U.S. empire. As campus police acquire more advanced technology, university administrations eagerly funnel resources to accommodate their growing arsenal, perpetuating an arms race within the academic sphere. This professionalization has been accompanied by the rise of campus policing expertise as a distinct field of knowledge production. It is a technocratic pursuit situated within the administrative engine of the neoliberal university, a system of efficiency and control designed to maximize “security” (Zaremba 2024).

Universities have thus invested millions of dollars (often diverted from DEI funds) into repression. To give but one example, the University of California alone allocated \$29 million to counter the pro-Palestine protests that took place in the spring of 2024.⁴⁴

Moral panic entrepreneurs

The moral panic entrepreneurs active in the US are to some extent similar to those singled out in the German case. In general, repression has been considered “part of a coordinated effort in the US to silence pro-Palestinian speech, abolish anti-racist teaching and diversity initiatives, eliminate academic freedom, and question the value of higher education in general. There are now enhanced alliances between academic administrators, Boards of Trustees and Regents, pro-Israel organizations, the Israeli government, Democratic politicians and their liberal Zionist supporters, and Republican politicians and their conservative Zionist Christian base” (Deeb and Winegar 2024).⁴⁵

Political parties

As in Germany, politicians from a variety of political parties have launched and amplified moral panic campaigns that have used the accusation of anti-Semitism in the repression of solidarity with Palestine.

In the US case, pro-Israel positions have also been more vehemently supported on the far-right of the political spectrum, especially in the radicalized Republican Party of Donald Trump. As with other far-right parties across most Western democracies, the Republican Party’s support for Israel is based on a racist vision of ethnic purity, which resonates not only with the policies of the Netanyahu government, but also with the defence of long-lasting economic and military interests. Indeed, the Republican Party has played

⁴³ <https://www.nyu.edu/students/student-information-and-resources/student-community-standards/nyu-guidance-expectations-student-conduct.html#:~:text=Using%20code%20words%2C%20like%20%E2%80%9CZionist,NDAH%20if%20directed%20toward%20Zionists>

⁴⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-07-18/uc-unveils-price-tag-for-this-springs-campus-unrest>

⁴⁵ See also <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1206481356/republicans-israel-gop-middle-east-evangelicals-end-times-rapture-christians>

a pivotal role in the campaigns against campus protests that have been carried out at a national level. Aggressive hearings involving presidents from various universities - accused of not doing enough to fight antisemitism - led by Republican congress-persons before the House Education Committee, pushed Harvard University President Claudine Gay and University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill, to resign from their positions⁴⁶. Anti-intellectualism, which Eric Fassin (2024) has defined as a typical characteristic of the Far Right, had already become embedded at both a federal and a state level in the Republican Party's attack on gender and post-colonial studies as well as in its commitment to dismantle so-called antidiscrimination policies. In fact, the so called "Cancel Culture" had developed as a moral panic campaign against an alleged illiberalism of the Left. Led by Donald Trump in 2020, an attack against critical race theory led to repressive measures in 44 states (Fassin 2024). As has been noted, in their anti-intellectual campaign against universities, "Republicans have placed the blame on diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI, programs. According to conservative lawmakers, these initiatives — meant to create welcoming learning environments for students from marginalized communities — are one reason some Jewish students feel fearful and unprotected on campus."⁴⁷ The attack on DEI was supported by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2023, when it challenged affirmative action in college admissions, stating that race could not be considered a factor in decisions on admission.

As in Germany, the attack on pro-Palestinian protests was also carried out by politicians from the mainstream Center Left. In the US, pro-Israeli lobbies have also traditionally been very influential in the Democratic party. President Joe Biden has repeatedly stated that the support of the U.S. government and ruling class for the State of Israel remains "ironclad." A campaign to remove Biden from the Democratic ticket by voting "uncommitted" in the primary elections proved ineffective. The initiative emerged in the state of Michigan and was initially labeled "Listen to Michigan," obtaining 101,000 votes during the primary elections in February.⁴⁸ In discussing the students who protested, Hillary Clinton dismissively stated that "They don't know very much at all about the history of the Middle East, or, frankly, about history, in many areas of the world, including in our own country."⁴⁹

Media bias

As in the German case, the mass media have also been involved in the spreading of the moral panic against alleged anti-Semitism in the repression of campus protests in the US. Pro-Israeli biases in reporting on Palestine in the US have been noted in research on the media coverage on Palestine in general (Liebes 1997), and specifically on the first and second intifada (Falk and Friel 2007).

