


Sacrifice and Silence: Neoliberalism, Right-Wing Populism, and the Repression of Pro-Palestinian Student Movements at the University of Alberta

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the intersection of neoliberalism and right-wing populism in the repression of pro-Palestinian student activism at universities, with a focus on the University of Alberta. Since October 2023, students across Canada have mobilized to demand their universities divest from companies complicit in the genocide of Palestinians, disclose financial holdings, defend the right to protest, and condemn the genocide. In response, university administrations, influenced by neoliberal policies and right-wing populist ideologies, have increasingly securitized campuses and relied on police violence to silence dissent. By framing peaceful activism as a threat, institutions sacrifice students' democratic rights to protect economic interests. This paper explores how the United Conservative Party (UCP) government has influenced the suppression of pro-Palestinian student activism by promoting a right-wing populist narrative that Others pro-Palestinian students and alienates them from the greater campus community. Additionally, this paper criticizes the role of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives for failing to support genuine systemic change. Ultimately, universities have become complicit in upholding oppressive structures, where dissent is criminalized to protect the neoliberal order.

KEYWORDS: neoliberalism, right-wing populism, EDI, social justice, student movements, Palestine



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The rise of right-wing populism and the influence of neoliberal policies at universities across Canada have led to the increasing suppression of student activism, particularly regarding student movements in solidarity with Palestine. Since October 2023, Israel intensified its genocide against Palestinians in an effort to expand the apartheid state, military occupation, and settler colonial project.¹ In response, student-led movements around the world have mobilized to call upon their universities to meet several demands. The Students for Justice in Palestine's (SJP) collective demands for the University of Alberta are to disclose financial practices and holdings, divest from companies complicit in the genocide of Palestinians, defend the right to protest, and condemn the ongoing genocide in Palestine.² However, calls for these demands are met with significant institutional resistance, repression, and police violence. At the University of Alberta specifically, President Bill Flanagan and senior administration authorized Edmonton Police Services (EPS) to violently raid the student encampment within days of its establishment, resulting in mental and physical injuries to protestors and a deepened sense of alienation from the greater University community.

This paper argues that the rise of right-wing populism in Alberta and the influence of neoliberal policies intersect to sustain the suppression of student movements in solidarity with Palestine. This intersection uses the neoliberal tradition of framing peaceful dissent as violent and threatening, rendering students as 'sacrificial citizens' who must forfeit their rights and pursuit of justice for the economic interests of the institution.³ Moreover, this paper explores this dynamic and its influence on transforming universities into spaces where dissent is not only discouraged but actively silenced and met with state-sanctioned violence. In doing so, this paper will highlight failures of neoliberal policies, such as Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), in addressing and eradicating systems of oppression that perpetuate right-wing ideologies and uphold neoliberal agendas. EDI policies at the University of Alberta serve to create and maintain a facade of progressive inclusionary policy while actively criminalizing social justice movements and non-violent dissent,

failing to support the very systemic change it claims to foster. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to demonstrate how student activists at the University of Alberta are not only advocating for global justice, but also challenging the very same oppressive foundations of neoliberalism and right-wing populism within academic institutions and the greater province.

Right-Wing Populism in Alberta: Reframing Palestinian Activism as a Threat

Alberta's political climate, particularly under the United Conservative Party (UCP) government, is witnessing a growing alignment with right-wing populist narratives. Drawing on Freire's concept of oppression which dehumanizes the oppressed by denying their agency and reducing them to objects within systems of control, these narratives vilify marginalized communities and dissenting voices to consolidate power and deflect attention from the failures of neoliberal policies.⁴ Central to these narratives is the entrenchment of whiteness as an invisible norm, which reinforces systemic inequities and sustains the marginalization of racialized and Indigenous communities. Right-wing populism often divides society into two opposing groups: the 'pure people,' portrayed as the white, morally righteous, hard-working, and tax-paying, and the 'corrupt elite,' often represented by marginalized communities such as immigrants, racial minorities, and activists, who supposedly corrupt the values of the 'pure.'⁵

