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50 YEARS LATER

HALF A CENTURY HAS PASSED SINCE THE **SPRING '68 STUDENT UPRISING**. *CCT* LOOKS AT WHAT HAPPENED THEN, AND HOW THOSE PROTESTS CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND OUR WORLD RIGHT NOW.

LAST FALL, *CCT*'S EDITORS sat down to consider how best to commemorate the half-centennial of Spring '68. Its anniversary has been noted at key milestones through the decades, but this year in particular felt different. Or rather, felt *similar*. We are a divided nation at this moment, in many ways. Young people are regularly protesting again, on topics such as free speech, immigration, LGBTQ rights, women's issues and gun control. We decided to take the opportunity to examine what has changed since 1968 — and what hasn't.

We requested perspective from writer and former *CCT* editor-in-chief Jamie Katz '72, BUS'80, and Paul Starr '70, a reporter for *Spectator* in 1968 and later its editor-in-chief, who today is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton. Katz's piece, "A Tinderbox, Poised To Ignite" revisits the animating passions of that time, and Starr's "How the '68 Uprising Looks Today" offers a big-picture comparison between 1968 and 2018.

When *CCT* marked the 40th anniversary in 2008, then-editor-in-chief Alex Sachare '71 warned readers not to take any one account of Spring '68 as gospel, and the same holds true now. People will always look at historic events through their own prism. There could be 100 different accounts of Spring '68 and they could all be true — or mostly true. Katz opted to emphasize the role of the black students who occupied Hamilton Hall, which he believes has been underplayed. Starr's analysis is based on his expertise as a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and professor, not as a soothsayer. Readers interested in more information can consider a number of accounts published in earlier issues of *CCT* as well as books such as *Up Against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis*, by Jerry L. Avorn '69 and members of the *Spectator* news staff (Starr among them); *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary*, by James Simon Kunen '70; *Crisis at Columbia*, by Harvard law professor Archibald Cox; and Paul Cronin JRN'14's new anthology, *A Time to Stir: Columbia '68*.

—Jill C. Shomer



DAVID FINCK '70

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE
STUDENT REVOLT OF 50 YEARS AGO

HOW THE '68 UPRISING LOOKS TODAY

BY PAUL STARR '70

If you know about it only vaguely or picture it in a gentle light, the student revolt at Columbia in April 1968 might seem like a romantic episode in that era's youthful rebellion. But it was a deadly serious confrontation — electrifying to people who supported the revolt; horrifying to others who saw it as evidence of a widening gyre of instability and violence in America. Inner-city riots were all too familiar by that time. Earlier that month, the black ghettos had exploded after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Yet the Columbia uprising was something new: students at a privileged, Ivy League university taking the college dean hostage and occupying the president's office and four other campus buildings for a week, until the administration called in the police to arrest more than 700 of them in a nighttime “bust” that left more than 100 injured.

Extraordinary as the revolt was, it would probably now be of interest only to aging alumni if there were no connection to larger developments

that have left a deep imprint on American society. The 1968 revolt was both an emblem of its time and a preview of things to come. In the half-century since, demands by minorities and social changes that first appeared among the young have provoked a furious backlash and split America across racial, cultural and ideological lines. Often the backlash has been stronger than the forces for change; indeed, the radical political impulse of the late 1960s was largely spent within a few years.

Today, the nation's campuses are again embroiled in political conflict over such issues as race and free speech. Recent demonstrations have not matched those of the Sixties in scale and national impact; the free-speech clashes that erupted in Berkeley last year were not nearly as significant as the mid-1960s Berkeley free-speech movement. Trends in student attitudes, however, do show a move back toward the pattern of that time. According to a national survey of college freshmen conducted annually by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, the proportion of students describing themselves as “liberal” or “far left” fell from just over 40 percent in 1971 to half that level in 1980. But the liberal/far left share has climbed since then, in 2016 reaching 35 percent, the closest it has come to its old peak. With middle-of-the-roaders declining and the proportion identifying as “conservative” or “far right” holding steady, campuses are more polarized now than they have ever been in the 51 years of the UCLA survey.

To be sure, both college students and American society have changed a great deal since the Sixties. Students today are far more ethnically diverse — at Columbia, non-Latino whites make up only 39 percent of the U.S. citizens and permanent residents in the Class of 2021* — and the College and the other Ivies no longer exclude women, as nearly all of them did in 1968. The salience of such issues as immigration, racism, gender equality and sexual assault should be no surprise. Women now predominate on the left. When UCLA began surveying freshmen, women were more conservative than men. Now they're more liberal.