An anti-Palestinian narrative was also observed in the mainstream media in the aftermath of 7 October. A quantitative analysis of more than 1,000 articles from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times about Israel's war on Gaza, based on coverage during the first six weeks following 7 October, shows that "major newspapers skewed their coverage toward Israeli narratives in the first six weeks of the assault on Gaza. Major U.S. newspapers disproportionately emphasized Israeli deaths in the conflict; used emotive language to describe the killings of Israelis, but not Palestinians; and offered lopsided coverage of antisemitic acts in the U.S., while largely ignoring anti-Muslim racism in the wake of October 7" (Johnson and Ali 2024).⁵⁰ The researchers singled out the fact that Israeli deaths are mentioned 16 times more often than deaths among Palestinians. Additionally,

⁴⁶ <https://www.inquirer.com/news/nation-world/clauidine-gay-resignation-harvard-president-liz-magill-penn-philadelphia-20240102.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.vox.com/24010858/republicans-antisemitism-dei-diversity-equity-inclusion-jewish-students>

⁴⁸ <https://www.blackagendareport.com/state-repression-and-palestine-solidarity>

⁴⁹ <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/12/hillary-clinton-protesters-chris-van-hollen-says-00157495>

⁵⁰ The data set is made available here <https://github.com/theintercept/gaza-media-bias>

Highly emotive terms for the killing of civilians like “slaughter,” “massacre,” and “horrific” were reserved almost exclusively for Israelis who were killed by Palestinians, rather than the other way around. The term “slaughter” was used by editors and reporters to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 60 to 1, and “massacre” was used to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 125 to 2. “Horrific” was used to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 36 to 4 (*ibid.*).

In strong contrast with coverage on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, children and journalists were very rarely mentioned as victims on the Palestinian side. Thus, as few as two headlines out of over 1,100 news articles analyzed mentioned the word “children” in relation to Gazan children. Moreover, “when it comes to how the Gaza conflict translates to hate in the U.S., the major papers paid more attention to antisemitic attacks than to ones against Muslims. Overall, there was a disproportionate focus on racism toward Jewish people, versus racism targeting Muslims, Arabs, or those perceived as such. ... Despite many high-profile instances of both antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism during the survey period, 87 percent of mentions of discrimination were about antisemitism, versus 13 percent mentions about Islamophobia, inclusive of related terms”. In sum,

Israel’s killings in Gaza are not given proportionate coverage in either scope or emotional weight as the deaths of Israelis on October 7. These killings are mostly presented as arbitrarily high, abstract figures. Hamas’s killings of Israeli civilians are consistently portrayed as part of the group’s strategy, whereas Palestinian civilian killings are covered almost as if they were a series of one-off mistakes, made thousands of times, despite numerous points of evidence indicating Israel’s intent to harm civilians and civilian infrastructure. The result is that the three major papers rarely gave Palestinians humanizing coverage (*ibid.*).

An even higher bias in the mentioning of Israel compared to Palestine was singled out in a quantitative analysis of U.S. cable news conducted in the first month of the war on Gaza.⁵¹ Similarly, research by Hamas Elmasry (2024), showed that in their use of Instagram popular Western broadcast news channels such as BBC News, CNN, Fox News, Sky News, and MSNBC consistently “favoured Israeli and pro-Israeli sources over Palestinian and pro-Palestinian sources; highlighted Israeli victims while neglecting Palestinian victims; and framed Israeli violence as self-defense while framing Palestinian violence as aggression.” Research carried out on 50 Sunday morning news talk shows between 8 October 2023 and the middle of January 2024 indicated that shows like *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), *This Week* (ABC) and *Fox News Sunday* (FOX) overwhelmingly featured pro-Israel guests.⁵²

