

What we've learned in New York City

11 May 2024 Ben Hillier [SHARE](#)

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A cop holding his truncheon near the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, 7 May PHOTO: Ben Hillier

Red Flag editor Ben Hillier has been in New York covering the student encampment movement in solidarity with Palestine and speaking to the activists—some new, others with a little experience, as well as some of the city's seasoned veterans. Here, he reflects on

two weeks of actions, observations and interviews, asking the question: what have we learned from New York City?

‘There are weeks when decades happen’

New York students, particularly those at Columbia University, have provided a moral clarity that has galvanised a new movement. When all they encountered in their city was complicity in or acceptance of genocide, the undergraduates threw themselves into their universities’ common spaces to demand that their institutions divest from Israel.

Yet these activists have been confronted by huge mobilisations of a police force that routinely kills people (ten so far this year across the state; 34 last year). They endure ongoing slanders about their motivations and purported bigotry. More than 500 have been arrested across the city and many have been suspended from their degrees. A huge doxing campaign by Zionist groups is attempting to ruin the activists’ future employment prospects. So the stakes in New York are much higher than in Australia, where students do not face such severe repression.

Over the course of Israel’s war, and particularly since the encampment movement took off in April, the political terrain here has rapidly and dramatically changed. Two aspects are most notable.

First, the student activists’ political consciousness has swung left. One obvious contributor to this is the US establishment arming, funding and supporting the genocide in Gaza. Part of it relates to

the severity of that same establishment's attacks on the students themselves—every ruling class institution in the city has been arrayed against them. But most important is the political colouring of those institutions. The students are under assault not from the MAGA crowd, but from the Democrats, who control everything in New York and ordered a wave of police violence against the encampments.

“The liberals are in power everywhere—federal government, state legislature, the governor, the mayor, the college administrators”, Michael Letwin, a co-founder of Labor for Palestine, says over coffee in Brooklyn. “The activists aren't going through ‘stages’. It's more akin to something like ‘permanent revolution’—they are leaping over the old liberal progressive consensus and drawing much more radical, even revolutionary conclusions.”

There is certainly evidence for this in conversations with, and observations of, activists in the last two weeks. For example, “S” (many students won't disclose their real names for fear of reprisals), a young Jewish graduate student at New York University, related that he first became politically involved through Democratic channels by helping to canvas for progressive candidates. But after Gaza and the encampment movement, that's over.

“I think they [the Democrats] have lost us. You can't be progressive and support genocide”, he said. “And it's not just about the votes. The Democrats have relied on us [young people] as volunteers—canvassing, knocking on doors, distributing material. We're not volunteering after what they've done. Who would volunteer for genocide? Who would help out the people who have attacked us as

anti-Semites, supported the cops against us and suspended us from campus?”

S’s testimony highlights that there is not simply a break with the pre-eminent institutional form of establishment liberalism (the Democratic Party). There is also break with Zionism, which has been central to liberal ideology in the United States for more than half a century. The chants at rallies and encampments have reflected this. They are not simply critical of Israeli policy. Most of them call into question the existence of the Zionist state: “Israel must fall!”, “No Zionists here!”, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!”, “One solution: intifada, revolution!”

A second aspect relates to life outside the campuses: the broader political topography has been altered, in part because of the radicalism of the students. “‘Progressive except for Palestine’. That’s been the reality of liberalism here”, Letwin says. “Good liberals support all the progressive causes and movements—except for the cause of Palestine.”

There were increasing cracks in that reality. But “except for Palestine” is now shattered, and a fissure, Letwin says, has opened in the edifice of liberalism. Not in the establishment. And not in the labour bureaucracy, which is still solidly Zionist, he says. But the students’ uncompromising response to the repression they have faced has forced an unprecedented reckoning in broader progressive circles, including among sections of the rank-and-file of the trade union movement, of which Letwin is a long-time member and activist.

While the US in recent times has exhibited an increasing polarisation between liberals and conservatives, there is now a polarisation within liberalism. It was evident in the Black Lives Matter movement from 2014 and the presidential campaign of Vermont senator Bernie Sanders (particularly his primary campaign against Hillary Clinton). Yet the current polarisation is more significant, having developed around the non-negotiable of US imperial politics—support for Israel. There is an emergent war within liberalism and within the Democrats over this question.

Putting aside speculations about how this plays out from here, a pertinent lesson can be drawn from what has already occurred. More cautious activists within progressive movements invariably try to usher them in a more conservative direction. They say that to be effective, you have to “reach out to the middle ground”, move beyond “preaching to the converted”, and win hearts and minds by “being respectful” (which often means tolerating the intolerable). That’s how real and lasting change is made, so the script goes.

What we’ve seen in New York defies this logic: the political dial has been turned not simply by moral clarity, but by the uncompromising rhetoric and commitment to direct action of the radical students. Change doesn’t always happen this way. But when it does, it defines generations and alters what was previously considered unalterable.