This exclusionary and overtly racist framework scapegoats marginalized communities for societal problems, reflecting on what Shildrick describes as the neoliberal tendency to regulate and marginalize bodies deemed excessive or non-normative, reinforcing economic and social hierarchies through interconnected systems of exclusion.⁶ Rather than addressing systemic failures such as job losses, stagnant wages, and the high cost of living, this framework shifts the blame onto continually oppressed populations, reinforcing exclusion and inequality. By framing these communities as a threat to moral and economic stability, right-wing populism creates a

justification for repressive measures. This ensures that structural inequities perpetuated by neoliberalism remain unchallenged.

The division between two opposing groups can be extended to social justice movements in response to the growing right-wing populist movements in Alberta. On one hand, the Coutts border blockade attempted to disrupt economic activity between Canada and the United States in an act of protest against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates. At the time, RCMP officers arrested 13 people for crimes ranging from possession of weapons, including guns and a machete, to conspiracy to commit murder of police officers.⁷ Concerningly, despite the violent nature of this form of protest, Alberta's UCP Premier Danielle Smith framed it as a "win" because it achieved its intended goal of weakening COVID mandates, aligning with the right-wing populist ideals that glorify defiance against authority by the 'pure' as a legitimate characterization of freedom and democracy, even when such actions involve public endangerment.⁸ This rhetoric is consistent with Premier Smith's troubling pattern of controversial comparisons, such as her widely criticized views of equating the perceived oppression of anti-vaxxers to the persecution of Jewish people during the Holocaust, a comment that rightfully garnered backlash for trivializing historical oppressions and genocides to bolster populist agendas.⁹

On the other hand, the University of Alberta administration villainized the People's University for Palestine solidarity encampment, established on the quad, as the 'violent Other.' University administration played a key role in the Othering of organizing efforts by student collectives through media statements that fueled anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian sentiments, framing the collective as inherently 'dangerous,' 'violent,' and in need of the police services to ensure campus safety.¹⁰ Similarly, the UCP government who supported the violent anti-mandate protests were swift to delegitimize this student collective. Following University of Calgary's decision to call in the police to violently dismantle their student encampment, Premier Smith stated that she would "watch and see" what the University of Alberta learns from

the police response in Calgary, implying her approval of police violence against peaceful protestors.¹¹ Furthermore, MP Michael Cooper, notorious for his Islamophobic remarks—including reading a white supremacist’s manifesto in parliamentary hearings and referring to Muslims as “goat herder cultures” when discussing Muslims within Canadian democracy—quickly labeled the activities of SJP as “antisemitic” and suggested the students were organizing “pro-Hamas rallies,” further inciting anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian bigotry, fear, and stigmatizing the movement by implying a trend of radicalization on University campus.¹²¹³

In the context of pro-Palestinian organizing, the rhetoric of Othering the group against the status quo from our provincial government and university administration mirrors what Steinberg describes as the “political weaponization of antisemitism,” where false accusations are used to silence legitimate criticism of Israel and intimidate activists.¹⁴ While Steinberg acknowledges that antisemitism is a real and dangerous phenomenon, particularly from alt-right and white-supremacist groups, he emphasizes that fabricated charges of antisemitism detract from addressing the actual problem of antisemitism.¹⁵ By condemning pro-Palestinian activism as ‘antisemitic,’ political and University leaders not only silence peaceful dissent but are also inactive in their efforts to address legitimate concerns of antisemitism. Labelling pro-Palestinian students as inherently violent or aligned with terrorism enables politicians, including Premier Smith and MP Cooper, to shift public sentiments against the movement and justify harsh police responses. Similarly, Hashlamon’s (2022) concept of ‘rhetorical debility’ highlights how institutional subjugation suppresses the rhetorical practices of marginalized groups, including pro-Palestinian activists, by delegitimizing their protests and framing them as threatening, while privileging expressions that conform to neoliberal ideals of respectability, whiteness, and safety.¹⁶ In the pro-Israel lexicon, ‘terrorist’ and ‘Palestinian’ have become virtually synonymous; these accusations are a feature of what is now recognized as “anti-Palestinian racism,” a tool used to silence legitimate criticism of Israel and delegitimize Palestinian

