

The University, Too, Must Be Destroyed

Identifying Antagonists in a World of Genocide

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What Time is it?

It is late April, 2024. The current phase of the Israeli genocide against the Palestinian people continues for the seventh month, uninterrupted. In an effort to push against the way this genocide has become ambient to daily life for many in the so-called United States, students at Columbia University occupied part of campus to build a “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” on April 17th. The following day the NYPD arrested more than 100 demonstrators in a massive sweep of the encampment. This prompted dozens of encampments to be built at universities across the country. Over the last week many of these encampments, too, have faced considerable repression yet many still remain.

These encampments have spurred a resurgence of energy among many radicals who has been seeking (and acting upon) points of intervention in the death machines making this specific genocide (as well as the world of genocide as a whole) possible. However, with a few notable exceptions (shoutout to the folks holding it down at Cal Poly Humboldt) many of these encampments struggle (if not outright refuse) to break with the frameworks of making demands of their respective universities and centering “the student” as *the* legitimate political actor in these negotiations. This signifies a failure to recognize the university in its entirety as an antagonist as integral to the violence of this world of genocide as the police, the prisons, and the borders. A failure of recognizing the stakes of our moment and the action necessary to actually intervene against genocide follows closely behind.

So, I write here, to make as explicit as possible: If we desire an end to this world of genocide (both its specific manifestations and the ability for those manifestations to arise) the university, too, must be destroyed.

The University and the Reproduction of Daily Life

At their core, every university in the so-called U.S. is part of the reproduction of daily life in this country. The primary function of the university is to create the next generation of the managerial class, to deputize the next in line to wield the hedge funds, oil drills, and missile silos all while laundering the myth of a meritocratic society where anyone can leave economic precarity for comfort if they simply dedicate themselves to study and craft. In this way the university sells the possibility of future comfort at the cost of participating in the genocidal and ecocidal death march of the status quo, maintaining the sanctity of the capitalist mode of production (of work) in the process.

While selling this (often illusory) possibility of future economic comfort, the university also serves as landlord and debt collector, adding to the economic precarity for many within its confines, making its illusory promise all the more enticing. At the same time the university fills the role of gentrifier and evictor for all those unlucky enough to have been born near a campus without institutional connection.

In its primary function, the university continually serves the reproduction of the relations of racial capitalism, settler-colonialism, and every other oppressive force that follows (anti-blackness, ableism, cisheteropatriarchy, etc.). This is to make no mention of how often the research conducted within, say, departments under the STEM umbrella explicitly expands the militaristic and surveillance capabilities of the state or how the prevalence of ROTC programs

encourage students to become the foot soldiers of empire. The university is not some neutral entity that is simply misguided by “bad actors” in the administration leading it to make “bad decisions” (such as investing in the apartheid regime of Israel).

There is no ending the regime of racial capital without attacking, undermining, and ending the systems that help to reproduce that regime. There is no way to end this world of death machines without breaking with daily life as we currently live it. There is no way to end the world of genocide without ending the institution of the university.

Unsettling the Legitimacy of “The Student”

Whenever action is taken that even remotely threatens to disrupt campus life-as-usual university administrations will immediately seek ways to delegitimize that action through defining particular people as having legitimacy to speak or act within the campus confines. The most effective method of this delegitimization is the invocation of “the student,” the university amalgamation of “the citizen” and “the consumer.” The “student” is a specter that posits an idealized (in the eyes of civil society and campus administration), member of the campus community as the pinnacle of who has the “right” to speak on campus affairs.

Sensing their moment has come, the wannabe managers of the death machines emerge to support the administration by claiming the mantle of “the student” for themselves, placing themselves in opposition to those “outsiders” from beyond the campus confines. These willing collaborators often speak out of both sides of their mouth, “radical” posturing mixing with justification for acquiescing to admin requests/demands, selling out those who desire genuine antagonism with the university and clearly delineating who is deserving of support when the hammer of repression comes down.

