# Universities as Sites of Class Conflict

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## Introduction

The freedoms of speech, expression, assembly, and inquiry that we take for granted at academic institutions are under threat. Students, faculty, and others exercising their First Amendment rights—native-born citizens and legal residents alike—have been slandered, harassed, suspended, fired, expelled, arrested, held without charge, and threatened with deportation (American Association of University Professors 2025; Bromwich 2025; Misra 2025). At my institution, pro-Palestinian activists were violently dispersed in May 2024; in March 2025, our Board of Visitors voluntarily dissolved the central Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In June 2025, our university president resigned under pressure from the Department of Justice; the circumstances, as of this writing, have not yet been fully explained (Mould and Sawaya 2025; Schmidt and Bender 2025). Naturally, such assaults from administrative, state, and federal bodies have galvanized resistance across this and other universities: We are right to oppose any attempt to control, defund, or censor us. As each week brings new developments regarding the impact of federal interference at my institution and others, it is imperative that we, as librarians and academics, engage in organized resistance against repression (Bender et al. 2025; Blake 2025; Blinder 2025; Moody 2025; Otterman and Hartocollis 2025).

However, it is equally incumbent upon us to never confuse institutional identity with our class interests as workers. The truly insidious threat to academic freedom comes not from external pressure but from university structures and systems that replicate and magnify preexisting inequalities. The academy has always been a site of class struggle, and in this time of overt repression, academic librarians can lead the charge to identify and counter systems of power and exploitation. By collaborating with allies inside and outside of the university, we can advance explicitly class-conscious policies that will directly address the material needs of university workers.

To better understand the situation and task at hand, I will first contextualize a specific right-wing criticism of higher education that can be leveraged to form a better, more materialist critique of universities. I will then conclude by suggesting at least three tools and methods that workers can use to mount effective resistance against both internal and external adversaries.

## Analyzing Right-Wing "Anti-Elitism"

Reactionary movements like MAGA and its ideological allies view higher education as a bastion of so-called liberal progressivism. They seek to either end the cultural influence of universities—especially the Ivy League and other elite institutions—or remake them along

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the lines of Florida's state university system under Governor Ron DeSantis (Atterbury 2025). The Heritage Foundation's manifesto, Project 2025, explicitly specifies reactionary opposition to higher education, referring to universities as "woke-dominated system[s]" packed full of "Marxist academics" (Dans and Groves 2023). A discussion of the legacy of the right's anti-intellectualism and obsession with the real or imagined excesses of progressivism on campus is beyond the scope of this article (e.g., Robin 2017). However, the reactionary critique of universities as elitist and exclusionary is persuasive *precisely* because it contains truth.

The Ivy League pads the ranks of corporations, the military, and government—five of the last six American presidents received degrees from the Ivy League: Trump (UPenn), Obama (Columbia), Clinton (Yale), and both Bushes (Yale). The elite capture of American institutions by the wealthy and well connected, connections inculcated and laundered through exclusive universities, hinders a functional democracy. As of 2023, less than 40 percent of American adults have a bachelor's degree (US Census Bureau 2023), and although the cultural and economic benefits of attending college are self-evident for some, the cost of a college degree has become prohibitively expensive for most people (Mowreader 2024). The cost-benefit of student debt and the capital that stems from the achievement of a college degree no longer makes sense to everyone: "To the majority of non-college-educated people, the [professional managerial class] increasingly appear as pedantic, hypocritical, and punishing" (Liu 2021, 74).

