

# Thoughts Towards a Paper on the Dynamics of University Disorders

1968 New England Psychological  
Association Meetings  
Boston

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Note of March 30, 2018. This was written shortly after working for the Kerner Commission and argues for the ironic relevance of social control responses. Academic careers often begin (and end) with the chasing, or being chased by, a central question or theme. Some of the subsequent papers over the years which expand on this theme:

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/civildisorder.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/movement.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/ironies.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/seattle.html>

and (52 years later):

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www.kernerrevisited.html>

While the state of our social engineering knowledge is limited, if one wanted to structure the world to be sure that university disturbances would occur, a considerable amount could be learned by watching the unintended consequences of the behavior of university administrators.

Drawing on examples of university response to student demonstrations and police behavior in racial disturbances, I wish to argue that the actions of authorities are an important factor in the creation of many youthful disorders—be they in the universities or black ghettos.

I will not consider the usual kind of society blaming variables. Though I would not wish to deny the possible relevance of factors such as inculcating sensitive youth with Judeo-Christian ideals and then throwing them out into a world where these ideals are largely ignored, unfulfilled promises for social change, lack of clarity in our definition of youthful roles, the disruptive and dehumanizing effect of some technology, the nature of the socialization process, and the frequent impossibility of bringing about change by working through normal channels. Rather for whatever diverse reasons I will take a degree of youthful indignation and/or predisposition to protest as given and then ask how this is affected (and indeed often induced, furthered, and nurtured) by the actual behavior of authorities.

One pattern that applied to a great many disorders up to 1968 is the following:

A small number of students, often with a cause or issue that doesn't actively interest the mass of their fellows, plan or actually carry out limited peaceful pretest action. The university administration tries to restrict the protest. It prevents freedom of speech and action, or it arbitrarily and without due process singles out certain activists for punishment, or it calls out the police to break up a demonstration. With these actions the nature of the unrest changes quantitatively and qualitatively. A basic issue now becomes free speech, police brutality or rights of due process. Latent tensions may result in additional issues coming to the surface; such as the quality of education, which had nothing to do with the original issue or university response. Greater unity among the protestors develops, the mass of uncommitted moderate students are drawn to their side (often in spite of opposing them or being indifferent to the original issue.) Liberal faculty and organizations in the outside community respond in like fashion. The dynamics of the situation often involve the move from a small peaceful protest to large disorderly and disobedient protest.

This pattern has a long history on the Berkeley campus.<sup>1</sup>

In 1934 student activists were denied the use of the campus for a meeting to protest the suspension of five UCLA students for allegedly communistic activities. Subsequently a student strike was held and a thousand students protesting the original issue as well as the suppression of academic freedom had their meeting violently broken up.

In 1935 in the first of a series of youthful protests against "war and fascism" a small group of students were arrested for passing out anti-war handbills without a required \$5 permit from the

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<sup>1</sup> Data up to 1955 on Berkeley from M. Heirich and S. Kaplan, "Yesterdays Discord:" in S.M. Lipset and S. Wolin, The Berkeley Student Revolt. New York, Doubleday, 1965.

city and university officials denied them the right to hold a protest meeting on campus. Subsequently a student strike occurred and more than 3000 students attended a protest rally,

In September 1958 university denial of a student political group's (slate) desire to hold a meeting supporting a fair housing proposition resulted in the same pattern. An off-campus rally was held to support the housing proposition and to protest the university's refusal to permit the original rally.

Police responded to student demonstrations in San Francisco against HUAC in 1959 with fire hoses and students were washed down the steps of city hall, helping to politicize the student body and gaining support in the larger community.

In 1965, in one of the first protests against the Vietnamese war, the refusal of Oakland city authorities to grant a parade permit to demonstrators swelled the number of protestors from a few hundred originally against the war to several thousand bent on asserting their right to march.

The 1964 Free Speech movement in Berkeley followed a similar pattern.<sup>2</sup> A non-student was ineptly arrested for sitting at a table collecting money for CORE.<sup>3</sup> Instead of taking the man into a nearby campus police office, the university police brought a police car into the area to remove him, where students were assembling for a noon rally. Numerous students promptly blocked the car. Mario Savio, an FSM leader stated, "We were going to hold a rally. We didn't know how to get the people. But, we've got them now thanks to the university." Groups as disparate as the Young Republicans and the Young People's Socialist League united in the same movement for free speech against the university. The issue became the right of advocacy and amnesty and not the specific cause of CORE. Later when the police were called to make massive arrests—the faculty was incensed, a general strike ensued, radical slate students won every seat they sought in a student election, and the academic senate recommended sweeping policy changes which were forthcoming.

This pattern was again repeated in Berkeley in 1967. A very few students protested the presence of off-campus military recruiters on the campus. A table protesting their presence, manned by non-students, was set up. A small scuffle broke out. The administration called the police. The basic issue then became use of the police and free speech. A large general student strike followed. One observer recalls "the sight of blue helmeted police barging up the stairs of the student union building, nightsticks in hand, brought students to their feet shouting and faculty instinctively to their defense."

