

STUDENT STRUGGLE / STUDENT RIGHTS: International Solidarity Campaigns and the Right to Education (2009)

Ryan Hayes

From South Africa to Palestine, to name two prominent examples, Ontario students have played crucial roles in international solidarity campaigns. Beyond raising political consciousness and holding academic institutions accountable for their complicity, student involvement in these campaigns has made important contributions on their own campuses towards realizing the assertion that “education is a right”.

The right to education is more than the right to a seat in a classroom, it also includes the right to actively participate in shaping one’s education from the classroom to decisions affecting the university as a whole. The declaration that “education is a right” is a response to barriers put in place to deny access and meaningful engagement, barriers upheld by the disenfranchisement of students in decision-making structures. These barriers have only been strengthened by the chronic underfunding, increased privatization and skyrocketing tuition fees produced by neoliberal economic policies.

While students and their allies have framed the right to education in a global perspective, for instance through student unions affiliating with the Right to Education campaign run by Birzeit University students in Palestine, international solidarity campaigns have also been pivotal in local student struggles. This article draws on two cases of student activism at the University of Toronto (UofT) to consider the right to education in relation to the shifting rights of students within the university.

The first case examines the significance of going beyond accepted rules of dissent in advancing the campaign against South African apartheid in the 1980s, while the second case focuses on how changing university practices have attempted to limit dissent by reducing access to space in the current campaign against Israeli apartheid. In both examples student activism is centred on campaigns to pressure the university to recognize its complicity with oppressive regimes and take appropriate moral action. Through this activism students put forward a different vision of the university in which the institution recognizes its complicity, but also in which students have a meaningful voice in the operation of the university.

The University as a Space of Citizenship

Both cases of student activism represent shifts in student rights and redefine the “citizenship” of students within the university. I use citizenship because I find it a useful tool for considering who has rights – in theory and in practice – and how rights shift over time based on political moments and movements. Citizenship can be understood in terms of formal and substantive citizenship. Formal citizenship is membership in a nation state or political entity, while substantive citizenship is entitlement to civil, political, socioeconomic and cultural rights.

Like citizenship, “student” is both an exclusive and inclusive category. Addressing the exclusive nature of who is allowed to be a student is central to the broader right to education campaign, however this article focuses on struggles around substantive citizenship, or rights claims, made by current students.

As is the case with many social movements, including the civil rights and women’s movements, student struggles have advanced student rights such as the right to engage in political activities on campus (within set

limitations) and participation (albeit minimal) in university bodies. If students and their allies had limited themselves to the rules of the day, many changes could not have materialized. This political engagement and expansion of recognized rights has in turn expanded notions of what it means to be a student within the university.

To qualify this, advances have been made in substantive rights and continue to be fought for, yet changes are by no means permanent nor are they all necessarily positive. We are constantly reminded of the need for resistance by the pervasiveness of injustices and again as regressive changes are justified with right-wing ideologies, particularly now under the cover of an economic recession.

Student Activism against South African Apartheid

In 1983 students and their allies began organizing to make UofT divest from apartheid South Africa. The Anti-Apartheid Network (AAN) drew members from the African and Caribbean Students' Association, NDP Club, Communist Club and Student Christian Movement. [1] Despite receiving a groundswell of support, the university refused to budge on its \$5.5 million in corporate holdings. UofT continued to purchase more stocks in South Africa after a toothless policy tied to the Canadian Code of Conduct was passed in 1985. [2]

UofT President George Connell argued that the university should not "be committed to a particular political cause, no matter how worthy," while students countered that investment was a political act that supported apartheid. [3] By 1987 the Arts and Science Students' Union, Graduate Students' Union, Native Students' Association, Canadian Union of Education Workers and UofT Staff Association had all joined the call to divest. An opinion poll showed that 64% of students supported divestment. [4] Over 70 faculty members signed a letter in *The Varsity*

that called for Connell to resign if he continued to refuse to support divestment. [5]

On March 4 1987, 28 students and one professor marched from the International Student Centre to Simcoe Hall and occupied the office of the president. [6] The sit-in lasted until the meeting of the Governing Council (GC) the next day, where a motion on divestment by a student member was to be discussed. On March 5 a rally was held outside Simcoe Hall and 200 students filed-in to attend the meeting. [7]

After governors voted to refuse to consider the motion, students spontaneously unleashed their frustration, chanting “freedom yes, apartheid no”. “One guy jumped on a table, next thing you know three or four people jumped on tables,” recalled former AAN co-ordinator Akwatu Khenti. [8] After ten minutes the meeting was adjourned and police escorted the president out. The image of students on tables made front page of the Toronto Star and The Globe and Mail.

