

# Class, Race and Corporate Power

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Volume 12 | Issue 2

Article 7

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2024

## Beyond the Ivory Tower: Exposing the Hypocrisy in University Responses to Civil Unrest

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### Recommended Citation

Arnold, Theryn (2024) "Beyond the Ivory Tower: Exposing the Hypocrisy in University Responses to Civil Unrest," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol12/iss2/7>

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# Beyond the Ivory Tower: Exposing the Hypocrisy in University Responses to Civil Unrest

## Abstract

This paper critiques the responses of American universities to student-led protests against the ongoing Gaza conflict, focusing on the events at Columbia University in April 2024. Despite their stated commitment to critical thinking and civic engagement, universities often suppress dissent, revealing a preference for maintaining ideological conformity aligned with capitalist interests. By labeling student activists as "outside agitators" and prioritizing donor interests over student welfare, these institutions betray their claimed values of intellectual freedom and public accountability. The paper exposes the contradictions in university policies, questioning their role as true bastions of critical inquiry and social justice.

## Keywords

Protests, Ideology, Capitalism, Hypocrisy

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## Cover Page Footnote

Theryn Arnold is a PhD student in Geography at York University. He holds a BA in Psychology and Philosophy from the University of Windsor and an MA in Labour Studies from McMaster University. His research interests focus on labour conditions, the concept of money, and de-dollarization, with an emerging focus on the intersection of state policy and environmental sustainability.

## **Introduction**

One month after the Lancet published a study estimating the death toll in Gaza to around 8% of the population, or around 186,000 deaths, student protestors are gearing up for another wave of demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> The students have faced a barrage of attacks, including suppression and censoring of speech, arrests and police violence, and disciplinary actions. These actions reflect broader trends of repression and control exercised by universities in response to political activism, particularly on issues like Palestine, which challenge deeply entrenched political and economic interests. This paper traces the university's response to students' demands and highlights the naked contradictions involved in these processes. Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is pertinent here. Universities act as ISAs by indoctrinating individuals with the dominant ideology, in this case, one that aligns with capitalist and imperialist interests. By labelling student activists as 'outside agitators' and policing their protests, universities enforce specific ideological conformity that supports the status quo. This suppression of dissent under the guise of maintaining order and protecting institutional integrity effectively stifles critical discourse and opposition, essential for the revolutionary change envisioned by Marx.

## **Student Movements and Social Change**

The historical and contemporary roles of universities and student movements as catalysts for social change are deeply intertwined with the intellectual foundations provided by academic Marxism. Latham's examination of academic Marxism highlights the critical function of universities as incubators for ideas that challenge entrenched power structures, equipping student movements with the necessary theoretical frameworks to mobilize effectively.<sup>2</sup> This intellectual tradition has been pivotal in informing and shaping significant historical movements, such as the anti-apartheid struggle and the protests against the Vietnam War, deeply influenced by Marxist and leftist critiques of imperialism, racism, and capitalism. Despite facing suppression, arrests, and violence, these movements have ignited widespread calls for justice and accountability, signalling a significant shift in political engagement. This activism highlights the growing influence of younger generations in shaping the future. It underscores the continued relevance of Marxism as a critical tool for analyzing and confronting global injustices.

## **Escalating Tensions: The University's Response to Student Protests and the Ensuing Fallout**

The University has long been heralded as a site of critical thinking and civil engagement, where young minds are encouraged to explore diverse ideologies and challenge existing paradigms. However, the reality is that these lofty ideals are rarely met in practice. As the ongoing genocide in Gaza perpetuated by the Israeli state continues, students in American universities have led a series of protests and demonstrations that started at Columbia University in New York City on April 17, 2024. The following day, Shafik summoned the

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<sup>1</sup> See Khatib, Rasha, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf. "Counting the dead in Gaza: difficult but essential." *The Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (2024): 237-238.

<sup>2</sup> See Latham, Robert E. (2024) "Academic Marxism in the Crosshairs: What is at Stake in the U.S.?", *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 5.

NYPD, who arrived in full riot gear and raided the encampments, detaining more than 100 students. Such severe repression had not been witnessed on the campus since the NYPD forcefully ended anti-Vietnam protests back in April and May of 1968. The university has also disciplined student activists, issuing suspensions, among other penalties. However, this clampdown has only fueled further determination, with students persisting in occupying the campus's South Lawn. On Monday, April 22, in response to the growing unrest, Shafik called off in-person classes, and hundreds of faculty members protested both Shafik's decisions and the NYPD's intervention.

These protests, calling for their institutions to cut financial links with Israel and businesses engaged in the conflict, have met with institutional responses that starkly contrast with the universities' advertised commitments to critical thinking, public accountability, and student centrality. It is a challenging situation, with victims on both sides. On one side, you have people being slaughtered in droves by genocidal massacres and siege warfare, while on the other, you have people whose feelings get hurt when these atrocities are opposed. It is hard to say which is worse.

