

Columbia 1968, One Former Columbia Student Looks Back

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It was about four in the morning, April 30, 1968 and we were blasting “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction” when the window in Fayerweather Hall lounge opened and a huge belly of a man appeared on the window sill. Then the rest of him landed. It was a New York City Policeman. Behind him were many more policemen. There were about a hundred of us sitting on the floor when the police came in, locking arms, non-violently resisting. We were mostly Columbia Students, a few Black high school students from Harlem. I was totally unprepared to what happened next.

The police started swinging blackjacks and the room exploded with blood. People were screaming. Bodies were being thrown around the room. Blood was streaming down faces. The Black kids got the worst of it. The police hit them hardest. Then I was hit on the head from behind. I blacked out and the next thing I knew I was being dragged down the cement steps, being carried out by the police, down to Amsterdam Avenue to waiting police vans. We were stuffed in the van, bruised, checking each other to see who was hurt the worst. 712 people, mostly Columbia students were arrested that night.

We were driven downtown to jail. There were hundreds of us. We were processed for jail and court appearances, waiting in long lines. The unlucky ones got prodded in the balls with nightsticks by the police while they waited in cells. Sometime later we were arraigned in court, in large groups. I was charged with trespassing and resisting arrest. I was let out the next day and made it back to my apartment on 113th street. I slept a long time. My mother came to check up on me. My head still hurt but I was ok.

This was how the occupation of Columbia University ended for me. We had been protesting the university’s involvement with the war in Vietnam and its plans to build a gym on public land. Hundreds of students had occupied a number of university buildings for about week before Columbia called the New York City police to clear us out.

How did I get here?

In April 1968 I was a junior at Columbia College. I had come to Columbia from Lynbrook High School on Long Island. Not a great school. One of my history teachers read the text book to us in class. Most of the teachers had themselves gone to Lynbrook, then to a local college in Queens, and back to teach.

But in September 1965 I landed at Columbia. It was wonderful. Dean Truman had “teas” for us in Hewitt lounge. His wife sat demurely behind a silver urn and added water to the tea so it would not be too strong. I stood there in my new tweed jacket talking about great ideas. My Contemporary Civilization teacher was the grandson of

President. Roosevelt. They told me I had entered a “community of scholars.” I was a long way from Lynbrook and glad to be out. .I wanted to learn everything.

I started studying ancient Greek, the cradle of civilization. The five of us in my first year Greek course met .at the top of Hamilton Hall. Plaster statues of Greek Gods looked over my shoulder. I rode the elevator with Moses Hadas, the famous Greek scholar. There was an old guy in my Greek class, obviously not a Columbia College student... He was Eric Bentley, the translator of Bertold Brecht. I had read his books in high school. I was totally in awe. I stayed up late in the Asian Library, with my study lamp on, surrounded by the dark wood paneling and tall shelves of books, studying Greek verbs. I read snippets of Plato in the original Greek. I loved Columbia.

But there was also a war going on. And a draft. Columbia afforded me a college deferment that kept me out of the army – at least temporarily. I knew the war was wrong. David Gilbert, a middle class Jewish upperclassman from Newton, MA, recruited me into the anti-war group my first week as a freshman. We talked about the war and how to stop it. (David is now in prison for life in New York State, having been involved with a “political” bank robbery that resulted in the murder of several police officers.)

There were lots of talking and anti-war action leading up to April 1968. The war in Vietnam was wrong. Why were we in Vietnam? Why was the US bombing the Vietnamese? They had never attacked us or had any such intention. They were not the Nazis my father had fought in Europe. The Vietnamese did not want to rule the world... I wasn't about to risk my life so U.S. corporations could take what they wanted in Vietnam.

Columbia also wanted to build a University gym in Morningside Park. They planned a separate (“but equal”) entrance at the bottom of the hill for the Black folks from Harlem, and another entrance at the top of the hill for Columbia students. That seemed wrong: using public land for a private college. The folks in Harlem did not want like the gym either.

Columbia and the US Government were throwing their weight around and they expected us students to get in line and help them. Our elders had set up a world they wanted us to inherit. Many of us had a different idea for our future.

