**On National Liberation, Combat Intellectuals, and the Imperialist University**

In the past year and a half, the armed struggle for Palestine’s national liberation has altered the consciousness of young people around the world. The Palestinian liberation struggle and its backers in the West Asia region have disrupted the narrow-minded insistence on nonviolence that mesmerized and indeed, pacified much of the Western “left” for at least two generations. Armed struggle in West Asia, along with the forceful seizure of state power in West African states, have shattered this hegemony of nonviolence and debunked the mythical power of “voting for change.” In doing so, they irrevocably dismantled the liberal consensus that dictates how an oppressed people must resist just to attain the slightest modicum of concessions.

The Palestinian armed struggle against Zionism and U.S. imperialism surged out of Gaza on October 7, 2023, with Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Palestine’s regional allies, including Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran, quickly joined the fray in support of Palestinian liberation. These countries, known as the Axis of Resistance, have endured bombings by the Zionist entity, the United States, and Great Britain as they wage a broader struggle to liberate West Asia from the scourges of Zionism and U.S. imperialism.

The spirit of struggle now reverberates across the globe. In addition to Palestine, anti-colonial movements have coalesced in the Pacific archipelago of [Kanaky](https://capiremov.org/en/interview/kanak-more-and-more-we-demand-our-independence/) and the Caribbean Island of [Martinique](https://www.blackagendareport.com/martinique-masses-continue-rebellion-against-french-colonial-system). These movements are also forging transnational ties with like-minded struggles. In West Africa, the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to confront neocolonial domination and armed occupations. The AES quickly [suspended](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/17/niger-suspends-military-cooperation-with-us) preexisting military relationships with Western countries and [ousted](https://apnews.com/article/niger-us-troops-withdrawal-65ee87e2185ef3fe1f2119dad767f57c) U.S., French, and [other](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-withdraws-troops-from-junta-run-niger/a-70097640) European troops.

National liberation struggles tend to transmit global shockwaves. They not only galvanize international support, but their ripple effects also stimulate other liberation movements. The Palestinian armed struggle has particularly radicalized students in Western universities and facilitated their organization into a transnational solidarity movement. Palestine has flooded the consciousness of students, who in turn, build on past campaigns against segregation, imperialist war, colonial apartheid, and racialized police violence. Today’s struggle is notable for overturning decades of propaganda that insidiously deems nonviolence as the only path to liberation. Palestinian armed resistance has transformed students from empty vestibules pumped with imperialist propaganda to active thinkers.

In short, Palestine has raised students’ consciousness to the level of combat intellectuals who now expose the inextricable linkages between Zionism and imperialist warfare. Zionism, the students have shown, not only represents the ongoing material interests of white world supremacy at the nexus of three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—but it also signifies a threshold point delineating acceptable from unacceptable protest. University administrators and their ruling class confederates will not allow students to traverse beyond this threshold without an unflagging defiance embodied by relentless repression.

**From Colonized Intellectuals to Combat Intellectuals**

In his anti-colonial treatise, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon devotes substantial attention to the colonized intellectual’s role in the struggle for national liberation. Fanon establishes early in the book that the ruling class, by way of its academics, implants Western values into the mind of the colonized intellectual. These values become so internalized, Fanon argues, that “a sentinel on duty guarding the Greco-Roman pedestal” stands at the back of every colonized intellectual’s mind. Educated in the Western academy, this intellectual class becomes indoctrinated in performative and meaningless acts that privilege individual advancement over the liberation of one’s people. But the struggle for national liberation inspires colonized intellectuals to reconnect with their people. The artificial sentinel once occupying the intellectual’s mind “is smashed to smithereens” in the process.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Fanon’s chapter on national culture details the politicization and radicalization of the colonized intellectual. If, in the first stage of intellectual development, the colonized assimilates into the colonizer’s culture, the second stage inspires the colonized to engage in the practice of immersion. The intellectual, now enthralled by the nascent liberation movement, nonetheless remains an outsider among their own people. Thus, Fanon writes, the intellectual is content to “go back” and becomes infatuated with the supposedly idyllic pre-colonial era. The intellectual emphasizes “customs, traditions, and costumes” in a forced search for the exotic. This ritualistic practice becomes an exercise in romanticism and delusion disconnected from the reality of the people and their resistance.