In their manifesto, the authors of Project 2025 are right to espouse trade schools and alternative forms of education that do not force people into enormous debt (setting aside the irony of numerous Project 2025 contributors having graduated from the same institutions they denounce—by my count, there are three Yale graduates, two Harvard graduates, and one graduate each from Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, and MIT among the thirty-four named authors and two editors of Project 2025). However, jobs that require a college degree and jobs in the trades need not be placed in opposition to one another. It is possible to simultaneously value the trades while also supporting those who wish to pursue degrees in literature, philosophy, and the arts: "Give us Bread, but give us Roses" (Oppenheim 1911, 214). Finally, the importance and dignity of trade jobs stem not from some inherent goodness found only in manual labor, but from the protections and benefits won through the historic struggles of organized labor that resulted in better working conditions, livable wages, and the opportunity to retire comfortably (Menaker and Biederman 2025).

So, while the right-wing assessment that universities perpetuate inequality is correct, their remedies would only lead to greater inequalities. The fundamental flaw with the "anti-elitism" of reactionaries stems from the fact that their critique is grounded in culture, not class. For those behind Project 2025, "elite" stands not for economic or political capital, but for culturally popular and "cosmopolitan" beliefs. Only in this equation could the ruling class be considered oppressed while workers, people of color, women, and other marginalized groups be considered "elite". For reactionaries, cultural signifiers replace class distinction.

## The (Real) Problems with Universities

Just as a broken clock is right twice a day, reactionary accusations of elitism are right for the wrong reasons. In fact, universities are propagators of systematic inequality because of their institutional role in society and their ability to wield economic, political, and social capital. In practice, universities function as bourgeoisie replicator machines. Recent research indicates that those with college degrees tend to be more liberal, vote for Democrats, and

make more money than those without college degrees (Zingher 2022). In her 2021 book *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class,* Catherine Liu observes that "academic research [. . .] is being subtly shaped by the agendas of the ruling class—sometimes directly by mega-wealthy individuals and their liberal-minded employees in para-academic positions in the media" (2021, 28). One need look no further than Bill Ackman's personal crusade against Harvard to understand the influence of billionaires on an institution, even one as wealthy as Ackman's alma mater (Wiedeman 2024).

In laundering the interests of their wealthy donors and alumni, universities perpetuate systematic inequality through at least three avenues: first, conducting research that supports unethical practices; second, collaborating with data brokers, tech firms, and technologies that undermine the ethos of scholarship; and third, claiming the mantle of authority and neutrality while perpetuating oppressive hierarchies and class conflict. In the typically incisive wit of Irish comedian and social commentator Frankie McNamara, the problem with academics is the fact that ". . . deep down, [they] don't want to change the world—[they] just want to theorize its decline and get cited for it" (2025).

## Funding Unethical Research

As a function of their societal role, universities work with both private and public interests to launder research, intellectual property, and scholarly labor for use in unethical practices. Since at least the end of World War II, the academy has functioned as part of a threefold system (along with the state and businesses) that together develop, market, and sanction violence, repression, and surveillance (Packard 2023). For example, universities contract with the Department of War (or, until recently, "Defense") to develop lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) (Williamson 2022; see also Beck et al. 2022) and thus provide time, labor, and resources in support of the American military-industrial complex. Furthermore, universities around the world collaborate with Israeli military and government agencies to develop technologies that have direct consequences for Palestinian lives (United Nations Human Rights Council 2025, cf. #83). In her book *Towers of Ivory and Steel,* Maya Wind explores how universities can be weaponized to promote the cultural and historical legacy of one group while simultaneously disparaging, negating, and literally destroying the legacy of another. Although writing specifically about universities in the UK, Elliot Murphy neatly summarizes the push-pull relationship between neoliberal policies and the West's military-industrial complex:

> All of this has occurred alongside the imposition of neoliberal policies on universities, resulting in reduced levels of funding, increased student debt and insecurity, the appearance of various market mechanisms on campus, and the deterioration of faculty self-determination. In this neoliberal environment, the arms trade is most welcome. After all, what could be more "marketable," and "impactful," and "business-friendly" than military research? (2021, 102)

