

# FIVE QUESTIONS

*for*

## CULTIVATING SOLIDARITY

**When Responding to  
Political Repression**



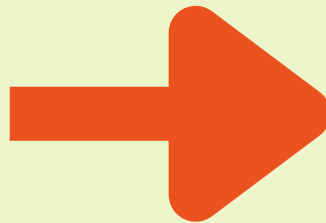
In a time of heightened mobilization, like now, law enforcement systems ratchet up repression and deploy legal categories to undermine our movements by singling out particular groups and tactics for criminalization. Universities and colleges collaborate with law enforcement to target and isolate student activists. It is essential that we show solidarity right now and resist their predictable attempts to divide-and-conquer.

In the wake of the indictment of 61 #StopCopCity forest defenders, and as people respond to mounting repression of protesters opposing genocide in Gaza, we noticed some common traps that commentators fall into. We offer this list of five common traps that erode solidarity, and some tips on avoiding them. As abolitionists, we oppose all criminalization, in solidarity with people criminalized for living their everyday lives, and with people criminalized for any social movement resistance work.



This document is an invitation, not a set of instructions. As organizers and writers who have fallen into the anti-solidarity traps described below, we invite anyone commenting or reporting on political repression to consider the questions we offer here. For people defending students, faculty, and staff (in or out of legal settings), or making arguments before legislatures, judges, officials, or school administrators, it makes sense to speak within the constraints of legal and administrative systems in those settings. However, when making broader public comments about repression cases, we can avoid framings that legitimize criminalizing systems, rejecting the temptation to reproduce harmful arguments. We want to refrain from using lawyerly arguments when they aren't necessary, especially if they come with assumptions that undermine our solidarity.

**FIVE QUESTIONS**



**TO AVOID ANTI-SOLIDARITY TRAPS**



# QUESTION #1

Does this argument erase or ignore the ongoing violence of the US colonial legal system, or legitimize that system?



## EXAMPLES OF THIS TRAP CAN INCLUDE:

“This is not what our justice system looks like,” “This is a threat to our democracy.” This makes it seem as if the system is usually fair and usually operates democratically. How can we talk about the internal inconsistencies of the legal system without contributing to the fiction that it is fair and consistent at its base, or was ever designed to be? Current tactics are no departure from long histories of repression across many movements for justice.

“This chilling repression will undermine our nation’s shared values of Free Speech.” Assertions about First Amendment rights which imply that freedom of speech and assembly are universal, and this instance is shocking and exceptional, ignore that US law has only ever recognized such rights selectively and inconsistently. Freedom of speech is not actually a national value, but rather a pretense that has never been reality for Indigenous people, Black people, immigrants, queer and trans people, religious minorities, and others who are targets of state violence, exclusion, and repression.

## QUESTION #2

Does this argument contribute to a false narrative that universities and colleges are neutral spaces for the free exchange of ideas?

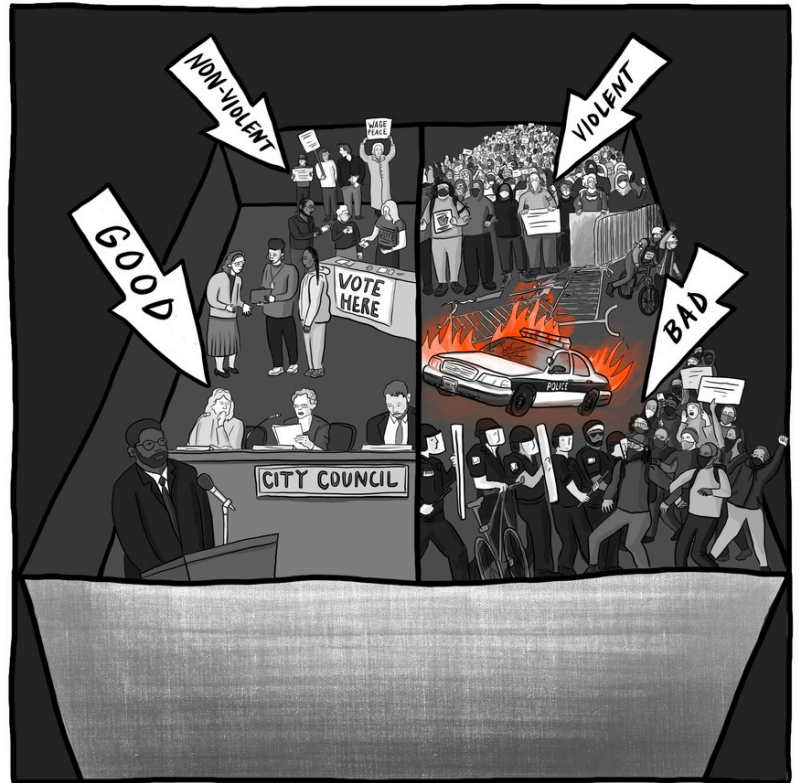


### ***EXAMPLE OF THIS TRAP CAN INCLUDE:***

**“The University’s commitment to academic freedom must be upheld here.”** This wrongly suggests that universities genuinely make and uphold this commitment except in this instance. In reality, US colleges and universities are settler institutions, and tightly curated spaces in which sets of ideas are supported (by hiring, admissions, funding of programs and events), or suppressed (through tenure denials, disciplining of students and faculty, sidelining of departments and centers, and targeted campus policing of some student and community activists).