Rallies and Occupation

There were many rallies, demonstrations and arrests in 1967 and early 1968. Then, after a rally on April 23, 1968 at the Sundial, a large group of us marched into nearby Hamilton Hall. And we stayed. We kept Dean Coleman in his office. I remember Pete Kirscheimer and me standing in front of his door. I felt very macho, like a military guard, part of a powerful group. As the afternoon wore on, I realized we needed some food. We had not planned on staying this long. People were getting hungry. I asked Gus Reichbach for his motorcycle helmet, He handed it to me and I asked for people to put money in it so I could buy some food. Having food meant we would be serious about staying. I liked the role of providing food (I still do). I took the money, went to

Pioneer Foods on Broadway, bought a lot of bananas and other filling, easy –to- eat food, brought it back to Hamilton Hall and we all ate. Now we were ready to stay.

After a day of occupation, it was barely light when a group of us white students left Hamilton Hall. The Black students wanted their occupation to be separate, so, after an all-night discussion, the white students decided to leave and in the early morning light a bunch of us marched up the hill to Low Library. The door was locked. JJ Jacobs broke the glass in the basement door, reached in through the broken glass, and opened the door. I was shocked at his breaking the glass. I never would have done that, but I was right behind JJ, and when the glass shattered and the door opened, I marched up the stairs right behind him into President Grayson Kirk's office, someplace I had never been.

Real history is personal:

There were about 20 of us sitting on the floor of President's Kirk's office, and I was looking at Mary Gifford, a pretty woman from England. Orest Ranum, a professor who always wore his black commencement gown, came flying in the window like Batman. He tried to reason with us to leave. I thought, "Oh, I am not going anywhere. This is a chance for me to hang out with Mary Gifford." Plus, I was tired. I had not slept all night. Plus, I was angry at the war, at Columbia, and not about to leave after so much trouble getting in. (I learned much later that people are not simple collections of issues they care about. They are flesh and blood real people who have all sorts of needs and desires, including desires to be near a pretty woman. And if you don't organize with that awareness, as well as the issues, you miss the real people in any organization.)

Dean David Truman called and said he wanted to talk to us. I thought, "Oh great, we are being recognized by the powers that be." (I had gone to talk to Dean Truman myself, several months earlier to warn him that students were really upset and angry about the war. I don't think he got it. Maybe now he did. Now, years later, I thought how people at the bottom will warn those at the top of impending trouble. Whether those at the top pay attention to the warning is another matter) Just then, someone smarter than me yelled, "Give him an appointment for early next week." So we stayed.

I went poking thru Grayson Kirk's desk. I was amazed to find a condom in a cigar humidor. Did this mean he had sex? (Not necessarily I reflected later.. I also carried a condom in my wallet and it did not mean I had sex.) I also found his draft card and showed it to crowd that had gathered below. Someone suggested I burn it.

In his files I found a memo from Kirk to the company contracted to put up a fence around the building site for the gym in Morningside Park. In the memo, Grayson Kirk himself directed the fence company to put up the fence in the wee hours of the morning to avoid community opposition. We thought Kirk was a bumbling old fool, but this memo showed he was no fool and was very hands on with the details of building the gym in Morningside Park. I read the memo to those who had gathered below

Later I moved to Fayerweather Hall, after other students occupied it.

That week in the buildings was a heady time. Our occupation was front page news in the New York *Times*, every day. I grew up in a family that believed the New York *Times* printed the truth. Now, for the first time in my life, I was making news. I was shocked how much the *Times* got wrong... It made me forever take whatever I read in the *Times*, or any newspaper, with many grains of salt.

Columbia Calls the Cops

After a week of sleepless nights on the floor, hundreds of hours of meetings, negotiations, rumors of the impending bust, Columbia called the NYPD to clear us out.

I was typical of the students arrested. I was totally unprepared for being beaten and arrested. I knew intellectually about “passive resistance” and “non-violence” from the Civil Rights movement (Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot and killed a few weeks before) I had even gone to the last few days of the Selma to Montgomery march when I was in high school. But non-violent civil disobedience were only words, not anything I (or any of students, I think) had practiced or prepared for. Unlike the Black students in Nashville who sat in at lunch counters, we had no training workshops in non-violent resistance from Jim Lawson. We had little real organization. As far as I could tell, we were loosely-knit bands of friends where ideology, personal expression and activism reigned. We had little planning, leadership structure, organizational membership, decision-making agreements or accountability. We made decisions on our action “in the buildings” as we went along. We talked a lot. We had goals of stopping the war and the gym, but had little understanding of organizing strategy, tactics, preparation or planning.

