
IMPOSING POWER ON THE IVORY TOWER: Tactics of State Takeover at New College of Florida and Boğaziçi University

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Universities, as crucibles of critical thought and collective action, frequently emerge as battlegrounds of state-society struggles. This paper delves into the tactics state actors use to exert control over higher education institutions. Focusing on interventions at New College of Florida and Boğaziçi University, it unveils how states implement counter-mobilization strategies to limit the potential of these institutions as arenas for dissent and critical engagement. First, the paper examines the role of universities as incubators for collective action, thereby establishing a rationale for why these institutions become targets for intervention. Subsequently, it dissects three specific techniques employed by state actors in the capture of these institutions: *restructuring* organizational frameworks, forcefully *restricting* physical spaces of dissent, and *reshaping* narratives surrounding interventions. The conclusion underscores the challenges faced by academic institutions under the shadow of state interference and urges further research into how university communities respond to such impositions.

New College of Florida and Boğaziçi University present compelling cases for analysis within the context of government intervention in higher education. As public institutions, they are both subject to government policies, though these are influenced by their distinct political and cultural contexts. Boğaziçi operates under Turkey's competitive authoritarian regime within a predominantly Islamic cultural setting, while New College exists in the democratic and culturally Christian milieu of the United States. Remarkably, both have experienced substantial compromise to their autonomy, labeled in each instance as government "takeovers." These interventions have led to changes in administrative autonomy, curriculum, and campus culture and reveal notable similarities in the strategies state actors employ to constrict opportunities for dissent. Such observations not only enrich our understanding of the specific cases of New College and Boğaziçi University, but also demonstrate recurring patterns in state counter-mobilization tactics within the academic sphere. This paper thus contributes to a wider discourse on state-university relations, illustrating a broader trend of government encroachment in academia that transcends traditional divides of regime types and cultural contexts.

Linking Universities to Collective Action

This section draws upon Tarrow's concept of contentious politics, which views such actions as "coordinated, collective claims on authorities, made through public performances," as well as previous work linking universities to collective action.¹ It explores four fundamental

¹ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Sirianne Dahlum and Tore Wig, "Chaos on Campus: Universities and Mass Political Protest," *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 1 (2021): 3-32.

processes by which universities contribute to this paradigm: facilitating individual transformation, cultivating interpersonal networks, lowering personal costs for participation, and harnessing physical spaces for mobilization. Each aspect plays a crucial role in molding universities into breeding grounds for social and political activism, aligning with Tarrow's framework where collective claims transform into public performances of protest.

Facilitating Individual Transformation

Awareness of contention is a crucial first step for individual involvement in social movements. This often necessitates that, on a micro-level, individual changes of beliefs, values, or behaviors occur. Universities, as environments where diverse ideas come together, are well-positioned to facilitate cognitive liberation, the process by which individuals come to recognize the inadequacies or injustices in their current social or political situation and believe that change is possible through collective action.² The effective integration of diverse perspectives into academic curricula and the broader learning environment are foundational ways that these spaces enable such transformations. While significant, the mere presence of altered views or preferences is insufficient to fully explain why individuals engage in protest activities.³ The development of collective action typically requires a network through which these new ideas and motivations can be channeled and amplified.

Cultivating Interpersonal Networks

Universities serve as vital breeding grounds for the formation and expansion of interpersonal networks that can fuel social movements due to their diverse student bodies and the organizations they host. Interpersonal networks refer to the social connections and relationships between individuals that play a crucial role in the formation, development, and sustainability of social movements. These networks are not just casual social links; they are often the channels through which ideas, resources, and motivations for collective action are exchanged and reinforced.⁴ By providing both diversity of thought and established organizational frameworks—for example, through clubs, activities, social events, common living arrangements, and student-run newspapers—universities are well suited to overcome Kuran's concept of the information problem, where individuals hide their true preferences due to societal or political pressures.⁵ This phenomenon is common in autocratic regimes like Turkey, where fear of repression leads to widespread preference falsification, but can also occur in less oppressive contexts like Florida due to cultural norms and the desire to conform. Moreover, the presence of shared identities is a significant factor in mobilizing individuals for protests and other forms of collective action.⁶ Universities create and reinforce shared identities such as that of being a student, or even more specifically, a student at that particular university.

Lowering Personal Costs

At universities like Boğaziçi and New College, the concept of opportunity costs—which includes not only the time spent away from studies, work, or leisure, but also potential risks to academic standing, future career prospects, and personal relationships—influences student

² Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³ Mark Irving Lichbach, "Contending Theories of Contentious Politics and the Structure Action Problem of Social Order," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 401-424.