solidarity movements.¹⁷ Haggart argues that this tactic to censor political opponents by labeling them as ‘antisemites’ represents a “McCarthyist impulse,” a practice he condemns as fundamentally anti-democratic.¹⁸ While often idealized as being about equality and freedom for all, democracy within neoliberal frameworks is shaped by the economization of its principles, distorting these ideals and reducing freedom to merely an economic concept.¹⁹ This political strategy ultimately renders pro-Palestinian students as ‘sacrificial citizens,’ forced to bear the brunt of the University’s broader neoliberal project, where maintaining institutional stability and economic interests take precedence over protecting the rights and democratic freedoms of students.

Neoliberal Universities & Securitization

In the context of neoliberal universities, students increasingly risk unwillingly becoming “sacrificial citizens,” a term Brown uses to describe individuals whose rights and interests are sacrificed to maintain institutional stability and economic priorities.²⁰ Endowments, investments, and partnerships with major corporations are becoming more prevalent in higher education, reflecting the increasing corporatization and neoliberal orientation of universities; these private interests in education have corrupted a variety of social justice goals, shifting the focus from equitable access and community engagement to profit-driven agendas and market viability.²¹ Therefore, instead of recognizing students who demand divestment as legitimate political actors engaged in social justice movements, they are viewed and sacrificed as expendable when their activism threatens the university’s neoliberal project. The university administration’s rhetoric further reinforces this Othering of the SJP collective, framing their efforts as disruptive and detrimental to the campus community. By categorizing these students as ‘outsiders’ or ‘unlawful,’ the university effectively strips them of their agency and legitimacy.²²

Through these processes, neoliberalism naturally conflicts with the goals of anti-colonial social justice movements.

Neoliberalism adopts securitization practices as a tool to confine social justice movements, framing them as threats to institutional stability and public order. In the case of the University of Alberta's decision to clear the pro-Palestinian encampment, students were accused of being in "violation under the *Trespass to Premises Act*," a common neoliberal tactic to enforce boundaries and restrict dissent.²³ Trespass laws and the notion of private property are used as a complete justification to repress any sort of criticism of university actions, reflecting broader neoliberal logics, where securitization practices—such as the use of police, surveillance, and physical barriers—are deployed to maintain control over private spaces and suppress activism. The selective enforcement of "the private from the public, the protected from the open, the familiar from the strange, the owned from the common" highlights the tyrannical and fascist nature of right-wing attacks on social justice movements.²⁴ These tactics delegitimize movements that challenge the neoliberal order, reinforcing arbitrary definitions of what qualifies as social justice or legitimate freedom of expression and what does not, exemplified in the contrasting responses from the UCP regarding the Coutts blockade and the pro-Palestinian encampments within the province. This selective application of public and private property adheres to right-wing populist narratives, casting legitimate demands for justice by non-right political actors as threats to authority. By criminalizing peaceful protestors as trespassers, the university leveraged these securitization tactics to delegitimize social justice activism and reinforce the neoliberal order, where economic and institutional interests are prioritized over democratic engagement and public dissent. In criminalizing peaceful protestors as trespassers, the University of Alberta utilized these tactics to undermine social justice activism that directly threatens the foundations of the university as a neoliberal institution.

EDI – Diversity Without Justice

Neoliberal policies, such as Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, often serve to reinforce the settler-colonial, white status quo rather than promote genuine systemic change. Instead of addressing the underlying issues of inequity and repression, EDI measures frequently operate as neoliberal tools, creating a facade of progressiveness while maintaining the very structures that suppress dissent and activism. As a result, these initiatives obscure the realities of inequality and allow institutions to present themselves as socially, morally, and ethically responsible without enacting meaningful change. The University of Alberta's *Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity* acknowledges that the eight guiding principles, including human rights and respect for reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, are "more fundamental than institutional policies." (CITE) While these guiding principles project an image of progressive change and inclusion, the institution's actions often contradict these ideals, exposing the dissonance between its stated goals and practices.

