



Policing the University – A Global Trend

Policiando a Universidade – Uma tendência global

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Abstract

The essay examines the increasing policing of universities and colleges and specifically the diminishing of faculty and students' right to peacefully assemble and challenge oppressive governance. I argue that we must understand the escalating presence of riot police on university grounds as part of a wider trend to prevent all forms of public protest. Thinking about policing students and scholars as constituting part of a global anti-protest trend is essential for several reasons. First, it avoids getting bogged down in detailed legal and constitutional debates about what constitutes academic freedom and what activities justify police intervention that may vary within and across national contexts. This helps overcome the state-centered approach that continues to dominate analyses of higher education and opens up new comparative and transnational perspectives and questions. Secondly, and more importantly, without considering the global context in which localized attacks on universities occur we will not fully comprehend why policing is escalating, nor develop strategies to resist far-right regimes that suppress scholars and wider societies' ability to challenge rising authoritarianism.

Keywords: academic freedom; censorship; policing; protest; antidemocracy.

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Resumo

O ensaio examina a intensificação do policiamento em universidades e faculdades, especialmente no que se refere à redução do direito de docentes e estudantes de se reunirem pacificamente e contestarem formas de governança opressiva. Sustento que é necessário compreender a presença crescente de forças policiais de choque nos campi universitários como parte de uma tendência mais ampla de prevenção a todas as formas de protesto público. Considerar a repressão a estudantes e acadêmicos como integrante de uma tendência global antiproteção é fundamental por diversas razões. Em primeiro lugar, evita que se fique preso a debates jurídicos e constitucionais minuciosos sobre o que constitui liberdade acadêmica e que tipos de atividades justificariam a intervenção policial, discussões essas que podem variar dentro e entre diferentes contextos nacionais. Isso contribui para superar a abordagem centrada no Estado que ainda domina as análises sobre o ensino superior, além de abrir novas perspectivas e questões de ordem comparativa e transnacional. Em segundo lugar — e mais importante —, sem considerar o contexto global em que se dão os ataques localizados às universidades, não será possível compreender plenamente por que a repressão está se intensificando, tampouco elaborar estratégias eficazes de resistência a regimes de extrema-direita que suprimem tanto a atuação dos acadêmicos quanto a capacidade das sociedades de enfrentar o autoritarismo crescente.

Palavras-chave: liberdade acadêmica; censura; repressão; protesto; antidemocracia.

Sumário

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1. Introduction

The 2024 wave of pro-Palestine student protests against the Israel-Gaza war, and the often-extreme response by university administrators to these protests that involved riot police, tear gas and violent altercations and arrests, should be considered a warning bell. The protests illustrate that what is happening in universities in one country is connected to campus communities in other places around the world. In the United States, over 500 student protests erupted across the country in the first half of 2024 and resulted in over 3,000 student and faculty arrests. This large-scale prosecution happened despite 97% of the demonstrations being peaceful gatherings, and the few that turned violent involving protestors fighting with intervening police officers.¹ The US protests inspired similar student demonstrations in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Mexico, Canada, Australia, Britain, India, Turkey, France, Germany, Japan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Argentina (CALLANAN, 2024). All protest groups shared concerns about the Israel-Hamas war and denounced police wielding taser guns, spraying tear gas, and in some cases firing rubber bullets into student groups and encampments. Some student groups also called attention to global structures of oppression, racism and settler colonialism. And other groups pointed to long-standing police brutality against student protests that had been happening for years prior to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war.

Riot police on campus grounds leave many people asking how has their society come to this point? Why is peaceful youthful protest, long regarded as part of campus culture, now regarded by many university leaders, alumni, donors and politicians in such radical terms, apparently justifying violence and arrest? Why didn't we see this kind of extreme response to earlier episodes of campus protest around South Africa's apartheid regime in the 1980s, the Occupy movement in the early 2010s, and more recently the global campus protests around the death of George Floyd in support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2020? Why has this set of student protests become so aggressively suppressed and made a focus of political conflict?