After the bust and arrests

Violence and jailing and threats of these are effective in keeping people in their place. Most people don't like being beaten or jailed. The NYPD stayed on the campus that spring and the next year. There were more demonstration and arrests. Columbia put up tall cast iron fences and gates on each end of College Walk and other entrances. They made all students carry new photo IDs and Columbia security police checked them at the gates so only students could enter the college.

A year later, in the spring of 1969, when the police were still very much around the campus, there were more demonstrations against the University and war. I don't remember the exact incident, but I remember some of us looking at the buildings and thinking of occupying them again. I remember thinking: “Oh, if I do that I will get hit on the head again.” I thought I could see others thinking the same thing. I knew what happened to me the last time we tried that. I got hit on the head. It hurt. Like a rat getting electric shock, my behavior turned away from doing something that would result in my getting hit again.

Little Training

Without any training, discipline, organization, mutual support or understanding of the larger picture and our potential effectiveness, I stayed away from action that would likely result in pain. It is a human reaction, but it was an important lesson for me as I stared at the windows of those big red brick buildings near College Walk. I was not ready to withstand the pain of the police again. I was isolated from the local community (and I

think most students were) and from any elders who might have been able to provide perspective or guidance. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was our motto. We felt we were the center of the universe and anyone outside that universe was irrelevant.

There were few elders with organizing experience to guide me. Some professors were supportive and against the war, but I could not find anyone to guide me, except from one or two slightly older students. We had no Highlander Center, no Ella Baker, no Septima Clark or Jim Lawson to help us get “ready from within.” (To quote the title of Septima Clark’s autobiography)

Turn to Violence

In 1968, some of us turned to violence (The Weather Underground) I was friends with some of those folks, and, like them, was frustrated with the war in Vietnam and our seeming inability to stop it. But when I went back to my block on Long Island, I looked at my dad, a Hungarian immigrant, working long hours doing commercial art. I looked at my next-door neighbor, Jack Landau, who sold shoes. Or Morty Feldman, down the block, who sold belts. Or Bobby Robbins’ dad, around the corner, who sold advertising on match-books, or any of the other dads on the block, and I thought, “How would blowing up an Army dance hall help them?” What would they think if I joined some “revolutionary underground cell” to make bombs to attack the US army or US corporations to stop the war?

It sure would not help the families on my block. If we were out to help the working class, I did not have to look far to find it. The dads on my block were not the “lumpen proletariat” sweating away in meat factories, but they were far from the ruling class. They were Jewish small-businessmen who worked long hours so their families could survive and their kids could go to college. Any acts of violence to stop the war would look loony to them. I would be too embarrassed to even ask them what they thought. The question was ludicrous and the answer obvious. My block was a long way from the heady discussions at Columbia of stopping the war “by any means necessary.” Without my realizing it at the time, but looking back on it now, my block back on Long Island grounded me in a reality I could not ignore. I knew all these families my whole life. So, instead of joining the Weather Underground, I took a job teaching high school in California after graduation from Columbia.

Looking Back:

1968 seems like a long time ago. Maybe it is. It is about 20 years before current Columbia student were born. It would be like 1927 for me: flappers, Prohibition, and the “roaring 20’s” But in some ways not that much has changed. College Presidents have become smarter. They learned from Columbia not to call the police to beat up their student customers when they occupy college buildings in the spring of the year. It is bad for business. I am sure all those arrests, beatings and headlines dampened enrollment at Columbia in 1969 and few years after.

Now, Columbia work-study students occasionally call me in the evening asking for money. I tell them about 1968. It is news to them. I guess it is not something Columbia mentions at orientation. Better to forget all that unpleasantness.

