

A Reflection on Global Protests over Gaza: The Role of Universities in the Public Debate

[Una riflessione sulle proteste globali su Gaza: il ruolo delle università nel dibattito pubblico]

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Abstract

[It.] Il violento attacco di Hamas contro Israele del 7 ottobre 2023 e la successiva drammatica controffensiva delle truppe israeliane a Gaza e in Libano hanno portato a un'onda crescente di proteste e controproteste che sono iniziate negli Stati Uniti e si sono poi diffuse a livello globale. L'onda di proteste studentesche pro-Palestina ha posto le università al centro di un dibattito complesso che sembra aver aperto un “vaso di Pandora” su questioni spinose e poliedriche. Questo articolo mira a comprendere le origini e il significato del movimento studentesco e ad esplorare il ruolo delle università nel contesto di una grave crisi politica come la guerra a Gaza.

[En.] The violent attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent dramatic counteroffensive by Israeli troops in Gaza and Lebanon, have led to a growing wave of protests and counter-protests that started in the United States and then spread globally. The current wave of pro-Palestine student protests has placed universities at the centre of a complex debate that seems to have opened a “Pandora’s box” on thorny and multifaceted issues. This article aims to understand the origins, meaning, and consequences of the student movement and to explore the role of universities in the context of a major political crisis like the war in Gaza.

Parole-chiave: Movimenti sociali – Proteste – Israele – Gaza – Università.

Keywords: Social Movements – Protests – Israel – Gaza – Universities.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. Where it all began: Columbia University then and now (1968-2024). 3. The global protests over Gaza. 4. Conclusion.

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1. Introduction

The latest escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, specifically the violent attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October 2023, and, above all, the subsequent dramatic counteroffensive by Israeli troops in Gaza and Lebanon, has had a strong emotional impact on international public opinion and has led to a growing wave of protests and counterprotests that started in the United States and then spread globally. The student protests, which in some cases were forcefully repressed, have placed universities at the centre of a complex cultural and intellectual debate that seems to have opened a “Pandora’s box” on thorny and multifaceted issues. But what is really happening? What do these protests mean?

A recent study led by Erica Chenoweth, entitled *Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023-2024*, highlights the figures of the mobilization in the United States. From 7 October 2023 to 7 June 2024, approximately 12,400 pro-Palestine protests and over 2,000 pro-Israel protests were recorded in the United States, with at least 1.5 million participants¹. The current wave of pro-Palestine protests can be considered the largest mobilization triggered by a foreign event since the Vietnam War. Chenoweth’s study identifies three possible reasons for the size of the pro-Palestine mobilization: 1) casualties and suffering motivate protestors, and the Palestinian casualties have been much higher; 2) protestors react to the US government’s position, which in this case strongly favours Israel; and 3) protestors are driven by emotional outrage at Israeli policy and the resultant Palestinian suffering. The study then underlines that until April 2024, the pro-Palestine movement included many students, but it was not centred on campuses.

That changed in April and May 2024, when Palestinian solidarity encampments mushroomed at colleges and universities across the country, and news media focused attention on them. Criticism of Israel then fuelled one of the thorniest issues: the accusation of anti-Semitism. An extremely contentious debate ensued, which spread from the United States to many European universities and the rest of the world. Chenoweth concludes that this pro-Palestine movement has not been violent. She further argues that the rhetorical core of these student protests was not a call for violence against Jews, but rather a call for freedom for Palestinians and an end to the violence inflicted upon them².

Recent studies conducted by Donatella Della Porta also reached similar conclusions, namely the absence of elements of antisemitism in the pro-Palestinian student protests³.

These initial considerations enable us to define the starting framework of this research; we are discussing a peaceful and non-violent student movement that emerged in US universities, against the violence perpetrated by the current Israeli government towards the Palestinian people in the Gaza territories.

¹ E. Chenoweth, S. Hammam, J. Pressman, J. Ulfelder, *Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023-2024*, in *Social Movement Studies*, October 2024.

² *Idem*, 2-3.

³ D. Della Porta, *Attacco agli studenti*, in *Left*, No. 6, 2024, 14-15.

