

Seize Power or Seize the Campus?



**An Introduction and a Modest Proposal
For Burning Down Your University**

University life is a socioeconomic ritual that modernity has reified with the historical processes of capitalism. In short, it is a cycle of mediocrity.

The university represents the social reproduction of “knowledge” in the contemporary bourgeois spectacle. For this is where an individual is supposed to acquire knowledge of a certain specialisation of labour. However, of course, there is a price to be paid for this knowledge.

Affordable tuition is a legend of yesteryear, especially in the aftermath of the privatisation of public universities in the recent economic crisis. Much of the student populace are actually stripped from the abundance of the commodity markets, existing more or less as vagrants in student housing ghettos.

Still, for many, becoming a university student is seen as the only opportunity for achieving a career that is sustainable/profitable, which is arguably true, but as may be expected, a large amount of self-loathing and regret comes with it.

University life becomes a daily stream of anxiety, depression, suicidal feelings, alienation, and other forms of discontent. However, often this discontent is not recognised as a symptom of being a student but instead is viewed masochistically as not “studying” or “working” enough. A student is simply supposed to appreciate the privilege of studying in a University.

At the same time, the student is hard to sympathise with. For the university student, earning the status of a despised creature, exists in a paradox. While the university offers the opportunity for one to go through the ritualistic development of social and symbolic capital through specialisation in a particular field, this requirement creates a complete unawareness regarding the state of one’s world. Simply being an immiserated subject does not necessarily make one a revolutionary. The condition of being a student does not in itself imply having the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, for being a student does not necessarily mean one is a proletarian. In fact, the category of the student usually fits Friedrich Engels’ definition of the petit bourgeois: one who, during revolutionary events, must either choose the side of the proletariat or the side of the bourgeoisie.

While this does not negate the possibility of students becoming radicalised, contemporary student struggles in the United States have nowhere near the size and impact of student struggles elsewhere. In fact, in the US in particular, we see the tendency of “subversive” student culture to be subsumed by the social reproduction of the university form.

A component of the spectacular-university is spectacular-subversion. As the left of capital plagues the world in its various cancerous forms, its academic equivalent residing in universities has recuperated the subversive potential of the student, providing us with hilarious, yet tragic, failures in tackling the horrifying

consequences of the contemporary university.

Economic turmoil is one factor which has accelerated the unraveling of university ideology in the 21st century. Economic recessions have brought about austerity measures in most industrialised capitalist nations. In response, educational institutions have implemented higher tuition rates and have cut graduate students' and university workers' wages. For many, the dream of a bourgeois future was interrupted, and a series of protests has erupted around the world.

In the remainder of this text we will look at the example of the University of California, Berkeley.

UC Berkeley is perhaps the “poster-child” for student protests in the United States. Thus, “the People’s Republic of Berkeley,” the mess Reagan threatened “to clean up,” is an ideal starting point for our analysis.

However, we will not sing any nostalgic praises. We do not wish merely to alter our social reproduction by harkening back to an age that was more “real,” more “authentic,” more genuinely concerned about the struggles of daily existence. We recall that Mario Savio took his shoes off before he mounted that police car. We have no illusions of a better yesterday.

To the contrary, we wish to see the collapse of the university form. We've no requests or demands of the university. We only want to hasten its end, knowing that with its destruction will we see the spark of a vehement and cohesive communist project. It is a fact that this project has yet to be seen. Instead, we are bogged down by the banal radical rhetoric of “autogestion” and “self-managed” universities: “Quickly comrades, we’ll make this place more efficient than the bourgeoisie ever could!” The university still stands, discontent continues on—just with more meetings every day. The bottom line is that a university is quite a terrible place to learn anything of value for one’s life. The social reproduction of knowledge in a communist society would effectively be much different. In fact, in a communist society the university social form would be totally annihilated. For the limitation of certain forms of knowledge in certain locations would be a limitation of the capitalist past.

Looking at UC Berkeley is a useful beginning, if only to show how student protests have become just another organ of the 21st-century university. Student protests are merely the university reproducing itself in another, more “subversive” form. It is a ritual, one with proper procedures, acceptable and unacceptable protocols, and of course, its own priests. We find UC Berkeley leading this herd, the shepherd that guides one to “protest responsibly” in accordance with university activity, complete with its own “disorientation guides,” tomes that can instantly reproduce an easily digestible, easily consumable, protest-form: protests stamped with the UC Berkeley brand, a seal of approval. But what does this seal of approval look like?

History: A Haunting of the Dead

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionising themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.

Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

One of the most difficult problems with UC Berkeley's contemporary student movement is the fact that no such movement exists. Instead, over the past six years, there have been large events that exhibit properties of resistance: large, spectacular events, which were nevertheless necessarily unable to become a systematic vehicle of resistance. While the protests of 2011 were successful in freezing tuition, the legacy of these events set the precedent for the failure of the 2014 Wheeler Hall occupation. The increasing bureaucratisation, banalisation, and ultimate betrayal of the controlling activist clique, among many other factors, indexes the total failure of the contemporary student protests. In order to understand this standing failure, we must revisit the events of the early student protests.

UC Berkeley has had a reputation of radicalism since at least the 1960s. Like most contemporary myths of the Free Speech Movement, this reputation is based less on truth and more on nostalgia. True, the Free Speech Movement is still visible today—at the Free Speech Movement Cafe located at the centre of campus, where one can purchase “soups, salads, and sandwiches made with local, sustainable, or organic ingredients when available”—a menu which is, apparently, “a manifestation of the ideals inherent in the Free Speech Movement.” Suffice it to say, the events of a now quite-distant past are not, for our purposes, worth discussing beyond pointing out that they mark the origin of institutionalised activist culture at UC Berkeley and beyond. We will instead begin with 2009.

In the shadow of 2009's crippling economic crisis, the UC regents—the governing committee that controls almost every factor of the University of California system—conducted a tuition hike of 32%. The enormity of this tuition hike triggered immediate student organising.

At UC Berkeley, a closed occupation formed with 40 activists barricading themselves within Wheeler Hall. When riot police were called in from as far away as Alameda County to bolster UCPD's already significant presence, students massed outside to “confront” them.

What did this confrontation look like?

It was traditional Berkeley “radicalism”: feather ruffling, shouting “shame” at police officers, and so on. When confronted by riot police with mass state-repression, the students responded from a place of moral superiority. “If only the police understood their role to protect and serve,” they cried. Maybe the students could appeal to their humanity. The police responded with the discourse of the baton (though, apparently some teary-eyed officers felt morally ambiguous while raining hickory upon the plaintive students). You can easily find several videos of the event, all of them displaying passive students having their bodies battered and arrested.

These 40 students, after one day of the closed occupation, were arrested in a police raid. In a documentary produced by activists chronicling the 2009 actions, a rather telling statement captures the strategic essence of this resistance:

“Even though none of their demands were met, the students saw this as a massive victory.”

The most significant actions after the events of 2009 were the Berkeley student protests in 2011. In response to another tuition hike—this time 80%—another round of student organising commenced. However, during this round of protests, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement had also been building. On November 9th, following Oakland, the City of Berkeley, and cities all over the country, students put up tents near the main campus administration building, Sproul Hall. Another dance between the protesters and the police occurred around 3:00 pm that same afternoon, with students pitifully trying to convince the police of their moral failings while wrapping a feeble human chain around targeted tents. The prospect of the police officer abandoning his or her truncheon is quite laughable, and the attempts to convert an obedient baton into a “fair citizen” only occasioned more broken students. At least one protester was cunning enough to drag her pummeled, limp ally away from the front row to the relative shelter of a bush, although that space would likewise be quickly flattened. That said, in 2012, a tuition hike freeze was passed. This moment was perceived to be a large victory for the “student movement.” However, was it really? This question can only be answered on the basis of the realities of today’s student movement.

On the evening of November 19th, 2014, Wheeler Hall was once again occupied. Earlier that day, the UC regents voted to increase tuition over 27.5%. The corresponding events should be analyzed by categorizing the content and nature of the recent occupation. First, we will look at the occupation’s program.

The Players At Hand

While this movement began with the language of an occupation, we who have organised this space in symbolic reclamation of higher education, call it Wheeler Commons. With an awareness of our presence on Ohlone territory and with the belief that this university should be open and belong to everyone, we are not disrupting classes. We stand for the Open University: affordable, accessible, public education. Accordingly, we intend for our demonstration of solidarity to elicit a sincere dialogue between the members of the UC Community, Regents, and the state.

November 23rd Wheeler Hall Occupation press release from the Cal
Progressive Coalition

In order to illuminate the political players in this spectacle of subversion, we will contrast them with our comrades' description of the left of capital in the pamphlet, "On the Poverty of Student Life." While similar in its structure and mundane tactics, the "Official Left" Stalinist youth groups of the 1960s have been replaced by the cadres remaining in the wake of these New Left activist cliques.

