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www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

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by JONAH RASKIN

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Columbia 1968, Columbia 2018: the Rebels of the Past Meet the Rebels of Today

“We created a liberated space that stayed with us for our whole lives. That’s the legacy of Columbia.”

– Juan Gonzales, April 27, 2018

Youth makes revolutions. Thomas Jefferson was 33 in 1776 at the start of the American independence movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the same age at the Seneca Falls Convention that launched the women’s rights movement in the U.S. in 1848. Che was 31 when the Cuban guerrillas seized power in Havana.

Young people also made the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s when they rebelled against parents, teachers, cops and the established order of things.

Once again young people are in revolt, from Indiana and Florida to New York and California.

Teenagers and 20-something-year-old activists are finding friends and allies among the baby boomers who are now in their sixties, and who once demonstrated against the war in Vietnam, racial injustice and patriarchal authority.

The boomer insurgents are not going gently into old age and retirement, though many of the protesters at Columbia in 1968, including Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Robert Kramer, John Jacobs, Barry Willdorf and Gus Reichbach are no longer alive. Melvin Margolis and Lynn Phillips, two young radicals who filmed and edited the 1968 Newsreel documentary “The Columbia Revolt,” died shortly before the 50th anniversary of their work and the protests they memorialized.

Still, the surviving 68ers, along with dozens of young rebels were present at Columbia University during the last weekend in April when they shared memories of the student protests that erupted in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Those protests made headline news and sparked protests from Harvard to Kent State and beyond.

“I wasn’t alive in 1968,” Professor Stefan Bradley, a young black writer and intellectual—and the author of *Harlem vs. Columbia University*—told the audience members and the panelists on the stage.

Bradley added, “I apologize,” though no apology was necessary.

His comment sparked laughter during an otherwise largely serious gathering that culled lessons of the past and explored the nature of protest itself.

Today’s rebels are more polite than the rebels of 50-years ago. They also have a very big fight on their hands in an era of unprecedented shootings in schools and on the streets.

At Columbia, the graduate students who teach undergraduates, and who keep the whole academic enterprise in motion, are currently on strike.

They call themselves "graduate workers." What's more they've formed a union that's affiliated with the UAW. They're demanding that the Columbia administration recognize their organization and enter into negotiations about wages and working conditions and respect the dignity of labor.

At the very start of the three-day 50th-anniversary event at Columbia, the graduate workers led the audience in a rousing rendition of the old union song, "Solidarity Forever."

I felt right at home singing the lyrics I'd learned from my parents and that I sang in the 1960s and 1970s.

The presence of the graduate workers, their voices, T-shirts and leaflets ensured that the April 2018 gathering would not be an exercise in nostalgia. but rather an occasion to link at least two generations of radicals and trace the continuities between the rebels of 1968 and those of 2018.

I was no disinterested observer. I attended Columbia College from 1959 to 1963, and then as a graduate student from 1963 to1964, when academic life was defined by anti-communist fervor, anti-Marxist fanaticism and even anti-intellectualism, though professors tried to look and sound like genuine intellectuals. In reality they'd sold their souls to the Book of the Month Club, *Partisan Review*, major Manhattan publishers and the privileges and the status of the Ivy League.

Columbia sociology Professor, C. Wright Mills, the author of *The Power Elite,* was an exception to the rule.

In the early 1960s, I was not only a Columbia student. I was also an anti-war activist and an advocate for civil rights who marched and picketed with my friends and classmates, many of us sons of 1930s radicals.

By the late 1960s, I was a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, trying to balance a career in academia with my left-wing ideals and values.

In April 1968, I was arrested along with more than 700 other protesters who had occupied five buildings on campus and declared them "liberated" zones. We were protesting Columbia's collaboration with the Pentagon and its plan to annex public land in Morningside Heights and build a gymnasium for students.

Harlem residents would be allowed to use the gym, but only under strict rules and regulations. They would have to enter through a separate entrance. Hence the slogan, "Gym Crow Must Go!"

