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A Professor on ‘Authorities’ Who Order Police to Crush Student Protests



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The Washington Post’s journalists recently exposed what many already suspected or knew. Donors from society’s richest 1 percent pressured university administrators and political leaders to use police and other means to crush peaceful student protests. The students wanted a change in United States and Israeli policy and action to secure an immediate ceasefire in

Gaza. Growing numbers of faculty are joining the students' protests. They too have been unjustly persecuted by the same "authorities."

Of course, the lawful role U.S. police are supposed to play is quite different. As "peacekeepers" police should act to make it safe for any and all sides of disputes over U.S. foreign (or domestic) policies to engage in free speech. When university leaders collaborate with police to shut down free speech, both abuse their power. Students around the world have confronted those abuses as have U.S. students in the past. Our students now confront them yet again.

As a professor myself, I am embarrassed when university administrators justify calling in the police to "remove" students from university "private property" (such as lawns). They argue as if real estate concerns outweighed the education and public importance entailed by peaceful student protests on urgent, life-and-death public issues of the day. Real estate justifications also reveal university administrators' ignorance. Huge tax exemptions subsidize private universities in the United States with public money. They get expensive public services delivered to them gratis. The rest of the U.S. public pays the taxes that fund those public services. Likewise, massive government grants support general university purposes (added on to grants for specific academic research projects) for both "private" and public institutions. To significant degrees, **all** colleges and universities are **publicly funded** institutions. They are thus perfectly appropriate locations for **public** expressions of opinion about important **public** issues. University administrators try to hide slavish pandering to rich donors when they try fake "private property" excuses for calling the police on students. Punishing students seeking peace in Gaza brings deep and lasting shame on the universities who do that.

The same applies to all those authorities who use the old "violence" ploy to cover their pandering. They pose as driven to prevent or end mostly unreal campus violence. Meanwhile, these same authorities mostly support real, infinitely worse violence in Ukraine and Gaza. In contrast, student protestors *for peace in Gaza* have every reason to avoid campus violence precisely because it risks dissuading some other students from joining them. Enemies of the protest try to associate it with violence precisely to constrain the protests' growth. Years ago, university administrators, police, and politicians likewise wildly exaggerated the minimal violence they blamed on anti-Vietnam war protesters. Unlike those authorities, those protesters actually helped end that war and its horrific violence.

Protests disrupt "business as usual" to open time and space for public discussion and action around an urgent public issue. That is why workers strike, marchers crowd streets for the

rights of minorities and women, and vigils for peace gather at traffic intersections. In recent years, millions of French people wearing yellow vests shut down France to ask for social changes. In the spring of 2024, general strikers similarly shut down Argentina. Protesters explain why they want change. Their protests ask others to engage with the question of change.

Protests also attest to a society's social health: its ability to overcome the resignation, reticence, and fear that too often prevent or delay social problems from getting public attention. The absence of protest often drives urgent social problems underground. There they fester and eventually burst forth more disruptively than earlier protests would have been. Let protesters make their points. If counter-protesters wish, let them do likewise with their points. That is what "free speech" means. When the "authorities" in power fear the criticism, questions, and demands of the people they control, almost any public protests quickly become intolerably frightening to them. Their control is challenged and they react in ways that undercut their empty claims to be "democratic." We all have a right and duty to affirm genuine free speech.

The larger world is changing. The horrors in Gaza, the forming of a new, powerful student movement critical of U.S. foreign policy, and undemocratic efforts to stop free speech all flow from global changes. Our world is now fast becoming very different from what it was for most of our parents' lives. Just as the British empire rose, peaked, and then fell, the American empire that followed it rose, peaked, and is now declining. Americans are only beginning to grasp that reality as denying it remains the majority's position. Each of us confronts the changes in the world based on our own histories. Therefore, before drawing conclusions about Gaza and the student protests, I need to explain where I am coming from, my family's history, and how it contextualizes my engagement with a changed and changing world.

