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Howard University courtyard, Washington, D. C.

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U.S. Universities, Racial and Student Conflicts

*No one really knows why they are alive
until they know what they'd die for.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Introduction

It could be said that, chronologically, the 1968 student movements in different parts of the world began in March at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University and New York's Columbia University. Later—and not in a chain reaction nor with a causal relation between them—came the May Days in France, the August social revolt in Czechoslovakia against the Soviet invasion, and the demonstrations that ended with the October 2 massacre in Mexico.

1968 was a particularly tumultuous year in many ways worldwide, both systemically and geopolitically. Student mobilizations were framed in prolific countercultural movements in which debates about the strategies for transforming society took place on a world scale, in both the capitalist and socialist countries as well as in the colonies and former colonies that were later categorized for a time as the “Third World.”

In the United States and the Soviet Union, the 1960s began with John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, respectively, but with different endings. However, both

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leaderships came to an end before the decade did, making way each in turn for Lyndon B. Johnson and Leonid Brezhnev. Those transitions are similar, as E. Wallerstein points out, in that the political systems of the time may have been aware of the roiling social pressures that existed, and, thus, they could be considered pre-revolutionary moments in their respective countries.¹

The first half of that decade provided a context of abundance and prosperity in which certain political concessions were made. With time, society considered them irrelevant or rather unsatisfactory compared with the expectations they had raised. This sparked the new generations to mobilize politically. Wallerstein and Zukin explain that

the new movements that emerged then were led largely by young people who had grown up in a world where the traditional anti-systemic movements in their countries were not in an early phase of mobilization but had already achieved their intermediate goal of state power. Hence, these “old” movements could be judged not only on their promises but on their practices once in power. They were so judged, and to a considerable degree they were found wanting.²

Each mobilization had its own specificities and different degrees of impact. This essay will review some of the interactions among the student movements that converged at Howard and Columbia Universities in March and April that year with the emergence of what Rorty called the U.S. “cultural left.”³ Characteristically, these interactions took place with other profound political movements in that country, such as the African-Americans’ civil rights movement, and the great mosaic of the pacifist counter-cultural movements, particularly against the Vietnam War, throughout the world.

Background

The U.S. student movements had tragic precedents like the Ole Miss riot in Oxford Mississippi on September 30, 1962. President Kennedy gave the order to admit African-American military veteran James Meredith to the University of Mississippi, but both that institution and the state government openly opposed the decision. The clashes between federal marshals accompanying Meredith to class

and local racists opposing his enrollment left two dead and 300 injured. This was one of many events that marked the civil rights struggles in the years before 1968.

On February 8, 1968, the Orangeburg Massacre took place in South Carolina. Similarly to what happened later at Columbia University, a group of students had previously protested segregation at a local bowling alley and carried their protest to the South Carolina State University campus. In attempting to quell the protest, police shot into the crowd, killing three Afro-American students and wounding 27 others, many of whom were shot in the back. In contrast with the two cases I will review here, police repression was repudiated by the public, making this an important case that motivated later student mobilizations.

Convergences

The Howard University Sit-In

From March 19 to 23, about 1 000 students staged a peaceful sit-in of the administration building at Washington, D.C.’s Howard University. The story began on March 2, when the university was celebrating Charter Day, the anniversary of its founding. In a local newspaper article, Barry Kalb states that about 70 students, both men and women, interrupted the traditional ceremony presided over by university President James N. Nabrit.⁴ Their argument: the university charter was an example of institutionalized slavery. They demanded the president resign and the institution be re-founded to focus on the study of Afro-American history and culture.

As a result, 37 students were expelled, leading to a new peaceful demonstration on March 19. According to Rick Massimo’s reconstruction of the events, added to the original demands were the elimination of sanctions against these students and the design of a disciplinary

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Columbia University, New York.

system for the student body to replace the administration's previous unilateral decision-making about disciplinary cases.⁵

After four days sitting in outside the president's office, student participation was increasing, so the authorities decided to open negotiations. The movement seems to have been successful, since the university committed itself to the students' demands and Howard University continues to be an obligatory reference point for the study of Afro-American history and culture.

The Columbia University Sit-In

According to Wallerstein, in that same month, two movements at Columbia University coincided with that of Howard University and used some of the same tactics. The first, led by the campus Student Afro Society (SAS) sought to put a stop to the university's plan to build a gymnasium that they thought would shore up segregation in the educational system. The other was made up mainly of young white leftist men: the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) demanded the university cut off its relations and cooperation with the Institute for Defense Analyses think tank because it was an ethical contradiction for a university to cooperate with bodies that participated in genocide, in this case, the Vietnam War.