But while the demographics, issues and alignments are different, there are parallels between the contentious campuses of the Sixties and those of today. Once again there is a resurgent left in a bitterly divided country. That's not to say college deans should get extra security or university presidents need new locks on their doors. This is a moment, however, when revisiting the events at Columbia 50 years ago might be instructive in thinking about what is happening now.



STUDENT PROTESTERS ENTERING MORNINGSIDE PARK IN APRIL 1968.

HUGH ROGERS

The issues that grabbed the headlines and drove protests nationally in the Sixties — racial injustice, the Vietnam War, traditional norms and systems of authority that a new generation saw as archaic and unresponsive — were also the concerns that lay at the heart of the 1968 revolt. Columbia just happened to be a place where the black movement (by then a movement for black power), a radicalized antiwar movement and cultural rebellion converged.

Organizationally, the 1968 uprising was two protests in one, the result of an uneasy coalition between the Students' Afro-American Society (SAS) and the radicals organized through the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Although the two groups agreed on joint demands, their underlying agendas were different.

For the black students, the key demand was that the University end construction of a gymnasium in Morningside Park, a proj-

ect opposed by many of Harlem's leaders. Designed with a back entrance facing Harlem and offering the community access to a separate portion of the facilities, the gym became a perfect symbol of inequality and racism. "Gym Crow," the protestors called it.

On the first day of the protests, after marching on Low Library and the gym site, both black and white demonstrators occupied Hamilton Hall, imprisoning Dean Henry S. "Harry" Coleman '46 in his office. That night, however, the SAS leaders kicked out the white students, told them to go seize their own building and blockaded Hamilton. The black students' role in the revolt panicked the administration, which hesitated for days to call in the police for fear that a raid on Hamilton would touch off an uprising from Harlem. But the black students were determined to be both respectful and militant. They soon released the dean, kept Hamilton Hall clean and in order, and eventually agreed to be arrested without resistance in a way that preserved their dignity.

The white radicals were not as restrained. After being kicked out of Hamilton, they broke into Low Library, where they occupied President Grayson Kirk's office, putting their feet up on his desk, smoking his cigars and going through his personal effects and files. During the next several days, additional groups took over Avery, Fayerweather and Mathematics, setting up "liberated zones" where they could enjoy true freedom by debating radical ideas for hours, while the "girls" from Barnard took primary responsibility for food and housekeeping. The radical leadership, just like the College, was all-male.

Aside from opposing the gym, the white radicals focused on the University's complicity with the war, demanding that Columbia sever its ties with the Institute for Defense Analysis, an inter-university consortium for defense research. Although the University insisted it had to stay neutral in political matters, radicals insisted its role in military research proved that it did not. Other demands included

ON SOCIALLY DIVERSE CAMPUSES, RACE AND DIVERSITY ARE NOT JUST ABSTRACT QUESTIONS, BUT ALSO PRACTICAL REALITIES OF DAILY LIVING.

a general amnesty for all demonstrators, as well as adherence in all future discipline to "standards of due process" at open hearings before faculty and students. The demand for due process implied a rejection of the University's authority to act *in loco parentis* (authority Barnard was exercising at the time in disciplinary proceedings against a student who had been found living with a Columbia man off-campus).

Achieving the concrete demands of the strike, however, was not what the SDS leaders were after. They saw themselves as a revolutionary vanguard in support of insurgents around the world, including the Viet Cong, and their goal was to reveal the University as an agent of oppression so as to radicalize students and inspire them to join in the revolutionary struggle.

The radicals were hardly a majority of Columbia students. Arrayed against them were counter-demonstrators, many of them athletes, continually urged by coaches and deans to "cool it" lest the campus devolve into random violence. Many others, varying in their sympathies, stayed on the sidelines. Members of the faculty interposed themselves between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators and sought unsuccessfully to mediate between the radicals and administration.

A more adroit University leadership might have had more support from students and faculty. In a *Spectator* interview about stu-



GERALD S. ADLER PH'80

THE POLICE BUST SET OFF A UNIVERSITY-WIDE STRIKE: ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING STUDENTS AT AVERY HALL.



BARNEY EDMONDS GS'67, SOA'69

STUDENTS OPPOSED TO THE TAKEOVERS ORGANIZED COUNTER-PROTESTS.

dents' role in University policymaking a year before the revolt, one administrator had declared, "Whether students vote 'yes' or 'no' on a given issue means as much to me as if they were to tell me they like strawberries." Students who might have wanted to work through channels had no channels to work through. The administration also succeeded in alienating the faculty who tried to negotiate a settlement during the crisis. At key junctures, top administrators and the trustees issued statements undermining the mediators' credibility with the strike leadership. In defense of his decision to call in the police, Kirk said he had acted on behalf of all universities: Conceding amnesty to the students "would have dealt a near-fatal blow" to American higher education.