My mother and her sister were both incarcerated in concentration camps in the late 1930s (my aunt in a German camp, my mother in a French camp). Their parents (my grandparents) were killed in a different German concentration camp. My mother was born and raised in Berlin, Germany, and attended the University of Berlin until she fled Germany in 1936. My father, born in Metz (a disputed French/German city on the border), attended several German and Swiss universities, became a lawyer and eventually a judge in Germany before leaving for France in 1933. His sister was picked up by the Gestapo in Paris in the late 1930s and later killed in Auschwitz. Many other family members died in ways linked to fascism and/or

World War II. All those who “survived” suffered severe traumas, often aggravations of other traumas they had suffered earlier in their lives.

My parents, beyond surviving, additionally underwent the refugee experience in the United States. The English language and U.S. customs were largely unknown to them. They had no money. Their European professional credentials were not honored in the United States. When I was born, my father was a steel worker in a Youngstown, Ohio, factory, and my mother was a “homemaker” in that period’s words. As the first child of refugee “survivors” of multiple traumas, I was heavily pressured to “succeed” in the new country. My unspoken task was somehow to compensate for all the losses and injuries my parents always carried with them everywhere. I also listened closely to the snippets of information about fascism, Europe, World War II, and contemporary history that emerged from countless conversations in and around my family. This is the background for how I “relate” to the events in Israel, Gaza, and the United States over recent decades, especially since last October. “Relate” here includes confronting today’s student protests, their attempted repression, and writing this article.

The uniform premise of discussions of fascism, war, and related subjects within my family was that they all represented the most recent of a long list of human tragedies across history. They could have happened anywhere and probably did. And they could happen and probably would happen again anywhere. Perhaps *the best that we could reasonably hope for* was that some sort of political action we might undertake now could reduce the probability, frequency, or horrors of future tragedies.

For me, that meant I should seek to understand how societies work, act to change them, and thereby contribute to achieving *the best that could reasonably be hoped for*. Notions that **any** nation or region was uniquely prone to or immune from becoming Nazis were not taken seriously. Germany was in no way uniquely prone to nazification. Likewise, “denazification laws,” “civil liberty traditions,” or slogans like “never again” gave no nation immunity from becoming partly or wholly nazified. That included Israel.

My father fought fascism as a student in Germany, then as a journalist across Europe, as a labor lawyer in Germany, and later as a naturalized U.S. citizen combatting the racism directed against African Americans and against Puerto Rican immigrants in New York City. He was respectful of Marxism as an intellectual tradition and a political movement but personally kept his distance from it. He was always a European left social democrat: comfortable in the United States of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) from his arrival in 1939 until FDR’s death in 1945. He became progressively more uncomfortable after 1945. He neither missed nor denied the rightward shifts of politics in the United States and Western

Europe after 1945. He sensed the maturation of conditions that could again enable new nazisms to emerge. He explicitly wondered about such possibilities, especially for a fascism to emerge and take power in the United States but also in other places including Israel.

As my mother grew older, she mused often that “the Jews learned nothing from the Holocaust” and “the Jewish Zionists learned nothing from the Holocaust beyond ‘Better to perpetrate one than to suffer it again’.” My mother, 9 years younger than my father, had to leave the University of Berlin in 1936 after police identified her as a courier for the anti-Hitler underground. A frequently heard comment from one or the other of my parents: Jews have very often been the enemies and victims of nationalisms, often after long periods of living and intermarrying in neighborhoods where Jews and non-Jews comingled peacefully. What drove non-Jews to turn on Jewish neighbors were worsening economic and social problems affecting both Jewish and non-Jewish communities. In both communities, few identified the sources of their problems as capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism: the taboos against such reasoning were too strong.

There were still too few Marxists to teach and explain the effects of capitalism. The Marxists and their allies that were active then analyzed social problems in ways and using terms heavily influenced by the Russian Revolution and the specific interpretation of Marxism promoted by the USSR. That interpretation became dominant over other, alternative interpretations because the unrivaled prestige of the first and only successful Marxist revolution in 1917 Russia made its interpretation dominant. Soviet Marxism defined capitalism as an economic system that combined private property (privately owned and operated enterprises) with free markets (enterprises and workers distributing goods and services to one another via exchange). Soviet Marxists and those who followed their lead argued that the capitalist system produced the inequalities of wealth and income, the instabilities of the “business cycle,” and the corruptions of politics by money that all together could lead to fascism and Nazis. In contrast, socialists proposed to advance beyond capitalism via (1) seizure of the state by the working class (by revolution or ballot victories), (2) state takeovers of enterprises, and (3) state planning instead of markets. They called such a socialism a rational economic system working in the interests of the majority working class rather than a minority capitalist class of owners. Such a socialism was the opposite, the antidote for, and the alternative to fascism.