The students’ actions were criticized in the corporate media (“Degrees In Shouting”), [9] with slightly more sympathetic coverage in the student media. [10] The same poll that found 64% of students in favour of divestment reported 27% of students supported the actions at the GC. [11] The AAN was unapologetic. Khenti stated that after “every institutional channel of redress ... had been exhausted” students were compelled “to let the Governing Council and university administration know that the present state of affairs cannot go on.” [12] While the chair of the GC claimed that free speech had been “abused”, the student member stated that “The administration and Governing Council must share the responsibility for any disruption” due to their inaction. [13]

According to Khenti, following the actions of March 4 and 5, “The momentum for divestment began to move forward expeditiously” and

“more mainstream folks began to get involved”. [14] Tom Parkin, also a former AAN coordinator, received a letter from an NDP MPP who had previously spoken at an AAN rally that said “This will not help your cause”. Parkin believes that “It did nothing but help our cause” because while it may have been impolite, no one was hurt and it “forced the discussion”. [15]

In September 1987, President Connell appointed history professor A.P. Thornton to prepare a paper on South Africa and possible alternatives to UofT’s present policy. [16] Thornton met with the AAN in October [17] and released his report in late November, urging divestment from South Africa. [18] In January 1988 the GC voted to divest its holdings in South Africa. [19]

Parkin described the appointment of Thornton by Connell for his “expert advice” as a way of “finding his reason to change his position”, or saving face for his policy reversal on ethical investment. “George Connell didn’t want to have students telling him what to do.” The divestment campaign was a “threat to his sense of control” and the university administration “didn’t want to have to be accountable” to students. [20] The strength of the divestment campaign, ranging from lobbying to powerful student demonstrations, was ultimately too much for the university to ignore.

As illustrated by the campaign to divest from South Africa, going beyond accepted rules of dissent can play a significant role in the achievement of a campaign’s goals. This example is one on many in the history of UofT where students have been left with no other resort due to their lack of input in decision-making. Examples from UofT’s official history, Martin Friedland’s *The University of Toronto: A History*, include students in 1967 stopping napalm manufacturer Dow Chemical’s recruiting efforts by blocking the entrance to the recruiting centre [21]; students in 1970 occupying an unused building and later Simcoe Hall to get the President

to commit to funding a daycare on campus [22]; and students in 1972 holding a sit-in in Simcoe Hall, being evicted by the police, and responding with another occupation of more than 500 people to gain access for undergraduates to Robarts Library [23].

Other notable examples include a sit-in that was part of the campaign that ended Hart House's men-only policy in 1972 [24]; a camp-out held in 1986 to secure space for the Women's Centre [25]; and an 11-day occupation of the President's office in 2000 that resulted in UofT being the first Canadian university to introduce an anti-sweatshop policy for university clothing [26].

Supporters of the AAN transgressed university rules by disrupting the GC meeting. While not sanctioned in any rules, the occupation of the president's office received no criticism, even before the events at the GC meeting had taken place. Jack Dimond, GC Secretary and spokesperson in the absence of President Connell was quoted as saying "I'm calm, I'm a child of the sixties". [27] Perhaps this response was due to the normalization of such actions and the minimal inconvenience caused because the President was absent.

In contrast, the actions at the GC disrupted business as usual by causing the meeting to be adjourned. It was a spontaneous protest against business as usual. Business as usual was investing in apartheid South Africa and by extension supporting the racist regime. Business as usual was a structure that restricted students to token representation and allowed their issues to be swatted off the agenda. The interjection by frustrated students asserted that such dismissals were intolerable.