Colonized intellectuals move beyond cultural immersion in the third, or combat, stage. Intellectuals begin to galvanize their people and call them to action in this stage. “Combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges.” Fanon is clear however, that it is the advancement of the national struggle which stimulates the corresponding progression in the intellectual’s consciousness. Resistance compels radicalization. “Sooner or later,” Fanon concludes, “the colonized intellectual realizes that the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people’s struggle against the forces of occupation.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Fanon’s prescriptions also apply to intellectuals residing in the West, many of whom hail from countries and communities victimized by imperialism and white supremacy. His analysis helps explain how movements for national liberation awoke today’s young intellectuals from the slumber of inane liberal indoctrination. While much of the petty bourgeois intellectual class—university faculty—remains mired in retrograde politics and pontificates on the meaning of colonial occupation and genocide, students develop a robust internationalist and anti-imperialist analysis as they learn about and from the Palestinian resistance. The struggle for Palestine has therefore politicized a generation of students on the ills of Zionism and U.S. imperialism. Politicization also stimulates a deeper understanding of the Western academy’s hegemonic function, as students comprehend how their studies are rooted in an imperialist curriculum garnished with liberal rhetoric. In effect, students are finding that they themselves are deeply colonized.

**Zionism Expressed as Fascism on Campus**

As they become more politicized, students not only express their unflinching solidarity with the Palestinian people, but they also begin to connect the dots on seemingly disparate issues. For instance, students are identifying the linkages between neoliberal austerity and imperialist wars. Money which should be allocated toward education and housing instead goes to war profiteering and private gain, thereby boosting prices for basic services. Students thus not only call for divestment from the Zionist project, but also from militarism in general, as they demand their universities to sever ties with weapons manufacturers and other war profiteering industries. In doing so, they are staking a claim to their education and their future.

Universities continually respond to the students’ courageous actions with extreme violence and unleash the police even against nonviolent demonstrations. They do so with the active support of local, state, and federal officials, betraying the tenets of free expression and academic freedom they claim to espouse. The university response demarcates the contradictions of liberal expression and shows how universities only tolerate academic freedom insofar as it does not challenge ruling class political orthodoxy. Joseph Massad [explains](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/student-protests-upend-hegemony-israel-palestine-forever), “Once dissent from hegemonic ideas threatens the ruling ideology and tests its tolerance, repression ensues in various forms within the university and by external forces, both private and public.” Universities play a vital role in maintaining a society’s ideological stability. On the surface then, while there is no rationalization for unmitigated state repression against students, a closer look reveals the stakes at hand.

Through their radical demands and administrators’ sadistic responses, students are discovering that the Western academy’s investments in imperialism run deeper than Zionism alone and reflect a broad structural regime of global domination to which universities are inextricably wed. Zionism, the young combat intellectuals have shown, is merely the tip of the iceberg. It represents the bloodiest aspects of the history of Western universities. By challenging Zionism, students are exposing this imperial history.

**The Imperialist University**

Western universities have functioned as imperialism’s intellectual arm since their inception. In the past and present, they have helped facilitate imperial conquest, rule, and expansion. European universities, and later, their North American counterparts, not only invested in white world supremacy, but they actively helped perpetuate racial slavery and colonial expansion. Oxford, England’s oldest university, [profited](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/21/oxford-college-to-investigate-its-own-role-in-colonialism) from the institution of slavery. It also educated and trained the colonial administrators and missionaries who worked to secure Britain’s global empire. Cambridge helped finance the Trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved people. According to the university’s [website](https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/legacies-of-enslavement-inquiry), Cambridge’s investments in the South Sea Company buttressed the Trans-Atlantic trade and brought the university “very significant financial benefits.” Across the ocean, Brown University recently [confessed](https://slaveryandjusticereport.brown.edu/sections/slavery-the-slave-trade-and-brown/) that its ties to slavery date to its first endowment campaign in the 1760s. Yale University inherited a plantation worked by enslaved people in Rhode Island, which it used to fund its first graduate programs and scholarships. Most U.S. colleges founded before the Civil War in fact relied on profits derived from racial slavery. “The story of the American college is largely the story of the rise of the slave economy in the Atlantic world,” [explains](https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2017/09/04/shackled-legacy) Craig Steven Wilder.

These same universities were built on [stolen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnlq37ncGxE) lands, which signifies an important parallel between the white settler projects in North America and West Asia. U.S. universities actively, and in a material sense, entrenched the gains of violent westward expansion by helping to build a society amid the ruins of racially cleansed Indigenous lands. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone highlight how the Morrill Act, which was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, [converted](https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/) “Indigenous land into college endowments.”