Coon & Parker (2021) argue that such policies rebrand past practices of legalized segregation and exclusion as corporatist logistics of race and racism in higher education.²⁵ Universities and other neoliberal institutions will participate in what Coon and Parker (2021) describe as racial capitalism and performative non-performativity, where surface-level efforts of diversity and inclusion, especially in marketing practices, serve to highlight as evidence for structural change; whereas, their actions argue the counter.²⁶ Universities often discuss structural race in relation to access and enrolment for BIPOC students, staff, and faculty, framing this as a 'solution' to structural inequities. This new racism within neoliberalism, which focuses on superficial inclusion, is dangerous as it ignores race as a factor and promotes this idea that we are already living in a post-racial society.²⁷ Institutions, like the university, will engage in diversity work to present an image of racial inclusion and structural change; however, Sara Ahmed argues that diversity within the constraints of such frameworks and institutions becomes more about "changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations."²⁸ The

University's Strategic Plan for EDI outlines five themes, including a focus on "workforce" where the university not only commits to EDI in recruitment and retention but also preparing "faculty and staff... to contribute to equity and inclusivity." (CITE) While this theme positions staff as central to advancing EDI, it also raises concerns with faculty and staff, particularly those from equity-seeking groups, being burdened with performing the diversity work of the institution, further perpetuating the very inequities EDI claims to address. Thus, enacting racial inclusion as the primary indicator of structural change not only reinforces institutional whiteness but, as Ahmed argues, turns inclusion itself into a mechanism that upholds exclusion by ignoring deeper systemic inequalities.²⁹ EDI frameworks embedded in institutions ultimately have been revamped as market-friendly concepts, steering them away from potential tools for social justice and structural changes to mere branding strategies.

For example, a photo of Frank Page, the Manager of the Threat Assessment Program for the University of Alberta Protective Services (UAPS), epitomizes how revolutionary theories and movements can be reduced to mere symbols when co-opted by neoliberal institutions. The image depicts Frank Page the morning of the dissolution of the encampment, in uniform and wearing a Pride flag pin, while actively directing violent police responses against BIPOC and gender-diverse protestors (SJP, n.d). Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism highlights how symbols of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, such as the Pride flag, are mobilized within settler colonial and neoliberal frameworks to reinforce state authority and obscure oppressive practices.³⁰ Moreover, Puar critiques the practice of pinkwashing, where representations of queer rights are used to project a progressive image while simultaneously enabling or justifying systemic violence and oppression, particularly against racialized and Muslim communities.³¹ In the context of Israel, pinkwashing not only serves to legitimize the settler entity by justifying the ongoing settler colonial occupation and genocide against Palestinians but also gains validation through the global normalization of homonationalist

practices, which frame 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion as evidence of progressive values while obscuring systemic violence.³² As a result, it is important to note that EDI initiatives, while ostensibly promoting inclusivity, can encounter resistance framed as a defense against perceived dangers to the status quo. The heightened visibility of marketable symbols like the Pride flag, intended to promote support and safety for 2SLGBTQ+ rights, can paradoxically be perceived as a threat by those who view such representations as challenging established gender norms.