By transgressing the rules students soon achieved their political objective of divestment. Students also demonstrated their agency as legitimate actors, regardless of their subordination within university structures.

Divestment was a blow against the apartheid South Africa regime, but it was also a blow against the arrogant policies of the university administration and their indifference towards student and international human rights.

Student Activism against Israeli Apartheid

The current generation of Palestine solidarity activism at UofT and the hostility towards it has centered around the inception and tremendous growth of Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). IAW began in 2005 at UofT and is now an annual event that has spread to over 40 cities worldwide [28]. IAW in Toronto is organized by Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA) at UofT in conjunction with SAIA at York University and Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights at Ryerson University.

The purpose of IAW is to raise awareness of the apartheid nature of the state of Israel and support the call issued by over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations for boycotts, divestments and sanctions against apartheid Israel, inspired by the call from the African National Congress to boycott the apartheid South Africa regime. [29] SAIA engages in university-specific campaigns for divestment from Israel, ending institutional partnerships with institutions that support Israel and supporting the right to education denied to Palestinian students.

The climate towards Palestine solidarity activism has resulted in attacks from pro-Israel organizations and intense scrutiny from the university administration. Organizers have long complained about bureaucratic hurdles and delays with room-booking requests. In 2007 the administration attempted to unilaterally assign undercover campus police to events deemed “security risks” and bill event organizers a prohibitive \$440 fee for their services. [30] After organizers refused to pay, the issue was picked up by campus media and the administration backed down.

However, shortly after IAW 2009 the administration indicated its intent to “require that Campus Police be present at all activities where we have justified concerns about safety and significant disruption” and “be fair in our allocation of the costs”. [31]

Moreover, a recent Freedom of Information request produced an email trail that proved administrators all the way up to President David Naylor colluded to deny a room–booking request on technical grounds for a cross–campus Palestine solidarity conference organized by SAIA. [32] The emails show that administrators decided to deny the request before it had been made, after being alerted of the planned event by a staff person for a pro–Israel campus organization.

This harassment of Palestine solidarity activists is taking place in a context of increasing repression of dissent at UofT, other universities in Ontario and within broader society. At UofT posters critical of major donor Peter Munk of Barrick Gold were torn down on the orders of the administration for being “potentially defamatory”. [33] Students alleged to have participated in a sit–in against fee increases received criminal charges and code of student conduct investigation notices, [34] and students were threatened with code of student conduct investigations for disrupting a meeting of the GC on fee increases. [35]

At other universities Palestine solidarity work has also been targeted, with IAW posters banned at Carleton and Ottawa Universities, [36] the term “Israeli apartheid” banned at McMaster University [37] and the student code of conduct used at York to apply suspensions and hefty fines to SAIA. [38] This chilling climate affects not just students but faculty and staff as well. Further, the federal Conservative government took an interest in denouncing IAW, [39] as did the leader of the opposition party. [40] In March 2009 funding for immigrant services was cut from the Canadian Arab Federation for its advocacy on Palestine, [41] and British

MP George Galloway was banned from entering Canada for delivering humanitarian aid to the elected government of Palestine. [42]

The situation on campus shows how access to space is tied to expression of dissent. Dissent requires a space to be expressed in. Bureaucratic hurdles, security fees and outright denial of space all attempt to prevent the expression of dissent. These tactics of curtailing access to space also attempt to impose a new “normal”. If in the 1980s an occupation of the president’s office was normalized as a result of the student activism in the 1960s, recent experiences suggest this is no longer the case.

In fact, it is quite the opposite. The code of student conduct was passed in the early 1990s, prohibiting disruption with the threat of expulsion and other punitive measures, [43] while “conflict management” has made managing dissent a professional field. Jim Delaney, director of the office of the Vice–Provost, Students, is the principal communicator or buffer between the administration and student groups, including in the cases of the imposed security fees and room–booking denial, and has made it known that he is pursuing a degree in Conflict Analysis and Management at Royal Roads University by contacting student activists with interview requests. [44]

Increased management of dissent has coincided with increased alignment between the university and private interests. This is partly due to a growing reliance on private funding and donations as neoliberal governments continue to underfund education, and partly a result of administrators holding the same neoliberal ideologies and choosing to run universities according to profit–driven business models.