Gentrification marks the continuation of colonial dispossession into the twenty-first century. Universities [systematically](https://jacobin.com/2021/09/university-cities-urban-development-gentrification) gentrify Black and Brown communities while performing apolitical land acknowledgments. These acknowledgments, which now appear on university [websites](https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/columbia-law-installs-land-acknowledgment-statement-campus), formally recognize the history of dispossession without committing tangible resources to reverse past and present land grabs. Rather than politicizing students to see genocide and racial cleansing as active processes that continue to destabilize Native American, Black, immigrant, and working-class communities, the empty gesture flaunts erasure as a series of events that took place during a bygone era. In the most [performative](https://grad.berkeley.edu/about/land-acknowledgement/) fashion then, land acknowledgments provide cover for present-day expansionism.

Numerous academic disciplines also owe their beginnings to imperialism and white supremacy. Fields like [sociology](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5405803/), [anthropology](https://anthropology.sas.upenn.edu/news/2021/04/28/statement-anthropology-colonialism-and-racism), [literature](https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/olr.1987.001), [archaeology](https://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/the-nature-of-things/archaeology-is-rooted-in-racism-and-colonialism-say-scientists-here-s-how-we-rewrite-everyone-s-history-1.6734989), and even the hard [sciences](https://library.harvard.edu/confronting-anti-black-racism/scientific-racism) rationalized and normalized a global system of white domination. By the mid-twentieth century, moreover, area studies emerged in U.S. universities to advance “knowledge” about African, Asian, and Latin American societies. Area studies served a crucial purpose amid the Cold War and in the context of Third World liberation movements. U.S. officials aimed to impel the newly independent countries of the Third World into the capitalist orbit before these states could gravitate to socialism and communism. Imperial “knowledge” aimed to advance U.S. interests while simultaneously curtailing genuine national liberation movements.

Area studies emerged alongside modernization theory, wherein intellectual elites and government officials pressed for the United States to “modernize” the Third World. The foundational theorists of modernization, including Walt Rostow, disparaged Third World revolutionaries as “scavengers of modernization.”[[3]](#footnote-4) National liberation, in other words, undermined the imperialist “modernizing” project, which was nothing more than a disguised neocolonialist approach to U.S. imperial policy. U.S. officials begrudgingly embraced bourgeois forms of nationalism in formerly colonized countries like Kenya and Viet Nam, among many others, as a bulwark against national liberation and indeed, socialism. Scholars-turned-White House aides like Rostow, Arthur Schlesinger, McGeorge Bundy, and Henry Kissinger embodied how the revolving door between the ivory tower and the White House was crucial to generating a malleable imperial policy amid a rapidly changing world.

**Student Resistance and the Neoliberal University**

Despite the Western university’s role as an intellectual laboratory for empire, world events also produced emboldened students who renounced white world supremacy in its manifold forms. As universities became increasingly accessible to young adults from racially and economically oppressed populations, campuses became central sites of resistance against the same global systems that the Western academy helped produce.[[4]](#footnote-5) Student activism in the United States became a major social force during the 1950s and especially the 1960s. Students not only helped advance the Civil Rights Movement, but they also pushed back against the most reactionary pillars of the Western academy.

By exposing the “traditional” disciplines as racist cogs for imperialism, students demanded a say in their own education. Many students who protested the U.S.’s war in Viet Nam simultaneously fought for Black Studies, which later catalyzed struggles for Women and Gender Studies, Latina/o Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian and Asian American Studies. These spaces became liberated zones within the academy and as such, are intensely contested to this day. Universities continually aim to either coopt or outright collapse these spaces through claims of austerity.

U.S. officials responded to the democratization of the university with economic policies that would soon become the fulcrum of neoliberalism. Roger Freeman, the education advisor to the erstwhile California Governor Ronald Reagan, [lamented](https://theintercept.com/2022/08/25/student-loans-debt-reagan/) in 1970 that the country faced the danger of producing an educated proletariat. “We have to be selective on who we allow [into college],” he asserted. “If not, we will have a large number of highly trained and unemployed people.”

Governor Ronald Reagan accordingly cut state funding for California’s public colleges and justified the move by urging them to charge tuition to in-state residents for the first time. This economic imperative began the metamorphosis of the university into its present neoliberal form, a privatized corporate institution intimately tied to the finance industry. Skyrocketing tuition costs fueled neoliberal financialization, which in turn, led to even higher tuition rates. The devious relationship between universities and banks spiraled multiple generations of working- and middle-class students into ever accumulating debt.