In the current moment of campus encampments and occupations as part of escalatory action in support of the Palestinian people we have already seen administrations find success with this tactic of appealing to the legitimacy of “the student.” Organizers of the encampment at Brown University capitulated to administration pressure and declared that only students could participate in the encampment. Rumor has spread that similar possibilities look likely at Columbia University following waves of repression against the encampment there.

A trend has emerged in the cycle of establishment, repression, and re-establishment of some of these solidarity encampments: the most militant elements of the encampments are the most likely to face repression because they are the most likely to insist on defending (or expanding) the encampments rather than acquiescing to university threats. This repression often means the physical removal of these militants from campus (be they student or otherwise). In these militants’ absence, the more liberal members of the encampments are free to assert their managerial desires over that space and limit their insurrectionary potential by invoking “the student” as the legitimate actor (with the intention of recentering themselves and their comfort in the question of tactic), except this time “the student” also often excludes those now-facing-repression militant students as the repression they face typically involves some suspension from campus.

In light of this trend, and the broader “student as preferential class” ideology it bears explicit statement: students do not have providential claim to the space currently captured by the university apparatus, certainly not in the context of institutions existing on stolen land whose infrastructure was often built via enslaved labor. Through its role in the reproduction of the hell

around us, the university is a participant in the enforced suffering of so many beyond its walls. For all who oppose and wish to end this reproduction of suffering, the university is theirs to strike against, to undermine, to abolish and destroy so thoroughly that something else may finally be able to grow in its place.

If we wish to end this world of death machines we must refuse the distinction of student vs non-student in the context of action on/against universities.

Beyond Encampments: Striking the Death Blow

If we can get on the same page about the necessity of refusing the distinction of student vs non-student in the context of actions of resistance on/against universities we can look towards what action is actually required to destroy these institutions as we know them.

The university cannot cede the only demand worth making, that it cease to exist. And so, there is no use in making demands of the university. If you make your desired world clear in your acts, and if your acts have teeth, the university will scramble to find the nearest person they can claim to be a representative of the relevant “affected community” and attempt to make some symbolic gesture of repair. But we are not interested in symbol and we are not interested in repair. We are here to destroy the institutions of our suffering.

In that vein, our actions must be to halt the functioning of the university, to cease its ability to participate in the reproduction of the world around us, the world of genocide and death machines of all sorts. We take these actions not to gain leverage (though they will also do that) but because we wish to choke this institution to death.

Any building in which classes are taught, administrative duties are carried out, data is stored, or research conducted are viable chokepoints for occupation. Establish barricades, expropriate materials and infrastructure for your own purposes. Let these spaces of occupation serve as staging areas for bigger and bolder actions to come.

The infrastructure of campus police can be attacked, proactively, not only as a defensive measure against police encroachment on encampments or occupations. The best defense is a good offense and by keeping the police on the backfoot you make them less capable of overpowering occupations for fear of stretching themselves too thin.

Equipment and resources can be liberated and shared with the those outside of the campus walls who may have use for them. Every printer can be weapon in the war of information.

Every paint can a weapon in the war over public space. Every brick can build a barricade or fend of an oncoming police assault. Every item in a university’s possession can be turned against it and against the world it helps to reproduce.

The key aspect in all of this: the university is a target we mark for destruction (not for capture) as much as any precinct, prison, bank office, or border wall. We must grow more capable of recognizing the totality of the death machines around us, grow more nimble in our ability to identify worthwhile points of intervention, grow more bold in our willingness to strike, and ultimately grow hungrier in our desire to be rid of this world of death.

Genocide is all around us, we must look ourselves in the mirror and ask whether or not we’re willing to act in accordance with a desire to change that fact. The university is but one of a thousand worthwhile antagonists against which we must strike, but there is real energy in, and emanating from, the ongoing encampments and occupations at universities. With the ghost of

the 2020 uprising haunting me each and every day, I need this summer to be one of a heat so unbearable that there is nothing to do but burn. I hope that this energy can be a spark for that heat, and that the universities surrounding that energy may be the kindling.

It all goes, or it all stays the same. So get going.

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