



FIRST WE TAKE COLUMBIA

LESSONS FROM THE APRIL 1968 OCCUPATIONS MOVEMENT

When you seize Columbia, when you
seize Paris, take
the media, tell the people what you're doing
what you're up to and why and how you mean
to do it, how they can help, keep the news
coming, steady, you have 70 years
of media conditioning to combat, it is a wall
you must get through, somehow, to reach
the instinctive man, who is struggling like a plant
for light, for air

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when you seize a town, a campus, get hold of the power
stations, the water, the transportation,
forget to negotiate, forget how
to negotiate, don't wait for De Gaulle or Kirk
to abdicate, they won't, you are not
"demonstrating" you are fighting
a war, fight to win, don't wait for Johnson or
Humphrey or Rockefeller, to agree to your terms
take what you need, "it's free
because it's yours"

—Diane Di Prima, *Revolutionary Letter #15*

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The following text is addressed to everyone currently taking action in solidarity with Gaza on campuses throughout North America and across the world. Written by participants in both the Yale and Columbia solidarity encampments, it was first circulated by hand at the Columbia encampment in New York on Sunday April 21st.

On April 23, 1968 hundreds of Columbia students seized Hamilton Hall, holding Dean Coleman hostage. Over the following days, five buildings on campus were occupied. The occupiers demanded that Columbia stop a construction project that would contribute to the gentrification of Harlem, an end to a secret research project funded by the CIA, and amnesty for student protesters. The occupations were finally brought to an end on April 29, when the NYPD stormed the occupied buildings, resulting in nearly seven hundred arrests. In response, faculty went on strike and campus was closed for the remainder of the semester. New occupations on campus and in the surrounding neighborhood sprung up in the following weeks. Eventually the Columbia administration gave in to nearly all of the occupiers' demands. What follows are some lessons from April, 1968 that might be useful today, now that university occupations have re-emerged as a tactic within the movement to halt the genocide in Gaza.

I. *Occupations are effective because they are disruptive.* The April 1968 occupations shut down the entire university for over a week. This forced the administration to concede to their demands, even after the movement faced repression.

II. *An occupation needs to spread in order to survive.* New buildings need to be taken on campus, throughout the city, and across the country. Take the enemy by surprise. Strive for daily or even hourly successes, however small. At all costs, retain superior morale.

III. *Every occupation is a commune.* By shutting down the normal flows of capitalist society, they open up space for something new to emerge. These become a place to experiment with how we might live differently. *Share everything.* Inside the occupation, there is no private property. *Break down barriers.* Inside, social status and jobs are meaningless.

“The whole point of Columbia '68 was that if you were inside one of the occupied buildings, you had just as much power as anyone else. It didn't matter who you were, what your major was, who your parents were, or whether you were on scholarship or paying your own way or not even a

student. None of these things mattered when it came to our daily lives inside Mathematics. Everyone was equal..”

IV. *All movements are confronted by the separations of capitalist society.* This is even more so the case with occupations, as they are immediately a question of living together. But wrestling with this limit can be done in a manner that contributes to the movement’s dynamic rather than devouring it. The occupations of 1968 were immediately confronted by questions of race and gender. Black and white students occupied separate buildings. But by organizing themselves, black students contributed to the strength of the entire movement. The determination and discipline of the black students occupying Hamilton Hall inspired the other student occupiers to become more determined as well. Within each occupation, efforts were made to overcome the gendered division of labor. Security and cooking was done by people of all genders. The bathrooms were desegregated.

V. *A proliferation of occupied spaces requires the space for a proliferation of autonomous initiatives.* Each tendency of the movement will need to find the confidence to organize themselves and to act. As new occupations opened in 1968, each one took on its own distinct characteristics and culture. The Mathematics building, for instance, was known to be the “most militant” and had the highest proportion of outsiders.

VI. *Occupations draw strength from the specter of a riot.* The April 1968 occupations took place in the immediate aftermath of the “Holy Week” of riots in the surrounding neighborhood and cities across the country after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Campus administrators, city officials, and the police department worried that any attempt to suppress the occupations might lead to unrest in the surrounding neighborhood; Harlem might invade Columbia. An occupation today will be in a stronger position if it is similarly able to build and mobilize support from the surrounding neighborhood.

VII. The first task then is to open the campus to the community. Students from other campuses, residents of the surrounding neighborhood, and

outside agitators need to be welcomed in. In April 1968, five hundred people marched on the gate at 116th St and Broadway. The NYPD stood down out of fear that violence might otherwise erupt. Similar tactics might be necessary today.

VIII. *The future belongs to the daring.* It is unclear if a majority of the campus or city supported the occupations while they were actually happening. But polls show that a strong majority at Columbia claimed to have supported them afterwards. No one wants to have been on the wrong side of history. But it takes initiative to overcome inertia. Audacity clears away the clouds of confusion. Bold actions win support, even if only in hindsight.

IX. *Form committees.* Once you seize a building, get organized around practical tasks. In 1968, a defense committee built barricades and coordinated the night watch. A liaison committee established communication between occupations and with the outside world.

“We had a walkie-talkie setup, citizens’ band walkie-talkies, plus there were telephone communications to every building, which the university tapped. We had three mimeographs at work constantly, and there were people who did nothing during the strike but relay to the mimeograph machine. And there was a big sign on the wall, a quote from somebody in Berkeley, who says five students and a mimeograph machine can do more harm to a university than an army.”

X. *Avoid the endless meeting.* Accounts of the Columbia occupations often emphasize that the participants spent nearly all of their time in around the clock meetings. This was intended to ensure equal participation and real communication. Recent experiences have shown that general assemblies often drain morale and suffocate initiative.

XI. *This is only the beginning.* A number of revolutionary organizations emerged from the 1968 occupations movement. Pushing the university struggle to its limit might contribute in a similar way to producing a constellation of revolutionary forces in the city today.

XII. *“Two, three, many Columbias.”* Then as now, it will take the opening of new fronts and the spread of increasingly disruptive tactics, such as building occupations, to pull the emergency brake on the war machine.

XIII. *The occupations movement in France the following month showed that, in the right circumstances, struggles within the university can detonate a much wider social explosion.*

XIV. *Smoke the president’s cigars.*

All power to the communes.

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