The SDS leadership, it's true, had no interest in compromise, as bringing on the police would help radicalize students. As a sociology professor, the late Allan Silver, remarked at the time, SDS and the administration were linked in a relationship of "antagonistic cooperation." They both saw themselves as instruments of a higher cause that made concessions impossible.

In the end, of course, the SDS leaders' hopes for a revolution were disappointed, though the uprising did have concrete effects. The gym was built at another location instead of Morningside Park, and the University adopted changes in governance — such as the creation of the University Senate — that demonstrated receptivity to greater participation. Perhaps the most significant outcome was a new understanding of the University's relationship to its students, best explained by anthropologist Margaret Mead BC 1923, GSAS'28, a longtime affiliate of Columbia's Department of Anthropology.

In an essay published that fall, Mead wrote that the events at Columbia marked the end of an epoch when students were treated as children and entitled to "special privileges and immunities from the civil authorities." By calling in the police, the University had revoked its "traditional claim to protect and discipline its own students." Although many people were outraged, Mead argued that it was time to abrogate the old compact: "It is no longer appropriate to treat students as a privileged and protected group who, in return for this special station, abstain from political activity of any sort, submit to the regulation of their private lives, and risk expulsion for every sort of minor infraction of a set of outmoded rules." Once students were treated as adults, Mead concluded, they would have to make "socially responsible demands" and would then acquire "the education in real life which they complain the university denies them." That was a revolution of sorts, though it was not the one the radicals had in mind.

So is it 1968 all over again? Not quite.

But 2018 is also a time when Americans are at odds with one another, the young are alienated from the government and the right spark could ignite riots and bloody confrontations. Just as the universities were swept into the conflicts of the Sixties, so they are being drawn into today's controversies. Fifty years ago, students demanded that universities drop any pretense of neutrality and oppose the Vietnam War; today they demand that universities take a stance on immigration, serve as sanctuaries for the undocumented and protect their Dreamers. In the Sixties, national politics had personal implications for people of college age because of the risk of being drafted to fight in Vietnam. Today, the Trump administration's policies have personal implications for many students, who, even if they are white, straight and native-born, know others who live in fear of deportation or harassment because of their minority or immigrant status.

On socially diverse campuses, race and diversity are not just abstract questions, but also practical realities of daily living. Likewise, the political issues related to gender and sexuality — women's equality, gay rights, gender nonconformity, sexual harassment — have direct and personal meaning. Contrary to some observers, these are not merely questions of "identity politics," to be disparaged by comparison with the great public issues of the 1960s. They are part of the same struggle for equality. The Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and #TimesUp movements today are just the latest phase in widening claims for equal respect. From the perspective of gender politics, the 1968 revolt took place in an ancient retrograde era, but many radicals at the time believed that "the personal is political" and later came to discover it had deeper possibilities than they at first understood.

In some respects, the roles of left and right have reversed. In the 1960s, liberalism in the universities was under attack from the left; now it's more often under attack from the right. In the Sixties, radicals on the left used provocative actions and language to unmask universities as repressive institutions. Now alt-right speakers come to campuses in the hope that their provocations will also unmask liberal hypocrisy about free speech. The game only works through antagonistic cooperation — for example, if progressive students demand the speakers be banned in the interest of keeping the campus a "safe space," protected from ideas and words that offend them. That suggests they want back the old order that Mead pronounced dead a half-century ago.

It is one of the glories of the university that it is not a safe space in that specially protective sense. While the seminar room requires civility and a guiding hand, the public forum of the campus does not. This is the good part of political confrontation on campus. It can be as educational as a seminar, and in fact, a deeper immersion in political argument than classrooms can usually provide. And while we shouldn't picture the 1968 revolt in too gentle a light, this was its upside. If you were paying attention, you could learn a great deal. Today's students can do the same.

Paul Starr '70 is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton and winner of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. He was a reporter for *Spectator* in 1968 and later its editor-in-chief.

DEAD GIVEAWAY

CHECK OUT VIDEO FOOTAGE OF THE GRATEFUL DEAD'S MAY 3, 1968, CONCERT ON CAMPUS: COLLEGE.COLUMBIA.EDU/CCT/LATEST/FEATURE-EXTRAS.