State Violence

But, how much has changed? What would happen today if hundreds of Black mothers and their five year olds from Harlem, Queens or Brooklyn took the Long Island Railroad out to a nice suburban school and asked to enroll their children in the kindergarten there? It would give their children a better education. I see the principal trying to explain they have to live in the district to enroll. But, what if they stayed, sat in, and refused to leave until their children were enrolled in the suburban kindergarten?

Eventually, I imagine that the Long Island town could call the police and arrest the mothers, just like the NYPD beat and arrested us that warm spring night in April 1968. They could throw them into jail. They could even beat them bloody. That would be legal. The mothers would be breaking the law. It would be, in the words of our political science professors “legitimate violence”

The police would more likely escort them gently to jail. But anyway you cut it is violence. Probably no billy clubs on skulls. Too many people now have cell phones and video cameras that would put police violence on You-Tube and the Internet in an hour. But, when people get out of line, state-sanctioned violence is available to make them act according to the rules --even when those rules mean their children receive a separate and unequal start in life. We all know this; yet we play by the rules, even when we know those rules are stacked against our children.

But it rarely comes to this. Mothers accept the fact that their children will go inferior schools if they can't afford to live in an expensive school district. (Parents know there is a pecking order of educational opportunity in America based on where you live which is based on what price house you can afford to buy. I find it ironic when people speak of “education in America” as if schools in Black city neighborhoods were anything like schools in white, upper-class suburbs.)

So I thank Columbia for teaching me an important lesson about how people are kept in their place, especially when life at the starting gate is unequal for so many. State supported violence is available to keep it that way.

In America now, most governments don't have to beat people regularly to keep them in line. They have long learned more modern methods. We have understandings. We accept our lot. Recently I saw a T-shirt quoting Paulo Freire: “The greatest tool of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” Most people, including Columbia students, quietly stay in their assigned seats.

Except when we don't – like in April 1968. Then the velvet glove came off. The “community of scholars” becomes the police, the jails and the courts versus the “scholars.”

College students today are deprived of the opportunity to learn this lesson first hand. I could invent a course, “Methods of Social Control.” Included would be the study of the use of state sanctioned violence. (We rarely describe “violence” as something coming from the police, army, CIA or National Guard, although they do most of it. “Violence” now most often refers to individual civilians hurting or killing each other, mostly referring to young Black men in our cities.

State supported violence is rarely mentioned in our American history books. But it has been frequently used to enforce law and order. I would not have had the opportunity to personally understand the function of state violence and social control had not Columbia called the cops on me, my fellow students and others. We overstayed our welcome in Fayerweather lounge. (Ironically just down the hall from my American History class) And those who overstay their welcome today, a similar fate awaits them.

Racism

Columbia also afforded me the opportunity to learn a little about racism. I spent several days after graduation in the “Tombs” – a downtown NYC jail, after being convicted of trespassing and resisting arrest. Aside from one other Columbia student who was convicted along with me, all the other inmates were Black or Latino men. We had a lot of time to talk to each other, crowded into narrow quarters. Most were awaiting trial for minor crimes that white people never would have been arrested for, or would have been released on their own recognizance. I remember a couple young men who had been arrested for stealing a battery from a car. It was clear to me they had only been arrested because they had been Black and near the scene of the incident. I felt safe in the midst of all those Black men, but afraid of the white guards. It made me realize how much race played a role in the likelihood of being arrested and jailed. The fact that *all* the inmates except me and the other student were people of color made the racism all too obvious.

Many Stories:

This is one man’s story. I did not and could not see every thing. Others have their stories and recollections. Interpretations will vary and conflict. A couple policemen were injured during the arrests. They and their families will see the events differently – as they should... Other students will have their recollections and analysis, as will the teachers, administrators, Black students and the folks from Harlem. It would take hearing from many to get a more complete and accurate picture of what happened, why, and what it all means for today.

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Michael Jacoby Brown (Columbia College, 1969, cum laude) has worked for over 40 years as a community organizer and trainer in a variety of settings. He has worked as a community organizer for the Vermont Alliance, Massachusetts Fair Share, B’nai B’rith, The National Jobs with Peace Campaign, Faith in Action (formerly the PICO Network) and as a trainer and consultant for numerous community, labor, religious, government

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