‘Elite’ students matter

The vicious crackdown and smear campaign by the city’s liberal authorities is not explainable with exclusive reference to their

intolerance of voices critical of Israel. It's also related to the spaces in which anti-Zionism has blossomed.

The ruling class liberal establishment reproduces itself through the Ivy League—the first-rate colleges such as Columbia University here in New York City. These institutions are beneficiaries of huge endowments not so that they produce more thoughtful and effective primary school teachers, social workers or artists. They are over-resourced and “elite” because they train people to run US capitalism, and the US state in particular. Overwhelmingly, it's the elite universities' students who graduate to the judiciary, the big corporate media, the diplomatic corps, the State Department, the Senate, the executive branch, and so on.

That the Ivy League seems to have become a central breeding ground for anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism is beyond intolerable for the ruling class here. For all the dismissive talk in the press and among politicians about the juvenile tantrums of “privileged college children”, it's precisely because sons and daughters of the establishment are involved that the encampments could not be dismissed.

In a way, it should come as no surprise that the Fashion Institute of Technology encampment was the last to face repression, and that it was by and large left alone and not subjected to the same level of public smears. From the point of view of the liberal establishment, what are the FIT students going to do? Knit a Palestine solidarity scarf? Create some digital artworks? The stakes at this college were not particularly high.

Not so at Columbia. Its students are expected to play a central role in the ideological and institutional reproduction of US liberalism. That's likely why the doxing campaign has been particularly ferocious, and the media campaign so centrally directed, against them and others at the elite universities.

The students are punching above their weight

“An organized left, currently under the cover of the Palestinian flag, is attempting to take over, and ultimately ruin, liberal universities and cities”, Daniel Henninger, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, recently sooked.

In reality, the student militants, while galvanising, are relatively few in number. In New York City, there were perhaps 1,000 encampment activists spread over five institutions (all now cleared), plus others who have mobilised in numbers totalling several thousand. Across the country, it looks to be a similar story. It is not like 1970, when, in a much smaller university population, more than 1 million students from **nearly 900 campuses** were involved in walkouts, protests and occupations around the United States.

Further, the organised left, both in New York and in the US, has nothing like the weight it had at the end of the 1960s, when the Black Panthers alone (one of many organised revolutionary groups) had thousands of members and a newspaper with a weekly circulation of maybe 300,000.

There is definitely a radicalisation among a minority who are breaking or have broken to the left. But the depth and breadth of

the politicisation is not entirely clear. For how many is anti-Zionism a revolutionary break from progressivism, rather than a progressive break from reactionary US liberalism, for example? There is mixed consciousness, as always. But at this point, a clear revolutionary pole is not evident in the movement.

That is not surprising. The last big student radicalisation, which fused the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, came out of profound social crises. Civil rights posed a direct question about the nature, not of a particular government policy, but of the entire discriminatory structure of US society. Vietnam became a social crisis through the draft and the deployment of millions of troops to Indochina, nearly 60,000 of whom returned in body bags and hundreds of thousands more with disabilities.

Today, there is no obvious transmission belt through which Palestine becomes or is conjoined to an acute social crisis in the US. That the students today have had such an effect on politics is quite remarkable given that absence. Michael Letwin, probably rightly, points out that there have been a range of other accumulating crisis in the US over the last couple of decades, which should not be discounted as contributors to political instability, and which could underpin an emerging radicalism.

Charles Post, a member of the Tempest Collective and a long-time socialist and academic labour activist, says something similar:

“There is a small but significant uptick in broader social struggle that needs to be taken into account—the rise in strikes and union organising, often spearheaded by young people, in the past few

years. It could, if it takes off, become the sort of anchor for a general radicalisation that the Black struggle did in the 1960s. Of course, there are lots of reasons to be cautious about the prospects of a sharp rise in workplace struggles, in particular the incredible weakness of the organised left.”

At any rate, there are limits to what the students can achieve at this point. While handfuls of campus administrations have sued for peace with the activists running the encampments, the primary effect of the movement thus far has been ideological rather than “material”. This accomplishment nevertheless should not be downplayed: the students have challenged something previously unquestionable in US politics. And they have potentially changed the consciousness of a generation. This will make a difference to future politicisations, and all activism to come.

It could also be the beginning of something much bigger. It should be noted, for example, that the explosive years of 1968–70 came after years of social struggles that, at first, were not so spectacular and in which the activists were quite isolated. Take an anecdote related in 2015 by Noam Chomsky, a prominent dissident who began campaigning against the Vietnam War in 1961:

“As late as October 1965 ... we tried to participate in [the first national day of action against the war] in Boston, a very liberal city ... The march took place, we got to the Common, I was supposed to be one of the speakers, but the meeting was totally broken up by counter-demonstrators ... The next day, the liberal newspaper the *Boston Globe*, maybe the most liberal newspaper in the country, featured on the front page a denunciation of the demonstrators

who were daring to make mild criticisms of US bombing in North Vietnam.”

