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Telos and Critical Pedagogy: Extrapolating the Ideological Censorship of Pro-Palestine Campus Protests

Joshua Guitar, Mansi Brat, Holly Van Ness, Bryan Ocas and Nefertiti Nzameyo

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's military offensive in Palestine has initiated a wave of protests worldwide, particularly on US college campuses. These protests have ignited critical debates on education, democracy ideals, and human rights. Student demonstrations, mostly focused on advocating for Palestinian liberation, have sparked a clash between student activism and political and administrative responses that often prioritize institutional stability over the expression of dissent. As university administrators publicly uphold the right to protest while simultaneously imposing restrictions, a deeper ideological censorship emerges undermining the democratic ethos inherent in education. In this analysis, we explore how neoliberal influences manifest in attempts to police dissent, revealing subtexts in administrative rhetoric that ultimately constrain the educational and participatory roles of students through an ideological telos. By invoking critical pedagogy and the concept of telos within our framework, this study emphasizes the necessity of rethinking the purpose of education as fostering a democratic community that supports activism rather than stifling it. Through a review of the discourse surrounding pro-Palestine campus protests, our findings reveal a collective conviction among students that their activism is integral to their educational experience. Our study concludes with implications for educational communities, advocating that a critically inclined telos of academia, through student protests and critical pedagogy, can usher the dismantlement of a wave of presently rising authoritarianism.

Keywords: campus protests, critical pedagogy, telos

Introduction

The current crisis in Palestine has informed a wave of global protests, many of which have occurred on college campuses. These campus protests have become sites of heated political discourse, especially given the executive actions that have forcibly disrupted many of them. While we recognize the uniqueness of each of these situations, they nevertheless constitute an overarching discourse regarding the actualization of some of democracy's core values, like the freedoms of speech and assembly. However, the necessity of

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education within a democratic society is often misunderstood within these discourses. Given this prevailing lack of attention to education as a fundamental component of democracy, we echo bell hooks (2003) in asserting that upholding "democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated," as a "collective effort," fosters "positive, life-transforming rewards" and promises to progressively "change our society" and eradicate "domination in any form" (p. xiii). As such, whereas colleges and universities are institutions uniquely positioned to espouse a democratic ethos, campus protests and their discourses have attracted broad public attention on the practices, legalities, and university policies regarding demonstrations, which has become especially cogent in the wake of student-activist responses to the ongoing crisis in Palestine.

As tends to be the case for most public demonstrations, discourse surrounding the recent pro-Palestine protests have become public spectacle. Largely, discourses have revolved around clashes between student-led protests and the administrators and law enforcement disrupting them. These sites of contestation have fueled polemical arguments, especially given the cultural layers of race, religion, and international policy rooted within the protests that extend beyond democratic rights of expression and assembly, especially in the US. The heightened tensions have sparked a questionable wave of censorship on college campuses as student protests have become increasingly regulated, cancelled, or eventually overrun by law enforcement. These sites of censorship are important for academic study and will remain an area of focus in the paper. However, through our review of these discourses, we have identified a deeper censorship emanating from subtextual references to a rhetoricized telos of academia. We identify this rhetoricization as an "ideological telos," and we proceed to define and demonstrate how such a rhetorical construction resituates public discourse at faux sites of contestation, like at the center of partisan politics, that erase the voices and democratic ethos of student activism.

Whereas we posit that competing rhetorics regarding academia's telos constitute a site of contestation, we employ critical rhetorical analysis to interrogate the ideological dynamics within this space. Overwhelmingly, student protestors contend that academia's telos extends beyond the formal classroom and should include broader purposes within the realm of democratic citizenship. Although not overtly stated as such, such student advocacy rhetoric espouses theories of critical pedagogy by foundational scholars like Paolo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994; 2003), and operates within the critical/cultural paradigm that seeks to dismantle the ideologies that drive authoritarian power interests, like statism (e.g. Bakunin, 1990), capitalism (e.g. Marx, 1986), whiteness (e.g. hooks, 1994), coloniality (e.g. Grande, 2004), etc. Education, in this sense, is more than a grade and a degree; it is the actualization of democratic citizenship and community.

Conversely, despite making broad, albeit qualified, assertions about students and the right to protest, politicians and university administrators who opine on the telos of academia largely rhetorize campus protests as separate from the educational experience. As such, while university officials and politicians claim to broadly support student activism and education, their rhetoric implies an ideologically informed disconnect between these two ideals. In this sense, institutions of higher education are posited merely as spaces for students to go to class, learn job skills, and graduate into the American work force, rather than as spaces of liberation and participatory democracy. Importantly, this site of contestation presents along

the popularized conservative:liberal binary, within which conservative politicians are advancing a premeditated, overt assault on education through initiatives like Project 2025. Comparatively, Democratic politicians appear as champions of education. However, as we reveal in our analysis, this partisan site of contestation is merely an illusion as both "sides" of this "debate" advance the same undergirding ideological telos, or faux telos, that postures as supportive of democratic education while augmenting the white, neoliberal State.