This essay argues that escalated policing of university communities can be understood as part of a wider global attack on academic freedom. Putting this differently, the recent crackdown on student protests regarding the Israel-Hamas war is the latest iteration of a wider trend in which faculty and students are being attacked, censored, and in some cases dismissed for daring to challenge the status quo. In recent years some countries such as Turkey, Syria, the Philippines and India have experienced extreme attacks on scholars that has led to punishment, imprisonment and even forced exile. In other countries such as the United States, Australia, Germany and Britain, the results are less extreme but nonetheless very distressing with some faculty being fired, denied tenure, and subjected to cyberbullying and online harassment. Others have had their syllabi vetted by oversight committees or boards of trustees, often resulting in widespread self-censorship and silencing in the classroom. This sensibility of being watched and monitored brings to mind Michel Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and the disciplinary power it exerts on people's behaviors and thinking: "a design of subtle coercion for a society to come" (FOUCAULT, 1991, p. 209). My general point is that despite variations in the mode of attack on scholars and students, in all countries these attacks

¹ "An analysis of 553 US campus demonstrations nationwide between 18 April and 3 May found that fewer than 20 resulted in any serious interpersonal violence or property damage, according to statistics from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Acled). Over the same period, Acled documented at least 70 instances of forceful police intervention against US campus protests, which includes the arrest of demonstrators and the use of physical dispersal tactics, including the deployment of chemical agents, batons and other kinds of physical force" (BECKETT, 2014).

have been led by far-right (and a few far-left) governments and political actors who are keen to silence any opposition to their authority to govern (DARIAN-SMITH, 2025, n.p.); SALAJAN; JULES, 2024, n.p.).

In what follows, I discuss the militarization of the university campus in the United States as an example of policing practices that have been occurring in a variety of ways around the world. I then connect the policing of university communities with the policing of wider societies and specifically discuss the anti-protest laws that are now common in many so-called democracies. Anti-protest laws seek to criminalize demonstrators protesting a range of issues that include protests over environmental degradation, nuclearization, poor labor conditions, abortion access and racial and religious discrimination. Anti-protest laws have become an essential political strategy among antidemocratic political leaders across the global south and global north. This includes US president Donald Trump in his first administration, and presumably these laws will become even more widespread in his second term. I conclude by arguing that understanding riot police on university grounds as part of a wider antidemocratic trend is essential for resisting accusations that student protestors create “hostile environments”, and for reframing peaceful academic protest as an essential feature of inclusive multiracial democratic societies.

2. Militarizing the University Campus

Today’s ramping up of armed police on US campuses is deeply entangled with the militarization of higher education over the past two decades in the wake of 9/11 and threats of global terrorism. This militarization has occurred on two interconnected fronts. First, many scholars and researchers have been funded through federal defense programs that involves work on security strategies, surveillance technology, drones, robotics, and chemical and biological munitions that help support and expand the United States’ enormous military industrial complex. What the militarization of research agendas signals is a much greater tolerance among faculty and students for a culture of violence, warfare and receptivity to propaganda about potential enemies (GIROUX, 2008, n.p.; SALTMAN; GABBARD, 2011, n.p.).

Second, the militarization of the campus has become more visible in terms of the number of campus police personnel and the equipment they carry. Many of their military-style uniforms and weapons are distributed through the 1033 federal program that transfers military surplus to law-enforcement agencies including university and college police forces. Arguably, war equipment has no place on campuses which are supposedly devoted to research and learning. But the most common item to show up in university police departments are semiautomatic rifles commonly known as M16s. Campus police often have a very menacing presence on campus, dressed in black riot gear, gloves, metal helmets and visors, and carrying long M16 rifles along with a range of firearms and batons swinging from their belts. This sense of menace is furthered by surveillance cameras and military-style equipment dotting campus grounds. There have been reports that military technology was used to monitor a graduate student strike on the University of California, Santa Cruz campus in 2019, as well as evidence of university police using AI technology and private security agencies to monitor students’ social media communications.

In 2020, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by a white police officer on the streets of Minneapolis, there was a wave of student activism in the United States and around the world demonstrating against police brutality. Studies have shown that campus police disproportionately scrutinize students of color, and that they perpetuate racial profiling and discrimination against certain sectors of the campus community. In the context of the global #BlackLivesMatter movement, many students felt it was important to divest from police security and to think about the racist roots of campus policing as well as college connections to broader issues of mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex (WATKINS, 2020, n.p.; CHASE; SURIEL, 2020, n.p.; COLE, 2021, n.p.).

Initially, many university leaders responded sympathetically to student demands related to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. However, by 2023 most student concerns had been ignored or overridden as college and university presidents increasingly turned to ramping up campus law enforcement. Much of this was justified on

the grounds of increasing hostility between student groups. Not coincidentally, the panic about violence on campus was often deliberately manufactured by the very groups calling for armed campus police departments. In the United States, and to a lesser degree in Britain, Australia and other countries, far-right groups invited extremist provocateurs and neo-fascist organizations to campus in a deliberate strategy to cause disruption and potential conflict, in turn justifying heavily armed campus police. As argued by Isaac Kamola, this strategy can be understood as part of a general backlash against higher education and promotion of public distrust in university institutions (KAMOLA, 2024, n.p.).

