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THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE FAYERWEATHER OCCUPATION

As a second-year graduate student in Columbia University's History Department during the spring of 1968, I heard the daily speeches reverberating from the sundial by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) militants with a mixture of approval and dismay: approval of the ardent denunciations of the war in Vietnam and the demand that the university sever its connections to a think tank that conducted weapons research for the Pentagon; dismay at the inflammatory revolutionary verbiage that accompanied what I considered that eminently reasonable demand.

The occupation of Low Memorial Library in the early hours of April 24 by SDS students—after they had been gently evicted by the Students' Afro-American Society (SAS) from their joint occupation of Hamilton Hall—filled me with the same feelings of ambivalence. On the one hand, my deeply felt opposition to America's war in Southeast Asia prompted me to support the Low occupation as an appropriate gesture of condemnation directed at our university's complicity, however indirect, in the conduct of that war. On the other hand, I was disconcerted by the stream of diatribes emanating from Low Memorial Library that revealed the SDS regarded opposition to this particular war as merely a pretext for a full-scale ideological indictment of "Amerika." I was an enthusiastic supporter of the antiwar campaign of Sen. Eugene McCarthy, whose strong showing in the New Hampshire Democratic primary a few months earlier had

precipitated the withdrawal of President Lyndon Johnson from and the entrance of Sen. Robert Kennedy into the race for the party's presidential nomination. I was convinced that this type of pragmatic political activism was a much more effective means of promoting social and political change than seizing university buildings and issuing a wholesale condemnation of the entire American political system as rotten to the core.

But I would soon have a change of heart as I was swept up in the fervor that surged through the campus in the waning days of April. Inspired by the undergraduate militants ensconced in Low and Hamilton Hall, I joined a contingent of graduate students in the social sciences and humanities who established residence in Fayerweather Hall, the site of the history department's offices. Over the next several days, we formed a kind of intellectual commune where ideas about how to combat militarism, racism, and other social ills were freely exchanged. Liaison was established with a contingent of sympathetic professors called the Ad Hoc Faculty Group that met periodically to seek a just and peaceful solution to the crisis. At one point, I was designated to present to the faculty group a hastily drafted statement announcing that, unlike the SDS and the other firebrands in Low, we Fayerweather folks were not revolutionaries intent on destroying the existing order but reformist progressives committed to the goals of ending the war in Vietnam and combating racism at home.

Amid the spirited debates in Fayerweather about the war, racism, and the university's alleged complicity in both, a new set of issues more directly connected to our daily lives as graduate students began to enter the conversations. What is the purpose of this graduate education in which we all were engaged? Why do so many of us feel disconnected from the faculty who were supposed to be our mentors and advisers as we prepare for careers as scholars and teachers of history? Why do we feel so alienated and powerless in a rigid, hierarchical education environment? Whatever happened to the august conception of graduate education—borrowed from Germany and transplanted to Columbia and other American universities—as a collaborative enterprise of master-teachers passing on their wisdom to student-apprentices?

After the forcible removal of students from the campus buildings by the New York Police Department on April 30, a large portion of the student body responded favorably to the appeal for a campus-wide strike in protest. On May 6, more than a hundred history graduate students

crammed into a lecture hall to express their support for the campus-wide shutdown, to record their particular grievances about their education experiences in their own department, and to demand remedial action from its faculty. The student assembly elected six student representatives—of whom I was one—to participate in a proposed student–faculty committee to negotiate reforms in the department. After the department chair acceded to our request to designate six faculty representatives to meet with the six student representatives, a twelve-person student–faculty committee spent the next several months in intense discussion of the students’ complaints and how they might be addressed.

The six student members of the committee kept in close touch with our constituency through periodic meetings in the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Amsterdam Avenue. We circulated questionnaires on a wide range of graduate student grievances and solicited suggestions for reform. On the afternoon of May 17, we six appeared before the Executive Committee of the History Department, which consisted of its thirty-two tenured members (only one of whom was a woman), to present our “Proposals for Structural Reforms of the Department.” We prefaced our remarks with the solemn warning that “the affairs of this department will not return to normal until the reforms [proposed by] this committee are implemented” and then read the list of proposals that had been approved by the graduate students assembled in the crypt of the cathedral.

Although the Columbia History Department, we declared, should be (after the title of a 1962 book by radical social theorist Paul Goodman that bemoaned the bureaucratic nature of higher education) “a community of scholars,”¹ its current structure was “hierarchical and undemocratic.” To remedy this defect, we proposed a drastic procedural reform: graduate students must share “equal roles in the decision-making process of the department” with the faculty, through 50 percent graduate student representation on all standing subcommittees of the Executive Committee, the department’s decision-making body. (An exception was made for the Personnel Committee, which dealt with matters of appointment, promotion, and tenure, but with the proviso that a parallel personnel committee composed of graduate students be empowered to convey student

1. Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-Education and the Community of Scholars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).



Figure 26.1 Demonstrating on campus, April 1968. *Photograph by David Finck.*

recommendations on all appointment, tenure, and promotion cases.) Our audacious proposition was followed by long list of substantive proposals concerning student access to personnel files, prior notification of faculty leaves, and the like.

It will come as no surprise that the many months of these student–faculty negotiations, which continued into the late fall, did not result in the implantation of any of the proposed reforms. After the end of the campus-wide strike and the intense agitation that accompanied it, the history graduate students returned to the two main tasks at hand: preparation for qualifying examinations and the selection of topics for doctoral dissertations.

In the years after I began my teaching career at Boston University, which included a twelve-year stint as History Department chair, an attitude of deference and respect toward the faculty replaced the fiery spirit of condemnation and defiance that briefly had engulfed us on Morningside Heights in the intoxicating spring and summer of 1968. At no time did the graduate students in my department evince the slightest inclination to

confront the faculty with such audacious demands for the improvement of their education experience as we had dared to do. But I like to think that those of us at Columbia who later would become professors retained an acute sensitivity to the anxieties and concerns of graduate students that we had experienced there in 1968.

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