Researchers also pointed to the effects of Israeli censorship. For instance, research carried out on CNN revealed that

Either reporting from Middle East, the United States, or anywhere else across the globe, every CNN journalist covering Israel and Palestine must submit their work for review by the news organization’s bureau in Jerusalem prior to publication, under a long-standing CNN policy. While CNN says the policy is meant to ensure accuracy in reporting on a polarizing subject, it means that much of the network’s recent coverage of the war in Gaza — and its reverberations around the world — has been shaped by journalists who operate under the shadow of the country’s military censor. Like all foreign news organizations operating in Israel, CNN’s Jerusalem bureau is subject to the rules of the Israel Defense Forces’s censor, which dictates subjects that are off-limits for news organizations to cover, and censors articles it deems unfit or unsafe to print.⁵³

This pro-Israel bias, especially addressed to a public that is increasingly capable of resorting to alternative media sources, has also been criticized by journalists themselves. Indeed, “There has been widely documented unrest in the halls of CNN, NPR and *The New York Times*, driven mainly by young journalists who rely on more diverse sources of information and question the institutional overreliance on U.S. and Israeli officialdom

⁵¹ <https://www.columnblog.com/p/massacred-vs-left-to-die-documenting>

⁵² <https://dawnmena.org/accounting-for-the-biases-in-u-s-media-coverage-of-gaza/>

⁵³ <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/04/cnn-israel-gaza-idf-reporting/>

about the war in Gaza. As with many members of the public, these journalists have called out these biases, which evoke the media failures of the Bush era over Iraq⁵⁴. In November 2023, an open letter criticizing the anti-Palestinian narrative in the coverage of Gaza by the US mass media collected more than 750 signatures from journalists.⁵⁵

Among the factors mentioned to explain this media bias are “the effects of corporate ownership structures that are risk-averse, the negative flak of mobilized interest groups, the lack of diversity in newsrooms, and perceived audience preferences given the interest in maximizing reach” as well as U.S. foreign policy.⁵⁶ As Bennet, Lawrence and Livingston (2007) noted in relation to reporting on the war in Iraq, most U.S. media outlets tend to defer to power, an attitude that is “deeply ingrained and continually reinforced in the culture and routines of mainstream journalism” as “The press reported reality during the Iraq years largely as the Bush administration had scripted it, even when the script seemed bizarrely out of line with observable events”.

The Pro-Israel lobbies

In contrast to the situation in the German case, while no commissioner on anti-Semitism was active in the US public administration, a very central role has been played by pro-Israel lobbies in the development of moral campaigns.

A long history of repression of Palestinians in the US peaked with the general anti-Arab and Islamophobic campaigns in the aftermath of 9/11. Since the 1960s, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has been accused of promoting harassment and spying on activists engaged in Palestine-solidarity, as well as on other left-wing organizations.⁵⁷ In 1969, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) issued a confidential memorandum that

alleged that college campuses were the sites of an Arab propaganda campaign against Israel. This set off what would be a decades-long offensive to combat the hiring of faculty of Palestinian and/or Arab backgrounds, silence Palestinian perspectives, and prevent criticism of the Israeli state from appearing in campus events or curricula. By the late 1970s and 1980s, the tactics of threatening, targeting, surveilling, and accusing faculty and students merged into a coherent strategy promoted in numerous tracts and conferences by organizations such as the AJC, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Hillel International (Deeb and Winegar 2024).