In the midst of campus activism to divest from South Africa, a struggle against putting the bottom–line of investment returns above ethical considerations, President Connell delivered a speech to the Empire Club

of Canada entitled “From the Ivory Tower to the Corporate Tower” advocating increased orientation to corporate needs. [45] Connell authored a Renewal 1987 document that was criticized for reducing a degree to a “commodity”, privileging applied science and graduate studies, and emphasizing “upgrading UofT’s relations with the commercial sector”. [46]

Since then this orientation towards private interests has solidified and developed significantly. In 2007 President Naylor spoke on “Ten Myths about Commercialization” at a one-day symposium on commercializing university research (with a \$200 registration fee, \$50 for students) at the MaRS Discovery District, a hub for commercialization closely affiliated with UofT. [47] Naylor pushed the Towards 2030 plan that advocated for further commercialization of research, deregulation of tuition fees and reduction of undergraduate enrolment. [48]

These two trends of increased management of dissent and increased privatization are not accidents. They are both products of similar right-wing ideologies in which the role of students and responsibility of the university to the public good are marginal at best. As reflected in its behaviour toward student activists, the university is far from neutral on the issue of Israeli apartheid.

Beyond investments, UofT supports Israel through relationships with Israeli academic institutions. Nine university presidents including Naylor toured Israel in 2008. Naylor joined other university presidents in condemning a proposal from Britain’s University and College Union to discuss an academic boycott of Israel on the grounds that it violated the sacred principle of academic freedom, yet has never shown concern for the academic freedom of Palestinian students and academics or the bombing of Palestinian academic institutions by Israel.

Faced with calls from supporters of Israel to ban IAW, the administration has so far refused to do so, and has instead deployed strategies to withhold and limit access to spaces for expressing dissent. Dissent would not need such intensive management if it did not pose a threat. Measures are needed to secure the university from dissent, to secure administrators from the claims and campaigns of students who threaten the operation of “business as usual” in their embodiment of principles of equity and social justice.

The response to these shifting conditions has been continued organizing. A “Freedom of Expression” campaign was launched in April to unify opposition to repression of dissent. [49] Silencing of dissent brings more attention to injustices that activists are organizing against, while the act of silencing also exposes the power structures that uphold them. Denial of access to space is one way to deny expression of dissent. Technical grounds have been used to make decisions appear neutral, however the clear pattern of targeting, particularly of Palestine solidarity activism, shatters the myth of neutrality.

Without the appearance of objectivity rules are exposed as biased towards the powerful. “The frequent use of force [or power] draws attention, far too graphically, to the existence of those ruling.” [50] These actions, which tip the balance between coercion and consent, expose the promises of equality, free expression and academic freedom as empty. This again is a struggle in which students are asserting their agency, resisting the marginal position the university wishes to confine them to, and actively seeking a real voice in how the university is run. Students are embodying their rights claims rather than waiting for rights to be granted or further stripped away.

Conclusion: Student Struggle/Student Rights

While the university emphasizes the formal membership of students, staff and faculty in a common university community, this ignores huge differences in power relations between administrators, employees of the university and students. This article has considered the shifting rights of students in the university through the cases of student activism against South African apartheid in the 1980s and the current campaign against Israeli apartheid.

In both examples student struggles are intimately tied to student rights, from transgressing university rules to advance the campaign for divestment from apartheid South Africa to continuing to speak out and organize against Israeli apartheid in the face of increased repression. Through their activism students directly challenge power relations within the university, refusing to play a tokenistic role in decision-making and rejecting the complicity of their university with apartheid regimes. The right to education resides in the collective power of students. Student rights are non-existent without demonstrable student power.