Through an evaluation of the competing rhetorical frames of academia's telos, in conjunction with democratic concepts—such as free speech, equity, and citizenship—within this (faux) site of contestation, we demonstrate how agents of neoliberalism ideologically censor campus protests in enduring ways beyond evoking campus police and university policies. In other words, while policing campus protests functions as authoritarian censorship, and is thus worthy of our attention, there remains a deeper, persistent undercurrent of ideological censorship, identifiable within the discursive subtexts of the statements made by university administrators and politicians, even from those who espouse support of protest and education. So, while administrators and politicians publicly support the right to education *and* the right to protest, students much more accurately understand the inseparability of these two ideals while administrators remain affixed to the "prevailing neoliberal order of the university" (Darder, 2012, p.417). Given our application of critical pedagogy philosophy within this contested site of telos, we then conclude with a discussion on the implications of our analysis.

We advance Giroux's (2025) recognition of two "deeply interconnected" "forms of scholasticide" which he dubs "ideological and structural" (p.7). Giroux (2025) notes that in Western educational systems, "censorship, repression, and various forms of pedagogical terrorism are aggressively deployed to suppress dissent and critical thought" (p.7). In this, "The ideological assault on free speech and academic freedom lays the groundwork for the physical destruction of institutions essential to critical education as a practice of freedom and liberation," thus ushering "the eventual annihilation of the very foundations of emancipatory education" (Giroux, 2025, p.7). Through our analysis, we demonstrate how the "ideological assault" does not always present as such and is often rhetoricized through an ideological telos that advocates for the advancement of education in neoliberal form. In other words, the vocal advocates of education, while seemingly more palatable than the conservative alternative, decidedly separate education from liberatory initiatives like protests, thus relegating education strictly to formal classroom settings. In the end, the faux contestations only augment "the more aggressive conservative and neoliberal forces" that foster homogeneity and "an economically-driven meaning of freedom and justice" (Darder, 2012, p.418). In sum, we help reframe the ways that education communities can assist students, faculty, and administrators better foster democratic community, rather than excommunication, through campus protest. Given the centrality of telos within public discourse on the recent pro-Palestine protests, we advance this case study and discuss its broader implications.

Context

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an attack from Gaza into Israel during the Nova Music Festival. The attack was one of the deadliest single episodes in the longstanding conflict in the region (Mackintosh et al, 2023) as Hamas took 251 hostages and killed approximately 1,200 people. In response, Israel bombarded Palestine—a state which largely views Israel's presence as colonialist occupation. Since the assault began, as of November 25, 2025, Israel has killed nearly 70,000 Palestinians (Jabakhanji and Bruce, 2025). Soon after Israel's onslaught began, the humanitarian crisis prompted global protests, particularly on US college campuses, where students largely advocated for divestment from Israel and the protection of Palestinian people and culture. Student demonstrators demanded economic disruptions, similar to that of successful student protests and strikes in the past, like those across Quebec in 2012 (Teruelle, 2019) protesting tuition fee increases, and at Southern Illinois University where in 1970 "students sought to interrupt business as usual, forcing a confrontation with the ethical and political implications of the institution's complicity in war and inequality" (Lieberman, and Cochran, 2001, p. 332) when protesting the Ohio National Guard firing at fleeing students—mixed with those going to class—which killed four and injured nine.

As student protest spaces have often succeeded in "providing a meeting area for students who share goals, values, and experiences to pool resources and work collectively," campus administrations have responded with authoritarian measures to quell that which is "too challenging and unpredictable to the neoliberal university" (Dolhinow, 2020, p.17). Pro-Palestine student protestors have also faced external backlash, like at Harvard University, when students faced doxing attacks by a conservative organization called Accuracy in Media; personal information, like student names, class years, photos, and hometowns, were published online (Hill and Orakwue, 2023). More broadly, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Louis D. Brandeis Center For Human Rights Under Law (Brandeis Center) sent a letter to the presidents of nearly 200 American colleges and universities calling attention to what they perceived as antisemitic behavior. The letter called for the investigation of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) for potential violations of 18 U. S. C. § 2339A and § 2339B, federal statutes that prohibit providing material support to terrorist organizations (Greenblatt, Lewin, and Marcus, 2023). In response, on November 1, 2023, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sent a letter to over 650 American college and university leaders strongly opposing the suppression of peaceful protests on campuses, citing violations of free speech, and emphasizing the lack of evidence for the claims made by the ADL and the Brandeis Center (Romero et all, 2023).

By mid-November 2023, reports of physical altercations, (Alfonseca, Katersky, and Margolin, 2023), growing perceptions of antisemitism (Barr and Hensley, 2023), Islamophobia, and xenophobia, and the deactivation of student-activist groups plagued colleges and universities across the US. In Florida, Chancellor of the State Ray Rodrigues demanded that state universities deactivate their SJP organizations, prompting the University of Florida chapter of SJP to file a lawsuit against Rodrigues. At Columbia University, pro-Palestine groups were forcibly disbanded, escalating a new wave of fear among groups at other schools and leading to the rise of new organizations which held the same passion and dedication to

leading demonstrations but did not fear disbandment due to not being officially recognized (Hill and Kettles, 2023).