⁴ Mario Diani, "The Concept of Social Movement," *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 1-25.

⁵ Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁶ Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283-305.

participation in protests. Students, often not fully employed and with less rigid schedules, face lower immediate time-related costs for activism. However, they must also consider the longer-term implications such as delayed academic progress, missed professional opportunities, or strained social connections. Despite these varied potential costs, the relative flexibility of university life provides a more conducive environment for engaging in protests and collective action, as the overall opportunity costs tend to be more manageable compared to those in more structured, non-academic settings.

Harnessing Physical Space

Universities, with their physical campuses, create pivotal “focal points” that reduce coordination problems for collective action. Focal points, which include specific locations, help explain how coordination occurs without direct communication, as people converge on these points based on shared perceptions or understandings.⁷ At Boğaziçi University, locations on campus such as the entry gates, main square, and areas near the rector’s office served as focal points for student gatherings and activism in response to government intervention. The barricade in front of the university entry became a significant site of interaction between protesters and police, explored further in the next section, marking a visible boundary of the protest activities. Such identifiable and accessible common areas facilitate gatherings, acting as natural hubs for student interaction, planning, and activism. The direct, face-to-face communication enabled by these spaces is crucial for mobilizing groups efficiently, which highlights the significance of physical proximity in promoting protest participation.⁸ Additionally, the symbolic power of certain campus locations, known for historical or emotional significance, can galvanize collective action, adding a deeper motivational layer to student activism.

Capturing Higher Education: State Counter-Mobilization Tactics

The potent capacity for universities to nurture collective action renders them prime targets for state interventions. Recognizing the influential role of higher education in shaping societal narratives and political attitudes, state actors deploy a range of tactics to stifle and redirect this potential. These interventions, from restructuring organizational frameworks to controlling physical and discursive spaces, represent a strategic response aimed at diluting the universities' capacity for fostering dissent and shaping public opinion. This section delves into the nuanced ways in which states exert control over universities, countering their role as incubators of collective action.

Restructuring Organizational Frameworks

In January 2021, Turkish President Erdoğan appointed Melih Bulu as rector of Boğaziçi University without consulting the faculty, an action against the university's democratic principles which historically promoted the election, rather than the appointment, of administrative positions. Two years later, almost to the day, a similar intervention happened in the United States. Florida Governor DeSantis appointed six members, including notable conservative activists, to New College of Florida’s Board of Trustees. This newly formed board promptly removed the university president and replaced her with Richard Corcoran, a former Education Commissioner

⁷ Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁸ David A. David, Louis A. Zurcher, and Sheldon Ekland-Olson, “Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment,” *American Sociological Review* 45, no. 5 (1980): 787–801.

and Florida House speaker. Both changes circumvented the traditional role of faculty in their universities' hiring processes, placing the institutions under government influence.

Such intervention illustrates the deployment of cronyism within higher education. Cronyism, as discussed by Kang, refers to favoritism shown to close associates in political appointments.⁹ By applying these practices, state actors strategically appoint loyalists to influential positions within universities, which shifts the universities' governance from a focus on academic independence and democratic processes to one aligning with specific political ideologies. This trend, reflective of a broader pattern of political patronage in both Florida and Turkey, poses significant risks not only to the traditional autonomy of public academic institutions but also to their role as centers for critical inquiry and diverse intellectual discourse.¹⁰

Importantly, the appointment of cronies to the heads of universities enables actors to reclaim the structural power needed to enact sweeping institutional reforms in line with their political agendas. At Boğaziçi University, this intervention was evidenced by the swift abolition of progressive entities like the Office for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and the LGBTQI+ Studies Club, and the peremptory establishment of new schools of Law and Communication. Changes at New College of Florida, including the dissolution of the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Gender Studies program, replaced by departments more aligned with conservative ideologies reflect a similar top-down approach. As Gerschewski observed, the manipulation of curriculum and extracurricular activities can transform universities from incubators of political awareness and dissent into vehicles for promoting obedience, loyalty, and support to the regime.¹¹

In addition to creating politically aligned institutions, ruling actors manipulate existing organizational structures, ranging from administrative bodies to student organizations, to constrict avenues of dissent. New College's faculty union, for example, historically allowed grievances raised against the administration to be brought to an external arbitrator. Recent legislative changes have shifted this decision-making power to the college president, who now makes the final determinations on grievances. These examples illustrate a strategy of minimizing political opportunity structures, which refer to the extent to which a political system is open to influence from social movements and dissenting groups.¹² In doing so, they reflect a recurring pattern within the cyclical dynamics of social protest, where ruling actors reconfigure institutional frameworks to stifle challenges to their authority. By altering the grievance process and centralizing decision-making, the administration at New College has closed off a critical avenue for faculty to challenge administrative decisions, strategically silencing internal dissent.

