

Student protests for Gaza: Yes, Politics Obviously Belong on France's Campuses

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In France, student protests for Gaza have faced police repression and dire legal threats. But discussion is also being suppressed by the academic establishment, pushing a dogma of political neutrality that makes a mockery of its commitment to free inquiry.

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It's often billed as France's premier school for the social sciences — the type of place where you get critical, no-limits inquiry into any question you can think of. And if that debate cuts against the grain of the prevailing intellectual climate outside of the academy, so be it.

But students and educators at Paris's School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) have also fallen victim to the attack on academic freedom, as France's centers of higher education cave to the pressure to silence demonstrations of solidarity with Palestine. Since October, the EHESS has been the scene of a growing divide between administrators and ranking research directors who claim that universities should remain wedded to a neutral position, and a large share of the student body and teaching corps who are mobilizing for Palestine.

In practice, the pretense of academic neutrality is foreclosing discussion and inquiry into the deep causes of the October 7 Hamas-led attack and the colonial nature of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Beyond the school's foot-dragging in coming out in opposition to the war, members of the EHESS community decry an implicit bias in the school's presentation of the conflict in the leadership's internally distributed statements, and in a series of public forums hosted this winter. This is symptomatic, others suggest, of a culture of intellectual blindness toward racism and colonialism. In the clearest disavowal of the "pluralism" and "dialogue" otherwise held up as the model for campus tensions, students and teachers who've spoken out against the Israeli state's actions have been signaled for disciplinary actions — with six members of the student body even facing investigation for possible criminal charges of ["apology for terrorism."](#)

Encampment

"What we're expecting from the school is a firm and clear statement for a permanent, immediate cease-fire, in line with international law, and against apartheid and colonization," said one student on May 13. "These demands are grounded in texts that France has signed! [The school's leaders] need to reverse directions and come out in support of students that they themselves have handed over to investigators in the justice system."

Unless otherwise indicated, all students and researchers who spoke with *Jacobin* requested anonymity, fearing possible retaliation from academic superiors in what one student calls a “McCarthyite” climate.

A small institution, the EHESS brings together nearly eight hundred researchers and some three thousand students and is reserved exclusively for master’s and doctoral-level education in fields like sociology, anthropology, and history. But latent tensions boiled over on the morning of May 13, when students and teachers led by the school’s Palestine Committee spurned a roundtable on the crisis at the institution, which had been organized under the auspices of the school’s leadership. Shortly afterward, upward of two hundred students and researchers voted in a general assembly to occupy the school’s main building in Aubervilliers, a Paris suburb that is home to a new higher-education campus hub.

Despite the possibility that the school would solicit an intervention from police, the assembly voted to maintain an overnight occupation. That encampment held for over forty-eight hours, turning the school’s building into an “open university” offering workshops and conferences on the Israel-Palestine conflict and the broader solidarity movement on university campuses. The students’ demands include an unequivocal declaration from the school’s leadership in favor of a cease-fire, the hosting of Palestinian researchers and students displaced by the war, and the end of disciplinary and possibly legal actions taken against students over pro-Palestine organizing and statements.

On the afternoon of May 15, however, police and gendarmes intervened to end the occupation. While a group of occupying students were kettled by police during the operation, none were arrested — a welcome exception from demonstrations at other French universities. Some eighty-eight were arrested at a Sorbonne occupation in early May, alongside dozens more at the Paris campus of Sciences Po. On May 17, students made the trip to the EHESS’s legacy building in central Paris and imposed an assembly with the school leadership. While gaining assurances that students can maintain “open university” activities in the coming week, the school has not come out in favor of the students’ other demands.

That concession will not be enough to bridge the deficit of trust within the EHESS, however. In what many view as the most egregious example of the school’s porosity to the broader clampdown on pro-Palestine solidarity in France, six students at the school are even the target of investigations for possible “apology for terrorism” in response to an October 9 press release by the EHESS branch of the Solidaires union, which declared an “unwavering support for the struggle of the Palestinian people fighting in all its ways and forms, including armed struggle.”

School Tip-Off

The summons facing the six students allegedly resulted from a tip provided by school directors over the French state’s warning platform. After facing questioning for possible charges this winter, the students have not yet been notified regarding possible criminal prosecutions.