The neoliberal era nonetheless saw continued student resistance. For example, students waged a successful boycott and divestment [campaign](https://theconversation.com/calls-for-divestment-from-apartheid-south-africa-gave-todays-pro-palestinian-student-activists-a-blueprint-to-follow-229591) against South African apartheid during the 1980s and 1990s. The campaign helped produce the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994.

**National Liberation in the Twenty-First Century**

The current student movement in support of Palestinian liberation builds on the legacy of these historical campaigns, particularly the anti-apartheid movement. In 1985, students at Cornell University [constructed](https://cornellsun.com/2024/05/07/from-shantytown-to-the-liberated-zone-cornells-history-of-encampments/#:~:text=In%201985%2C%20students%20created%20a,segregation%20and%20discrimination%20against%20nonwhites.) a “shantytown” encampment to protest their university’s investment in apartheid. The encampment lasted over two months before the university dismantled it. The “shantytown movement” spread to dozens of campuses across the U.S.

Today’s students are challenging the entire war-finance structure of the Western university. The overwhelmingly violent reaction, coordinated between university administrators, police officials, corporate tycoons, and the organs of government, has only radicalized the movement. Students are more aware than ever of the intricate relationship between Zionism and U.S. imperialism. As combat intellectuals, they have heightened the contradictions that the Palestinian national liberation movement exposed.

To be sure, analytical gaps remain in this resurgent student internationalism. It remains to be seen whether the student movement will challenge the U.S.-orchestrated imperialist occupation of Haiti, the criminal six-decade U.S. embargo against Cuba, or the series of attempted coups against the democratically elected government of Venezuela. Important misconceptions about the Axis of Resistance also linger. Criticism against Iran from pro-resistance circles ebbs and flows with the Palestinian liberation struggle’s strategic victories and setbacks, but much of the prevailing Western pseudo-intellectual [analysis](https://darkmatter-hub.pubpub.org/pub/hm3auju3/release/3) of Iran [echoes](https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-status-of-women-is-the-status-of-democracy-event/) State Department talking points. Students have, at times, fallen into this reactionary trap.

Similar criticisms persisted about Syria, an important cog in the Axis of Resistance before the coup against the Bashar al-Assad government by NATO-backed and rebranded al-Qaeda forces in December 2024. Syria endures a U.S. occupation over vast swaths of national territory. The United States and the Zionist entity closely coordinated their aggression to undermine the Syrian state and disrupt the supply lines of the Resistance Front. After the coup, Zionist troops quickly moved to occupy even more of Syria’s territory, including strategic locations [overlooking](https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/after-buffer-zone---israel--occupies-syrian-mount-hermon) much of both Syria and Lebanon. The Zionist entity also relentlessly bombards Syria, [destroying](https://www.palestinechronicle.com/extent-of-damage-revealed-israel-destroys-syrias-military-capabilities/) over 80 percent of the country’s military capabilities within days of the coup. Syria is now balkanized, demilitarized, and gutted of its sovereignty as a result of what some so-called leftists are calling a “revolution.” Thus, any movement which claims to support Palestine must take these regional and global realities into account.

Despite these lingering contradictions, students have effectively identified the linkages between national liberation and internationalist solidarity. This is what it means to be a combat intellectual. The student resistance of today, whether in colonized countries, imperialist universities, or any space in between, takes part in a world-historical tidal wave that will hasten the demise of U.S. imperialism and white world supremacy. It does so by exposing the university as an incubator and beneficiary of these structural projects.

As resistance movements fight and make the ultimate sacrifices, the new world they create will also reflect in the transformation of the academy. Through their resistance, national liberation movements and their internationalist supporters will relegate the Western university model—based on extraction, exploitation, oppression, and genocide—into a mere artifact documented in the historical texts of subsequent generations. Students around the world have demonstrated their commitment to building a future liberated from Zionism and U.S. imperialism.

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid., 158-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1960] 1990), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Anti-imperialist student movements emerged in the Third World during the early twentieth century. Student [protests](https://www.blackagendareport.com/essay-united-states-oppresses-haitian-masses-hermina-dumont-1930) in Haiti were a driving force behind the withdrawal of U.S. marines from the country in 1934, which ended the nineteen-year U.S. occupation of Haiti. Cuban students likewise organized and protested successive [authoritarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Directorio_Estudiantil_Universitario#cite_note-Aguilar73-78-2) and corrupt governments backed by the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s. In Guatemala, students played a significant role in the 1944 [revolution](https://www.ucpress.edu/books/this-city-belongs-to-you/paper), which ousted the U.S.-backed dictator Jorge Ubico from power. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)