In her book *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*, Sarah Lamdan persuasively argues for the regulation of data brokers and tech companies as a solution to problems of privacy, accessibility, and fairness. Academics already know that corporations like RELX, Thomson Reuters, and EBSCO charge exorbitant fees to access and use academic

publications, scholarly materials, and databases. Through monopolization and other unfair business tactics, these companies retain ownership of materials through digital rights management (DRM), essentially rent-seeking the materials they already force subscribers to pay (cf. Lamdan 2022, 67). Additionally, anyone familiar with the landscape of scholarly publishing—necessary for promotion and tenure—knows that this system relies on uncompensated labor from faculty and grad students to write, edit, and review materials for publication. These same publishing conglomerates then require institutions to purchase expensive subscriptions so professors and students can read and access their *own* research. Moreover, significant economic and business-related research is based on free, publicly available data. The flow of these materials (including gray literature, white papers, census demographics, public company filings, etc.) is particularly susceptible to privatization. Since March 2025, we have witnessed firsthand the defunding, deletion, and disincentivizing of publicly available data as part of the larger attempt to dismantle the administrative state.

Relatedly, emerging technologies like generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) pose unique, even existential threats to the foundation of scholarship. The environmental impact of the infrastructure needed to support data centers is not without consequence, but the existential threat presented by GenAI is not necessarily that of human existence. Rather, AI threatens the quality and meaning of human life and intellectual inquiry. Often lost in official discussions of AI are the deeper issues at play. The right questions are not so much *whether we should* adopt AI or *what kind of* AI tools we should incorporate into our lives, but fundamentally, how do we view the role of technology in society? What do we believe about the relationship between humans and tools? How do humans adapt and change according to their material circumstances? Librarians have previously contended with seismic shifts in the world of technology and incorporated new tools (the internet, ebooks, smartphones) into our work. However, it is precisely the *speed* at which AI has been promulgated and adopted that makes it a fundamentally different kind of technology (with gratitude to my colleague T. B. for this observation).

Naturally, our enthusiasm and embrace of any new technology should never outweigh our ethical concerns. Recall how the initial excitement around social media and its promise to better connect us fell away to reveal how toxic the medium can be to human connection and how companies like Facebook (now Meta) exploit the personal data of millions of users. Similarly, we may soon see a time when the hype surrounding AI will give way to a more sober assessment of both its relative usefulness and its unforeseen consequences.

In the meantime, we must prepare for universities to pursue the profit motive to the detriment of other concerns. The most extreme example might be that of Western Illinois University, whose administration fired many or even all their academic librarians, ostensibly to cut costs—a decision likely driven by the misguided belief that AI could do the same job for less (Palmer 2024). With a "race to the bottom" for wages, librarians and other academics will struggle to "prove" their usefulness to administrators and demonstrate why humans are necessary in the age of ChatGPT.

Techno-optimism is vaporous precisely because wealth distribution and labor exploitation will continue *until* dramatic action is taken. We have arrived at a historical crossroads, and it is our collective action that can influence how we view and apply emerging technologies. As information professionals, librarians stand in a unique position to leverage our professional skills to instruct, shape, and guide us down a path that benefits the many, not the few.

Reading Lamdan's 2022 book in 2025 already feels like reading about a foreign country: only three years hence, we have already seen the elimination of whatever guardrails,

regulations, and restrictions were in place, and we face both a dramatic increase in price and exclusivity, alongside a rapid narrowing of access. Even if universities may not be primarily to blame for the creation and proliferation of predatory subscriptions or technologies developed by companies like OpenAI, Meta, and Google, higher education's fatalistic embrace of Silicon Valley's effluent betrays the mandates of academic freedom, intellectual curiosity, and scholarly integrity.

Without succumbing to utopian hype on one hand or hyperbolic doomerism on the other, the rapid implementation and simultaneous lack of consistent policies regarding the use or misuse of AI in higher education have already shaken the foundations of what constitutes the university experience. The knowledge of *how* to use a technology cannot be used as an excuse for uncritically embracing and condoning the use of GenAI in ways that undermine critical thinking, reading, and writing—ostensibly, the very reasons for pursuing a university education. As Walter Benjamin observed ninety years ago, humanity's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (1969, 20).

