

## Memory, Sexuality, and Columbia '68



Finally, what long range goal is worthy of this rebellion? Obviously the question is not whether to work for revolution – armed, communist revolution – in America, but how, and what form it will take

– John Jacobs,  
May 1968 (in a Manifesto for the Columbia protests)<sup>1</sup>

Has the left come to terms with Stalinist repression, Maoist repression, or Castro's repression? Clearly the answer is no. Those who remain within the confines of the left prefer not to deal with those issues... One of my main regrets about the 1960s is the role that Liberation News Service, and to a certain extent SDS, my most important affiliations, played in promoting violence for political ends.

- Allen Young  
May 1988 (in response to a twenty year Columbia reunion)<sup>2</sup>

1968 is the most mythologized year in a decade often lionised for its supposedly unique social movements, political upheaval and cultural rebellion. In the historiography of the decade, the protests at Columbia University in the spring of 1968 are the most commonly used symbol of the militant turn that the New Left, and particularly the organisation Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), would take as the 1960s came to a close. Whilst Columbia certainly influenced a minority of students among in the New Left to endorse militancy, most notably the Weathermen faction that would emerge in 1968, of which John Jacobs was a key theorist and leader, this legacy often masks competing and equally compelling counter narratives. Gay and Lesbian Liberation scholars and activists Allen Young and Karla Jay were both involved in the Columbia protests; the way in which they remember Columbia runs counter to the mythologisation of the event as a moment of radical exuberance. For Young, competing histories such as the repression of gay citizens in Cuba mean that the legacies of the New Left remain politically dubious, even as he remains committed to leftwing causes.

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<sup>1</sup> John Jacobs, 'Bringing the War Home', May 1968; University Protest and Activism Collection, Box 13, Folder 5; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library. 1

<sup>2</sup> Allen Young, Response to the Twentieth Anniversary Columbia Protest Reunion, May 1968; University Protest and Activism Collection, Box 25, Folder 6; University Archives, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library

**The following is an extremely select list of key events with a limited bibliography**

**April 23, 1968** – Students at Columbia University, led by the Student Afro-American Society and SDS organise a protest on campus in which Hamilton Hall and Dean Henry Coleman are seized. In the spirit of black self-determination SAS racially bifurcate the protests in the early hours of April 24, forcing white students to seize a further 4 buildings. The protests draw upon a host of issues, including Columbia's quasi-colonial disdain for the neighbouring Harlem; the administration's despotic control of the university and its politically motivated disciplinary procedures; the University's complicity in the Institute for Defence Analysis, a joint university and government research body students believed inculcated the university in the war in Vietnam. For a detailed account of the issues see Robert Friedman, ed., *University in Revolt: a History of the Columbia University Protests* (London: Macdonald, 1968). Stefan Bradley's *Harlem versus Columbia: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009) is a flawed but useful text which explores the protests entirely through the lens of African American history.

**April 30, 1968** – Negotiations between administration and students, mediated by the faculty, break down. Columbia President Grayson Kirk calls in the police to remove the students. A bloody and protracted police bust radicalises the majority of the student body and a general strike is called, closing most of Columbia for the remainder of the academic term.

**June 1969** – The SDS national convention is hijacked by the violent Weatherman movement, led by key figures in the Columbia protests such as John Jacobs and Mark Rudd, essentially scuppering the organisation. For a good comparison between competing histories of the New Left and of SDS see Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987) and Van Gosse's *Rethinking the New Left, an Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005). See also John McMillan and Paul Buhle's edited collection *The New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

**June 28, 1969** – Elements of New York's gay community erupt into violence in response to a police raid of the Stonewall Bar in Greenwich Village. These Stonewall Riots marked a symbolic starting point for a history of Gay and Lesbian activism in New York and beyond. Jeffery Escoffier's 'Fabulous Politics: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Movements, 1969-1999', printed in *The World the 60s Made*, eds. Van Gosse and Richard Mosser, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) provides a good starting point for exploring the post 1960s gay, lesbian, and queer political movements.

**May 1, 1970** – Radical Lesbians including Karla Jay announce the formation of the Lavender Menace at the Second Congress to Unite Women, highlighting the exclusion of lesbians from the dominant discourses of women's liberation. Their name was selected because of the belief that Betty Friedan, president of the liberal feminist movement the National Organisation of Women (NOW), had described lesbians as a lavender menace, arguing that their presence within the women's movement threatened its mainstream success. By co-opting this term the Lavender Menace symbolised the complex relationships within the Gay, Lesbian and Women's liberation movements. For a detailed history of the modern women's movement see Roth Rosen's *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). The chapter 'Gender and Certainty' in Daniel Rodgers' *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) provides a compelling overview of the intellectual history of the women's liberation movements and their legacies.