In 1972, the FBI included Arabs in America in Cointelpro, and the Nixon administration began “Operation Boulder”, which included checking the visa status of anyone with an Arabic surname. Subsequently, various pro-Israel watchdog organizations were founded, including the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting (CAMERA) founded in 1982, the David Horowitz Freedom Center (DHFC) in 1988; Campus Watch, the David Project, and the Israel on Campus Coalition in 2002. Many of these organizations, which were devoted to monitoring and blacklisting faculty members and students as well as developing campaigns to fire and discipline activists, “had links to Israeli and US intelligence groups, as well as to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)” (Deeb and Winegar 2024). The surveillance website Canary Mission was founded in 2015, while in 2016 Project Butterfly was launched to surveil and harass faculty members and others who criticized Zionism or the Israeli state (Bamford 2023a). A taskforce set up by the Israeli ministries of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora Affairs has been accused of promoting action oriented to inflict “economic and employment consequences on antisemitic students and compelling universities to distance them from their campuses” (Gowayed 2024). According to the Washington Post, after 7 October, a group of billionaires – who were in contact with the Israeli government – campaigned to put pressure on

⁵⁴ <https://dawnmena.org/accounting-for-the-biases-in-u-s-media-coverage-of-gaza/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2023/11/09/open-letter-journalists-israel-gaza/>

⁵⁶ <https://dawnmena.org/accounting-for-the-biases-in-u-s-media-coverage-of-gaza/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/article/2024/may/23/islamophobia-us-palestine-history>

the New York City Mayor to use the police against protesters at Columbia University, including through donations to the New York City police department (NYPD).⁵⁸

The political economy of the higher education sector

As in the German case, the repression of pro-Palestinian protests in the US is also related to the organizational models of neoliberal universities. However, this varies from a comparative perspective, according to the specific regimes of commodification in higher education.

While the German system is based upon public universities, which are highly sensitive towards political repression at both federal and state levels, the fact that many US universities are heavily dependent on private funding means that they have “come under pressure from wealthy donors who have accused the schools of failing to crack down on antisemitism on the campuses”.⁵⁹ Thus, for instance, as the Yale Police dismantled the encampment on campus, arresting 44 student protesters, a Jewish student noted that “It makes me deeply uncomfortable to see the disconnect between my university’s rhetoric and posturing towards growth and knowledge production, and their material connections to weapons manufacturing, which produces death in Palestine, the United States, and across the world.” The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which has long-standing ties to Israel, also engaged in particularly heavy repression of protests, even suspending the MIT Coalition Against Apartheid (CAA) that represents over 15 student groups, shutting down its website and sanctioning 13 student organizers.⁶⁰

As the NYU branch of the American Association of University Professors condemned the police action, which particularly impacted on people of colour. The document they produced pointed to the special ties that their institution had with arms producers:

NYU’s complicity in the genocide of the Palestinian people, NYU’s investment in the weapons manufacturing that facilitates such genocide, and NYU’s legitimization of the Israeli state policy of settler colonialism with its site in Tel Aviv... NYU Leadership’s decision to call the NYPD was capricious, unwarranted, and without justification. It would have been unconscionable under any circumstances, but is all the more so given that a large proportion of the protestors were people of colour, and NYPD are known for their particular history of brutality toward Black and Brown people. The police arrived en masse, in full riot gear, with buses and vans and the clear expectation of making mass arrests.⁶¹

The importance of university funding is confirmed by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni which, in their report titled *An Equal Space for All: A Trustee Guide to Preventing Encampments and Occupations on Campus*, suggested that financial decisions be “left to fiduciaries rather than political actors.” As was critically remarked, this would allow “administrations to completely elide the question of divestment for the foreseeable future while profiting from and investing in genocide” (Zaremba 2024).

In the US, as in Germany, high levels of precarity in the labour conditions of teaching staff increased the intimidation potential of disciplinary actions against workers. As the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) criticized, “top-down edicts” that “bypass the central role of elected faculty bodies, such as faculty senates, in university governance” especially affected “contingent and full-time non-tenure-track faculty members, and graduate student employees, especially people of color in these groups” (Zaremba 2024).