At the April 2018 gathering to commemorate 1968, both the protesters of the past and the protesters of the present were candid about the struggles they've waged and that they're still waging.

Chloe Haralambous, 25, a graduate worker in the English Department—and one of the strikers—talked about "the hypocrisy of the Columbia administration." Indeed, while the University uses 1968 to represent itself as a campus with a radical past, it refuses to negotiate with the radicals of the present, or to acknowledge the legitimacy of their cause.

John Coatsworth, the provost of the University, welcomed the audience and then made an early exit. The University also provided booze and nibbles, as well as the space for the event.

Chloe Haralambous's comments about the hypocrisy of the University were amplified by those of Juan Gonzales, a student radical at Columbia 50-years ago who went on to help form the Young Lords and who is a co-host of Democracy Now with Amy Goodman.

"Capitalism is a resilient system," Gonzales told the crowd of several hundred who had gathered at Faculty House on the edge of the campus and with a view of Harlem. He added that in the wake of 1968, capitalism had found a way "to co-opt movements" in a variety of ways, sometimes with the proverbial stick and sometimes with the proverbial carrot.

A native New Yorker, a Puerto Rican and the first member of his family to attend college, Gonzales insisted that the 1968 Columbia rebellion was "multi-ethnic and part of a world-wide anti-colonial movement that brought about a social and a cultural, though not a political revolution."

Gonzales spoke for a great many of the '68ers when he explained that, "when you live in a liberated space your mind becomes free" and that "we created a liberated space that stayed with us for our whole lives. That's the legacy of Columbia."

From the audience, former SDS member Eric Mann told the crowd, "Columbia was a great victory. It's what keeps me going today."

Martha Schmidt, 71, a student at Columbia in 1968, looked back at the past and explained that she joined the protests because "It was the right thing to do." She added, "We were on the side of history." Schmidt came back to campus 50-years later "out of a sense of curiosity" and because 1968 had been "a defining moment" in her life.

Former members of the Weather Underground, some of them Columbia students in 1968, were in the audience. They circulated leaflets about David Gilbert, a member of the Weather Underground now in prison for his participation in the 1982 robbery of a Brinks Armored truck when two police officers and one Brinks guard were killed. Gilbert was an unarmed get-away driver.

“I very much regret my role and actions in that Brinks robbery,” Gilbert recent wrote.

For the graduate students today, the Columbia campus isn’t a liberated space, but rather a contested territory. Tania Bhattacharyya, 28, who comes from Calcutta and who is one of the most articulate of the strikers, noted that, “So many of the questions from the past remain the same today.”

She added that the Columbia administration uses “the law and the police as forms of social control” and that “solidarity demands real organizing and not just showing up and shouting slogans.”

Fifty years after 1968, it was clear that the protests on campus that year were far more complex that anyone had initially realized and that there was also far more kinship than strife between the black students and the white students, a narrative of cooperation that the mass media has largely ignored.

Nancy Biberman, who was a student in 1968 and who became a lawyer and a community activist—and who founded the Women’s Housing & Economic Development Corporation—touted the role of women during the occupation and the liberation.

Eric Foner, who had been an undergraduate at the college in the early 1960s and who went on to become a professor and a renowned scholar, insisted that Mark Rudd, one of the leaders of the 1968 protests, had been too critical and too negative about the Columbia revolt.

“The fact is that many people have enjoyed long productive lives since 1968,” Foner said.

Indeed, the audience was packed with rebels in their 60s who had become teachers, writers, lawyers, librarians and organizers who had not lost the faith. They have also been energized and inspired by the young protesters in Parkland, Florida and elsewhere around the country.

Yes, young people make revolutions, but they make them with support from men and women two and three times their age.

“What can you do to help us?” Tania Bhattacharyya asked the audience at Columbia. “You can bring us food to eat. We get hungry on our picket line.”