The concept of the new racism within neoliberalism not only promotes the notion of a post-racial society but also complicates the role of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives in holding institutions accountable. In an attempt to portray a progressive, decolonial image, the University has also outlined a 5-year Indigenous Strategic Plan that “hopes to break down some of those colonial barriers” that we see within the University institution.³³ However, the Indigenous Graduate Students’ Association (IGSA) condemned the University’s actions as performative, criticizing its superficial approach to decolonization and Indigenization, especially in the context of its hypocritical, brutal response to the encampment, which IGSA argued to be in defense of settler colonialism.³⁴ Additionally, two Métis PhD students resigned following the violent police sweep of the anti-genocide protest camp, stating in their open letter that if the University intends to suppress calls for divestment through police violence, “then [they] have no choice but to cease to provide [the University] with [their] money or [their] labour to invest.”³⁵ Furthermore, student collectives that the University continually incorporates into its branding strategies of inclusion, such as the Black Students’ Association (BSA), the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA), and the Indigenous Students Union (ISU), to name a few, have further evidenced this trend through public backlash. These collectives took to posting open letters on their respective social media accounts to condemn the University’s response to protests against settler colonialism, criticize the use of police violence to dismantle the encampment, and/or echo the calls

for the resignation of the President, Bill Flanagan.^{36 37 38} EDI initiatives do not merely fail to hold institutions accountable for reinforcing oppressive systems; they actively foster and internalize these measures within their policies, perpetuating cycles of inequality and exclusion, ironically enough. A report by Independent Jewish Voices Canada on the suppression of pro-Palestinian speech in Canada found that EDI initiatives frequently included antisemitism training that “depicted Palestinians, their campaigns, and/or criticism of Israel as antisemitic.”³⁹ This not only reflects a troubling alignment with right-wing narratives but also highlights how policies designed to promote inclusivity can inadvertently perpetuate the racial connotations that drive the political weaponization of antisemitism, in the context of Palestinian organizing on campuses.

Conclusion

The intersection of right-wing populism and neoliberal policies at the University of Alberta enable and encourage the suppression of pro-Palestinian movements, by framing protests and dissent as inherently violent and a threat to institutional stability – or, the institution’s neoliberal branding and right-wing pandering. By rendering student activists as ‘sacrificial citizens,’ these policies force student collectives to forfeit their rights and voices in the name of economic interests, effectively silencing calls for justice and equity. Furthermore, the use of securitization—such as police responses and the enforcement of trespass laws—reinforces a culture of fear that deliberately stifles dissent. These measures not only control public spaces but also deter future activism, ultimately maintaining the status quo while undermining the fundamental principles of democratic engagement and social justice. Reflecting on the larger landscape of Albertan politics, the contrasting responses to the violent Coutts blockade—which received approval from the UCP government as a legitimate expression of dissent—highlights disparity to the violent suppression and condemnation faced by the pro-Palestinian collective on campus. This discrepancy

highlights the hypocrisy in how social movements receive political reactions based on their alignment with the prevailing right-wing populist narrative.

Similarly, EDI initiatives at the University of Alberta reinforce existing power structures, rather than challenge them. While these policies are ostensibly designed to promote inclusivity and address systemic inequalities, they operate as neoliberal tools that foster the roots of oppression. By co-opting revolutionary theories and frameworks within the neoliberal institutions, EDI policies create a façade of progressiveness while failing to hold institutions accountable for their roles in perpetuating violence and inequality. This is evident in the performative nature of branding efforts that highlight marketable symbols without enacting systemic change. The responses from various student groups—such as the Black Students’ Association, the Muslim Students’ Association, and the Indigenous Graduate Students’ Association—further highlight the limitations of EDI initiatives, as these student collectives condemned the University’s response to the pro-Palestinian protest encampment. Furthermore, Indigenous students criticized the University’s performative actions regarding decolonization, citing the University’s failure and hypocrisy in responding to global anti-genocide and anti-settler colonial protests while claiming to support Indigenous self-determination at home. Ultimately, the shortcomings of EDI initiatives not only fail to dismantle oppressive systems but also contribute to their reinforcement, further complicating the struggle for transformative social justice within the neoliberal framework.

The University of Alberta, like many other Canadian universities, insists on maintaining a neutral stance regarding Israel/Palestine. However, there is no moral or ethical justification for neutrality in response to genocide, oppression, and apartheid. By choosing not to fund one side over the other, divestment seems to be the most neutral stance the University can ethically take.