There is a long history of political activism in US campuses, which has contributed to many important examples of progress, such as opposition to the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid struggle, and the civil rights movement⁴. The protests against Israel's war in Gaza that have erupted on college campuses across the United States are the latest in a tradition of student activism dating back to at least the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests of the 1960s⁵.

Protests have frequently occurred on college campuses and sometimes in the same buildings as in previous years: Hamilton Hall at Columbia University in New York was occupied by students during the 1968 protests, as well as during the latest student protests. Some of the student protests, such as the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements, helped achieve tangible goals that have become widely accepted over time⁶.

As Richard Fausset recalls in the *New York Times*, the idea of the progressive college student as a force in public life is a relatively recent development. The template for student protest coalesced in the 1960s, as “Baby Boomers” swelled the ranks of colleges and universities in a wealthy country that was beginning to confront its long history of racism and would soon be engulfed by the Vietnam conflict – one in which 61 percent of the 58,000 American soldiers killed were under 21 years old⁷. With these and other efforts, US college students began to be seen as a catalyst for profound structural change⁸.

In the 1970s and 1980s, student-led movements sprang up on numerous college campuses calling on schools to divest from companies that did business in South Africa, which at the time was under white apartheid rule⁹. Though these protests were only one factor that led to the fall of apartheid in the early 1990s, the South Africa divestment movement directly inspired the current demands that schools divest from businesses connected to Israel. These demands are part of the broader effort targeting Israel known as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which calls upon nations, businesses and schools to sever links with Israel¹⁰.

In September 2011, it was the turn of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). Activists occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City to denounce the abuses of financial capitalism, the excesses of the market economy, and economic and social inequalities. The OWS movement inspired activists not only in the United States

⁴ C.J. Broadhurst, *Campus Activism in the 21st Century: A Historical Framing*, in *New Directions for Higher Education*, No. 167, 2014.

⁵ R. Fausset, *From Free Speech to Free Palestine: Six Decades of Student Protest*, in *The New York Times*, 4 May 2024.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ H. Horowitz, *The 1960s and the Transformation of Campus Cultures*, in *History of Education Quarterly*, No. 1, 1986; K. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era*, New York University Press, 1993; C. DeBenedetti, C. Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*, University Press, 1990.

⁸ R. Fausset, *From Free Speech to Free Palestine*, cit.

⁹ P.G. Altbach, R. Cohen, *American Student Activism: The Post-Sixties Transformation*, in *The Journal of Higher Education*, No. 1, 1990.

¹⁰ R. Fausset, *From Free Speech to Free Palestine*, cit.

but also in other parts of the world and acquired a global dimension with strong student participation.

The peaceful student protests continued throughout the second decade of the 21st century¹¹. Student protests in the 21st century have created new areas of contestation, brought about a new generation of racial strife (see Black Lives Matter movement), and fuelled a renewed sensitivity towards the climate and environmental emergency, and created new opportunities of confrontation with other forms of power¹².

This brief historical background on the major US student protests allows us to place the current Gaza protests within a tradition of student activism that has had a significant impact, starting from the context of US campuses, and then spreading beyond the United States. Recent demonstrations in solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have also spread from campuses in the United States to universities in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The main aim of this article is to understand the origins, meaning, and consequences of the current student protests over Gaza and explore the role of universities in the context of a major political crisis like the war in Gaza.

2. *Where it all began: Columbia University then and now (1968-2024)*

In the United States, the latest escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict sparked the largest student revolt since the 1960s. The worst crisis to roil American universities since the Vietnam era began back in October 2023. In the wake of the Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent invasion of Gaza by Israeli troops, protests and counter-protests on college campuses gathered in intensity¹³.

The end of the 2023-2024 academic year was particularly turbulent for several colleges; but one institution, Columbia University, found itself at the epicentre of the movement, eliciting echoes of the Ivy League institution's complex history with campus activism¹⁴. Battles over free speech are not new to the 270-year-old university. Columbia faced a similar uproar in 1968, when students held extensive demonstrations and sit-ins to protest against the Vietnam War and call for civil rights¹⁵.