As the crisis in Palestine persisted, campus protests and the responses to them became more complex. At the University of Pennsylvania, administrators denied a request to screen *Israelism*, a documentary critical of Israel made by young, Jewish-American filmmakers who confront longstanding assumptions about Palestine. Despite a warning from the Vice Provost of University Life, student-led organization Penn Chavurah proceeded with the screening and attracted nearly one hundred community members (Cota and Herzog, 2023). On January 26, 2024, when the International Court of Justice claimed that Israel was in violation of the Genocide Convention (International Court of Justice, 2024), three protestors, including two students from Gateway Community College, were detained for advocating for a ceasefire in Gaza during a campus visit by Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont and acting US Secretary of Labor Julie Su (Ingram and Uzunlar, 2024). On April 4, 2024, Columbia University suspended four students for participation in an authorized event titled "Resistance 101" (Huddleston, Stahl, and Mendell, 2024).

Across the US, pro-Palestine protests often took the form of encampments, which were often met with even harsher penalties. On April 17, 2024, Columbia University students established an encampment consisting of approximately fifty tents on campus that was quickly dismantled the following day by the New York City Police Department (NYPD), which had been authorized to do so by President Minouche Shafik. A new encampment was installed the next day and lasted until April 29, 2024, when it was forcibly dismantled again. On April 30, 2024, student protestors occupied Hamilton Hall, prompting a second NYPD raid and resulting in the arrest of over one hundred students. These arrests represented the first instance of Columbia University allowing police to suppress campus protests since the demonstrations against the Vietnam War in 1968 (Mansoor, 2024). Meanwhile, at the University of California Los Angeles, a Palestine solidarity encampment was confronted by more than 100 counter-protesters who deployed aerosol irritants, discharged fireworks, dismantled encampment barricades, and assaulted individuals inside with metal poles and wooden planks (Hamilton, 2024). Although an external analysis of 533 campus protests conducted in response to the Israeli offensive revealed that the demonstrations were overwhelmingly peaceful, US law officers have nevertheless arrested over 2,800 individuals relating to campus protests, most of whom were students (Moody, 2024).

Once the 2023-2024 academic year concluded, college campuses quieted throughout the summer months. Most encampments had been dismantled, either voluntarily or by force, and media coverage of student-led demonstrations diminished. Nevertheless, the passion for the cause remained vibrant. For example, the Palestinian Youth Movement, alongside other organizations, hosted a three-day conference bringing in over 3,000 participants (Markin, 2024). As well, over 100,000 protestors, including college students, convened in Washington D.C. to oppose President Joe Biden and his administration for their support of Israel (Lebowitz, 2024) and protest the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Ludden, 2024). Furthermore, there was a growing mobilization to advocate for students facing legal charges related to their involvement in encampments and occupations.

Throughout the summer of 2024, many US universities updated their policies regarding the censorship of campus protests as they braced for the potential resurgence of campus activism. For example, Rutgers University issued a one-year suspension for one of the student groups that led protests on its New Brunswick campus and banned the New Brunswick chapter of SJP from participating in campus activities over the coming academic year (NBC10 Staff, 2024). In another instance, Montclair State University instituted a new policy on "expressive activities," which was revised soon after its implementation in response to student backlash (Kadosh, 2024). The Trump administration withdrew 400 million dollars in federal aid to Columbia University, claiming the university failed to address antisemitism on its campus (Looker, 2025).

In the US, many politicians and university administrators threatened students who assembled on college campuses in support of Palestinian liberation. President Donald Trump, for instance, has threatened more funding cuts "to [public] colleges allowing 'illegal protests'" (Singh and Allen, 2025). In negotiations with Trump, Columbia University eventually consented to a set of demands in exchange for their funding. As part of the agreement, the university prohibited the wearing of face masks and granted police officers enhanced powers (Tucker and Watson, 2025).

Trump has begun fulfilling his threats on student activists. For example, Mahmoud Khalil, an immigrant student at Columbia University, was arrested at his university residence by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents who indicated they would revoke his green card (Osgood, 2025). Another student at Columbia University, Yunseo Chung, claimed that immigration officials executed search warrants at various Columbia University locations, including her dorm, due to her involvement in the pro-Palestinian protests on campus. As of March 25, 2025, Chung has initiated a lawsuit against the Trump administration (Halpert, 2025). To date, the Trump administration has revoked the visas of hundreds of students who participated in Pro-Palestine protests (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025).