Notes

- ¹ Omar Barghouti, “BDS: Nonviolent, Globalized Palestinian Resistance to Israel’s Settler Colonialism and Apartheid,” in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, (2021), 108.
- ² Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) UAlberta. (@sjp.uofa), (n.d.).
- ³ Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics,” in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory*, (2016), 5.
- ⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (2015).
- ⁵ Lise Gotell, “The United Conservative Government, Right-wing Populism, and Women,” in *Anger and Angst* (Black Rose Books: Montreal, 2023), 487-488.
- ⁶ Margrit Shildrick, “Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, (2012), 2.
- ⁷ Kieran Leavitt, “Danielle smith says Coutts blockade was a ‘win’ because it got rid of covid vaccine mandates,” in *Toronto Star*, (2023).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Joel Dryden, “In resurfaced video, Danielle Smith said the vaccinated fell for ‘charms of a tyrant’ referencing Adolf Hitler,” in *CBC News Calgary*, (2023).
- ¹⁰ University of Alberta, “Statement on ‘Students for Justice in Palestine’ event,” (2023).
- ¹¹ Dean Bennett, “Alberta Premier ‘Glad’ Gaza Protest in Calgary Ended as Encampments Escalate,” in *The Canadian Press*, (2024).
- ¹² Fatima Syed, “‘There Is an Awful Lot of Room for Intolerance’ in Scheer’s Conservative Party: Trudeau,” in *Canada’s National Observer*, (2021).
- ¹³ Michael Cooper, (@MichaelCooperMP), (2023).
- ¹⁴ Bernie Steinberg, “For the Safety of Jews and Palestinians, Stop Weaponizing Antisemitism,” in *The Harvard Crimson*, (2023).
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Yanar Hashlamon, “Rhetoricity at the End of History: Defining Rhetorical Debility under Neoliberal Colonialism,” in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, (2022), 52(1).

¹⁷ Nestel and Gaudet, “Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada,” in *Independent Jewish Voices Canada*, (2022), 18.

¹⁸ Blayne Haggart, “Academic Freedom, Weaponized Antisemitism, and the Big Chill.” In *Centre for Free Expression*, (2024).

¹⁹ Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics,” in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory*, (2016), 5.

²⁰ Ibid, 8.

²¹ Coon and Parker, “Racial Evasion Policy: University Leadership Responses to Incidents of Racism in the Age of Neoliberalism,” in *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, (2021), 345-346.

²² University of Alberta, “Message to the U of A community: Update on encampment - May 11” in *The Quad*, (2024).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in the Twenty-First Century ‘Democracies’,” in *Critical Times*, (2018).

²⁵ Coon and Parker, “Racial Evasion Policy: University Leadership Responses to Incidents of Racism in the Age of Neoliberalism,” 346.

²⁶ Coon and Parker, “Racial Evasion Policy: University Leadership Responses to Incidents of Racism in the Age of Neoliberalism,” 351.

²⁷ Ibid, 363.

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, “Institutional Life,” (2012), 34.

²⁹ Ibid, 43.

³⁰ Jasbir Puar, “Postscript: Homonationalism in Trump Times,” in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 223–241.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Geoff McMaster, “Braiding past, present and future: U of A launches Indigenous-led strategic plan,” in *University of Alberta Folio*, (2022).

³⁴ ¹²² Indigenous Graduate Students’ Association (IGSA), (@igsa_uofa), (2024).

³⁵ The Progress Report, “An open letter from two U of A PhD students resigning from the U of A after violent sweep of anti-genocide protest camp,” in *The Progress Report*, (2024).

³⁶ Black Students’ Association (BSA), (@uabsa), (2024).

³⁷ Muslim Students' Association (MSA) - University of Alberta, (@msauofa), (2024).

³⁸ Indigenous Students’ Union (ISU), (@indigenous.su), (2024)

³⁹ Nestel and Gaudet, “Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada,” 19.

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