Meanwhile, the emerging Nazis analyzed society by focusing on altogether different concepts such as race and nation. They defined **the** social problem as national and racial in origin: the

German nation/Aryan race was being victimized by the Jewish nation/race. My father quoted Engels to the effect that such antisemitism was the stupid person's socialism.

How had Germans in fact suffered (or, in Nazi terms, been victimized)? In and by the loss of World War I (1918), the huge reparations bill charged to Germany afterward, the worst inflation in modern European history that devastated its middle classes' savings (1923), and then the Great Crash (1929) and its global Depression aftermath. German capitalists and the right-wing parties they funded took political advantage of all those events by deeming them victimizations. They blamed non-Germans for them: Bolsheviks from whom German socialists and communists had imported their evil ideologies. Nazis stressed the presence of Jews in the German left as their basis to rewrite history as a conspiracy to subordinate Germans (and others) to Jewish global financial rule. That project drew much inspiration from earlier writings across Europe accompanying antisemitic upsurges there. Casting Jews as thus a threatening race/nation, Nazis could mobilize Germans for their self-defense against the Jewish threat. Self-defense could and did justify repression, property dispossession, arrest, and eventually physical extermination of Jews. Similarly now for many Israelis, the war on Gaza is justified as an exercise in defense against Palestinians and the deep threat they are seen to represent. Aggressive U.S. foreign policies likewise refer to their military arm as the Department of *Defense*.

Germany's extreme problems after World War I culminating in the impact of the global Great Depression after 1929 overwhelmed its leaders. They found no traditional way forward as the mass of Germans became ever more desperate. Therefore they accepted the way offered by Hitler. His genocidal tendencies found a fertile ground that led to scapegoating especially of Jews. The Nazis filled the jails, concentration camps, and eventually the ovens and graves of Germany and many of its allies (Poland, Austria, Italy, Spain, and occupied France) with all their scapegoats.

There was always opposition to Nazism. Alongside the Jewish opposition, there were also many others, especially among socialists and communists. Those oppositions suffered countless tragic losses but also proved spectacularly productive of heroic and productive breakthroughs in thought, association, and action. Those breakthroughs shaped world history after 1945. They helped to make us the critics of received norms of racial, gender, and class discrimination. In particular, they strengthened and transformed post-war anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. Most colonialisms were overthrown by the colonized.

My parents' and their families' traumas generated among the survivors a certain sympathy and empathy for the idea that Jews (and also LGBTQ+ people, the Roma, and others

persecuted by Nazis) might finally and somehow find safety in the world. That extended to a romanticized early image of Israel—and especially its kibbutzim collectivities. But starting in the 1950s, as the kibbutzim declined and Israeli governments accepted ever more subordination to U.S. foreign policies, my parents' sympathies diminished.

Qua religion, Judaism had been long abandoned not only by my mother and father but also by their parents. Those generations were proudly “free-thinkers” or what my father once called “post-religion.” Holding on to religious symbols and rituals at a time when they seemed ever more inappropriate, absurd, or worse struck them as unwanted modes of separation from the progressive tendencies of the larger society. Both my sister and I grew up and shared in that framework as have my children.

The previous paragraphs sketch some context for how I approach the Israeli-Palestine conflict and U.S. student protests. The Israelis and Palestinians are trapped in a dead-end. Different as it is in most details from Germany in the 1930s, the Palestine-Israel conflict is similarly driven toward ever more deeply irrational objectives and strategies. For safety, some Jewish Zionists undertook a 20th-century settler colonialism in Palestine similar to what the British, French, German, and other European nations had undertaken in earlier centuries. Back then it was possible to “succeed” in military, political, and ideological terms in establishing and profiting from such settler colonialisms for long periods. There were centuries of time to ethnically cleanse indigenous people, to enable invading settler colonists to herd them into areas “reserved” for their impoverishment. Israel's is the attempt much, much later to establish and secure a settler colonialism in radically altered historical conditions. Now most of the world's people fight for and celebrate freedom from (ending) settler and other colonialisms. Their opposition offsets and now threatens to overwhelm the immense support Israel received and receives from the US and its shrinking number of other supporters.