⁵⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/05/16/business-leaders-chat-group-eric-adams-columbia-protesters/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/columbia-university-students-stage-vietnam-style-anti-war-encampment-gaza>

⁶⁰ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

⁶¹ <https://www.counterfire.org/article/the-whole-world-is-watching-us-campuses-in-revolt-for-gaza/>

While private universities found ways not to apply constitutional protections on freedom of speech in order not to upset their donors, public universities have come under particular pressure in states that have threatened to withhold funding from institutions that fail to contain pro-Palestine student organizing. Thus, for instance, in 2016, Governor John Kasich signed a law that prohibited Ohio state agencies from doing business with entities boycotting Israel at Ohio colleges⁶². The discussed Senate Bill 83, or Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act, has been depicted as “a sweeping higher education bill directly impacting academic freedoms and instruction on controversial issues and policies. The bill restricts mandatory DEI training and programs, race and gender-based policies, hiring and education around controversial issues, academic partnerships with China, faculty retrenchment, and collective bargaining. would have banned all boycott, divestment, and sanction activity”⁶³ At the City University of New York (CUNY) repression was triggered in December by a letter by Governor Kathy Hochul to university presidents across New York that threatened legal action against universities that failed to discipline “antisemitism and calls for genocide of the Jewish people”.⁶⁴

In this type of profit-oriented higher education system, the privatization of security is most advanced. In the Summer of 2024, the creation of new rules aimed at a more effective repression of campus protest based on “more militarization, more law enforcement, more criminalization, and more consolidation of institutional power” has been a product of the “risk and crisis management” consulting industries. As Zaremba (2024) has noted, “Schools used this past summer to hear from consultants and prepare the crackdown, with no time to waste”:

Run by ex-military, law enforcement, and campus public safety officials, the risk and crisis management consulting industry constitutes a critical node of a larger repression network of state actors, partisan off-campus groups, and the Zionist lobby, who collectively work to criminalize student political dissent. Risk management involves financial and non-financial risks, everything from regulatory compliance to campus safety. Institutional investors, driven by mandates for safe, predictable returns, encourage universities to adopt stringent risk management frameworks that prioritize financial stability and institutional reputation over intellectual integrity. ... In the era of the Student Intifada, pro-Palestinian student activism is regarded by stakeholders as posing risks severe enough to justify policies that reconfigure the boundaries of permissible expression.

The actions of private security management companies has been particularly noted in the Summer of 2024. In July, for example, over 450 “campus protection professionals” convened in Atlanta for the 11th annual Campus Safety Conference, whose conference advisory board included current and former law enforcement officers, with experience in Israel, among other places (Zaremba 2024). During the same period, the Blue Moon Consulting Group hosted a Crisis Leadership Retreat to train participants in protest management policy and planning, while the Hillel Foundation and the Secure Community Network launched a security campaign called “Operation SecureOurCampuses”. The SCN also co-hosted a roundtable discussion with public safety officials from 92 universities and “representatives from the FBI, law enforcement association leaders, and Jewish security professionals” which “produced ten security recommendations, such as banning encampments, implementing emergency plans, and deepening collaboration with law enforcement—all of which have rapidly been enacted across the country in recent weeks..... Bans on encampments, temporary structures, amplified sound, chalking, freestanding signs, flyering, outdoor displays, and event tables are among the measures introduced to curtail political expression” (Zaremba 2024).

Conclusion

⁶² <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

⁶³ <https://www.honestyforohioeducation.org/sb-83.html>

⁶⁴ <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/gaza-solidarity-encampments-campus-crackdown-palestine/>

While the pro-Palestinian protests have remained broadly peaceful and even prefigured alternative relations of solidarity and mutual respect, they have been subjected to extreme levels of repression. This has especially been the case in countries that have invested more in their alliance with Israel, such as Germany (della Porta 2024) and the US. Through an instrumental use of the accusation of anti-Semitism, Pro-Palestinian activists (many of whom are themselves Jewish) have been presented as major enemies of the proclaimed “Western civilization” – the stated values of which have been betrayed by the genocidal violence perpetrated against Palestinians by the Israelis as well as the very violation of the main principles of civil rights and political freedom in Western countries. The extreme authoritarian forms that this repression has taken during the very first weeks of the Trump presidency are based on already existing trends in the state and societal reactions to mobilization for a ceasefire in Gaza and subsequently for a free Palestine that, as the protest against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and 1970s expressed the moral shock at violation of proclaimed principles. Aside from the call for the respect of human rights in Palestine, the protests challenged the specific vision of civilization that is based on the de-humanization of the Other, not only in Palestine but also in the US. Indeed, the main targets of repression were ethnic and religious minorities as well as non-US nationals. At the same time, the repression developed out of a concerted attack against emancipatory knowledge and attempts to spread this more widely in academia.