There is a growing Jewish divide

New York has the largest Jewish population of any city in the world. And nearly half live in Brooklyn. In a small café near Prospect Park, Charles Post, who is also an editor of *Spectre: A Marxist Journal*, is explaining the split—rarely reported on—in this community over the question of Israel.

“It’s generational and it’s unprecedented”, he says. “There has been a slow and steady, very much minority growth in Jewish anti-Zionism since 1967. But events of the last seven months have really blown things open.”

Interestingly, the first thing he points to is a social rather than political change: greater numbers of Jews marrying non-Jews. For example, a comprehensive study of Jewish life in the US, **published in 2021 by the Pew Research Center**, noted that, prior to 1980, just 18 percent of Jews had non-Jewish spouses. That rose to 37 percent in the 1990s, 45 percent in the 2000s and 61 percent in the 2010s.

“One of the results [of this] is that fewer children, proportionally, are being sent to Hebrew school. That’s where the intense Zionist indoctrination happens. It happened to me—it’s just drilled into you that we are alone in the world, that everyone is out to get us, that Israel is great and surrounded by people who want to kill Jews.”

He walks through the fascinating transformations of New York's Jewish society since World War II. But the transformative political events ultimately take centre stage in Post's explanation. The First Intifada (1987–93), which shattered some of the liberal Zionist myths about who was oppressed and who was oppressor in Palestine. The repeated attacks on Gaza, each of which contributed to an emerging polarisation between Zionists and anti-Zionists in the Jewish community. The collapse of Labour Zionism and with it the illusion of a social-democratic Israel. The increasingly illiberal nature of Israeli government and society, making it progressively more difficult for younger New York Jews to square the circle of their own liberalism with the political realities of the state they are supposed to support.

The balance of forces between anti-Zionists and Zionists in the Jewish community is not entirely clear. The Pew survey, which was conducted in 2020, found that eight-in-ten US Jews say that “caring about Israel is an important or essential part of what being Jewish means”.

How much have things now shifted? In a March *New York Times* article, *Jewish Currents* editor Peter Beinart noted an “emerging rupture between American liberalism and American Zionism”, which, he believes, “constitutes the greatest transformation in American Jewish politics in half a century”. Whatever the scope of this rupture in 2024, it will be felt most acutely here in New York, a liberal heartland in which the Jewish population is solidly Democratic.

S, the young Jewish student at New York University quoted above, is at least one point of reference here. How many of his Jewish friends are Zionist and how many are anti-Zionist, or perhaps non-Zionist? “I couldn’t think of one committed Zionist”, he said, after a pause.

Another development is worth mentioning, which is also affecting Democratic politics and challenging the political sensibilities of many Jewish liberals. “This is the first time that there has been a Palestinian/Muslim/Arab political explosion in US politics”, Joel Geier, a socialist since the 1950s, says. “For the first time, a self-conscious Palestinian American movement has emerged. Its centre is not New York, but Michigan. And Michigan matters very much to the Democrats. It’s impossible to retain the presidency if they can’t win Michigan.”

NYPD highlights the limits of identity politics

With regard to the police, the most common observation during the clearing of the encampments was just how violent they were (as well as how the violence only deepened the movement). But there’s another political observation to be made. Taking race as the foundational framework for politics, it would be all but impossible to make sense of the violence in New York City.

The most striking thing about the NYPD is how multiracial it is. According to the **city’s statistics**, nearly 57 percent of patrol officers, and 48 percent of lieutenants and sergeants, are Black, Latino or Asian. At most demonstrations and encampments, student activists have been faced with a wall of Black and Brown cops, an increasing

number of whom are women, whose chief of police is a Latino who answers to a Black mayor, Eric Adams.

This reality must influence activists' political consciousness in some way. In the 1960s, cops were almost invariably white men, which gave legitimacy to sectional ideas associated with various forms of identity politics and helped to undermine confidence in the possibility that people could unite across social divides.

While the ruling class has clearly used the politics of identity to its advantage, it is also showing that people cannot be defined simply by their ethnic background, skin colour, gender or whatever—that their political and social role, or their class position, in the system is ultimately what matters. The existence of an “intersectional” police department has the potential to change how people see each other, especially, and most importantly, those trying to build movements to change the world.

After Columbia

The campus year is coming to a close at most universities. The dorms soon will be emptied of students; most will return home for the summer. Yet the assault on Rafah has only just begun. Will there be a late spring fire or a burning summer of protests? Will the dedicated minority engage in smaller direct actions, perhaps now targeting government buildings, arms companies or politicians? Will most of this be over by the time classes resume in August? Will suspended activists even get back onto the campuses? What about the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—will there be scenes reminiscent of the last time it was held in that city?

Who knows. But, after Columbia, politics here will never be the same.

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