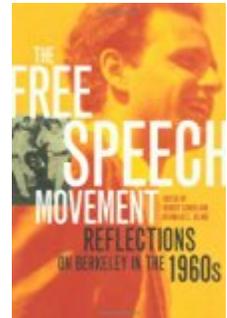




Robert Cohen, Reginald E. Zelnik, eds.. *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xx + 618 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22221-2.



Reviewed by Lisa Rubens

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Bodies upon the Gears

The basic story is familiar: soon after the fall 1964 term at UC Berkeley began, administrators--perceived to be pressured by conservative Republican William F. Knowland--banned the right of student groups to hand out informational leaflets, to set up recruiting tables on campus, and to organize off-campus political activities. The reaction was unexpected--a huge coalition, ranging from the sectarian left to the Young Republicans, and including the vast middle of the politically unformed, came together to oppose the administration. At one point ten thousand students sat all night around a police car, from the top of which a succession of speakers discussed the nature of education and citizenship, the role of the university, and the function of civil protest. On December 2, over 1,000 students walked into the three-story administration building, as Joan Baez, in particularly glorious voice that day, sang the anthem of the times, "We Shall Overcome." Ten hours later, 824 students were manhandled into Alameda County sheriff's buses, hauled off to Santa Anita

Prison, and into history as the largest mass arrest in the United States.

What emboldened students to defy the university, and to create a movement that animated college students across the country, is the primary subject of *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s*. At the heart of this book--as of the movement--is Mario Savio, as unlikely a leader as ever there was: a shy, ruffled philosophy major, who stuttered in private conversation but, when addressing thousands, had the extraordinary ability to lead people through his reasoning process into their own clarity and commitment. It was his famous line--"there comes a time, when the system becomes so odious, that you can't take part, you can't even tacitly take part"--which set the tone for the uniquely personal and moral nature of the movement. That in turn set in motion the massive civil disobedience of December 2, which led a heretofore reticent faculty to side with the students and vindicate their cause.

Savio's untimely death of a heart attack in 1996 inspired the editors of this invaluable collec-

tion to sponsor a workshop on his life and times at the 1997 annual convention of the Organization of American Historians. In the wake of that session, New York University historian Robert Cohen, who had tried unsuccessfully to publish on the Free Speech Movement (FSM) since the late 1980s, now had an eager audience and putative authors clamoring to contribute to a volume that would speak to his goal: to "spark the broadest possible discussion and debate about the movement's causes, character, and consequences."

In the opening essay, co-editor Reginald Zelnik, a Russian history scholar who in 1964 was a first-year assistant professor at Cal, reminds us that the larger story of "speech and academic freedom issues at Berkeley dates back at least to the bitter Loyalty Oath Controversy of 1949-50." Then the faculty had been the target of the university's capitulation to McCarthyism as rigid rules about who could speak on campus were enforced. By the early 1960s, however, students had learned to circumvent those rules and had begun putting up recruiting tables at the entrance of the campus to organize protests against the House Committee on Un-American Activities, capital punishment at San Quentin Prison, and racial discrimination in employment and housing in the Bay Area. But it was the civil rights movement, and particularly the role of students who had participated in the eventful 1964 Freedom Summer, that fueled the FSM and gave it a unique spirit and moral toughness. Essays by Jo Freeman and Waldo Martin discuss how the experiences of participation in those struggles--whether in Mississippi or across the Bay in San Francisco--had built a sense of empowerment that was now directed to power relations on the campus and within the university "system."

The majority of essays are by former participants who, from their various perspectives, revisit the sequence of events that led to their participation in the FSM. Most reflect on the extent to which their particular subjectivity was developed

at the time. We gain an insider's perspective on leadership, and we learn how--within an apparently ultra-democratic and participatory framework--a contest for authority led to the purging of some "moderates." Bettina Aptheker, one of the few public members of the Communist Party at that time, writes a moving "meditation on women," pointing out that gender consciousness and a women's movement had yet to develop and that despite the presence of strong women leaders, male chauvinism blunted their impact.

The collection offers other perspectives as well. In "A View from the Margins," David Hollinger, then a graduate student and now a leading intellectual historian at Berkeley, recounts how he was sympathetic to the movement but not inclined to join mass action. His activism was directed towards his discipline. Several essays offer as a subtext the development of "history from the bottom up," the campaign within the academy to broaden the scope of inquiry in order to give voice to the voiceless and to incorporate the ordinary as well as the extraordinary structures of everyday life.

Perhaps the most compelling articles wrestle with the language and vision of the emerging New Left in the days before the Vietnam war protest and the counter-culture revolution began. Jeff Lustig argues that the FSM "burned off the fog of Cold War repression." He also concludes that the movement "reveals something important about the sixties as a whole--that it was 'radical' before it was left. The nature of radicalism is what made the later left 'new.'" At the same time, Robert Cohen observes that the majority of the rank and file were not radical or even liberal. Using letters that the sentencing judge required of arrested students to explain their actions, Cohen shows that a majority "did not apologize for sitting in, but that University intransigence had left them no alternative."

The 1960s has become mythic--shorthand for a period of greater authenticity--and my students

often become misty-eyed when contemplating that storied decade. Some express their wish that they could have lived in those hot times. *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* goes a long way towards dispelling some of the nostalgia. Recent scholarship has created a series of dualities that distinguishes between the good sixties and the bad, the early and the late, the tame and the wild, the morally clear-eyed and the rabidly sectarian. As discussion on H-1960s illustrates, embedded in such categorizations is an effort to situate movement culture and politics within broader themes in U.S. history. Thus essays here by historians William Rorabaugh and Doug Rossinow are a welcome contribution to seeing a more nuanced and complex history that predated the FSM and continued as a part of the larger movement for social justice. Ronald Reagan may have promised "to clean up the mess at Berkeley" as part of his successful campaign for governor in 1966, but his brand of conservatism had hounded liberal politics since the late 1950s and would reappear in his assault on "the evil empire" in the 1980s. A similar moral dogmatism within the New Left may have limited its effectiveness and led to its splintering into identity politics.

Still other essays tie the movement to the present. When Savio died, he was championing the cause of affirmative action. Jackie Goldberg, another member of the FSM Steering Committee represented in this volume, is a reform-oriented member of the California Legislature and recently married her long-time partner during San Francisco's recent liberalization of marriage laws. Three essays on the legal and constitutional issues that underlay the FSM, written by the movement's defense lawyer and two Berkeley law professors who study the First Amendment, are even more relevant today, when in the guise of guarding against terrorism, civil liberties are diminished.

Missing from this compendium, as it was missing in the Free Speech Movement, is attention to the ethnic/racial groups that began to form in

communities and on some campuses in the early sixties. These aimed to expand the focus of civil rights beyond the black-white binary. In the last decade an important historiography including these subjects has developed which students and teachers must utilize to contextualize the FSM. And a new generation of scholars, as evident in papers scheduled at the upcoming OAH, are studying the links between Indian, Hispanic, as well as African-American and white student activism.

In the preface to this outstanding work, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Leon Litwak asserts, "History teaches us that it is not the rebel, it is not the curious, it is not the dissident, who endanger a democratic society but rather the unthinking, the unquestioning, the docile, obedient, silent and indifferent." The FSM was one of those rare and brief times in history when a wide coalition of diverse interests engaged in intellectually thoughtful and morally driven political action formed a critical mass that successfully confronted a power structure and brought about democratic reform. In our own era, no less than that heroic time, the conditions are ripe and people seem ready for significant change.

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