

FROM THE ENCAMPMENTS: STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON PROTESTS FOR PALESTINE

COLUMBIA LAW STUDENTS FOR PALESTINE, CUNY LAW STUDENTS AGAINST GENOCIDE

Columbia Law Students for Palestine (CLSP) is a student group working to raise awareness of the legal issues that Palestinians face.

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Earlier this week, with more than 150 Gaza solidarity encampments [popping up throughout the country](#), the national news media speculated that the protests were the result of students [not having enough sex](#), the [loss of college community](#), republican lawmakers [taking advantage of a wedge issue](#), students activists operating as [proxy groups for Iran](#), and students finally releasing [their long-withheld rage](#) from Covid shutdowns. Lost in this coverage were the protestors' demands, or how they relate to the ongoing assault on Gaza.

To help correct the record, the LPE Blog reached out to law students involved with the protests at Columbia, CUNY, NYU, and Yale and offered them the opportunity to explain the aims of the encampments, highlight the centrality of the issues to the [Law and Political Economy movement](#), share their perspectives on what has unfolded over past two weeks, and analyze the obstinate and frequently brutal responses by their universities. Most of these reflections arrived just prior to Tuesday night's police crackdown across New York City.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

COLUMBIA LAW STUDENTS FOR PALESTINE

At first glance, Minouche Shafik's appointment to the presidency of Columbia University is a bit odd. While Shafik came to Columbia from the London School of Economics, her [career prior to that](#) had mostly been with institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and other economic development agencies, institutions that have become synonymous with austerity and an imperialist agenda to restructure formerly colonized nations in the image of Western "democracies." Upon further reflection, however, what background could provide better preparation for her current position. As [others have suggested](#), Columbia and most other American universities are less educational institutions than [real estate holding companies](#) and [sources of capital for hedge funds and portfolio managers](#). A portfolio manager like Shafik need not concern herself with academic freedom, the well-being of faculty and staff, the [thousands displaced directly and indirectly](#) by Columbia's voracious appetite for real estate, or the hiked rents for which Columbia is responsible. This is only one tendril of the imperial project that Columbia — and other US universities — are engaged in: profiteering off of displacement, violence, and particularly in the case of Palestine, settler-colonialism and genocide.

Since April 17, 2024, Columbia students in Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) have occupied one lawn or the other on the Morningside Heights campus. Even after Shafik suspended more than one hundred students and called in the NYPD to arrest students for trespassing, the students remain undeterred. They continue to occupy the other lawn and have begun negotiating with the University, demanding nothing short of Columbia's complete divestment from the genocide in Palestine and the Israeli settler state. Columbia holds investments in numerous companies that facilitate Israeli displacement and settlement in the West Bank, Golan Heights, and now, Gaza, including Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, and Airbnb. As a result, Columbia funds both genocide and settlement, facilitating violations of international law and contravening any reasonable sense of morality. No doubt, Columbia holds even more in companies facilitating the Israeli settler project, but Columbia has maintained a unique opacity regarding its holdings, [with 99.4% of its holdings undisclosed](#). Columbia has also begun the process of opening a "Global Center" in Tel Aviv, an outpost of the University that most Palestinian affiliates of Columbia would be unable to enter, [in violation of Title VI](#).

CUAD is part of a vivid tradition of student divestment activism at Columbia. In 1985, Columbia was the [first school to divest from South African apartheid](#) in response to a three-week-long student blockade of the university's administrative building, and in 2015, student activists succeeded in pushing Columbia to become the first university to [divest from private prison companies](#).

Most prominently, however, CUAD activists view their project as a continuation of the work of students protesting the Vietnam War at Columbia in 1968. Students involved in the '68 protests vigorously investigated the university's secretive affiliation with the [Institute for Defense Analysis](#)

(IDA), which connected research universities to government intelligence and defense agencies. The culmination of their research was a pamphlet entitled "[Who Rules Columbia?](#)," which exposed the university's connections to imperial expansion at home and abroad. In addition to publicizing the ties between Columbia's board of trustees and the military-industrial complex, the '68 student activists narrativized how trustees appeared to use their position on the board to further their own economic interests, including through expanding Columbia's real estate holdings in Morningside Heights and the broader Harlem area.

Over fifty years later (and following additional major expansions into Harlem, including the [Manhattanville project](#)), CUAD protesters continue to link their demands against the university's persistent profiteering off of U.S. military imperialism and its gentrification of the surrounding community. The question framed by the '68 activists — *who rules Columbia?* — continues to resonate with CUAD protesters today, who ultimately seek to regain student control over the university from corporate interests and empire.