The fight for the protection of campus protests remains paramount here, especially within the context of the recent pro-Palestine movement. However, we argue that we need to more substantively disrupt the undergirding neoliberalism informing perceptions of academia's telos as an apolitical, and thus anti-democratic, enterprise. While the causticity of the Trump administration cannot be overstated, the presented "pro-education" alternative advances "watered down and tame versions of civic or community engagement toward social justice" where "universities attempt to control and direct dissent on their campuses while commodifying the elements of social justice for easy consumption and university credit" (Dolhinow, 2020, p.17). As a result, "the values, priorities and private interests…redefine the purpose of higher education, heavily tilting the public enterprise toward the neoliberal mission" (Darder, 2012, 420) and perceptions of politically quiet college campuses create "the illusion that there is no dissent," which silences dissidents and leaves "the general public ignorant of alternative political opinions" (Demaske, 2008, p.53). In totality, while the contestations within these spaces indicate different approaches to education, the ideological usurpation of academia's telos inconspicuously informs the underpinnings of this entire discourse.

Telos: From the Classical to the Critical

Within the tradition of rhetorical studies, the concept of telos derives from Aristotelian philosophy, and serves as a foundational principle within rhetorical thought. In theorizing telos, Aristotle (1999) contends that overwhelmingly, things have evolved or been constructed to have a "nature" or an "end," and that these things "cannot be the result of coincidence or spontaneity" (part 8, para 3). In essence, the idea of telos is to emphasize the intrinsic purposes of the material world as well as our actions within it. Aristotle's (1999) notion posits that everything possesses a form that defines its very existence, like how "leaves" provide "shade for fruit" (part 8, para 4). Per this perspective, Aristotle (2006) argues that "this end is the good of that thing, and in general the supreme good in the whole of nature" (part 2, para. 2).

Recently, however, critical rhetorical scholars have expanded the concept and application of telos beyond the naturalist arguments that default to purpose as a static condition, instead turning toward a philosophy that reconceptualizes telos to embody a progressive fluidity. Ono and Sloop (1992), for instance, argue that "a commitment toward a contingent telos must exist as a sustained critical praxis for those engaging in critical rhetoric" (p.48). Given the critical turn in the late twentieth century and academic conversations regarding the shifting theoretical landscape of rhetorical studies (Hall, 1997), Ono and Sloop (1992) theorize telos as representative of "the moment when a person's pen is put to paper purposively, when ideas become words and when will becomes action" (p.48).

This reframing does not entirely reject Aristotelian philosophy; instead, it signifies a departure from viewing telos as merely an "end state in the Greek sense" or as "teleology in the religioethical sense" (Ono and Sloop, 1992, p.48). Critical rhetorical scholars highlight that maintaining a fluid understanding of purpose ensures the actualization of critical rhetoric's own telos of advancing human knowledge in concert with ecological liberation and the dismantlement of authoritarian systems of power. As Aswad (2021) notes, there exists a "rhetorical disconnect between what critical rhetoric purports and what its rhetorical practices entail—a jadedness toward radical subjects" (p.218). Aswad (2021) argues for a radical rhetorical paradigm that more closely aligns with the emancipatory goals of rhetoric's critical turn and that we, as scholars, "establish a practice of rhetoric that agitates toward creating a space for all of us to become 'cognitive revolutionaries'" (p.218).

This reconceptualization embraces the complexities of human discourse, and a broader ecological experience acknowledging that goals and intentions are shaped by shifting natural, social, political, and cultural contexts. By adopting a perspective of progressive fluidity, telos becomes an ongoing process of becoming rather than a final destination. This allows for greater flexibility in how individuals and societies define and pursue meaning, opening possibilities for growth, adaptation, and continuous transformation. Through this lens, rhetoric is not merely a tool for persuasion toward a fixed goal, but a participatory practice that shapes and reshapes purpose in response to the demands of the moment.

Critical scholars broadly understand telos as a guiding principle that sculpts and directs the purpose and outcomes of rhetorical practices, serving as a framework that informs how arguments are constructed, what values are prioritized, and how rhetoric can influence or persuade audiences. Cisneros (2021), for

instance, calls for an abolitionist telos that relates directly to contemporary protests that challenge systems of exclusion, domination, and marginalization, critiquing the implicit telos of citizenship that is bound by settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and heteropatriarchy (p.95). Protests about immigration policies, such as those pertaining to the US/Mexico border, highlight the ways citizenship is used as a gatekeeping mechanism that upholds racial and economic inequalities. Cisneros (2021) further argues that "the study of border(ing) rhetorics (perhaps the study of rhetoric, full stop) should be governed by a commitment to such an abolitionist telos" (p.95) to dismantle rather than uphold systems of exclusion. Relating border(ing) rhetorics to academics, Cisneros (2021) suggests that the "commitment to telos entails considering the border(ing) rhetorics within our own discipline, especially how these inhibit the mobility and advancement of certain types of scholars and scholarship and/or allow only for their 'differential inclusion' and exploitation" (p.97).

Additionally, Aswad (2021) emphasizes the importance of solidarity with the "radical subject, achieved within a radical rhetorical paradigm that acknowledges the radical subject's testimony as a resistive historical actor" (p.211). Solidarity, in this context, is not just an intellectual pursuit, but a tangible, action-oriented commitment to the radical subject. By centering the radical subject—the individual or community resisting oppression—Aswad (2021) proposes that the telos of radical rhetoric is not just to critique or analyze social structures, but to actively engage in solidarity that pushes these structures toward transformation so the radical subject's testimony becomes "the starting point in inquiry" (p.211).