In looking at student demonstrations abroad, use of the police has often had similar consequences. It has helped unify demonstrators, generated larger mass support, and enlarged the original issues.

In France, for example, at Nanterre a small number of students prevented a professor from giving a lecture. This was misinterpreted by the Education Minister as a general revolt, and he closed the university. The angry students then moved to the Sorbonne. Fearing a clash between

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<sup>2</sup> The non-student issue was a source of much amusement on the Berkeley campus. Many of the non-students involved in campus issues held that status precisely because the university had expelled them and wouldn't let them back in.

<sup>3</sup> Data from "Chronology of Events" in Lipsset and Wolin, *op .cit* .

the left and right, police were called in to occupy the quadrangle. This led to a series of clashes which, according to a *New York Times* account, involved "unbelievable police brutality."<sup>4</sup> The brutality altered the nature of the events.

The unfocused rebellion acquired a more precise target—the government. Adult feelings of sympathy developed for youthful victims of the police. Subsequent disorders engulfed much of French society. The disturbance spread from a few student activists to millions of Frenchmen.<sup>5</sup>

The killing of a student during clashes with Berlin police in 1967, over a protest against the Shah of Iran, and the very repressive reaction of authorities to the demonstration led to the downfall of the Mayor of Berlin and created a wave of student solidarity throughout German universities.<sup>6</sup>

In this move from limited to general protest, aged university administrators, sometimes with crew cuts, confronted with a novel situation, are pulled between a conservative Board of Regents, Trustees and public, and the liberal academic community. They vacillate, act inconsistently and unpredictably, and may fail to grasp the essence of the situation they are confronted with. They make undocumented, and certainly unwise, statements about the role of communists, off-campus agitators, and troublemakers. They may be unable to differentiate kinds of student demonstrators. Sometimes students will be punished for civil liberty rule infractions while other times the same behavior is ignored. At Columbia, SDS broke rules against indoor demonstrations three times and numerous highly visible violations of the non-advocacy rules occurred at Berkeley, none of which were challenged by university administrators. Various Deans and university officials make statements and offer interpretations that may contradict each other. Agreements reached between students and authorities may be overruled or distorted by other authorities. As at Berkeley and Columbia, administrators may fail to accept the recommendations even of their own faculty or faculty-student committees set up to deal with the crisis. At Berkeley a tri-partite committee was dissolved by the administration and a report of the Academic Senate on eight suspended students was ignored and termed "advisory."

In discussing Columbia one observer, in noting the failure of university officials to act in a clear and coherent way, suggests "...at the crucial moment the administration froze. Like a wooden soldier it stood at rigid attention with its arms glued to its sides."<sup>7</sup>

Students perceive university administrators as being confused, bungling, arrogant, hypocritical, and acting in bad faith. This failure to act swiftly and decisively strengthens student feelings about the legitimacy of their cause.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times* accounts and M. Crozier, "French Students: A Letter From Nanterre—Ça Folie." *Public Interest*, Fall, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Sampson, *Journal of Social Sciences*, July 1967.

<sup>6</sup> R. Mayntz, "Germany: Radicals and Reformers." *Public Interest*, Fall, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> S. Donadio, "Black Power at Columbia." *Commentary*, Sept. 1968. The parallels between Berkeley and Columbia are striking.

<sup>8</sup> Though generalizations based on cases selectively chosen must be highly suspect. It is interesting to note, whatever the morality of the issues, that at the University of Chicago, where student sit-inners were told that they would be suspended if they didn't vacate a building by 5 PM., and expelled if they didn't leave by 6 PM, they withdrew before the first deadline. A similar situation occurred at Roosevelt University and the University of Denver. Yet the role of force and get-tough policy is unclear and relatively little is known about the consequences of varying strategies of under- and over-reaction. For a brief consideration of these issues see G. Marx, "Civil Disorder and the Agents of Social Control." *Journal of Social Issues*, forthcoming.

Finally, when authorities do act by calling in the police, they conform to the strategy of the demonstrators. They seem unaware that such a strategy, if not completely self-defeating, at best has no win consequences.

Clearly some demonstrators provoke police and authorities. This has become a self-conscious strategy arising most recently out of the civil rights movement, but traceable to early revolutionary movements.

There are actually two issues with the police. The most important is the mere fact that the police are called and that the conflict is stopped by the naked power of the State, contrary to the hallowed ideals of the liberal university. The second issue involves undue and often indiscriminate use of force as insulted and provoked police sometimes lose control and are inept in their attempt to clear an area.

A fruitful area of study is the sociology of martyrdom and the conditions under which repression will arouse sympathy on the part of larger audiences. Important issues here would seem to be whether the repression is directed against non-violent or violent demonstrators and whether the protest involves a morale issue easily seen to be consistent with the basic values of the larger society. Police repression of recent black rioters has engendered a rather different mass response than their repression of earlier peaceful non-violent demonstrators. Student disobedience on behalf of legalizing certain drugs has met with a less favorable response than that on behalf of impoverished and powerless minority migrant farm workers. As the writings of Martin Luther King suggest, repression of peaceful protest on behalf of a powerful morale issue would seem to greatly increase chances of an effective martyrdom and the generation of mass support.