

balise the intifada” as one chant that made him feel unsafe. But Mr Ben-Menachem argued that there was a difference between comfort and safety. Some may find these demonstrations disagreeable, he suggested, but that did not make them intimidating.

Secondly, this is about freedom of protest. The encampment may have violated Columbia’s rules, but is that not the point of protest — to disrupt? Is that fair when many students may simply want to learn? Classes have moved online for the rest of the semester.

Some Jewish students in pro-Palestinian groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace feel just as targeted and as unsafe as Jewish students on the other side.

Can these sides meet in the middle? In one video posted online, protesters form a human chain after seeing that “Zionists have entered the camp” to ensure “they do not pass this point and infringe upon our privacy and try to disrupt our community”.

Jessica Schwalb, who filmed the incident, said her friend was wearing a Star of David necklace, which may be why they were targeted. She believes that if you’re not wearing a keffiyeh (a scarf often worn by pro-Palestine activists) or mask, you are seen as anti-movement. They left the lawn.

There are controversial figures on both sides. In the Congressional hearing, Republican Elise Stefanik asked about visiting scholar Mohamed Abdou, who wrote on October 11: “Yes, I’m with muqawamah [the resistance] be it Hamas and Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad but up to a point”, and who has called the October 7 attackers “warriors” and “resistance fighters”. Ms Shafik said he would never work at Columbia again. Dr Abdou did not respond to a request for comment. Shai Davidai, an assistant professor at Columbia’s Business School, has been vocal in recent months about antisemitism on campus and called on the university to do more. But he is under investigation for reportedly harassing students, and when I spoke with Nicholas Lemann, from Columbia’s antisemitism task force, he said that Mr Davidai had refused to work or engage with them. Mr Davidai has denied the allegations of harassment and criticised the task force for failing to provide a definition of antisemitism.

Ultimately, Columbia may be in an impossible bind, with every side feeling unheard or angry or targeted, and with the eyes of the political and media world scrutinising the institution’s every move. Free speech, or limited speech. Protest, or restricted protest. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

Where we go from here is for the students and administration of Columbia to decide. Ms Shafik has said she is “happy to engage” in discussions on whether police should be on campus. The university has spoken with students from the encampment for several days.

Protesters have agreed to dismantle some of the tents, ensure those not studying at Columbia leave, and take steps to make the encampment welcoming to all.

The saga has drawn historic comparisons. Police entered Columbia’s Morningside Campus in April 1968 during anti-Vietnam War protests.

That led to demonstrations and riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, revealing a divided party that ultimately lost the 1968 election to law-and-order candidate Richard Nixon.

The Democratic National Convention this year again takes place in Chicago.

The article first appeared on iNews.

Student anger, responsibility of universities

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OPINION

Student anger at Israel’s assault on Gaza has been directed at their own universities, whose refusal to condemn the Israeli aggression they see as a moral failure. By closing down protests to “protect” the neutrality of the academic environment, universities only appear to confirm this. On January 26, the United Nations’ highest court in The Hague, the International Court of Justice, found it plausible that Israel’s violence in Gaza amounts to genocide. This ruling corroborated what Gazan journalists had been documenting for months at immense personal risk, and what genocide scholars had been warning. At the time of writing, the situation has become even more acute: famine has taken hold of large swathes of Gaza, a ground invasion of Rafah is imminent, and newspapers continue to report daily horrors.

Throughout Europe and the US, students have been protesting their universities’ positions on Gaza. Many universities have avoided taking a stand, often parroting the positions of their governments. Their students see the moral salience of the situation more clearly. They are not wedded to pragmatism. Their moral sense is acute and they expect the world to be structured according to what is right, not what is opportune.

But instead of commending the political consciousness of their students, universities have cast students’ outrage as disorderly and dangerous. At my own university, officials have called in the police to close down protests. In opting to criminalise protestors in this way, universities misrepresent their students’ anger.

Anger, protest

Angry protests are often misunderstood. It is easy to see why. Conventional wisdom tells us that anger is volatile, “prone to excess” as the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum has put it. Nussbaum is largely pessimistic about anger, which she believes is always about vengeance. Indeed, revenge is often motivated by anger and the belief that righteous violence can balance the scales of justice. This, Nussbaum argues, is a form of “magical thinking” driven by “metaphysical ideas of cosmic balance”. Our violence can never undo the harm done to us. Harms do not cancel harms.

If we accept Nussbaum’s view, students are protesting because they want payback. They are out to get the academic community and their protests and disruptions are aimed at “counterbalancing” harm. Besides the obvious moral problems with payback, this perspective makes the students’ anger seem misdirected and irrational. Vengeful anger is typically directed at whoever has caused harm, but universities are hardly causally responsible for the events in Gaza.

This view, however, excludes other forms of anger, even if it registers one of its most prevalent forms. Anger can also be about communicating wrongs and expressing the need for accountability. I am angry when someone with whom I stand in a moral relationship contravenes that relationship. Anger expresses my belief that a wrong has occurred and articulates itself through protest. In fact, according to P.F. Strawson, emotions such as anger and outrage are constitutive of our moral responses. To be affectless in the face of object violence is to be missing a part of one’s humanity.

Audre Lorde once described anger “as a liberation,” an offering to the one that suffers, an act of solidarity. She found herself defending anger partly because the anger of the oppressed classes is often

dismissed by the ruling classes as violent and destructive. This kind of anger, Lorde argued, is distinct from hatred and contempt, which are indeed purely destructive.