The MAGA Republican strategy of manufacturing a so-called “hostile environment” was explicit with the pro-Palestine student protests in 2023 and 2024 in the United States. As already mentioned, the student protests were overwhelmingly peaceful and relatively respectful. This was the case at my own university, the University of California Irvine, where about 100 students had lived in a encampment for a few weeks and participated in prayer, singing, and doing homework. The students called for the administration to waive the suspension of students involved in earlier protests as well as for the divestment of the university from all activities associated with Israel. University administrators became increasingly upset with the protestors as corporate and private donors, alumni, and community members voiced outrage over the student protest and called for the encampment to be dismantled. Unable to reach an agreement, on May 15, 2024, a university spokesperson falsely declared the protest had turned violent and ordered a campus lockdown. This in turn justified the mobilization of external police units and hundreds of officers quickly assembled on university grounds with helicopters circling overhead. As things heated up, the local mayor, Farrah Khan, put out an advisory for law enforcement “to stand down”. As she later stated, “It’s a shame that peaceful free speech protests are always responded to with violence”. She went on, “Taking space on campus or in a building is not a threat to anyone. UCI leadership must do everything they can to avoid creating a violent scenario here. These are your students w/ zero weapons” (RODRIGUEZ ET AL, 2024).

As the late afternoon wore on and onlookers dispersed, the students took to a nearby lawn to pray as riot police inched forward and finally broke up their protest line, arresting 47 people. Classes were canceled the following day and distress over events was felt intensely across the university community. Many angry faculty demanded some form of accountability from university leaders, but numerous emergency academic senate meetings had little impact. Some faculty called for a vote of no confidence in the university president. In my view the egregious authorization of riot police to enter campus grounds profoundly changed the relationship of many students and faculty with the university administration and a feeling of distrust settled in.

Undeniably, with hundreds of campus protests across the country, university leaders’ relationship with the government also profoundly changed. If leaders do not take a tough stand on pro-Palestine protests, their institutions are threatened with losing federal and state funding as well as the financial support of wealthy donors and alumni. Presumably, university leaders are concerned that they are politically vulnerable and may be personally held responsible for campus unrest. This was the case in December 2023 when the Republican-led Congress Committee on Education & The Workforce questioned university presidents from Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Pennsylvania. After a grueling 5-hours of questioning by Republican legislators, Penn’s president resigned a few days later and Harvard’s president a few weeks later amid false allegations of plagiarism. In August 2024, Nemat Shafik, president of Columbia University also abruptly resigned after appearing earlier in April before Congress and specifically naming professors she thought should be punished for their support of Palestine. This in turn caused outrage among faculty who accused her of complicity with the Republican attack on academic freedom.

Numerous commentators recognized the Republican’s apparent concern over antisemitism as a “proxy war” in their escalating attack on higher education more generally (NEW YORK TIMES, 2024). According to Dr. Offner, the president of the University of Pennsylvania’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors, “This is an anti-democratic attack unfolding, not just at Penn, but all across the country, including at public universities in Florida, in Texas, Ohio and beyond”. Offner went on to say that the University of Pennsylvania had become “ground zero of a

coordinated national assault on higher education, an assault organized by billionaires, lobbying organizations, and politicians who would like to control what can be studied and taught in the United States” (NEW YORK TIMES, 2024).

In August and September 2024, as universities and colleges returned to start the new academic year in the United States, campus leaders were faced with further potential disruptions with the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and a highly contentious presidential election in November. Many administrators had spent time over the summer tightening up their policies and rules over student free speech and what kind of protest, if any, would be allowed (NEW YORK TIMES, 2024). Some universities, such as Vanderbilt University, required incoming freshman students to attend mandatory information sessions that detailed its rules on protests. At Northwestern University, incoming students received mandatory training on antisemitism and various forms of hate speech. And among the University of California 10-campus system, UC President Michael Drake directed all ten chancellors to install policies that protests must be officially approved in advance and students cannot wear masks to conceal their identity.