## Questions of Authority and Neutrality

Academia also faces a crisis of authority, but it is not alone; other traditional sources of information, such as mainstream media and government entities, are likewise experiencing low levels of public trust (Brenan 2024). This skepticism and distrust, even if taken too far or done for the wrong reasons, should be taken seriously and treated as a legitimate reaction against the excesses of both popular and academic sources. The failures of institutions and the normalization of corruption in business and government lead to the uncomfortable conclusion that some so-called "conspiracies" are at least understandable theoretically, if not factually correct; as Wayne Bivens-Tatum writes, ". . . perhaps the self-interested bias of too many traditional sources of expertise has just become too obvious to too many" (2022, 220).

This is not to dismiss the importance of a shared scholarly ecosystem in which sources, citation, and expertise are respected. Together, these form the foundation for our collective understanding of the world around us. Legitimate skepticism, left unchecked, could lead to a wholesale rejection of rational inquiry and of shared reality, a problem that directly impacts us as librarians. Some of this crisis comes from GenAI and the slop it disseminates in both scholarly circles and in the general populace. But much of the blame also stems from the elite capture of institutions and how so-called "facts" and "common sense" are manipulated or redefined to serve the interests of the ruling class. For example, corporate media entities like the *New York Times* have shamefully covered the genocide in Gaza by parroting IDF *hasbara* and equivocating on obvious instances of war crimes. Additionally, mainstream media sources and "respectable" politicians refused to acknowledge former President Biden's declining mental acuity until it was too late. As librarians, we will find ourselves caught between conspiratorial thinking and official disinformation, a tension that will require from us a level of intellectual bravery that will be difficult.

At the institutional level, official narratives have clearly failed to account for emerging circumstances. With mixed success, universities have endeavored to reckon with their legacies of slavery, eugenics, racism, and sexism because, as we are told, the entire project of liberal democracy depends on the ability to shape a better future by learning from the past. Academia ostensibly promotes the message that the civic duty of all informed citizens is to exercise freedom in service of democracy and to resist tyranny in all its forms. In the

legitimate alarm in response to recent, ongoing government intervention, we should remember that the institutions in which we work are already sites of oppressive neoliberal policies. Systemic, institutional violence is always inflicted on others by those in power, and the chickens have now come home to roost.

The aspiration of liberal democracy to promote freedom, justice, and equality runs aground on the legacy of institutional repression. We are told that the American way of life rests on robust civic institutions and inalienable rights of free speech and free inquiry. Public discourse generally agrees that we are right to honor and emulate the legacies of abolitionists, suffragettes, the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, queer and Indigenous liberation movements, and anti-Apartheid groups. In all instances, these movements were only approved retroactively and rarely supported institutionally at the time they occurred. It is only later that these movements are absorbed and metabolized by the very institutions and systems these movements sought to reform or overthrow. Sanitized, ahistoric narratives paint universities as peerless forces of good that have always been on the right side of history. But for librarian and philosopher Sam Popowich, this dichotomy is not so simple, and our presence in these institutions presents us with a choice: ". . . not between the liberal illusions of pure, individual freedom against tyranny, [but] the choice [. . .] between both corporate and state tyranny on the one hand and a collective commitment to concrete social justice on the other" (2019, 294).

We must no longer fear the appearance of partisanship. As Liu writes,

> . . . in academia, [the professional managerial class] has achieved a great deal in establishing the rigors of peer review consensus and research autonomy, but we can no longer afford to defend its cherished principle of epistemological neutrality as a secret weapon against 'extremism.' We live in a political, environmental, and social emergency: class war over distribution of resources is the critical battle of our times. (2021, 13)

Class war is already raging, and we leave ourselves at a disadvantage by not fully and clearly embracing this fact. Writing about the right to read, Bivens-Tatum states that "the implication of [his] argument is that librarians cannot be, and should not be, neutral at all. Intellectual freedom should not mean the freedom to believe nonsense, but only to read it" (2012, 187).