Notes

- [1] Interview with Tom Parkin, March 26, 2009.
- [2] Akwatu Khenti and Carolyn Lynch, "Connell's divestment stand ignores morality", *The Varsity*, March 5, 1987.
- [3] *ibid.*
- [4] Richard Ellis and Lori McDougall, "Majority of students support divestment, poll says", *The Varsity*, March 16, 1987.
- [5] Undersigned, "72 Professors support divestment", *The Varsity*, March 5, 1987.
- [6] Jennifer Gould, "Students storm President's office", *The Varsity*, March 5, 1987.
- [7] Gary Feld, "Protestors break up GC meeting", *The Varsity*, March 9, 1987.
- [8] Interview with Akwatu Khenti, March 20, 2009.
- [9] Editorial, "Degrees in Shouting", *The Globe and Mail*, March 7, 1987.
- [10] John Hovland, "Intensity is no excuse for Governing Council rioting", *The Varsity*, March 9, 1987.
- [11] Richard Ellis and Lori McDougall, "Majority of students support divestment, poll says", *The Varsity*, March 16, 1987.
- [12] Akwatu Khenti and Bogdan-Eduard Ghetu, "Anti-apartheid groups clarify their position", *The Varsity*, March 19, 1987.
- [13] Gary Feld, "Protestors break up GC meeting", *The Varsity*, March 9, 1987.
- [14] Interview with Akwatu Khenti, March 20, 2009.
- [15] Interview with Tom Parkin, March 26, 2009.
- [16] Andrea Jacobs, "UofT appoints divestment officer", *The Varsity*, September 24, 1987.
- [17] Danielle Adams, "Divestment activists get moving", *The Varsity*, October 29, 1987.
- [18] Eric Geringas, "Report urges UofT divest from S.A." *The Varsity*, November 26, 1987.
- [19] Unknown Author. "UofT decides to divest". *The Varsity*, January 25, 1988.
- [20] Interview with Tom Parkin, March 26, 2009.
- [21] Martin Friedland, "Student Activism." *The University of Toronto: A History* (2002) p. 527.
- [22] *ibid.*, p. 535.
- [23] *ibid.*, p. 537.
- [24] Graduate Students' Union, "Activism: Victories" (2006), <http://www.gsu.utoronto.ca/activism/victories.html>.
- [25] *ibid.*
- [26] Helen Lenskyj, "Funding Canadian University Sport Facilities: The University of Toronto Stadium Referendum." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 28.4 (2004), p. 381.

- [27] Jennifer Gould, "Students storm President's office", The Varsity, March 5, 1987.
- [28] Israeli Apartheid Week, "History of Israeli Apartheid Week", (2009), <http://apartheidweek.org/en/history>.
- [29] *ibid.*
- [30] Liisa Schofield, "Exposed: University of Toronto suppresses pro-Palestinian activism", Rabble, February 18, 2009, <http://www.rabble.ca/news/exposed-university-toronto-suppressed-pro-palestinian-activism>.
- [31] Cheryl Misak, "Update on Controversial Events at the University of Toronto", University of Toronto, March 26, 2009, <http://www.provost.utoronto.ca/public/pdadc/0809/47.html>.
- [32] Liisa Schofield, "Exposed: University of Toronto suppresses pro-Palestinian activism", Rabble
- [33] André Bovee-Begun and Naushad Ali Husein, "UofT admins rip off protest posters", The Varsity, February 14, 2008 (accessed April 2, 2009), <http://www.thevarsity.ca/article/2015>.
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- [37] Karen Ho, "McMaster ban on phrase 'Israeli Apartheid' stirs protest", The Varsity, February 28, 2008, <http://www.thevarsity.ca/article/2141>.
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- [41] Asam Ahmad, "'Beyond the Pale': Jason Kenney and the Criminalization of Dissent", UofT Free Press, March 28, 2009, <http://utfreepress.org/2009/03/beyond-the-pale/>.
- [42] *ibid.*
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- [44] Jim Delaney, "About Jim Delaney", (2008), professional website, <http://individual.utoronto.ca/jimdelaney/about.html>.

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- [49] Unknown Author, "Launch: Freedom of Expression Campaign", Rabble event listing, <http://www.rabble.ca/whatsup/launch-freedom-expression-campaign>.
- [50] Sharon Wall, "'To train a wild bird': EF Wilson, hegemony, and native industrial education at the Shingwauk and Wawanosh residential schools, 1873-1893", Left History 9:1 (Fall 2002/Winter 2003), p. 3.