The students are not only making demands; they also bear gifts. They are both generously offering Columbia an alternative divestment agenda—one less bloodied by settler colonialism, genocide, imperialism, and state violence—and modeling alternative social and institutional structures. Within the encampment's autonomous zone, students are intentional and vigilant about community care. When over a hundred students were forcibly separated from their comrades by university sanctions and suspensions, the collective [held Shabbat service through external gates](#) of the now-closed campus. The voices of students banned from their campus blended with those continuing resistance efforts inside and flowed freely across the barriers as they sang hymns in unison. When internal conflict presents itself, the collective practices de-escalation and community-based resolution. They engage in ongoing political education by hosting teach-ins, and they [amplify one another's voices](#) using tactics cultivated by activists who came before them. Across cultures and religions, they protect one another. During Jumma last Friday, [students used blankets to form a protective perimeter](#) around those in prayer to preserve their privacy and shield them from the prying, Islamophobic eyes of the public. Through this project of resistance and cooperation, students are modeling deep solidarity under precarious conditions, in defiance of colossal state and institutional power.

In the last several days, activists have taken over Hamilton Hall, following in the footsteps of the 1968 protestors and the 1985 anti-apartheid protests. And as the 1985 protestors did in their own apartheid protests (rechristening the building Mandela Hall), the protestors have [renamed the building Hind's Hall](#), after a six year old killed during the ongoing genocide. Three weeks after the creation of Mandela Hall, [Columbia divested from apartheid](#); as students for a free Palestine, we have no doubt that student power will rule the day again, and Columbia will be forced to divest from Israel and its apartheid regime.

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

CUNY LAW STUDENTS AGAINST GENOCIDE

CUNY YOUR HANDS ARE RED, OVER 40,000 DEAD

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In the early morning hours of Thursday, April 25, as CUNY students, faculty, and alumni raised the Palestinian flag at the center of City College (CCNY) in Harlem, Israeli military [bombed Rafah](#), in the South of Gaza, in Palestine.

The precision-guided missiles manufactured and [supplied by the United States](#), which Israel aimed at the homes of three families that morning, killed six Palestinians, including one journalist. Those six martyrs joined the [34,305 Palestinians](#)—men, women, children, newborns, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors and friends, teachers and their students—whose lives have been taken by the Israeli state, in the most recent escalation of the genocide against the Palestinian people.

Amid the systematic destruction [of every single university and institute of higher education](#) in the Gaza Strip, the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at CCNY transformed a university system battered by [administrative repression](#) into a student-led autonomous space for political education, organizing, and community care. CCNY was chosen because of its revolutionary history as a site of [the 1969 student protests](#) where more than 200 Black and Puerto Rican students de-occupied campus buildings, shutting down campus operations for 17 days.

As students of one of the largest working-class, Black and Brown public urban university systems in the country, we join our fellow students, faculty, alumni, and community members in struggle. Echoing the original five demands made by CUNY students in 1969, we demand the following:

- Disclose & Divest: CUNY's immediate and total divestment from companies which aid in Israeli colonization and war crimes. Ensure accountability by publishing annual reports of CUNY's investments and contracts.
- Academic Boycott: Ban all academic trips to "Israel" (occupied Palestine) and relationships with Israeli universities, encompassing birthright, Fulbright, and prospective trips.
- Solidarity with the Palestine liberation struggle: Protect CUNY Students & Workers for expressing solidarity with the Palestine Liberation Struggle.
- Demilitarize CUNY, Demilitarize Harlem: Get IOF and NYPD officers off all CUNY campuses and end all collaboration, trainings and recruitment by imperialist institutions, including the CIA, Homeland Security and ROTC. Remove all symbols of US imperialism from our campuses: Rename the Colin Powell School of Global and Civic Leadership at CCNY and reinstate The Guillermo Morales and Assata Shakur Community and Student Center!

- A People's CUNY: CUNY was free and fully funded for over 125 years. There is plenty of wealth in New York that could be taxed and redirected to make CUNY fully open and free for all.

These demands are not requests. They are mandates. We will not stop until they are met.

We write this at a critical moment. Last night, on April 30, hundreds of militarized NYPD—brought in at the request of CCNY administration—stormed the physical encampment and [tore down the Palestinian flag](#). An estimated [173 people](#) were arrested and brutally assaulted both inside the CCNY campus and its surrounding streets in Harlem. Yet, despite this new escalation in physical repression by state actors, we will not be intimidated into silence. Our organizing for Palestinian liberation and an end to this genocide will not stop until we are all free.

¡VIVA VIVA PALESTINA!

FREE PALESTINE!