A series of occupation protests by pro-Palestinian students occurred on 17 April 2024, when pro-Palestinian students established an encampment of approximately fifty tents on the university campus, calling it the "Gaza Solidarity Encampment", demanding that the university call for a ceasefire and divest from companies that

¹¹ E. Chenoweth, *The Future of Nonviolent Resistance*, in *Journal of Democracy*, No. 3, 2020.

¹² C. Cerami, *Civil Resistance from the End of the Cold War to the 21st Century: A Historical Perspective*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie (NAD): Diritto, Istituzioni e Società*, No. 2, 2022.

¹³ M. Mazower, *The week that shook Columbia*, in *Financial Times*, 27 July 2024.

¹⁴ L. Spitalniak, *Then and now: Two eras of protests at Columbia University (1968- 2024)*, in *Higher Ed Dive*, 29 August 2024.

¹⁵ B. Slonecker, *The Columbia Coalition: African Americans, New Leftists, and Counterculture at the Columbia University Protest of 1968*, in *Journal of Social History*, No. 4, 2008.

do business with Israel, including weapons manufacturers. The “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” has had an eventful life, reconnecting a new generation of Columbia student activists to predecessors who made the university a centre of protest against the Vietnam war when they occupied buildings in 1968. It has also energised similar anti-Israel protests at other US campuses, from New York University to the University of California, Berkeley¹⁶.

The day after Columbia protesters erected their encampment, University President Minouche Shafik authorized the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to enter the campus and arrest more than 100 protesters¹⁷. Calling the police was regarded as an unpardonable sin to those who still cherish Columbia’s tradition of activism. Hundreds of professors staged a walkout in response¹⁸. At the same time, students rebuilt the encampment, where it stayed until 30 April. That day, protesters occupied the university’s Hamilton Hall, a century-old academic building on the corner of Columbia’s campus, after Shafik announced the university would not divest from companies with ties to Israel. Columbia had negotiated with protesters for days «to find a path that would result in the dismantling of the encampment and adherence to university policies going forward», Shafik said in a statement on 29 April¹⁹. No agreement was reached, and Columbia brought in police to clear the encampment. Within hours, New York City police clad in riot gear and toting stun grenades would breach Columbia’s Hamilton Hall to clear protesters in a scene reminiscent of 1968, when the same building was seized by students opposing the Vietnam war. It happened in 1968 and it has happened again now. Officers arrested dozens of students. As the NYPD made clear, the students were non-violent. Professors and students have said they are troubled by what they see as violations of freedom of expression, an erosion of faculty autonomy and overreactions by administrators.

The Gaza Solidarity Encampment tested the university’s president, Minouche Shafik, and intensified a debate about the boundaries between free speech and harassment at a university renowned for its social activism. The decision by its administration to suspend students and call in the police to arrest them sparked widespread copycat occupations and clampdowns in the US and at universities abroad²⁰.

On 9 May, the President of Columbia University, Minouche Shafik, wrote a letter to the *Financial Times* entitled *Universities must engage in serious soul*

¹⁶ J. Chaffin, *Columbia University’s ‘Gaza encampment’ becomes centre of US stand-off*, in *Financial Times*, 24 April 2024.

¹⁷ Letter to NYPD, Columbia University website. The letter was sent by President Minouche Shafik to the New York Police Department’s deputy commissioner for legal matters on 18 April 2024, <https://publicsafety.columbia.edu/content/letter-nypd>.

¹⁸ J. Chaffin, *Columbia University’s ‘Gaza encampment’*, in *Financial Times*, 24 April 2024.

¹⁹ Statement from Columbia University President Minouche Shafik, 29 April 2024, <https://president.columbia.edu/news/statement-columbia-university-president-minouche-shafik-4-29>.

²⁰ A. Jack, J. Chaffin, *New York police storm Columbia University and arrest pro-Palestinian protesters*, in *Financial Times*, 1 May 2024.

searching on protests. The aim of the letter was to clarify the meaning of her decision and start a debate on the role of universities in major political crises like the war in Gaza. The letter certainly contains much food for thought. However, some of the conclusions Minouche reaches are controversial. According to Minouche, «if colleges and universities cannot better define the boundaries between free speech and discrimination, government will move to fill that gap, and in ways that do not necessarily protect academic freedom»²¹. This is a reflection that has inevitably sparked a wide intellectual debate in the academic world, on the importance of free speech, on academic freedom, on the role of internal debate within universities, and, no less importantly, on the long tradition of political activism of liberal universities such as Columbia itself. The American Association of University Professors wrote on X that Shafik's «failure to protect free speech and academic freedom by silencing peaceful protesters and having them hauled off to jail did a grave disservice to Columbia's reputation»²².