The Cal Progressive Coalition is a popular front focused on a variety of issues. Perhaps unintentionally, but nonetheless hilariously, parodying the popular fronts of Spain and France in the 1930s, CPC is a mixed bag of pubescent politics, including careerist activists, inept environmentalists, cultists, Trotskyists, and others. CPC is the product of nearly four years of institutionalised student organising, during which coalition-building became the prime objective.

CPC's program was established on the basis of the 2014 Wheeler Hall Occupation. Here, we see a symbolic protest effect that comes from the Occupy movement, saddled with a deep nostalgia for the Berkeley protests of the 60s. The CPC describes itself as part of a proud lineage that serves to "protect academic freedom," whatever that means.

This program includes hyper-democratic assemblies, which the police are welcome to attend (after all, they are "one of us!"), a moralistic policy of non-disruption (an attempt to protect the "values" of the university), and engaging in backroom deals with the administration. CPC has even been suspected of snitching, passing information about radical students to the police.

These last two points need to be stressed: they show divisions among a determined student resistance to tuition hikes (as well as other unaddressed issues, like sexual assault, the role of campus police, etc) and a puritanical, masturbatory, idealistic "re-enactment" that pads the resumes of leading activists, while bravely handing others over to the baton.

All “official” tactics for the 2014 Wheeler Hall occupation were designated by the CPC and were mediated by a general assembly model. These tactics are based upon open dialogue with the administration and the police, in the belief that they might have a change of heart. Students at GAs were continually forced to endure discussion after discussion on “solidarity,” but what does Berkeley solidarity look like? Forgetting even the mandatory oath to “respect the space”, negating the whole purpose of a mass action, the protest’s continual fragmentation only led to its own implosion. Hyper democratic, easily startled, paranoid, pathetic. The students have learned nothing.

Police truncheons didn’t even play a role in the finale, the occupation simply withered away.

The General Assembly

A theoretical error is always at the root of an error of political tactics.

Amadeo Bordiga, “The Democratic Principle”

And in order to constitute themselves the only legitimate spokesmen for the workers, union functionaries employ a liberal-type “consensus politics” which consists of a maximal exploitation of the conflicts between the interests among the varied levels of workers in the factory.

Fredy Perlman, *Worker-Student Committees, France ‘68*

The General Assembly form of decision making and group solidification stems from the recent past of the Occupy movement, its animating principle being a decentralised, democratic, horizontal network of organisation. It is opposed to hierarchy in spirit.

Of course, as an ideal espoused by numerous contemporary political ideologies, the spirit of this ideal is conditioned in its possibility by a contradictory practical reality.

The marked tendency, it turns out, is a systematic process of bureaucratisation and fetishisation of the title of “mass democracy.” Here come the procedures of constant and paranoid checks and balances meant to secure the proper functioning of its democratic drive toward majoritarian inertia, toward liberal “salon-style” enlightenment values, the quiet reinstallation of an activist clique at its reins, and a constant public relations base action, all depending on the “image of the occupation to the public.”

The name of the absolute toward which the GA strives is *consensus*.

Berkeley has been an ideal vantage point from which to witness the careerist trajectory of activism and the co-articulated boom of the non-profit industry. With a history readily lending itself to banal reformist cooptation, student resistance in Berkeley serves as a synecdoche for activism as a whole.

The domination of activism in student politics hygienically preserves a “tradition” in which formidable direct action is seen as an alienating force. Dialogue becomes primary, offending the school administration is a taboo, and cops are welcomed into the occupation with open arms. Students lose the ability to conduct effective action, and the activist bureaucracy squabbles over the wording in apology letters to the university administration about graffiti in the hall.

From here, we conclude that the GAs have a layered nature. The internal machinery manifest in the general assemblies is dominated by an external plea to the UC administration and media. The democratic form creates a reactionary totalitarian effect that is only detrimental to the students involved. By its nature, the GA system wastes so much time and effort that, for example, the first several hours of the Wheeler occupation were spent on debating the same three demands that would eventually be accepted exactly as they were proposed.

The democratic ideology espoused by the occupation organisers becomes a totalitarian system where EVERY SINGLE matter must be approved by a supermajority of the participants of the GA (which, nearing the end, was completely dominated by the activist clique).

As with all tactical and organisational matters of praxis, situational attention is mandatory. We'd suggest that practical decisions as to future direct actions, strategic visions, logistics, and if anything, creating the potential for building a proto-revolutionary party, ought not be worked out in their concrete particulars in the GA setting—especially not if, contrary to all good radical political sense and reason (as was the case in Wheeler Hall in 2014), the police are there listening!

Considering the open invitational nature of the general assembly, these actually decisive factors ought to be sufficiently prepared such that regardless of the character of the crowd assembled on a random day, smaller groups and affinities can enact them as designed and desired.