## Tools of Resistance

So, what is to be done? As Kathryn Lofton, a scholar of religion, states, "The academic is an economic subject. Either they get aware of what comprises their material functioning, or they consign themselves (to borrow from Trotsky) to the dustbin of history. . . ." (2019, 656). In other words, no scholarly discipline, institution of higher education, or form of academic labor exists outside the demands and constraints of political economy. Once that is established, we can then turn to the implementation of at least three tools or methods that can be used by university workers to enact material change.

The first tool in our toolbox is labor organizing. Only through building class consciousness, unionization, and collective action can we advocate for systemic change while also providing cover and security for workers risking their jobs to demand material improvements.

It is imperative that anyone worried by recent events and employed at a college or university join, form, or otherwise participate in a union that organizes, directs, and supports university workers. Recent reporting by *The New York Times* suggests that greater numbers of college students in the US come from more precarious economic circumstances than the "traditional" student stereotype. With greater numbers of students enrolled at community colleges (free, as it were, from the fog of institutional mythos shrouding more "prestigious" schools), the identification of students as workers instead of soon-to-be-minted members of the ruling class could greatly aid the transformation of classrooms from sites of class conflict to sites of class solidarity (Blinder and Rich 2025).

The second tool at our disposal is to implement broad Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns that target not only states like Israel, but also our own government and corporations that use our research and scholarship to develop and field weapons of war and surveillance. Beck, Kayser, and Beenes (2022, 227–42) suggest implementing methods like open letters, protests, boycotts, awareness campaigns, and ethics committees to combat the use of institutional resources for antihuman purposes, whether foreign or domestic.

The third tool is to implement critical and antiauthoritarian pedagogy in our research and teaching. In stark contrast to the logic of the market, the beauty of librarianship is that, at best, our relationships with students and faculty are not primarily transactional. Central to our work as librarians is a collaborative, creative, and comradely disposition that seeks to aid research, teaching, and learning. Although the designation of librarians as faculty, staff, or a hybrid differs from institution to institution, this liminal status can be leveraged for revolutionary purposes. Librarians interact with all kinds of university workers, and in some cases, have formed strong connections that transcend traditional departmental lines. As purveyors of connection and natural organizers by disposition, librarians are uniquely situated to foster interpersonal and interdepartmental solidarity that otherwise siloed departments or programs cannot. Among others, Rob Garnett's research on the production of academic labor can help ground librarian advocacy in class-based analysis: "To defend the core educational purpose of colleges and universities—namely, the production of learners and learning—we need a coherent vision of higher education that places faculty and students at the center, as coproducers of academic knowledge" (2024, 362).

## Conclusion

I conclude with a question: Are we prepared to resist repression *regardless* of its origin? It is hard to resist external pressure, but it is harder still to adhere to our ideals when university administrations treat us as internal opposition. We are fighting a two-front war, but a united front of librarians, faculty, students, and staff can advocate for change. Together *we* form our best hope for the expansion and preservation of public goods and services in the face of austerity, privatization, and overt fascism. This will not be an easy task and requires personal and professional risk: "A socialist intellectual should refuse to wear the cloaks of virtue, erudition, and detachment: she should be prepared to enter the field of class struggle on the side of workers and the exploited" (Liu 2021, 77). How, then, do we advocate for the public good within the confines of an institution? That is, how do we strive for our ideals while simultaneously serving an institution when the two prove mutually incompatible? Although the path is long and arduous, it must begin with building class consciousness and solidarity. Armed with both radical theory and radical practice, we can empower ourselves and groups

within our institutions. Only *together* can we resist the forces of reaction and enact revolution in ways that isolated individuals cannot.

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