But whether we understand anger as a form of solidarity, or an expression of moral indignation, in both cases we acknowledge that it can be productive. Here is how the philosopher Jeremy Bendik-Keymer describes anger’s moral core:

“It makes a complaint and seeks moral repair — of the relationship primarily and, at the least, of the standing of the one who has been momentarily erased by the moral wrong. If the wrongdoer(s) will not own up on their own, the community that hears the protest can at least reinforce the standing of the one wronged... The public nature of angry protest affirms something that is morally considerable, and thus, calls on solidarity since it appeals to moral accountability.”



NYPD officers surround protesters near Columbia University on April 25, 2024. [Profanities have been obscured.]

WILLIAM MILLER/NEW YORK POST



The map shows in which US universities the students have protested and/or made encampments in recent days in solidarity with Gaza and protest of Israeli crimes.

AL JAZEERA

This account of anger puts the anger at the heart of student protests in a different light. The student protestors feel a combination of grief and anger at the violence they see on their screens or, often if they are Palestinian, inflicted on those who are close to them. They are angry at their universities because they perceive these institutions to lack moral consistency.

Student protestors in the Netherlands have told me they think Dutch educational institutions are practicing double standards with respect to wars and violence. While other atrocities have been vociferously condemned, most notably the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Dutch institutions have called for neutrality when it comes to Gaza. But upholding neutrality as a value is cynical, the students believe, when it is employed selectively and perpetuates the marginalization of the powerless.

Neutrality

Let’s assume that there is some substance to the idea that universities should remain neutral. The University of Amsterdam, for instance, has banned all “expressions of a cultural, political, and/or religious nature” in its house rules for campus buildings, appealing to the role of the university as a neutral place of learning. A safe space for everyone, university officials suggest, is one which is apolitical. If we accept this

notion, then the students’ anger can indeed be seen as misdirected: it does not belong at universities.

But if we want universities to maintain neutrality in the face of atrocities, we should ask ourselves what exactly we mean by neutrality. Many things that academics and scientists study exist on multiple planes. Take white phosphorus. On the one hand, white phosphorus is the stuff of objective scientific curiosity that we might study in a chemistry lab; on the other hand, it is a chemical used in munitions banned by the Geneva Conventions because it causes third-degree burns that reach to the bone and can lead to multiple organ failure. Amnesty International has shown that the Israeli Defence Forces have illegally used white phosphorus in Gaza.

Not only do objects of science exist on multiple planes, but universities are also normative and political spaces in a more direct sense. They make evaluative judgments about what matters in science. They receive and give funding

Responsibility, according to Young, goes far beyond cases where the responsible agent is the one who caused the harm. Even if individuals and institutions are not causally responsible for injustices, they are nevertheless “politically responsible”. That is, they are in the position to behave in a “morally appropriate way” with respect to injustices, for instance by taking steps to counter them. From Young’s perspective, while universities have not caused the violence in Gaza, it is still their responsibility to do something about it. Just as we, as voters, policymakers, students, faculty, administrators, and so on, are capable of ensuring that the right “outcomes obtain”.

Put in simple terms: if you have fallen off your bike because someone pushed you, I am not causally or directly responsible for your fall. But I am responsible for helping you off the ground. This sort of responsibility is woven into the fabric of our social relations. It is why universities cannot forgo their responsibilities towards injustice simply because they are not causally responsible for it. As long as universities are in a position to do something to improve the situation, they remain politically responsible.

Take the Dutch case. While universities in the Netherlands are not directly involved in the war in Gaza (unlike the Dutch state, which has illegally been selling parts for F35 fighter jets to Israel), they are politically responsible. They can, for instance, suspend ties with Israeli institutions and corporations, while supporting Palestinian students and institutions that are under attack. As powerful institutions of learning that occupy an important place in the national and international landscape, universities can make a difference by taking moral stances. This is the responsibility students want them to recognize.

At the same time, it’s true that anger has its limitations. Fixating on our own emotions as witnesses of atrocities is self-regarding, in that it foregrounds ourselves rather than the atrocities. Furthermore, as Nussbaum points out, outrage and anger alone do not effect change: they are often short-lived. I recall the persistent indignation about the treatment of migrants in Europe at the height of the ‘migrant crisis’ in 2015: in newspaper headlines, in frequent protests, and in classrooms. Now, migrants suffer unbearable conditions in various camps across Europe and continue to die en masse at Europe’s borders — all this, while the hateful far-right scores political victory after political victory. Gone are those vocal protests for migrants when they are needed most.

Outrage is temporary; what is needed are permanent and structural commitments to justice. As stable institutions and communities, universities can be the bases for these commitments.

Solidarity

As students or teachers, we are bound to each other not exclusively as members of an academic community, but also as members of a moral community. In what relationship, I wonder, do we stand to our fellow Palestinian academics in Gaza when we fail to condemn their decimation? Israel has destroyed every university in Gaza through air strikes and planned demolitions. According to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, Israel’s assault on Gaza has killed 94 university professors “as well as hundreds of lecturers and thousands of students”. This is not to mention the fate of schools in Gaza and the pupils who once attended them, thousands of them now starving, thousands of them maimed, and thousands of them dead. We should not fear the anger of students who hold their institutions to moral standards. What we should fear is morally hollow institutions that fail to take political responsibility in the face of atrocities.

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