In tipping off state authorities, EHESS leadership is applying a line directed by the central government. On October 9, higher education and research minister Sylvie Retailleau issued a public letter calling for school administrators to apply “disciplinary sanctions” and “appropriate legal steps,” including notifying state prosecutors, for any possible infractions among their school communities. Contacted via email, the EHESS administration did not provide any specific response to *Jacobin*’s questions on the potential pursuits against those students — as well as the broader accusations leveled by the school’s Palestine solidarity movement about a university bias, or about promises made in meetings between students and directors this spring that the school would come

out in favor of a cease-fire.

“Accusations for apology for terrorism are being leveled against people who express their solidarity with Palestine, but the declarations we’ve made are in complete accordance with international law,” said one student, among the six who had to respond to police summons in February. “What we’re really making the apology for is international law! We’re not supported by the school and it speaks volumes about the climate here.”

The school’s alleged neutrality on all matters political, moreover, is sharply contradicted by the open opposition it expressed to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On its [website](#), the school highlights its “[mobilization](#)” for Ukraine, vaunting its “support for Ukrainian researchers and students” and has hosted events designed to analyze Russian aggression.

By contrast, the school’s treatment of the Israel-Palestine conflict is drenched in equivocation, with internal communications still preferring guarded formulations like “the dramatic situation in the Near East.” The EHESS hosted on its Aubervilliers campus [a series of debates](#) on the subject this February. For critics, however, these forums were an ersatz of debate and critical discussion, and gave a distorted and vapid presentation of the roots of the current crisis. Most revealingly, the series of roundtable discussions did not include a single Palestinian researcher or speaker.

Independence for Who?

“It’s all well and good for the school to say that it wants a pluralistic dialogue, but if that were really the case it would have happened in February,” one student told *Jacobin*. “But to judge by the exclusion [from the February exchanges] of students and researchers working on the issue, it’s clear that there wouldn’t be any dialogue. The school’s debate has been monopolized by people who are not specialists in the region, or who are largely sympathetic to the Israeli side of the conflict.”

A researcher at France’s prestigious National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Véronique Bontemps is also one of the instructors in charge of the annual Palestine seminar at the EHESS. “None of the teachers who lead the Palestine seminar were invited to participate in February’s discussions,” Bontemps told *Jacobin*. “The purpose of the debate was really to make sure that there was no debate.”

On October 8, Bontemps relayed over EHESS’s internal “debates and discussions” forum — screenshots of which were viewed by *Jacobin* — the Solidaires press release that resulted in the six students’ summons for “apology for terrorism.” Though Bontemps only received a pro-forma sanction from the CNRS, she said that she has received a litany of harassing emails from colleagues at the EHESS and beyond. In an October 9 letter likewise distributed over the school’s “discussions and debates” thread, several of the school’s leading research directors accused Solidaires and Bontemps of providing “an apology for terrorism” for distributing their communiqué.

Revelatory of the deep divides over the Israel-Palestine conflict, the tensions at the EHESS are also symptomatic of the gulf between a conservative wing of French academia and the ideas and research methods embraced by a younger generation.

One EHESS student told *Jacobin* about the climate of “intimidation” and “ostracization” facing researchers who work on questions of race and colonization. “What I have experienced is a denial of the scholarly standing of my work, without any explanation or argumentation,” said the student, whose field of research includes Israeli colonization in the West Bank.

“When I started collaborating with certain scholars my superiors didn’t approve of,” the student continued, “or when I began to use a decolonial and even a Marxist vocabulary in my work, I could sense the change of tone they showed toward me and my work, or the attempts to denigrate me and intimidate me from pursuing those avenues of study.”

That pressure conforms to a broader hardening of intellectual positions in France. EHESS president Romain Huret was one of seventy French university presidents who signed an April 25 [open letter](#) in *Le Monde* urging that “French universities need to fight for their autonomy.” But it seems like the only people trying to make that autonomy a reality are the students and researchers who took control of their school between May 13 and 15 — at the expense, some might say, of bringing politics into the classroom.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 05.20.2024:
<https://jacobin.com/2024/05/ehess-palestine-protests-academic-freedom>
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