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ANONYMOUS NYU 2L

In what is by now a familiar cycle of media coverage of protests in the US, the spectacle of the State's repression has overshadowed the actual demands made by protestors themselves. As [videos circulate of police crackdowns on student encampments](#), the news discussion surrounding current events has largely just integrated them into traditional coverage of the Palestinian genocide, with some additional [First Amendment flair thrown in](#). Lost is the distinct *goal* of the protests themselves. In fact, if your only connection to the protests was reading about them through news coverage, you might be under the assumption they have no purpose beyond communicating opposition to Israeli occupation.

In reality, nearly every student encampment has set out [demands tailored to their campus](#). Yet common and central to each of these groups' demands is divestment – that is, demanding their university withdraw its investments in companies that either do business with Israel or materially provide support for the occupation. Universities in the United States are *massive* financial institutions, who invest *billions* in assets to provide revenue. How big of a player are Universities in the world of finance? Columbia University's endowment [totaled \\$13.6 billion last year alone](#). Where does the money go? It goes into traditional investment portfolios meant to maximize returns; included in these portfolios are weapons manufacturers like Lockheed Martin and Raytheon. Some Universities have [as much as \\$52.5 million invested in weapons manufacturing alone](#).

In targeting universities for divestment, student protests across the country are not about citizens exercising their First Amendment rights, nor are they a mere ideological struggle over a conflict the students themselves are divorced from; student encampments target institutions ostensibly accountable to them, in a way that aims to prevent their material support for the occupation. The ties between a university campus and the violence propagated by capital investment are close and tangible. Not only do universities pour billions of dollars into the companies providing the material means of Israeli occupation, but figures within those companies find themselves looped back into the university's administration. For example, Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock, [sits as an officer of the Board of Trustees for NYU](#), a university which violently swept its campuses own encampment demanding divestment from the company he heads.

The connections between university administration and finance capital certainly provide ample material for a political economic analysis. We can see how these relationships inform the increasingly violent response of universities against their students who now present tangible, economic demands. The current moment has opened an important discussion into the very role universities play – why *should* a higher education institution have billions to throw around, and for what good reason is it directed towards building capital and [gobbling up private land](#)?

To these thoughts we say: it is an important conversation, but one for later. The current moment demands that our attention and efforts remain directed towards Palestinian liberation. Letting coverage of student protests center the spectacle over the substance is counterproductive. Our demand is divestment, but divestment is a means towards an end, not the end in itself. Activate yourself and organize to meet the current moment. No one is free until all of us are.

ANONYMOUS NYU 1L

I first cut my teeth in endowment organizing as an 18-year-old at Yale College, as part of the Fossil Free Yale movement. Researching the university's endowment during my free hours, I would learn that Yale had millions of dollars shoved away in a bunch of incredibly unsavory, hidden places—fossil fuel, private prisons, Lockheed Martin, the opioid crisis. These investments paid for the literal castles in which we lived, walled off from the rest of the majority working class, majority person of color New Haven community. And because it was an educational institution, the university didn't pay tax on its money, meaning that none of the capital acquired was returned to the community it was located in.

I am now a student at NYU Law. Law schools, compared to most undergraduate institutions, are much more overtly extractive. My classmates—and I—are almost entirely debt financed. In order to pay off their debts, many of us will go on to sue the EPA for adopting sensible environmental regulations, while defending corporations for spilling oil into poor Black communities or profiting from child slavery in third world countries. It's a sobering reminder that our role in this world is to continue to create surplus value and maximize profits for those who own the means of production.

The longer I have spent attending and looking into private universities, the less convinced I have become that they are anything but a front for tax-free investing, which grants degrees and supports research on the side. They masquerade as places of education, free expression, and learning, but highlight their returns on investment above all else, ever expanding their endowment and real estate holdings. I write about my experiences because universities' profit-maximizing investment role works best when hidden in the shadows, when no one knows where the money goes or what it does.

Critics will tell me that university endowments are a good thing, that there is nothing wrong with having a lot of money so you can attract the best teachers or create a nice student lounge. But the demands of us Pro-Palestine organizers, like my classmates before in prison divest and fossil free divestment, aren't in conflict with wanting the university to have resources. We simply don't want those resources to come at the expense of death and destruction in Gaza. We physically locate ourselves on the campus to disrupt the status quo, visible so individuals can't go through the day without remembering that there is genocide of individuals with our tuition money. Investment into weapons is a conscious choice, and the university can always choose to divest.

The only question for universities now is—why are our universities are so afraid of divesting? What is stopping them?