Forcefully Restricting Physical Spaces of Dissent

The restriction of physical space for organization emerges as an additional tactic to constrict political opportunities for opposition. By controlling these spaces, the state limits the ability of dissenting groups to gather, plan, and execute their activities. Crucially, state actors have access to public resources, such as law enforcement, that they can mobilize to manage or suppress social movements. As McCarthy and Zald note, the efficient and strategic use of resources can significantly enhance the trajectory of social movements.¹³ This theory is equally applicable to

⁹ David C. Kang, "Transaction Costs and Crony Capitalism in East Asia," *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 4 (2003): 439–58.

¹⁰ Jackie Llanos, "Secret Searches, Political Patronage Could Lead to Failed Presidents at FL's Universities," *Florida Phoenix*, July 19, 2023.

¹¹ Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38.

¹² Donatella della Porta, "Research on Social Movements and Political Violence," *Qualitative Sociology* 31, no. 3 (2008): 221–230.

¹³ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212–1241.

state actors, especially in terms of how they deploy resources to manage, control, or suppress social movements. States often have greater access to financial and legal resources compared to grassroots social movements, but they must balance the extent to which they deploy such resources. Excessive use of force or public finances, for example, can lead to what Josua refers to as the “backfire problem,” the potential loss of legitimacy spurred by negative responses to this deployment.¹⁴

At Boğaziçi University, spaces were restricted through extreme police intervention. The government's initial takeover attempt involved surrounding the campus with police that prevented students from entering and exiting the campus. By deploying police forces, the state attempted to preemptively control dissent to the appointment of a new rector. When students rallied in the university's main square against what they perceived as an imposition on their academic freedom and autonomy, police responded with force, using tear gas and water cannons to disperse the demonstrators. Numerous students were detained, with allegations of ill-treatment, torture, and threats reported during these detentions.

As Kudelia points out, the threat or application of violence by the state raises the cost of participation in dissenting activities, as individuals weigh the increased risks against the potential benefits of their involvement.¹⁵ This strategy incites fear among potential protestors, deterring them from engaging in collective action due to the heightened risk of repression. This action reflects the broader strategy of dismantling the participatory infrastructure needed for collective action, which is crucial for the sustenance and growth of university social movements.

The police's violent response can be partly explained by the dynamic and reciprocal adaptation between protestors and law enforcement. Each side's actions and tactics escalate in response to the other, leading to a cycle where initial peaceful protests might turn violent as a reaction to perceived aggression from the other side.¹⁶ A more precise explanation of this scenario, however, is rooted in Turkey's normalization of excessive force as a legitimate law enforcement behavior. Despite being a hallmark of authoritarian regimes, autocrats do not solely govern through outright aggressive coercion. Instead, they often employ advanced methods of legitimation and “authoritarian upgrading,” which involve sophisticated strategies to justify their rule.¹⁷ When authoritarian governments exert force upon their citizens, it is common for officials to frame these acts to the public as necessary and justified, creating a culture wherein such violence is viewed as an acceptable and legitimate aspect of governance.

Reshaping Narratives

In the arena of higher education, states often resort to manipulating narratives as a strategic approach to justify repression and undermine dissent. As Josua argues, justifying repression involves framing state interventions in a manner that appears rational and necessary to the public.¹⁸ The concept of framing involves constructing a particular narrative or perspective around an event or policy, guiding the audience's interpretation in a way that supports the state's objectives.¹⁹ Moreover, framing helps legitimize crackdown actions that might otherwise be viewed as oppressive or authoritarian.²⁰

¹⁴ Maria Josua, “The Legitimation of Repression in Autocracies,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2021).

¹⁵ Serhiy Kudelia, “When Numbers Are Not Enough: The Strategic Use of Violence in Ukraine's 2014 Revolution,” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 4 (2018): 501–21.

¹⁶ della Porta, Donatella and Sidney Tarrow. “Interactive Diffusion: The Coevolution of Police and Protest Behavior with an Application to Transnational Contention.” *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 1 (2012): 119-152.

¹⁷ Steven Heydemann, “Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World,” The Brookings Institution, October 15, 2007.

¹⁸ Josua, “Legitimation of Repression in Autocracies.”

¹⁹ Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51-58.

²⁰ Volha Charnysh, Paulette Lloyd, and Beth Simmons, “Frames and Consensus Formation in International Relations: The Case of Trafficking in Persons,” *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 2 (2015): 323-351.