Furthermore, critically conceptualized telos plays a pivotal role in approaching contemporary social protests, particularly in the discussions surrounding the efficacy and ethical implications of social movements. For instance, Murray (2022) critiques the current understanding of nonviolent protests, arguing that it has shifted from being a strategic approach toward justice to becoming "an end itself, [essentially] a telos" (p.147). While recent pro-Palestine student protests were overwhelmingly non-violent, Murray's argument nevertheless demonstrates how an ideological telos clouds public perceptions of public activism. Murray (2022) notes that the use of protest violence does not merely serve to highlight the presence of nonviolent protestors; rather, it aims toward a democratic telos that seeks to disrupt undemocratic processes. Murray (2022) emphasizes that the primary objective of protest is justice, and that "using nonviolent tactics without understanding the role of disruption and the telos of justice was immoral" (p.156). By contrasting mainstream notions of protest with leftist critiques that position violence as a necessary response to systemic oppression, telos becomes something rooted in community protection and the disruption of oppression. Rhetorical scholars must acknowledge that protest violence can restore the disruptive function of protests, and that "we have been led astray by our unquestioning cultural valorization of nonviolence" (Murray, 2022, p.161). Rather than viewing protest violence as an unwarranted deviation from rhetorical norms, it should be recognized as a means to address the vulnerabilities of systemic oppression within public spaces and restore the disruptive functions of protest. Whereas an education that enhances democracy innately challenges authoritarian power and advocates for justice, we find these perspectives on telos as broadly encompassed within the philosophy of critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy as Telos

The concept of telos maintains a significant presence—albeit oftentimes unspoken or elusive—within the philosophy of critical pedagogy as democratic praxis. Dewey (1930), for example, argued that "the purpose of school education" was to organize "the powers that insure growth" (p.60) and advocated for a holistic approach to education. Yet, Dewey (1930)—despite being regarded for his contributions to participatory education—struggled to accept that an abstract concept like education warranted a telos, arguing that pedagogy can have "no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers, etc., have aims" (p.125). Nevertheless, philosophies like that of Dewey (1930) and Marx—who never advanced a formal theory of pedagogy in his writings—have collectively helped shape the philosophy of critical pedagogy and its purpose.

Following the scholarly lineage of critical thought, scholars have long interrogated how Western societies have instituted educational systems that benefit the privileged classes already in power. For instance, radical minds like Bakunin (1990) scrutinized how education systems perpetuated the realities of statism and capitalism. Bakunin (1990) urged a "revolutionary" approach to education that promised "liberation" as well as "the broad development of social life" (p.135). Just as Bakunin (1990) theorized ways for the oppressed to "throw off their hated, centuries-old yoke and eradicate bourgeois exploitation and the bourgeois civilization that is based upon it" (p.20), other scholars have long argued similarly, like Foucault (1995) who criticized modern education for operating like "a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding" that dictates "a hierarchy of knowledge or ability" (p.147) and Grande (2004) who argued that the purpose of education is to "understand, reveal, and disrupt the mechanisms of oppression imposed by the established order, suturing the processes and aims of education to emancipatory goals" (p.21).

Regarding the philosophy of critical pedagogy proper, scholars largely credit Paulo Freire (1970) who challenged the traditional relationships among educators, students, and the expansion of knowledge. Freire (1970) analyzed normative educational dynamics at various levels and revealed that relationships overwhelmingly position teachers as narrating subjects and students as passive objects. Freire (1970) scrutinized educational models that assumed students to be mere vessels that learned solely by intaking information, and he criticized this static approach to "learning" that disregarded the transformative potential of knowledge. Indeed, such systems discourage critical engagement and disempower both students and teachers within the process (Smith and Seal, 2021).

Critical pedagogy interrogates the social, environmental, and economic systems that reinforce anti-democratic power imbalances (Freire, 1970). The interests of the oppressors lie in transforming "the mentality of the oppressed, but not the situation oppressing them" (Beauvoir, 2012, p.126). Freire (1970) contends that "the more the oppressed adapt to the situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (p.55). This dynamic is reflected in the role of modern public education, which is widely recognized among critical scholars as a vehicle for instilling capitalist values that promote individualism, neoliberal competition, and a disregard for collective efforts (hooks, 2003). Critical educators argue that privatization

and militarization are deeply embedded within the education system, aligning it more closely with corporate interests that delegitimize democratic processes.

