Beginning on April 23, 1968, several hundred Columbia University students launched an occupation of five campus buildings over frustration with the school’s decision to build a gymnasium in nearby Morningside Park that would include a separate entrance for the neighborhood’s African American residents, and Columbia’s institutional affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analyses, a think tank that contributed to the nation’s ongoing prosecution of the war in Vietnam. The occupation ended violently a week later as police forced their way into the buildings and removed demonstrators. Paul Cronin’s book, *A Time to Stir: Columbia ’68*, makes an insightful if occasionally frustrating contribution to our understanding of the demonstration, the history of the New Left, and, more broadly, the events of 1968. The book contains extensive introductory material, including a foreword by demonstration participant and author Paul Berman, a lengthy timeline of events at Columbia, and a somewhat superficial introductory essay that aims to place the events at Columbia into a wider historical context. The main body of the text, however, is composed of written testimonials from more than sixty participants.

The most problematic aspect of the work, particularly for historians of the 1960s, is the almost total lack of explanation of the project’s origins, goals, and methodology. The only insight provided by Cronin indicates that contributors to this book were also interviewed for an “accompanying panoramic, multichapter documentary” that makes use of “several hundred newly recorded conversations” (p. xlix). Cronin reveals few details about this project, but readers interested in learning more about this film will discover on his website that the film is now over seven hours long, has been in development for over a decade, and “makes use of nearly seven hundred newly filmed interviews and tens of thousands of never-before-seen photographs.”[1] Cronin provides little explanation of the connection between the book and the film.

Cronin’s omissions raise numerous questions. What criteria was used to select contributors? Since each participant had been interviewed for the film, why were transcripts of these interviews not used instead of allowing contributors to provide written essays? When, during the past ten years, were these essays commissioned and how heavily did Cronin edit them? A review of contributor biographies also raises questions about selection criteria, given that a majority of the essayists hold advanced degrees and an unusually large number (even apart from Columbia faculty present at the demonstration) possess PhDs and have had careers in higher education. Lacking further explanation from Cronin, readers are left...
to wonder how representative these contributors are in relation to both other demonstrators and to those who opposed the occupation. Cronin also provides the most basic structure to this collection. The essays are organized alphabetically, creating yet another challenge for those aiming to use the book as a historical resource. In the end, those looking for an easily mineable source of information, a narrative exploration of the events that occurred that spring, or a thorough explanation of how the Columbia demonstration fits into the broader history of the student movement, the antiwar movement, and the civil rights movement, should look elsewhere.

These shortcomings, although potentially substantial for some readers, are clearly overshadowed by the collection's strengths, particularly for those who read the book in its entirety. The volume's structure and seemingly light editing reward the patient reader. As the stories unfold one after the other, readers are given the opportunity to reach their own conclusions, identify aspects of the demonstration they most connect with, and gain an appreciation for how large social events cannot be easily boiled down into one dominant narrative. In addition, several themes emerge that provide useful insights into the events of that April. Many contributors touch on the critical decision made by members of the Student Afro-American Society (SAS) to demand that white students leave Hamilton Hall and relate how that decision spurred the occupation of four other buildings and influenced the way in which the administration decided to end the occupation. More significantly, the essays explore the role of the Columbia chapter of Students for Democratic Society (SDS) in spurring the demonstration, the effectiveness of its members in leading the occupation, and the mistakes it made as seen through the memories of its members, supporters, and detractors. These remembrances provide a valuable look at the internal workings of a key chapter of the organization and serve as a useful primer for those looking to build student movements today.

By 1968, the Columbia SDS chapter had become divided between the older, more experienced activists of the "Praxis Axis," who favored the slow, frustrating work of strengthening the student movement through building the base, and the "Action Faction," which favored direct, immediate, and confrontational action against the university. Mark Rudd, the newly elected SDS chairman and a prominent member of the Action Faction, became the face of the Columbia protests but, as these essays demonstrate, it proves difficult to reach definitive conclusions about Rudd's leadership or SDS's role in the demonstrations. Contributors who had belonged to or supported SDS offer a fairly positive portrait of Rudd and the organization. Most student occupiers, however, had little connection to Rudd or SDS, and essays from these demonstrators paint a more dismissive picture of Rudd and of how SDS exerted leadership over the occupation. One occupier describes Rudd as a "petulant kid who had problems with authority" (p. 335). Fayerweather Hall occupier Joshua Rubenstein reveals that "most of us ... grew to mistrust how SDS was leading the strike," and "a group of us tried ... to go around SDS" (p. 292). Taken together, these essays reveal that while most demonstrators believed society needed to change—and change quickly—they opposed the radical methods and ideological inflexibility offered by the Action Faction of SDS. It also becomes clear that although birthed largely by SDS, the occupation soon grew beyond its control as students and faculty with no connection to the group worked to end the demonstration peacefully (a goal that unfortunately failed).

Rudd provides his version of events and supports the criticisms leveled against him and SDS. Buoyed by the perceived successes of the demonstration, SDS became convinced that militant, confrontational action was the best strategy for future victory, but it only led to the group's isolation...
and waning influence on campus the next academic year. In his final assessment, Rudd criticizes his fellow members of the Action Faction for forgetting that building a movement comes from educating, "gaining people's trust, building relationships, forming alliances, and 'building the base'" (pp. 297-298). In the end, according to Rudd, "there doesn't seem to be an alternative to strategic organizing" (p. 299).

Rudd's conclusion echoes those of many of the book's contributors and proves particularly relevant in the political climate of 2018. As in 1968, many young people today, disillusioned by electoral politics, distraught by acts of violence, and feeling abandoned by an older generation of leaders, are demanding change. Those who take up the mantle of activist leadership would do well to read A Time to Stir. In it, they will find hard truths about the nature of political organizing but also a great deal of hopefulness. Perhaps by paying heed, they may help achieve the long-term change that Rudd and the other Columbia demonstrators so desperately wanted but never fully achieved.

Note


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