Overall, there appears to be increasing reluctance by university leaders to push back against external political interference and defend either the autonomy of the university or members of their scholarly communities. In short, they don’t want to risk aggressive inquiries into their leadership and internal decision-making. These leaders’ willingness to preemptively adopt laws that limit free speech and peaceful assembly evokes what Timothy Snyder called “anticipatory obedience” to political oppression (SNYDER, 2017, n.p.). So perhaps it is not a coincidence that University of California chancellors all received – at the same time as complying with harsh rules over student protests – salary boosts near or exceeding 30%. UC President Michael Drake also got a significant 25.3% boost to bring his annual salary base to \$1.3 million. Remarkably, these salary compensations were provided by private donors who also financed the purchase of “military equipment” to UC campuses which considerably added to their inventory of pepper balls, projectile launchers and drones, all deemed necessary to “ensure public safety” (WATANABE, 2024).

3. Escalating Anti-Protest Laws

My university was one of many across the country – and around the world – that experienced riot police on campus grounds aggressively and sometimes violently arresting pro-Palestine protestors and dismantling encampments. Almost all the student protests were peaceful, though undoubtedly at some universities there was name-calling and incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia that made some students feel very uncomfortable. Of course, each campus had its own unique sequence of events and story to tell. And each university community must come to terms with what happened, and design new ways of living together given that rising antidemocracy, increasing inequality, genocidal wars and the looming climate emergency will continue to escalate tension within campus communities for the foreseeable future.

Be this as it may, what I want to underscore in this essay is that common to each protest was the university administration claiming that students had created a “hostile environment” that threatened the security of the campus, in turn justifying calling in military-styled external law enforcement. Moving forward, this manufactured hostility also justifies greater budgets for campus police units that increases personnel, equipment and surveillance technology to monitor campus communities more effectively. In the United States this is particularly disturbing because armed campus police are largely unaccountable to anyone other than a university president. University police departments hold special jurisdictional authority distinct from accountability protocols of city and state enforcement agencies. This means that campus police can treat some students differently – be it based on their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or religion – and get away with it. This was the case in the past at the University of Chicago which was well-known for its campus police incessantly targeting Black students and extending their anti-Black racism into the surrounding community (COLE, 2021, n.p.).

Today what we are seeing in the United States – and other so-called democratic countries – is the extended capacity for university administrators to “manage” university communities. This means suppressing and silencing

scholars and students speaking critically about pressing social issues that includes challenging the authority of far-right politicians to govern. Of course, each society has its own manifestations of university activism. Sometimes students build encampments and occupy lecture buildings, other times they march with banners on the streets, and still other students build broader coalitions with labor groups and leftist activists. My general point is that it is important to look past the details of each student protest and understand their aggressive political suppression as part of a larger trend of anti-protest mobilization against peaceful public assembly.

For instance, in the United States, beyond university grounds, there has been a coordinated Republican assault on limiting peoples' voting rights that has been enhanced by decisions of the Republican-led Supreme Court (ROTH, 2016, n.p.; DOUGLAS, 2024, n.p.). In addition, numerous Republican-led state legislatures introduced "anti-riot" bills in a backlash against environmental protests of the Keystone XL pipeline and the #BlackLivesMatter movement (DARIAN-SMITH, 2022, n.p.). These bills redefine what constitutes a "riot" and increase penalties for people involved in public demonstrations. Some of the laws make it illegal to protest near "critical infrastructure" such as gas and oil pipelines. Other legislation in Florida, Oklahoma and Iowa grants legal protection to drivers who hit protestors with their car. Together these legal strategies represent a well-organized attack on voting rights and the right to peacefully protest, building upon longer-term efforts to limit political demonstrations (PASSAVANT, 2021, n.p.). In effect, Republicans are intentionally narrowing the ability of everyday citizens to vote for political representatives who, among other things, seek to curb the power of the fossil fuel industry, reduce planetary warming, and defend women's right over their body. Clamping down on public conversation that critiques the status quo and challenges the authority of those in government undermines a core principle essential in the maintenance of any democratic system. But this right to peaceful assembly is being steadily eroded on and off university grounds, often without the public realizing it.

Unfortunately, the growing militarization of policing public demonstrations is not confined to the United States. With the global lean toward authoritarianism and growing political dissent among ordinary people resisting oppression, there has been a corresponding global rise in anti-protest laws. These anti-protest laws try to stop mass mobilization of people protesting on the streets and have been passed in many countries prohibiting political organizing and assembly on a wide number of issues including labor conditions, racial and gender discrimination, and the climate emergency. For instance, there has been a large uptick in criminalizing people demonstrating outside oil company headquarters or infrastructure such as gas pipelines and labelling environmental activists as "hooligans" and "eco-terrorists".