There is little to no consistent attendance at GAs, due to the compulsions of labour time upon socially alienated individuals. Additionally, in the absence of any kind of sustainable radical organisational form, it is unrealistic to expect any radicalisation from day to day.

We're not ashamed to say the contemporary assumption of democratic principles as the *sine qua non* of any emancipatory politics must be categorically rejected.

Concluding Statements: A Growing Appetite for Destruction

On the day the Wheeler Hall occupation died, a St. Louis grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, a police officer who had murdered a black teenager named Michael Brown in the city of Ferguson, Missouri. Anger towards police apparatuses continues to grow in light of the systematic slaughter of black Americans by the police. On that night, this anger tore apart the city of Oakland, as well as cities all across the US. What followed was a consistently violent, but largely contained, series of riots.

Capitalism has two concurrent tendencies: the objective movement of capital that sets the stage for the material conditions of capitalist society, and the subjective political movement that comes out as a response to these objective conditions. Whether a given political movement is to be revolutionary, or more likely, a subsumed, deformed political fad, is determined by the political actors therein.

The remnants of the left today are laughable in their political motivations to combat these objective conditions. This can be highlighted in the diversity of leftist treachery, from idiotic tactics of martyrdom to opportunism and the disgusting recuperation of tragedy.

We live in a world that does not exist for us. It exists for the ghost of contemporary bourgeois culture. It is a disastrous ideal, set in motion by capital, that has far-reaching and dangerous consequences.

Trapped in the conditions of the present, we have no future. Instead, we are desensitised to systematic immiseration.

We are supposed to be grateful for our scars as they somehow determine who we are. We are supposed to be respectful and open to those who give us our scars: we are supposed to disavow any retaliation for our scars.

The message that the riots in Ferguson (and more recently and clearly in Baltimore) have shown is that the black masses are not in the position of theoretically negotiating their lives with blatant, backstabbing bourgeois legalism.

Instead you see the potential of the proletariat pushed by the diverse and dynamic objective tendencies of the crisis of capital—the potential to realize that the question is not to change the world, but to seize it.

With our black comrades, we can see this potential.

Even some parts of the black bourgeois apparatus, the “community leaders,” the liberals, are slowly realising the implications of riots and stating that riots are the only means to “adequately call for justice.”

But this is not a question of reform, nascent calls for combating income inequality, increasing funding for education, etc. These become simple pacifications which are

given up only after intense struggle, whose only purpose is to put an end to these struggles on the bourgeoisie's terms. In granting these temporary reprieves, they recognise what it would take to still hold power: they have their own ways of navigating tides. But once the waves cease, and resistance dissipates, the explicit violence of these struggles apparently collapse into abstraction, and daily realities fall back into a place that can be safely ignored and excluded from spaces of power.

With this in mind, nothing short of the invariance of a cohesive communist ethics will be able to finally end these struggles, the point of which should be to negate the movements of capital, to combat its enforcers, and to set up a dictatorship of the proletariat.

This is, of course, fundamentally a question of seizing power. But what does it mean to seize power? And more importantly, how can power be seized?

These are questions we cannot yet fully answer. We understand them only in a fragmentary way: riots are necessary but are flawed by their short lifespan. We see the need to negate the movements of capital that strangle our realities, but we also see that achieving this through purely economic self-management simply invites a violent backlash if it does not have its own cohesive response. Everyday life regenerates, and the forces of capital move on.

Answers can come only through actively experimenting with organisational methods, or to put it simply, to experiment with the prelude to a cohesive party: an association of people, driven together through both the desire to negate the present and see creation come from its rubble, not some hellish, bureaucratic, nightmare of a party; an association formed through mutual praxis, cohesive resistances to concrete, material problems of organising. What this will become cannot be understood through mere reflection: as Bordiga said, "there are only social forces that are revolutionary through the direction in which they act."

This is the problem facing the precarious position of the student. Student self-organising can systematically construct a solidarity network of comrades, but when its praxis is limited to symbolism, backwards traditionalism, and passive idealism for the sake of dialogue, student organising simply becomes another piece of the university, a celebration of its own history and "relevance."

We are presented with a real opportunity for the seizure of the university's ruins and the coordination of effective proletarian forces. However, if practice is to be solely defensive, guided by a naive democratism, rife with pacifist appeals to the sympathy of the ruling class, and paired with the romantic mythologising of Vietnam-era activism, it is not an actual intervention in a struggle, but rather the last cries of a long-dead past, a past that serves no purpose but to give rise to ever more ghosts. Let the dead bury the dead.

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