YALE UNIVERSITY

FOUR ANONYMOUS YLS STUDENTS

Shortly after sunrise on Monday, April 22, on orders from Yale President Peter Salovey, Yale police arrested nearly fifty students and New Haven community members at an encampment built to protest the [university's complicity in the Israeli genocide in Gaza](#), which has killed over 34,000 Palestinians, including over 14,000 children. Protestors had peacefully occupied the campus's Beinecke Plaza since April 19, where they maintained mutual aid stations with food, water, blankets, and medical supplies; hosted live music, art-making, and prayers; and provided free education through teach-ins and a donated popular library. All efforts supported the protestors' demands that Yale disclose its investment portfolio, divest from military weapons manufacturing, and reinvest those resources in the New Haven community.

Yale's attempt to silence its students through arrests and the destruction of the first encampment backfired. Hundreds of students, faculty, and New Haven residents arrived in support of the arrested protestors that morning and maintained a day-long [occupation of a major intersection](#) to protest Yale's actions. On Saturday, April 28, a [second, larger encampment](#) arose on Yale's main Cross Campus quad, as Occupy Beinecke grew and transformed into "[Occupy Yale](#)."

In this brief reflection, we offer a view from the Yale encampment: contextualizing its demands, explaining why Yale is so afraid of them, and underscoring why the continued focus of these campus protests must be on Gaza.

Occupy Yale remains committed to three central demands: that Yale Corporation disclose its investments; divest from weapons manufacturers; and reinvest in affordable housing, education, and food security in New Haven.

The third demand – for reinvestment in New Haven – is all the more significant in light of the administration’s racist and classist tactics in clearing the encampments. President Salovey [justified the arrests](#) in the name of “campus safety” jeopardized by “harmful acts” and “threatening language” from Yale affiliates as well as “outsiders.” And when New Haven residents arrived to support arrested students, Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis echoed the president’s racist, classist tropes about “outsiders” in an [April 22 email](#) that blamed the intersection occupation on “dangerous” “non-Yale protestors with a known history of violent confrontation” – [false claims](#) that he would later be forced to [retract](#).

How should we understand Yale’s decision to respond to these demands by threatening and arresting its own students rather than engaging in dialogue pursuant to its own commitments to [“compassion and civility”](#) and [free expression](#)? Consistent with the well-documented campus [“Palestine exception to free speech,”](#) this outcome is best explained by the university’s location within a network of private and public institutions ideologically opposed to Palestine solidarity – one that mobilizes a playbook of tactics to silence it. These tactics include official denunciation, threats of donation withdrawals, Title VI complaints that jeopardize federal funding, and more. The [Yale Board of Trustees](#) currently includes six corporate executives and directors, five financiers, and three university presidents. It surprises no one that such a board would refuse to have a substantive, public conversation about war profiteering.

Yale’s response also highlights the extractive, hierarchical social relations that define the university’s relationship to racialized communities near and far. Only an analysis attentive to race and class can explain why Yale opts to criminalize the presence of non-affiliate protestors on its campus while it stands as [one of the city’s largest landholders and employs an armed police force with city-wide jurisdiction](#).

In turn, the same kind of analysis can explain why Yale refuses to divest from the ongoing genocide in Gaza. On April 17, Yale’s Advisory Committee on Investor Responsibility (ACIR) [announced](#) that it would not recommend divestment from military weapons manufacturers to the Trustees because it did not deem this industry to “meet the threshold of grave social injury, a prerequisite for divestment.” The ACIR explained that military weapons manufacturing supported “socially necessary uses, such as law enforcement and national security.” This decision – which refuses to recognize the killing of 34,000 Palestinians as “grave social injury” – makes explicit Yale’s current position within social and economic networks strongly tethered to militaristic, carceral, and capitalist forms of domination and control.

Scores of Yale students, however, do not share their university's commitment to material extraction, even as they realize how they benefit from it. Students demanding divestment adapted one of the university's mantras, "It's Your Yale," into "[It's Your Yale. They're Your Bombs.](#)" to emphasize the material stake in genocide that they seek to end. Many of these students come from racialized and working-class backgrounds and choose to express solidarity with those oppressed by their institution, from New Haven to Palestine.

Most importantly, Occupy Yale sees its platform as a conduit to direct attention to the place suffering the brunt of the destruction caused by Yale's investments: Gaza. The assault on Gaza recently passed its 200-day mark. Each day brings more death and more news of atrocities by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians. Last week, the United Nations reported the discovery of [hundreds of bodies, including the elderly, women, and wounded, buried in mass graves](#) in hospitals in Khan Younis and Gaza City. Palestinian authorities [report](#) that many bodies were found naked and with their hands tied. The Israeli military has [destroyed every university in Gaza, imprisoned thousands of Palestinians, used starvation as a war tactic, and massacred civilians seeking humanitarian aid](#). According to UNICEF, severe malnutrition is rampant in Gaza, and many children do not ["even have the energy to cry."](#) And, throughout the past six months, Israel's mass slaughter of the Palestinian people has been live-streamed and shared with millions around the world.