In Turkey, President Erdoğan's communication around controlling universities ties into a broader populist narrative contrasting “Black Turks,” the supposedly pious, common people, with “White Turks,” the secular, Western elite.²¹ Such framing serves to justify Erdoğan's control over universities, painting them as bastions of the Westernized elite that need to be reformed in line with his vision of national identity: Framing is not merely about disseminating information but about shaping the collective consciousness. As Snow and Benford discuss, frames are used to produce and maintain alignment within groups. In Erdoğan's case, framing serves to align the public's understanding of national identity with his political agenda, turning educational institutions into arenas for ideological dissemination and control.²² This process is crucial in authoritarian regimes, where control over narratives and public opinion is a key instrument of power.

In Florida, Governor DeSantis's communication around sweeping educational reforms serves a dual purpose in the justification process. By framing the reform as a fight against “wokeness” and championing parental rights, DeSantis taps into broader cultural and political themes resonant with his base. This strategy aligns with the goals of political communication, as outlined by Geddes and Zaller, to create support and mobilize the regime base.²³ While ostensibly aimed at combating what DeSantis describes as “ideological conformity” and “political activism” in higher education, this narrative also strategically positions him for broader political ambitions, particularly his 2024 presidential run. DeSantis's presidential ambitions can be viewed as a catalyst, an action that escalates social movements—in this case, a countermovement—by changing the political environment. Through this lens, the framing of Florida's educational reform becomes manufactured to help build a national profile that aligns with the sentiments of a significant voter demographic and to position DeSantis not just as a governor acting on state education policies, but as a national figure taking a stand on issues central to current political discourse. Such reforms can thereby be seen not just in the context of state politics but as a component of a larger strategy in DeSantis's political trajectory, indicative of how political figures can use state-level policies, and the discursive tools around them, as springboards for national ambitions and legitimation across different scales.

In both cases, the process of justifying state interventions in universities is closely intertwined with the rhetorical vilification of opposition groups. Naming, a mechanism in which state actors use derogatory and belittling terms against dissenters, is extensively employed to demobilize and discredit opposition.²⁴ Notably, both counter-mobilization movements depict university students as violent: while students at New College are portrayed as “intolerant,” “aggressive,” and “militant,” those at Boğaziçi are histrionically described as “terrorists.”²⁵ This tactic of naming effectively casts protestors and their respective universities as hostile “others,” fostering societal polarization between an in-group of good government supporters and an out-group of bad opposition agitators. In Turkey, this mechanism goes a step further, serving to criminalize the actions of protestors and further justify the harsh measures used against them. Criminalizing dissent exacerbates the climate of fear and compliance and raises the costs of

²¹ Michael Ferguson, “White Turks, Black Turks and Negroes: The Politics of Polarization,” in *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #occupygezi*, edited by Umut Özkırımlı (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2014), 77-88.

²² David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1, no. 1 (1988): 197-217.

²³ Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, “Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (1989): 319-47.

²⁴ Lisel Hintz, “Adding Insult to Injury: Vilification as Counter-Mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests,” *Project on Middle East Political Science Paper Series* 20, no. 1 (2016): 56-60.

²⁵ Christopher Rufo, “The Fight for New College,” Christopher F. Rufo, YouTube video; “Erdogan Compares Turkish Student Protesters to ‘Terrorists,’” *Al Jazeera*, February 4, 2021.

participating in protest. In this strategic reshaping of narratives, state actors demonstrate the potent power of discourse in legitimizing control and silencing opposition within the academic sphere.

Conclusion

The exploration of state interventions in universities like New College of Florida and Boğaziçi University uncovers a troubling global pattern: the instrumentalization of higher education as a theater for political struggle and ideological dominance. This paper has dissected how state actors, through varied tactics, attempt to stifle the mobilizing potential of universities and mold them into conduits for their own agendas. Such analysis opens the door to diverging avenues for research about the dynamics of resistance to state intervention within these universities—a counter-counter-mobilization, so to speak. Investigating the strategies employed by students, faculty, and alumni to counteract state interventions would provide a richer understanding of the interplay between power and dissent in academic settings. Moreover, the role of digital platforms and social media in these struggles warrants closer scrutiny. In an era where information warfare and digital mobilization play pivotal roles, understanding how these tools are used by both state actors and university communities to advance their narratives and strategies becomes increasingly important. The future of higher education as a space for free thought, dissent, and innovation depends not only on recognizing these threats but also on actively seeking ways to fortify these vital institutions against the overreach of state power.