Critical pedagogues challenge the systems that perpetuate oppression, especially within educational settings. In essence, critical pedagogy recognizes that learning should be "liberatory" (hooks, 1994, p.6). By revising the oppressive banking model of education, critical pedagogues intend to transform how reality is received and processed, calling for a shift away from a mechanical, robot-like passive engagement with information and encouraging humans to actualize their agency in alignment with an "ontological vision of humanization" (O'Shea, 2013, p.145). From this perspective, education is not a neutral or apolitical concept, but a site of ideological struggle where students should be empowered to critically analyze and question the dominant systems of power rather than mindlessly accept them. Critical pedagogy fosters critical consciousness, creates spaces for dialogue that uncover social injustices, and urges transformative alternatives. It also challenges the authoritarian status quo, encouraging participatory learning and empowering students "for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination" (hooks, 2003, p.46). Critical pedagogy encourages questioning entrenched beliefs and amplifying marginalized voices, emphasizing solidarity in the pursuit of a more just world. Educators within this philosophy labor "to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination," especially as it pertains to "race, gender, class, and religious hierarchies" (hooks, 2003, p.45). Critical pedagogues intend to help students develop "competencies they need to cultivate the capacity for critical judgment, to thoughtfully connect politics to social responsibility and expand their own sense of agency in order to curb the excesses of dominant power, to revitalize a sense of public commitment, and to expand democratic relations" (Giroux, 2001, p.20).

The intersection of telos and critical pedagogy provides a particularly ripe space for analyzing the discourses surrounding the recent pro-Palestine student protests. The recent actions of the Trump administration (Halpert, 2025), for example, cogently demonstrate that while student protests overwhelmingly sought to author an ethos of democratic worldmaking, students are regularly "spied on, incarcerated, criminalized and written out of the discourse of democracy," and have been subjected "to the harsh dictates of the neoliberal state and a symbolic reminder of a social order that offers youth no promise of an alternative and democratic future" (Giroux, 2009, p. 29). Given the capacity of critical pedagogy to inform our understanding of the discourses surrounding campus protests, we now analyze the discursive tensions pertaining to the competing perceptions of telos across education discourses, with critical attention paid to the "ideological telos" of those in power.

Analysis

In this critical rhetorical analysis, we interrogate the construction of academia's telos by prominent university administrators, politicians, and student activists regarding the recent pro-Palestine campus protests. Although not an exhaustive evaluation of protests across this context or beyond, the gravity of the situation warrants our undivided attention in unpacking these rhetorical constructions. Significantly informing our studied site of contestation is the rhetorical framing by university administrators and

politicians who, in one statement, claim to defend principles of free speech and assembly on college campuses, and, in another, exclude protest activities from their articulations of academic practices. These statements overwhelmingly contrast with those of student activists who envision academia as a space for democratic worldmaking. Whereas protests, by their nature, disrupt and challenge the status quo. Responses to these disruptions and challenges by agents and institutions of power can reveal the undergirding ideologies of an anti-democratic status quo.

Student Activist Rhetoric and the Telos of Education

In the recent pro-Palestine movement, student activist leaders overwhelmingly supported the Palestinian cause in the name of justice, human rights, and democratic harmony. However, in advancing a rhetoric of social justice for Palestine through campus protests, student activists also articulated an academic telos that envisioned college campuses as grassroots sites of democratic worldmaking. While major news media and politicians exaggerated instances of spectacle, student activists largely celebrated inclusive, "carefully organized" campaigns that were "committed to building a community from scratch" (Oakes, 2024). In a statement regarding university restrictions of Pro-Palestine protests, the Council of Graduate Students at the Ohio State University (2024) argued that if administrators actually believed in "free speech," "academic freedom," and "Education for Citizenship" (the university's motto), "then political expression and normal campus activities should be encouraged, not met with threats and violence from police and criminalization." George Washington University student activist Miriam Siegel (2024) contended that the protests provided "value" to the "community" and that they demonstrated a "microcosm of the radically different world we strive for—a world founded on solidarity, love, accountability, and collective care. Our community has demonstrated this kind of world is possible and that is terrifying to those who thrive off our isolation, separation, and oppression." Siegel (2024) further expressed that their protest fostered a robust "site of cultural exchange and community education." University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate student Dahlia Saba offered similar sentiments, arguing that her university had "lost its sense as a moral institution, an institution of ethics and an institution that aspires to do good in the world" and that it should, instead, act "as a force of justice in the world, rather than just a machine that takes in money and spits out degrees" (Hellmann, 2025).

Recent pro-Palestine student protests articulated their telos of liberatory education in ways that coincide with previous scholarly discourse on student protests. Protest spaces and encampments represent what Dolhinow (2020) has called "Commons Counter Spaces" which "offer students a place to organize their activist campaigns and support each other in their growth as radical activists" (p.17). For example, recent pro-Palestine protests parallel some anti-Vietnam war demonstrations where "Students envisioned an education that went beyond vocational training to include critical awareness of social injustice, fostering active citizenship rather than passive compliance" (Lieberman and Cochran, 2001, p. 327).