According to the Civicus Monitor (a global civil society alliance that tracks restrictions on public protests), excessive force and detentions of those marching in the streets is escalating. It found that in 2023, the right to peacefully protest, which is protected under international law, has been violated in over 75% of countries where protests took place (CIVICUS, 2023). Many antidemocratic governments are using lawfare strategies that includes the "over-criminalization" of targeted groups and activists. This entails labelling public protests as "riots" and dissenters as "terrorists" who are heavily penalized and even criminalized for their behavior. The International Center for Not For Profit Law (ICNL) works with Civicus and other global organizations to monitor laws prohibiting peaceful public protest. It notes on its website, "Since 2016, 91 countries have proposed or enacted more than 260 legal measures affecting civil society. Of these measures, 72% have been restrictive. The trend is truly global and includes laws and regulatory measures that impede the formation of civil society organizations, their ability to seek and secure resources, and the freedom to peacefully assemble" (INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW, s.d.). Disturbingly, the rise of anti-protest laws has escalated both in authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia and in more liberal democratic societies such as Britain, Australia, Germany, France, Italy and the United States (TERWINDT, 2020, n.p.; WEIS, 2022, n.p.).

4. Conclusion

Policing the university and militarizing campus life should be understood as a global trend occurring on many campuses around the world. But it is also reflective of a wider set of laws emerging across a growing number of countries limiting peaceful protest in general. Putting this differently, new rules stopping student protests are a material indicator of increasing antidemocratic governance and underscore a worldwide lean toward authoritarianism. We should all be very alarmed by this global trend given that universities are one of the last remaining sites where anti-government protest can occur – as was the case in Argentina with student protests against budget cuts to education and other services by far-right President Javier Milei in April 2024, and in Bangladesh with a student-led democratic revolution against job quotas imposed by the authoritarian government in July 2024.

The United States needs to take note of what has happened - and is happening – in other countries such as El Salvador, Turkey, Syria, Poland and Hungary, and link these countries' dismantling of their respective higher education sectors with the current dismantling of higher education under the second Trump administration. At the time of writing this essay, Linda E. McMahon had been sworn in as Secretary of Education on March 3, 2025. Trump had expressly directed her to dismantle the US Department of Education by firing career civil servants and redistributing federal authority over education to state legislatures, effectively abandoning national policies supporting public education. At the same time, Trump's administration escalated its attacks on many colleges and universities with extreme demands for government oversight over curriculum, admission processes, and the vetting of political and religious affiliations of faculty and staff. If universities fail to comply, Trump threatened with the cancelling of federal funds. The government also stepped up the revocation of international student visas under the leadership of Secretary of State Marco Rubio. These visa revocations forced students to quickly leave the country or enter complex legal proceedings. In some cases, students who had been charged with minor misdemeanors were handcuffed by immigration agents when they turned up for visa appointments. Even more shocking, some students who had been active in pro-Palestinian protests were bundled into unmarked cars and detained in custody with the plan to deport them, even though they had legal residential status and no formal charge had been made.

Against these illegal, unconstitutional and unethical practices, there was a glimmer of hope provided by Harvard University who refused to submit to Trump's demands. With the full force of its institutional wealth and prestige, it brought a legal suit against the federal administration in April 2025. This helped galvanize a more united front of resistance, marked by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) releasing "A Call for Constructive Engagement" that was quickly signed by hundreds of college and university leaders. As the document stated, "American institutions of higher learning have in common the essential freedom to determine, on academic grounds, whom to admit and what is taught, how, and by whom. Our colleges and universities share a commitment to serve as centers of open inquiry where, in their pursuit of truth, faculty, students, and staff are free to exchange ideas and opinions across a full range of viewpoints without fear of retribution, censorship, or deportation." How this legal resistance to the aggressive attack on higher education will play out is not certain, but the future of hundreds of thousands of students, faculty and staff is on the line. In short, Harvard's lawsuit and the signing by many university leaders to the open letter provided some hope. More importantly, this mobilization by university leaders offered a moment of reflection about the importance of science and research for the general well-being of society.

Defending the university as a space free from policing, censorship and political interference, where ideas can be explored and challenged in an atmosphere of respect and professionalism, lies at the core of thriving democracy societies. Unfortunately, with widening inequalities among and between countries around the world and many millions of people being forced to focus on the basics of survival – jobs, food, housing, healthcare – what happens to higher

education is seen as increasingly irrelevant. The university system is often associated with elitism and being disengaged from everyday people's needs and desires. Overcoming this perception and communicating that universities and academic freedom are essential to everyone's best interests, whatever one's class, race, religion, gender or level of education, are the urgent and enormous challenges before us.

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