In this article, I have analysed the main forms that repression has taken, building on a number of theoretical innovations in research on social control. In particular, using the concepts of policing, disciplining and stigmatizing, I have extended the analytic focus from the repression of street protest by the police, to the different mechanisms through which regulatory power has been used by various institutions (such as universities), increasing their role in the monitoring of political opinion. Defunding and the dismissal of students and teachers have been used in an attack on academic freedom in all of its facets: from teaching and research freedoms to so-called extra-mural rights to the expression of political positions. Additionally, pressure has been placed on activists by the mobilization of ridicule and defamation through the combined intervention of countermovements, pro-Zionist associations, journalists, and far-right politicians – but also it must be said by the compliance of a large section of the Democratic Party, trade unions and liberal associations. Hysteria, panic and shock were also broadly cited as the predominant reactions to the emergence of peaceful protests that were immediately labelled as affected by a “new”, “imported” form of anti-Semitism.⁶⁵ With the support of pro-Israeli lobbies, far-right activists and party politicians – well known for their anti-Semitic positions in which the Jews are considered a threat to the White race – have suddenly mounted campaigns against the “new anti-Semitism” and “Israel hate” of progressive activists and migrant citizens, who are considered to be the main culprits within the Great Replacement conspiratorial thinking (Fassin 2024). As in the German case, it is a party whose leader, Donald Trump, has often used anti-Semitic narratives (suffice it to mention the QAnon conspiracy theory), that paradoxically presents itself as the promoter of a highly moralizing discourse in defence of the Jewish people, which they identify as a single, pro-Israeli group. In contrast to the SPD, the Democratic Party appears to be more divided in its support for the moral panic campaign. Another similarity with the German case is the fact that pro-Israeli pressure groups have also supported these moral panic campaigns. They have been joined, to a more visible extent than in Germany, by a number of powerful economic actors who express their influence by the fact that they are major donors to universities and political parties. What is more, far-right activists, often with a background in anti-vax and anti-gender activism, have violently attacked pro-Palestine camps.⁶⁶ A pro-Israeli bias has also often been noted in the media – even from within the media itself with regard to a number of mainstream media outlets. While the pro-Palestine student protests in Germany have mainly been targeted by the mainstream media and government politicians (della Porta 2024), in the US conservative watchdog organizations and pro-Israeli groupings⁶⁷ that specialize in

⁶⁵ <https://jewishcurrents.org/anatomy-of-a-moral-panic>

⁶⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/10/college-campus-protests-far-right>

⁶⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/name-shame-pro-israel-website-ramps-up-attacks-pro-palestinian-student-2024-05-11/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAAR2nDqkyVIKr9vQWwfY5Wc7utkfMmQ2WPvzd8k1YueX9NFjM4MGxJM>

doxing have spread rumours and misinformation on social media; this has been accompanied by tactics such as driving trucks through the streets accusing people of colour especially of anti-Semitic acts in order to produce a disciplining effect and counter-protests.⁶⁸

In conclusion, in this dramatic time of deep conflicts and very heavy repression, social movement studies must deal with several challenges in an attempt to understand ever new, unexpected and swiftly developing processes. In this article, I have attempted to show that in order to address these challenges we must move beyond the established conceptual tools and expand our analytic scope in order to understand elaborate processes in which different players are involved in complex arenas, with a great deal of space for agency but also for the impact of conjunctural development (della Porta 2020, 2025).

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⁶⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-05-10/how-social-media-rumors-sparked-a-night-of-mayhem-at-ucla>

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