No longer can anyone deny the reality of the [unimaginable human devastation](#) perpetrated by Israel in Gaza. Yale's efforts to threaten protestors into silence over its material investment in these atrocities only further motivate its students to demand divestment. When students link arms with faculty, New Haven residents, encampments nationwide united under the vision of the ["Popular University for Gaza,"](#) and in ultimate solidarity with Palestinians, they make possible a different kind of university that leaves the current administration and Trustees behind – to their great fear.

At sunrise on April 30, over 100 Yale and New Haven police [surrounded](#) the second encampment and threatened mass arrest and emergency suspension of those who remained. The second encampment was cleared after President Salovey warned protestors that ["civil disobedience...comes with consequences."](#) Regardless of its location, Occupy Yale remains on campus, steadfast in its demands, because it refuses to turn its back on Gaza.

TWO ANONYMOUS GRADUATE STUDENTS

As Pro-Palestinian student encampments continue to [spread across college campuses](#) in the United States, critics are quick to paint these acts of protest as self-indulgent or, at best, misguided. Yale and Columbia, after all, are thousands of miles from Gaza, possess no airborne divisions, and have no direct say over how Israel prosecutes its genocide. This response, though common, is deeply mistaken, as the core demands of the protests—demands to 'disclose,' 'divest,' and 're-invest'—reveal the interconnected global and local scales of resistance against an increasingly transnational military-industrial complex.

Israel's militarism is dependent on foreign, particularly American, arms manufacturing and supply. Combatting the transnationalism of the military-industrial complex requires transnational resistance, making universities across the US ideal sites of intervention given their sizable endowments and public prominence. The fact that universities are implicated within a wider capitalist framework is not new. Indeed, universities have been exposed for reproducing racialized capitalism through [staff precarity](#) and increasing privatization, [gentrification](#) within local communities and [funding wars and genocide](#) with their endowments. Often, these same universities function as [sites of knowledge production](#) facilitating settler colonialism. Student encampments, therefore, respond to these intersecting forms of oppression by urging universities to divest from its material and epistemic, its local and global complicity in funding and supporting the genocide in Gaza.

[At Yale](#), student activists position the university as complicit in a "double occupation," demanding divestment from both Yale's involvement in "Israel's genocide in Gaza" and its continued encroachment and accumulation of property within the city of New Haven itself. As agents of a "double occupation," educational institutions are entangled in varied forms of extraction, exploitation, and racialization that affect a global and local racialized working class. Activists have made this link through their [calls to action](#), demanding the university first *divest* and then *re-invest* in affordable housing, food security, and education in New Haven.

What happens if we take seriously these calls for re-investment? What restorative and transformative forms of justice emerge in student demands? How does local and global resistance interact and intersect? We suggest that the demands of Occupy Yale should be seen as an attempt to frame local and global struggles against racial capitalism as fundamentally interconnected. In doing so, the demands to 'disclose,' 'divest,' and 'reinvest' reflect how strategies of resistance link geographically distributed movements with shared calls for justice. [One placard](#) at the Yale encampment reads, "Divest from Genocide and War Profiteering, Reinvest in New Haven." It specifies, "instead of investing in the displacement of millions from their homes across Palestine, we demand Yale reinvest in affordable housing." Student encampments position Yale as an "occupying force" that is both actively complicit in the military occupation of Palestine through arms manufacturing and the economic occupation of New Haven. Critically, they link the eviction of working-class communities through [systemic gentrification](#) and [tax evasion](#) to the brutal military occupation of Palestine through Yale's financing and profiteering from arms manufacturing. By recognizing these struggles as inseparable, activists reveal the importance of [translocal connections](#) to global solidarity.

Place-based struggles, embedded in local concerns, are often symptomatic of globalized systems of racism, coloniality, and capitalist extraction. Occupy Yale foregrounds the inseparability of capitalism, race, and imperialism. In these actions, we hear the echoes of a longer tradition of resistance against racial capitalism linked to Black Marxist thought developed by thinkers like [C.L.R James](#) and [Cedric Robinson](#). Occupy Yale is one example of these interconnected dynamics of resistance and solidarity, belonging to a longer history of translocal activism present in anti-colonial, abolitionist, and anti-capitalist movements. It speaks to the

underlying truth of a popular campaign slogan frequently used by student protestors: “none of us are free until all of us are free.”