Afterwards, a University Senate report concluded that Columbia had violated its own rules by bringing the police onto the campus. On 31 May, a third campus encampment was established. Shafik announced her resignation from the presidency on 14 August. In her resignation letter to Columbia faculty and students she described «a period of turmoil where it has been difficult to overcome divergent views across our community»²³.

Fifty-six years ago, Columbia also became a hotbed of student protest. Times were different, but one of their causes was the same: protest against an unpopular war being fought on foreign soil. During the Vietnam War, the rising death toll of American soldiers partly fuelled the protests. Now, students are largely protesting the US's military aid for Israel in its war. They are calling for their universities to divest from companies with business in Israel and to cut ties with Israeli universities²⁴.

During the height of the Vietnam War, Columbia became a flashpoint for anti-war and anti-racist activism. Columbia has since enshrined the protests and sit-ins known as the spring 1968 student uprising into its institutional history. It commemorated the 50th anniversary in 2018, with an online archive that collected interviews and documents from the period. It took decades for the university to recover from those turbulent times.

The recent events at Columbia University have shown not only the administration's lack of understanding for the community that populates it and its students, but above all, a lack of attention to the history and tradition of political activism of the university itself. Political activism is also part of the “brand” of

²¹ M. Shafik, *Universities must engage in serious soul searching on protests*, in *Financial Times*, 9 May 2024.

²² A. Jack, *Columbia University president resigns after pressure over student Gaza protests*, in *Financial Times*, 15 August 2024.

²³ Announcement from Columbia's President Minouche Shafik, 14 August 2024, in <https://president.columbia.edu/news/announcement-president-minouche-shafik>.

²⁴ L. Spitalniak, *Then and now*, cit.

Columbia university. The university itself encourages enrolment in a place where it is possible to be part of political activism, social justice and political commitment.

As pointed out by Tyler Austin Harper in *The Atlantic*, «universities spent years saying that activism is not just welcome but encouraged on their campuses. Students took them at their word»²⁵. Many universities at the centre of the ongoing police crackdowns have long sought to portray themselves as bastions of activism and free thought. Administrators have spent much of the recent past recruiting social-justice-minded students and faculty to their campuses under the promise that activism is not just welcome but encouraged. There is a sense of disconnect between these institutions' marketing of activism and their treatment of protesters²⁶.

The war in Gaza is seen as a moral cause that has mobilized students but has also become a catalyst for broader discontent with the world they are inheriting. Universities are a crucial part of society, and students seem to have opened a sort of “Pandora’s box” regarding a war that adults have preferred to sweep under the carpet for many decades.

3. The global student protests over Gaza

The wave of student protests, marches, and sit-ins, which began at Columbia University, quickly spread to other American universities, such as Cornell University in the State of New York, NYU, Emory University in Atlanta, and the University of Texas in Austin, where demonstrations were suppressed by riot police. A wave of arrests then affected other universities, like Emerson College in Boston and the University of Southern California, where nearly 200 people were arrested overall. Student tents set up on campuses were promptly removed by law enforcement, as seen at Princeton University in New Jersey. Among other universities impacted are the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Michigan, the University of New Mexico, the University of California, Berkeley, and many more.

Edward Luce in the *Financial Times*, wrote:

The role of grown-ups facing student unrest is to keep the peace without sacrificing rights. These include free speech and physical safety. The task requires principled consistency. In practice, adults from all walks –Republicans, Democrats, the media and university administrations – are exhibiting traits of hysteria and dogmatism they deplore in the young. It should come as no surprise that the protests are getting angrier²⁷.

Following the news of student protests at US colleges, occupations, marches and initiatives in support of the Palestinian cause have spread to universities across the

²⁵ T.A. Harper, *America's Colleges are reaping what they sowed*, in *The Atlantic*, 2 May 2024.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ E. Luce, *Adults, not students, are America's problem*, in *Financial Times*, 1 May 2024.

globe. From Canada to Argentina, from the Iberian Peninsula to the British Isles, from North Africa to the Middle East, and all the way to India²⁸.