Several versions of the story imply that the Afro-American students were much better organized and disciplined, certainly in the framework of civil rights movement

mobilizations, as I will show later. Perhaps due to this, the Afro-American students did not want the two movements to converge, thus leading each group to take over different buildings in the university, each raising its own demands. Although both movements were successful, they were bloodily repressed and the NYPD arrested more than 700.

Documentaries like *The Whole World Is Watching* have shown the climate after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the importance of the fact that the Vietnam War was considered contrary to U.S. American values.

Another literary and cinematic reference to this historic moment is *The Strawberry Statement*, a book by James Simon Kunen that was freely adapted by Stuart Hagmann for the screen. Regardless of their artistic value, both works offer an interesting, fresh look at the cultural left Rorty studied. The title refers to a statement attributed to University of Columbia Dean Herbert Deane, who said that a university could not be run democratically and that the students' opinions about matters the dean's office dealt with were as relevant as knowing whether they liked strawberries or not.

Interactions

As mentioned above, the two movements took place in a context marked by rejection of the Vietnam War, the different forms of struggle for full civil rights for the Afro-

American community, and the era's countercultural boom. It is also important to point out that, in an atmosphere of opening to racial and sexual issues, certain events scandalized those who were not part of that generation or who did not share that perspective. One was the first interracial kiss on television on the series *Star Trek* and another, José Feliciano's controversial interpretation of the U.S. national anthem at the fifth game of the baseball World Series that year.

The violence toward the Afro-American community was at a high point, and while the student mobilizations were going on, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. This sparked violent protests in more than 100 cities throughout the country.

Despite the fact that the 1964 civil rights legislation passed by Lyndon B. Johnson was already in force, a bill to ensure equal housing rights for African Americans had been blocked on several occasions in the House of Representatives. King's assassination and the wave of discontent that followed it, in addition to the possibility that the Afro-American movement might connect with the white cultural left, as had already happened at Columbia University, very possibly led the House to finally approve the Civil Rights Act of 1968 on April 10.

That year, other events involved political violence. In August, at the Democratic Party Convention, for example, the police violently repressed the peace demonstrators outside the hall as Hubert Humphrey was being nominated as presidential candidate inside. On October 22, Lyndon B. Johnson passed a gun control law regulating inter-state commerce in weapons; and on October 31, he announced the ceasefire in Vietnam, to come into effect November 1.⁶ This could be seen as a desperate—and unfruitful—attempt at preventing Richard Nixon's victory at the polls a few days later.

Conclusions

The March and April mobilizations at Howard and Columbia Universities were milestones that would be repeated in other latitudes like France and Mexico. The U.S. specificities are due to their relationship with the Afro-American movements and the emergence of the cultural left currents that at that time were raising the demand to end the Vietnam War.

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The police repression at Columbia University opened up the possibility of an alliance among certain sectors of the Afro-American and cultural left movements. Very possibly, the political seed planted in 1968 was what allowed Barack Obama to be elected president 40 years later.

The aims of these collective actions were fulfilled: Howard broadened student participation and strengthened its history and U.S. culture studies programs to include the painful experience of Afro-Americans. At Columbia, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 clearly established the illegality of any form of segregation, and the students from Students for a Democratic Society managed to expose and cut the links between U.S. universities and military establishments like the IDA.

In contrast with other experiences such as Mexico's that same year, these collective student actions were convergences that interacted and fed back into the social movements of the time, thus mutually strengthening them. Fifty years later, a large part of the core causes of these struggles continue to exist, but in a context of precariousness and vulnerability. It is devoutly to be wished that we may learn from their disciplined, non-violent tactics and generous strategic visions to make this world a better place. ■■■

Notes

1 Immanuel Wallerstein and Sharon Zukin, "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries," *Theory and Society* vol. 18, no. 4, July, 1989, pp. 431-449, https://www.jstor.org/stable/657747?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 435.

3 Richard Rorty, "Una izquierda cultural," in Richard Rorty, *Forjar nuestro país: el pensamiento de izquierdas en los Estados Unidos del siglo xx* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1999), pp. 71-96.

4 B. Kalb, "Students Halt Howard Rites, Proclaim a 'New University,'" 1968, <https://www.dc1968project.com/blog/2017/3/2/hu-deja-vu>.

5 R. Massimo, "'Our Demand Is an Answer'—50 Years since Howard University Protest," 2018, <https://wtop.com/dc/2018/03/demand-answer-howard-university-protest-50/slide/1/>.

6 The war continued despite this ceasefire until April 30, 1975.