### **The Illusion of Critical Thinking: Suppressing Student Voices Under the Guise of Intellectual Freedom**

Universities often market themselves as bastions of critical thinking, championing the free exchange of ideas as the cornerstone of academic pursuit. As part of the capitalist superstructure, these ideals frequently crumble when students dare to leverage these principles to scrutinize and challenge the institutional status quo or broader societal injustices. The response from academia is not just inconsistent; it is blatantly hypocritical. At institutions like Columbia University, among others, this hypocrisy is starkly visible. There, administrative tactics have not merely been passive-aggressive in their discouragement but have escalated to overt censorship. Such actions starkly betray the ideals of intellectual freedom and open dialogue that these institutions proudly advertise. By muffling student voices and sanitizing academic discourse, universities reveal a disturbing alignment with oppressive mechanisms rather than with the progressive, enlightened values they claim to embody. Yet, as Antonio Gramsci (1971) discusses, they perpetuate the cultural hegemony of the ruling capitalist class, moulding students to conform rather than challenge societal norms. The recent administrative actions at institutions like Columbia University, which range from discouragement to overt censorship, starkly betray the ideals of intellectual freedom. These actions align with Terry Eagleton's (1991) descriptions, illustrating how educational institutions manipulate ideological constructs to maintain capitalist interests. This profound discrepancy between their espoused values and conduct undermines their credibility and questions the integrity of the academic missions they purport to uphold. From a Marxist viewpoint, universities promote critical thinking only to the extent that it aligns with the dominant capitalist ideology. When students apply critical theories to challenge structures of power and capital—such as state and corporate complicity in oppression—their actions threaten the ideological control of the ruling class. Universities, as Ideological State Apparatuses, respond by curbing these radical forms of critical thinking to maintain the status quo, thus preserving capitalist interests.

## **The Myth of Public Accountability: Labelling Student Activists as Outsiders**

The label "outside agitators" imposed on student activists by university administrators is a glaring testament to the profound disconnection between these institutions' self-proclaimed roles as open, public-facing entities and their actual reactionary behaviours towards public dissent. This insidious tactic seeks to delegitimize the genuine concerns raised by students and actively damages the public's trust in these institutions. Across the nation, this pattern has been observed in numerous public universities where confrontations have laid bare the administrative discomfort with genuine scrutiny and accountability. By employing dismissive labels, universities expose their preference for maintaining a facade of engagement rather than fostering authentic dialogue and reform. This approach erodes the foundational trust that communities place in educational institutions and contradicts the principles of democratic engagement and critical inquiry that they are supposed to nurture. Marxist theory interprets the labelling of student protesters as "outside agitators" as an example of how universities serve capitalist interests by discrediting threats to their economic and ideological stability. The label of "outside agitators" imposed on student activists highlights a profound disconnection between universities' roles as public-facing entities and their actual behaviours, which seek to stifle dissent. This tactic, as Paulo Freire (1970) argues, denies the dialogic engagement essential for proper education and transformation. Instead, it reveals a preference for maintaining a facade of engagement, as Raymond Williams (1977) discussed, where universities manage cultural responses to maintain authority and control.

## **The Oligarchy of Donor Dollars: Prioritizing Wealth Over Student Welfare**

The financial architecture of many universities starkly illustrates a profound prioritization of donor interests, often at the expense of the student body. This dynamic is a matter of skewed priorities and a blatant betrayal of educational principles. Extensive case studies across numerous private institutions reveal that monetary contributions from affluent donors frequently steer decisions in ways that substantially degrade student welfare. These actions contradict the institutions' public assertions of valuing educational quality and student experiences. This prioritization reveals a mercenary ethos at the core of these institutions, where financial incentives routinely eclipse the academic and social needs of the student population, compromising the integrity and purpose of higher education. Ivy League universities like Columbia are often regarded as bastions of liberal values and intellectual freedom. Yet, the persistent infringements on essential democratic liberties in the aftermath of Israel's invasion reveal a stark contradiction in their principles. The governance of these institutions leaves no room for input from students or staff. High-earning administrators hold the reins, making unilateral decisions. These decision-makers are deeply influenced by billionaire donors who view these educational institutions as extensions of their interests. The prioritization of donor interests over student welfare exemplifies the capitalist motives discussed by David Harvey (2005). The financial dependencies of universities on capitalist benefactors steer them to make decisions that often harm their student bodies' educational and moral interests, revealing a deep-seated mercenary ethos contrary to their academic missions.

## **Free Speech in Chains: How Private Universities Undermine Democratic Values**

In the landscape of private universities, the suppression of free speech and assembly rights is not just a policy flaw—it's a systemic violation of constitutional protections. These

limitations are profoundly troubling, highlighting a disregard for the bedrock principles of democracy that these educational institutions claim to champion. The restrictions on speech and assembly within these campuses provoke significant legal concerns and pose deep ethical questions. By curtailing these fundamental rights, universities contravene legal standards and betray their mission to foster open, critical discourse and intellectual freedom. Restrictions on free speech and assembly in private universities reflect the systemic violation of constitutional protections, as outlined by Herbert Marcuse (1964). These restrictions manifest authoritarian control under the guise of maintaining order, betraying the mission of fostering open, critical discourse and intellectual freedom.