Colonial subjects always resisted and fought back against the colonizers. Resistance repressed went and grew underground. Periodically then it exploded into view surprising the colonizers with its ever deeper roots, persistence, and intensities. Eventually and everywhere, resistance to colonialism developed the self-consciousness, theories, organizations, and weaponry to overcome colonialism at least to the point of acquiring formal political independence. My own PhD dissertation sought to identify the roots overdetermining this process in Britain's settler colonialism in Kenya. There, accumulated resistances and repressions peaked in the Mau Mau rebellion. It freed Kenya's people by ending Kenya's colonial status. Acquiring real political independence is the next step now engaging many

formerly colonized territories. Real economic independence—as required by real freedom—is yet a further step now gingerly explored by China, India, and Brazil.

Colonial history thus suggests the poorest of prospects for Israeli settler colonialism prevailing over a colonized Palestine. The conditions of existence for any such prevalence are not there now nor likely to emerge. Israel's history thus displays repeated Palestinian uprisings and repeated Israeli repressions. Both become increasingly violent and vindictive. Stuck in a dead end, resistors and repressors resort to ever more extreme actions such as Hamas's attack last October and Israel's destruction of Gaza ever since. Israeli officials refer to Palestinians as "animals" and speak publicly about expelling millions of them from the country. Palestinian officials insist a genocide is being imposed by Israel upon them. Netanyahu's allies join in banning and arresting opponents of his policies. How much further along that road will they go? U.S. students in response have given birth to a new mass movement that is changing the country as you read this.

Hitler's genocide ended when outside forces intervened to fight and win World War II. Inside forces (Jewish resistance, resistance to German occupation, and anti-fascism) helped in key ways. Will the forces already inside Israel and Palestine together with outside forces intervene and stop the Palestine-Israel catastrophe? Students and faculties at colleges and universities across the world are now in the movement for such interventions. Each of them is now making personal choices about whether and how to participate in that movement. Each person's choice will affect the rest of that person's life.

Many students and teachers are at work trying to understand honestly how Palestinian and Israeli societies evolved, separately and in relation, such that they came to today's horrific situation. They use classes, readings, and libraries seriously to interrogate concepts like "settler colonialism," "apartheid," "self-defense," and "antisemitism/anti-Zionism."

Many students and teachers proceed unafraid to ask about how capitalism may have operated on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides—and among their supporters—in producing today's dead end. The point of asking is to inquire further about an urgent issue: could basic social changes help overcome the Israeli-Palestine dead end by providing a new beginning on an economic foundation better than capitalism? Might the kibbutzim, had their numbers and importance within the Israeli economy been facilitated, have produced a different politics? Might the growth of worker cooperatives within the Palestinian territories have functioned likewise? Had such coops and kibbutzim built upon their shared economic structures to fashion political alliances, how differently might the whole Middle East have evolved?

Yes, these are big, bold, new ways of thinking about the present, horrific dead-end in Gaza. Students and universities have often led the rest of society in such new ways. Yes, universities around the world now struggle with huge free-speech vs. police issues provoked by the Gaza events. But the old, defensive, aggressive ways of thinking and acting have more than failed to solve the Israeli-Palestine problem. They made it worse. Old defensive, aggressive ways of thinking also misunderstand a changed world, one in which the U.S. dominance coming out of World War II has now peaked and is receding. A declining empire is a new experience and context for everything else happening around us. Our generation is living through that process of decline. We need to think critically about historic dead ends *without past generations' fear of using anti-capitalist traditions of thought.*

The student and faculty protest movement around demands for a Gaza ceasefire is doing that. For that it deserves applause and to be joined. To the students now leading us I offer my gratitude.

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