Social inequality, the university “donor revolt” and the McCarthyite campaign against Harvard student activists

A Harvard employee
25 October 2023

The hysterical campaign against student activists at Harvard University has laid bare a few truths about the Israeli assault on Gaza, economic inequality and democratic rights.

Much of the backlash to the Harvard undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) has been public, and intentionally so, in an effort to strangle any opposition to the policies of the Israeli government, especially related to the current conflict, for which terms such as “ethnic cleansing” and even “genocidal” are increasingly applicable. Any sympathy with the oppressed Palestinian people, criticism of Israel as an apartheid regime or identification of Israel as bearing principal moral and political responsibility for the violence of the last three weeks is decreed as tantamount to support for terrorism and antisemitism—never mind that such positions are held by many Jews and Israelis.

In addition to the public campaign, which has included a far-right “doxxing truck,” a letter from seven Republican lawmakers and furious statements by CEOs, university donors are pulling funds.

This “donor revolt,” in the words of CNN, is no more limited to Harvard than the overt attacks have been. The *Financial Times* reported that “[d]onors are withdrawing millions of dollars in planned funding. … The pressure has left universities including Harvard, Stanford and the University of Pennsylvania struggling to contain a growing crisis.”

Indeed, the crisis atmosphere is such that the “direct reports” subordinates to Harvard President Claudine Gay are meeting twice daily as they respond to “hundreds” of angry donors. A previously scheduled meeting of the anodyne-sounding “President’s Advisory Group”—which consists of dozens of longstanding wealthy donors and donor families—was devoted to the topic instead of Harvard’s financial report. I have heard the discussion between the donors and President Gay at that meeting described with euphemisms like “challenging.”

Columbia University “postponed” its annual Columbia Giving Day, previously scheduled for October 25, clearly in response to the conflict and its aftershocks. Two students have had job offers withdrawn for their speech and “someone who identified himself as a Columbia University administrative officer at the medical center” said during a radio interview, referring to pro-Palestinian demonstrators, “I hope every one of these people die,” according to the *New York Times*.

If you speak to university administrators, especially those in upper management, they will describe the current period as the most difficult of their careers, even when those careers span decades and include the rapid exodus from campuses just three-and-a-half years ago at the beginning of the pandemic.

One recent example of this “donor revolt” is illustrative: the Wexner Foundation announced last week that “the Harvard Kennedy School [HKS] and the Wexner Foundation are no longer compatible partners.” This is due to President Gay’s allegedly “tiptoeing, equivocating” response to the PSC statement and “the absence of [a] clear moral stand.”

The Wexner Foundation was co-founded by Leslie Wexner, the billionaire founder of Bath & Body Works and former owner of Abercrombie & Fitch and Victoria’s Secret. He gave more than $42 million to HKS in the years leading up to 2012, and one of HKS’s main buildings is named after him. In addition to his “philanthropy,” he is most well known for his decades-long personal and professional relationship with financier and sex trafficker of underage girls Jeffrey Epstein; he was Epstein’s main personal client until 2007, fully a year and a half after Epstein was charged with unlawful sexual activity with a minor and related offenses in Florida, and Epstein was a trustee of the Wexner Foundation’s board.

An immediate practical effect of Wexner’s action is the end of the Wexner Israel Fellowship, which funded 10 fellowships for Israelis to attend HKS and complete a Master

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in Public Administration (MPA).

This encapsulates how ostensibly philanthropic donations can be used to influence academic priorities. Moreover, programs and associated jobs become dependent on sustained annual funding (or an incredibly large endowed gift that can fund such a program in perpetuity).

According to the Council for Aid to Education, more than 90 percent of contributions to universities are so-called restricted gifts, which means that they are legally only able to be allocated to their specific purpose. Two decades ago, 78 percent of gifts were restricted.

David Callahan, author of *The Givers: Wealth, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Guilded Age*, told CNN that ultra-high-net-worth donors use the growing share of university revenues they provide to influence academia: "We have top-heavy philanthropy in higher education with major donors increasingly important to the funding streams of these institutions. Money buys you the ability push your own specific interests at a university."

Despite skyrocketing tuition and student debt, student aid accounted for only 10 percent of donations in 2018, less than 30 years prior, according to a study from Indiana University. Moreover, program-specific funds are generally directed toward math, science and business rather than social sciences, history or art.

Donors influence universities not only through gift terms, but through seats on university boards. Large schools like Harvard and Columbia have boards at the all-university level and at each individual school. From the universities' point of view, these boards court donors with the promise of privileged information and access to decision-makers; at the same time, these boards often have the power to select university presidents, and having the ear of the president or the dean is indeed power—especially when they know you have a large pocketbook and have certain priorities.

There are at least some cases in which this influence has become both overt and publicly known. One of the most egregious examples was at George Mason University, which allowed the Charles Koch Foundation and the Federalist Society to influence the hiring and firing of professors.

In 2021, Professor Beverly Gage resigned from leading Yale University's Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy after the university told her that they would be creating a new board to oversee the program after Nicholas Brady, former US Treasury secretary in the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations and program namesake, complained about an instructor. The board was to include war criminal (and Harvard alumnus!) Henry Kissinger.

Just as inequality in general is increasingly incompatible with what remains of democracy, so is the subordination of universities to wealthy donors incompatible with academic freedom. The right-wing, pro-Zionist "donor revolt" is a qualitative development in big-money university donors attempting to use their power and influence to shape campus discourse. That these donors wield such influence—and that many of them seek to do so publicly—is an indication of how deeply compromised academia already is.

However, the instinctive and intense hatred these donors hold for academic freedom and freedom of speech is a sign of their weakness, not strength. They are genuinely terrified and disgusted that a substantial section of the student body at Harvard and other leading universities, which play such a key role in the formation of official policy and public opinion, are sympathetic to the struggle of the Palestinians against Zionism.

Moreover, these student activists have not been cowed. Last week alone, hundreds of students protested Wednesday and Thursday at Harvard, and Harvard affiliates participated in a thousands-strong march in downtown Boston on Sunday. A majority of Harvard Graduate Student Union members at a special membership meeting supported a resolution condemning the McCarthyite campaign against the PSC and demanding that "[t]he largely U.S.-funded Israeli government's 'genocidal war on Palestinians in Gaza' must end," although the resolution was tabled by the minority using a procedural rule. Victimized New York University student Ryna Workman has held strong and continued their principled stand against the genocidal Israeli blockade and bombardment of Gaza.

This is not a war that can be pursued or expanded under conditions of democracy. As it develops and, in all likelihood, becomes further interlinked with the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and flashpoints with China over Taiwan and the South China Sea, there will be more widespread and authoritarian crackdowns on democratic rights, including on college campuses. The only way to defend democratic rights is to link up their defense with the struggle against the war in Gaza and the growing movement of the working class on a socialist basis.

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