### **Security or Suppression? The Violent Costs of 'Protecting' Students**

The deployment of external security forces in response to student protests starkly illustrates how universities often prioritize image over substance. Rather than safeguarding the student body, these measures escalate tensions and frequently incite violence, indicating a severe misalignment between proclaimed commitments to student safety and the actual strategies employed. This approach exposes a cynical stance where universities appear more concerned with suppressing dissent and maintaining a facade of control than genuinely protecting their communities. Using such forceful measures under the pretext of security raises significant ethical concerns about the role of educational institutions in a democratic society.

This analysis resonates with the situation in India, as discussed in Das, 2024 where universities have become sites of militarization and surveillance.<sup>3</sup> In both contexts, force and security measures are less about protecting students and more about suppressing dissent and enforcing conformity. In India, the presence of police and military forces on campuses, the installation of CCTV cameras, and the infiltration of student groups all serve to create an environment of fear and control, mirroring the repressive tactics seen in U.S. universities (Das, 2024).

### **Diversity for Show, Not for Substance: The Selective Silence of Universities**

Diversity and inclusion, while prominently featured in liberal-democratic university marketing materials and public statements, often exist more as aspirational ideals than as fully realized commitments. These values are frequently embraced in a manner that is superficial and performative rather than substantive and transformative. Universities may highlight their dedication to creating a diverse and inclusive environment, showcasing images of multicultural student bodies and issuing statements that celebrate various identities.<sup>4</sup> However, the reality of how these policies are implemented reveals a different picture, one that is marked by selectivity and conditionality.

This superficial embrace of diversity is particularly evident during times of crisis or controversy. When individuals from diverse backgrounds raise critical questions, challenge established norms, or push back against the status quo, the response from university administrations often shifts from one of inclusion to exclusion. Rather than welcoming these voices as essential contributors to the academic dialogue, institutions frequently marginalize

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<sup>3</sup> See Das, Raju J. 2024. "The Right-Wing Attacks on the Academic Left in India." *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 12, no. 1: Article 6.

<sup>4</sup> Minouche Shafik, president of Columbia University, openly celebrated the diverse and urban campus while simultaneously calling all student protestors antisemitic.

or silence them, especially when the critiques threaten entrenched power structures or the university's public image.<sup>5</sup>

This selective approach to diversity—wherein inclusion is conditional upon aligning diverse voices with the institution's existing values and priorities—exposes the limits of the university's commitment to true diversity. Instead of fostering an environment where all perspectives are genuinely valued and debated, universities often use the rhetoric of diversity to promote an image of progressiveness while avoiding the discomfort and challenges of embracing true diversity.

Such practices undermine the credibility of these institutions' diversity claims and reflect a more profound institutional reluctance to engage with the transformative potential that genuine diversity offers. True diversity requires more than just the presence of different identities; it necessitates an openness to fundamentally rethinking and reshaping institutional practices, policies, and power dynamics. When universities fail to move beyond superficial commitments to diversity, they betray the individuals seeking inclusion and limit the potential for meaningful change within their communities. In doing so, they risk perpetuating the inequities and exclusions they claim to oppose.

### **Remote Learning: A Convenient Tool for Control, Not Safety**

The application of remote learning illustrates a striking example of policy manipulation, where decisions are tailored more to administrative convenience than principled educational strategy. Promoted ostensibly for disease prevention, its selective use to curb student gatherings unveils a tool of control rather than a safety measure. This practice raises profound concerns about equity and access to education, highlighting a utilitarian approach that prioritizes operational ease over educational integrity and student well-being. By exploiting remote learning in this dual capacity, universities expose their willingness to sacrifice educational values for managerial benefits, reflecting a troubling shift in educational priorities.

The recent surge in pro-Palestine protests at American universities highlights a severe moral paradox in contemporary societal values. As these institutions of higher learning face demand from students to sever financial ties with Israel and companies linked to ongoing conflicts, the administrative reactions starkly contrast with the universities' professed commitments to fostering critical thinking and promoting public accountability. This discrepancy reveals a troubling misalignment between the universities' espoused ideals and their actions, especially in response to student-led activism against the genocide and siege warfare in Gaza. The heightened institutional responses to these protests underscore a disturbing inversion of moral priorities: it appears more reprehensible in our society to protest genocide than to perpetuate it. This condition suggests a misunderstanding and a profound misapprehension of reality, indicative of a deeply troubled civilization.

The absurdity of the situation is palpable when considering the comparative outrage directed at protesters versus the perpetrators of genocidal acts. This scenario evokes a world where societal norms are entirely inverted—a hyperbolic yet effective illustration of the severity of

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<sup>5</sup> See Jones, V., & Reddick, R. (2017). The Heterogeneity of Resistance: How Black Students Utilize Engagement and Activism to Challenge PWI Inequalities. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 204-219.

our current ethical disorientation. Suppose society views the routine massacre of civilians as a normative and justified state of affairs while deeming opposition to such atrocities as perverse or hateful. In that case, it reveals a delusion akin to the most severe forms of insanity. This ethical misalignment challenges us to reconsider what we value as a society and calls into question the role of educational institutions in shaping and reflecting these values.

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