The first Canadian university to have been the site of student mobilization was McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Also in Canada, the universities of Western Ontario, Ottawa and Toronto in Ontario, and those of British Columbia, Victoria, and Vancouver Island in British Columbia followed suit. Following the example of the United States, students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) set up tents and erected a pro-Palestine camp, the first in so-called Latin America, calling on the government of their country to stop diplomatic relations with Israel. In Central and South America, student protests were heard more in the form of marches and demonstrations.

The protests then spread to Europe. Those in France and the UK have had the most resonance, but they have also reached Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Holland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Spain, and Italy. In Europe, the student protests have opened a wide debate both within the universities and on the role of universities in the context of a major political crisis like the war in Gaza. Like in the USA, the rhetorical core of the student protests in Europe was not a call for violence against Jews, but rather a call for freedom for Palestinians and an end to the violence inflicted upon them. Other issues have also emerged, such as freedom of expression and academic freedom, administrative and financial transparency of universities, and the links between European universities and Israeli universities.

In the Near and Middle East, students' protests were especially felt in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, and Iran. Among these, the Lebanese protests at the University of Beirut were particularly loud. Hundreds of students gathered, waving Palestinian flags and denouncing Tel Aviv's actions.

In Africa, student protests have been concentrated in the northern part of the continent, and have particularly affected Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Egypt.

Protests also took place in Australia and India. While demands varied by university, protesters generally called for their schools to divest from companies with operations in Israel and to cut ties with Israeli universities.

4. Conclusion

Patrizia Nanz, President of the European University Institute (EUI), wrote a stimulating and interesting article in *The Guardian*, in May 2024. She wrote:

The brutal repression of student protests from Amsterdam to Los Angeles is exposing failings at the heart of our universities. Across the world, university students have set up encampments to protest against the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza and put pressure on academic institutions and governments. Whatever one thinks of their message and of their requests, their moral indignation in the face of avoidable human suffering is one we should all be able to share. [...] We must be vigilant about the

²⁸ L. Aprati, *Le proteste universitarie pro Gaza dilagano dagli Stati Uniti, all'Europa, all'Oceania*, in *Rainews*, 3 May 2024.

academic culture: when we say that universities must be a “safe space”, this is not only true in terms of physical and emotional integrity (which are paramount) but also in terms of intellectual integrity: a university is a space in which one can be, and should be, safely challenged, rather than confirmed in their convictions²⁹.

It is highly likely that in student movements there may be errors in communication, but this is still preferable to silence. Whether or not one agrees with the students’ demands, the way of protesting, or the content of some messages, the universities must remain a place of debate, political activism, interaction, and freedom of thought. This includes asking difficult and contentious questions, with no restriction other than intellectual rigour and respect for the dignity of those involved.

Another key point, underlined by Patrizia Nanz, was the administrative and financial transparency of universities. It is in the interest of academic institutions to have a comprehensive picture of their “political economy” – the networks of power and influence that they are part of. Making a university’s political economy available for discussion with students and faculty staff is a sign of openness and is vital to ensure universities do not compromise our principles when engaging with external partners³⁰. Transparency and the possibility of open dialogue are crucial aspects on this point.

Finally, we should remember that there were many universities that experienced the protests in a less conflictual manner. Places for debate, analysis, and confrontation were created, and some student requests were carefully analysed and, in some cases, accepted.

The aim of freedom and the method of reason are the crucial tools to face the challenges of modernity. The search for doubt, trial and error, the exploration of countless possibilities, and the respect of diversity and pluralism are the fundamental values that should characterize academic knowledge and the role of universities. The new generation of students who demonstrate in many parts of the world against violence and war represent an evolving protest movement which must be listened to, not repressed. The protesters are forcing everyone to turn their gaze towards the Arab-Israel conflict and a humanitarian tragedy that we can no longer ignore.

²⁹ P. Nanz, *I run a university. People like me should be backing students’ right to protest over Gaza*, in *The Guardian*, 27 May 2024.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.