Overarchingly, pro-Palestine student protests demonstrated the praxis of an academic telos embodying critical pedagogy and radical democratic worldmaking. Across US encampments, "students held teach-ins, built libraries and created alternate curriculums with de-colonial scholars and teachers fashioning ideas that challenged the status quo" (Essa, 2025). Despite news media designed to profit off the

spectacular, student encampments were overwhelmingly "peaceful," "well-organized," and featured "inspiring interfaith spaces, snacks and art supplies for children and musical performances" (Cabán et al., 2024). Encampments often offered amenities like free tutoring and medical supplies, and students—including Jewish students—reported feeling "united," a strong "sense of community and love" (Forand, 2024), and "safe" (Houdek, 2024). Students also expressed a sense of "hope" and "joy" despite their mission, and they celebrated the diversity of the intimate communities they had built (Eid, 2024). In addition to calling attention to the crisis in Gaza, student encampments raised awareness on multiple other societal problems as well, like university investments and campus policing (Said, 2024). In addition to these initiatives, students reported that the encampments deconstructed the ways they "have been conditioned to view the world" (Terrell, 2024).

These exemplars of student activists broadly articulate that campus protests function as a core component of academia's telos. Whereas discourse often differentiates between the pursuit of truth and the promotion of social justice, student activists understand the co-constitutive nature of truth and democratic advocacy. Although the students are not directly citing critical pedagogues like Freire (1970) and hooks (1994; 2003), they nevertheless demonstrate an academic telos that opposes neoliberal education and supports democratic worldmaking.

University Rhetoric and the Telos of Education

While US university administrators actively quelled pro-Palestine protests, they also covertly censored the processes of democracy by articulating an ideological telos grounded in "education" as oppression, often packaging such statements within supposed support for First Amendment rights. For instance, University of California's President Michael V. Drake (2024) stated that while the university supports free expression and that there are "countless ways to protest lawfully," university administrators "must act" when that "expression blocks the ability of students to learn or to express their own viewpoints, when it meaningfully disrupts the functioning of the University, or when it threatens the safety of students, or anyone else." Drake's statement reflects a commonly held belief among university administrators that campus protests are only acceptable if they do not interrupt the ideological telos of education. Shafik (2024) iterated similarly that Columbia University was "committed to academic freedom and to ensuring that all members of our community have the right to speak their minds" and that "everyone at Columbia has the right to express their views," but that "protests must comply with time, place, and manner restrictions which, for example, prevent loud protests at night when other students are trying to sleep or prepare for exams." Shafik (2024) contended that the right to free expression "cannot come at the expense of another group's right to speak, teach, and learn."

Like Shafik's comments, many university administrators regularly rhetoricized campus protests as external to educative actions. University of Oregon President John Karl Scholz (2024) stated that his university would remain committed to "long-standing policies for peaceful protests and demonstrations" that "are designed to protect and uphold free speech while maintaining health and safety" and "limiting disruptions to education while preserving the daily activities required for learning, teaching, living, and working at the university." Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway similarly contended that

Rutgers valued "free speech and the right to protest, but it should not come at the cost of our students' education and safety" and that they sought to "balance these rights and maintain a safe and secure environment for our students to learn and succeed" (Nieto-Munoz and DiFilippo, 2024). In a joint statement, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill administrators Interim Chancellor Lee H. Roberts and Provost J. Christopher Clemens (2024) stated that "While anyone — including students, faculty and staff — may gather and exercise their rights to free speech, state law and the Board of Governors policy prohibit disruption of University operations" and that since "students are preparing for final exams and end-of-year activities, including graduation," they would "continue to promote an educational environment where they can do so safely and without disruption." George Washington University President Ellen M. Granberg (2024) called local protests "illegal and potentially dangerous" and urged for a return "to normal operations." By framing the protests as "disruptions" to the "normal operations" like "final exams" of their universities, administrators clearly articulate an ideological telos that positions protests as antagonistic rather than integral to intellectual advancement and democracy.

Political Rhetoric and Telos

Despite articulating their support for free speech and a right to protest, US politicians often perpetuate an authoritarian, subtextual rhetoric that censors public protests, especially when the protests are critical of US foreign policies (Demaske, 2008). Recent political discourse surrounding the Trump administration's efforts to shutter the Department of Education has especially complicated efforts to address campus protests and the broader telos of academia. Senate Majority Leader (2024) Chuck Schumer (D-NY) emphasized that free speech, even in the form of strong disagreement, is a fundamental American value and should be preserved on campuses; however, drew a line when protest behavior veered into what he termed "lawlessness," suggesting that such actions were not aligned with the core functions of higher education. Schumer argued that "campuses cannot be places of learning, argument, and discussion when protests veer into criminality" (Schumer, 2024).

Despite partisan differences, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) advanced a rhetoric similar to that of Schumer, stating that protests and occupations disrupt the academic purpose of universities. McConnell (2024) criticized campus protests as disturbing students who "want to go to class, study for exams, and lead productive lives." McConnell not only excludes campus protests from the educative process, he equates going to class and studying for exams with the neoliberal mythos of leading a "productive" life. McConnell (2024) even went so far as to celebrate arrests made on campuses for "unlawful disruptions," an utterance that positions protests as external to the formal functions of a university. Additionally, Biden (2024) contended that, "dissent must never lead to disorder or to denying the rights of others so students can finish the semester and their college education. Look, it's basically a matter of fairness. It's a matter of what's right. There's the right to protest but not the right to cause chaos." While presented as a defense of protest, Biden positions campus protests as separate from the processes of a democratically inclined pedagogy.