## QUESTION #3

Does this statement participate in dividing people engaged in resistance into “good” or “bad,” “violent” or “non-violent,” thereby legitimizing criminalization of people using bolder tactics?



### EXAMPLES OF THIS TRAP CAN INCLUDE:

“These aren’t criminals, they weren’t damaging property, they were just speaking,” suggests that some people in the resistance movement do deserve punishment, but not these people, that some tactics of resistance are legitimate while others are not if they are illegal.

Overuse of terms like “peaceful protest” and “nonviolent protest.” People often include these terms to argue that the protest is legitimate, even though the statement would be just as strong without them. They may also subtly sanction the criminalization of anyone the government labels “violent” or “unlawful.”



## QUESTION #4

Does this statement reinforce boogeymen terms and tropes that our opposition is using to delegitimize our movements and justify repression?



### EXAMPLES OF THIS TRAP CAN INCLUDE:

“The indictment outrageously paints #StopCopCity as an anarchist project.” Distancing from misunderstood ideologies, like anarchism and Black radicalism, contributes to marginalization and dehistoricization. Isolating these principles is dangerous not only to their proponents but also to the interwoven solidarity of our movements.

“They were just flyering, they weren’t throwing molotov cocktails.” This type of statement relies on the same tropes as our opponents by lifting up property destruction as a legitimate reason to criminalize people in social movements.

“They were engaged in peaceful protest, they aren’t terrorists.” It is harmful to mimic the terms our opponents use, like “terrorist”, which have continually been racialized, used to label and isolate, and have seized the political imagination in dangerous ways. These labels are cornerstones for regimes of repression.

## QUESTION #5

**Does this argument focus too narrowly on procedure, as if the repression would be acceptable if not for this procedural flaw?**



### ***EXAMPLES OF THIS TRAP CAN INCLUDE:***

While a particular procedural argument may be of great use in court, making it too central in the media commentary about the case distracts from the overall argument against repression, and may contribute to the illusion that the government's case against people or groups is legitimate except for this sole procedural problem.

**"Most shockingly, this prosecution was brought outside of the statute of limitations and in violation of the state speedy trial laws."** While it can be useful to highlight procedural issues, describing them as the most egregious or harmful part of repressive state conduct risks implying that a prosecution or state action would have been appropriate had it obeyed the existing procedures.



**These solidarity traps are tricky and most of us have fallen into them in our efforts to argue against political repression. As repression heightens, building greater solidarity across our movements, including between people doing aboveground and underground, legal and illegal resistance work, is particularly important.**

***INSTEAD OF FALLING INTO THE TRAPS DESCRIBED ABOVE, WE CAN MAKE OTHER ANALYTICAL MOVES THAT BOTH SHOW THE INJUSTICE OF THE REPRESSION AND MAINTAIN SOLIDARITY. SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD:***



Describe how First Amendment or voting or similar rights weren't intended to be and have never been universal in the US, connecting the current repression to a pattern rather than making it seem exceptional.



Provide examples of how this repression has been consistent across time, which helps delegitimize the repression and its agents (cops, prosecutors, courts, laws). These acts of repression are unconscionable, yet very much in step with other moments of heightened repression.



If law enforcement is doing anarchist-baiting (as in the Cop City indictment), affirm that there are many political tendencies united within the group/campaign facing repression, including anarchism, socialism, communism, anti-racism, feminism, environmentalism, etc, and that all agree on the topic (for example, they don't want a police training facility).



Return the focus to what organizers are fighting for and resisting, rather than following media and law enforcement attempts to label what the resisters did as good or bad. Talking points that try to reassure audiences that certain organizers aren't "criminals" or "terrorists" or "anarchists" tend to divide our movements and legitimize the repression of other resisters.

The commentary that emerged after the Stop Cop City indictment demonstrated that many of us have to work carefully to respond to these moments without legitimizing the US legal system or contributing to stigma of people who take up bold tactics in fights for liberation. It can be helpful to study the history of political repression of social movements to put the coming waves of repression into context and make sure our talking points are aligned with our commitments to solidarity. Studying COINTELPRO, the Green Scare, and the long history of political repression on college and university campuses can also help ground our responses to repression emerging now.

## **EXAMPLES OF MAINTAINING SOLIDARITY WHILE COMMENTING ON REPRESSION FROM THE STOP COP CITY FIGHT**



Here is an essay by two legal commentators (a lawyer and a law student) involved in the Stop Cop City campaign who critically respond to the indictment, talk about the range of tactics in the campaign, and show solidarity across tactics.



Here is an example of how people in the Vote to Stop Cop City referendum campaign, issued a statement of full throated support towards the people who put their bodies on the line to block the construction in the Weelaunee Forrest. This kind of cross-tactic solidarity helps keep the fight going and agile.



After a group of people took responsibility for the burning of a number of construction vehicles belonging to Ernst Concrete (a much more legally risky tactic than a campaign referendum or a self-proclaimed peaceful march), Kamau Franklin, the head of Community Movement Builders, one of the cornerstone Atlanta organizations involved in the fight to Stop Cop City, was able to both disavow knowledge of who engaged in the action and also explain why the tactic was a legitimate strategy with which to engage.



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