Like that of university administrators, many influential US politicians assume that academia's telos is to remain restricted within a neoliberal, banking model of education. So, while university and political

officials claim to support the rights of free speech and assembly, they advance an ideological censorship of democratic worldmaking. Critics of such a critical pedagogy contend that universities should maintain a singular telos centered solely around a restricted sense of truth-seeking (Haidt, 2022). Haidt's claims, like that of many politicians and university administrators articulate a simplified, static idea of an academic telos. Haidt fails to understand that "the political nature of knowledge production requires that we examine whose interests are served by the production and dissemination of knowledge" (Harding, 2004, p.1).

Discussion

Through this analysis, we have demonstrated that despite the importance of the discourse regarding the direct censorship of campus protests, a deeper level of censorship exists within the ideological subtext of campus protests writ large. Although university policies that dictate the parameters of campus protests certainly operate as censorship, we identify and interrogate a deeper ideological censorship within the discourse regarding the telos of higher education. The rhetoric of student activists on campuses largely frames the telos of education as elemental within the whole of democracy, conjoining it with other fundamental ethics like free expression, community-building, and social justice. Conversely, while representatives from institutions of power that benefit from the corporatization of American education rhetoricize their conceptions of pedagogy differently—oftentimes fostering partisan bickering as a result—they nevertheless all advance an ideological telos that positions education as a transactional process within an economic model of consumerism. Thus, while Giroux (2025) has described the "soft and hard war on education, history, critical inquiry, and any viable movement of dissent" (p.5), the soft war presents as partisan polemics while functionally driving a faux telos that serves the interests of the white, neoliberal State.

Despite the restrictions suggested by administrators, a philosophy of critical pedagogy—which aligns with democratic progress—asserts that campus protests are inherently tied to the mission of higher education, particularly in the context of empowering critical thinking and encouraging liberation and intellectual growth. Protests, often organized by students, serve as a direct challenge to existing inequities and injustices. In this sense, protests function as a form of active inquiry, where students promote universities as spaces of intellectual engagement rather than transactional consumerism. Protests—whether focused on demanding divestments, organizing sit-ins, or engaging in picketing—reflect a desire for societal change and for the questioning of dominant narratives that do not serve diverse or marginalized communities. The refusal to allow protests to take place on campus, or the imposition of severe restrictions on how protests can be conducted, risks undermining the dynamic intellectual environment that higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to nurture within democratic societies.

Critical pedagogy urges citizens to engage in dialogues that challenge the dominant, packaged ideals of what education should be. Whereas past student protests have demonstrated their propensity to initiate change (Teruelle, 2019), such movements can energize both educators and students to command democratic progress regarding a variety of social injustices. As hooks (2003) notes, for instance, "From the onset, the presence of black studies created a context for a counter narrative, one in which learning

could take place that did not enforce white supremacy" (p.3). The introduction of Black Studies, and other disciplines focused on oppressed groups, not only disrupted the stagnant curriculum but also challenged the dominant values that academic institutions identified. In this, pro-Palestine activism urges more than an end to the crisis in Palestine; it seeks to initiate a new wave of democratic community building and worldmaking.

While university administrators and politicians overwhelmingly offer an oppressive functionality of academia that engrains students "with the narrow rationality of neoliberal objectives" (Darder, 2012, p.420), critical pedagogues and student activists advance a more fluid concept of telos, arguing that "while the telos of an ax may be stable over time, everything else about it — its design and the context in which it is produced and used — is not. In other words, the telos of an ax does not tell its whole story. Likewise, the telos of the tool we call higher education does not tell its whole story either. We require context, too" (Koppelman, 2021). A critical telos of truth ensures, for instance, that marginalized groups have equal access to education and opportunities to contribute to the processes of knowledge (Ahmed, 2012). Furthermore, the idea that universities should rotate around a single axis disregards the reality that universities—and society as a whole—are constantly evolving.

In response, while we recognize that the telos of academia should be grounded in the pursuit of knowledge, we firmly contend that these epistemological processes cannot properly exist without the obliteration of ideologies that oppress. In other words, to the extent that society restricts, whether overtly or covertly, the capacity for everyone to freely and equitably access epistemological processes, we are defaulting to anti-democratic conceptions of an academic telos. In this, social activism that seeks to liberate, like that of, broadly, the recent pro-Palestine protests, is not just an extra-curricular activity on campus; it is an inseparable component of democratic education. So, as politicians and administrators articulate an ideological telos focused on going to class, taking exams, and getting a degree, they evoke a subtextual censorship that is counterintuitive to education as liberation. Any iteration of education that decenters liberation is but a neoliberal enterprise posturing as otherwise.

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