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13 May 2024

Student power

Published in the wake of the 1968 uprising at Columbia, Immanuel Wallerstein's University in Turmoil holds critical lessons for the campus protests today.

By Bruce Robbins

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The Gaza protests at Columbia University, like the anti-war protests of April 1968, have proved as contagious as Covid. In May 1968, the events at Columbia were followed by the *événements* in Paris. Organisers at Columbia reported receiving a telegram from the Sorbonne saying that students had occupied a building – what should they do next? The protests against the war in Vietnam swept around the world. In 2024, pro-Palestinian encampments sprung up across the country and the phenomenon has now gone global, in Paris, the UK and elsewhere in Europe. The demands of the protesters are broadly the same: divestment, financial transparency and amnesty for those students and faculty members who have been disciplined for their participation in the protests. Even if some

encampments have been demolished and the protesters arrested, there have been some divestment successes, as at Trinity College Dublin, and it seems unlikely that the fires can so easily be stamped out.

It may be too soon to theorise about what sort of conflagration this is, exactly, and how far it can go before the authorities (sometimes, as with the occupation of Hamilton Hall at Columbia, invoking violations of the fire code) manage to douse the flames. Given the day-to-day urgency of the killings and the starvation in Gaza, trying to achieve theoretical distance from the movement may seem badly timed, even an unfriendly act. Still, one would like to know more. A salient feature of Immanuel Wallerstein's *University in Turmoil: The Politics of Change*, a short and remarkably compelling book inspired by the Columbia protests in 1968 and published a year later, is that it is unafraid of premature theorising. Wallerstein's gamble seems to be that he can hazard a cool, unruffled analysis of the insubordinate students without raining on their parade.

When the protests broke out in April 1968, Wallerstein had been teaching for a decade in Columbia's department of sociology. He had received tenure on the strength of three books about the politics of a newly independent Africa. His own politics could be described, in the lexicon of the day, as Third Worldist. The same could be said of some, though not all, of the Columbia protesters, who were indignant both at an attempted land-grab by the university in Harlem and at its many-sided complicity with American militarism in Vietnam and elsewhere. Wallerstein was on the students' side. But he was a faculty member, not a student. It must have felt awkward to be an academic when students were the ones making the decisions and taking the risks, but when the university as an institution also seemed to be at risk. Like Edward W Said, his colleague in the department of English and comparative literature, who was to expand radically what could be said about Palestine, Wallerstein held publicly unpopular views and clearly treasured the protection that the university provided. Said was away on leave in April 1968, but Timothy Brennan's recent biography reports that he was ambivalent about the disruption to university life.

Reflecting on "the dramatic events that broke out on April 23, 1968, and that have not ended as of this writing", *University in Turmoil* generalises about the university as a site and an agent of political change. But the book's language will probably strike today's reader as dispassionate, indeed colourless to the point of anaemia. The preface calls the book "the fruit of an intensely personal experience", but the personal and the intensity have been scrubbed away, at least from the prose. Instead of the activists' inflammatory rage – to the less accommodating, their sloganising and bluster – Wallerstein opts for neutral-sounding abstractions and a calm sociological detachment. He does not permit himself to mention, say, the victims of Operation Rolling Thunder (1965-68), the bombing campaign against North Vietnam which by itself probably killed as many Vietnamese civilians as the total number of American casualties in the war. It's as if he is trying not to sound like the protesters themselves even when he is in wholehearted agreement with them.

With Gaza's mass graves silently screaming in their ears, readers will perhaps wonder whether Wallerstein's reluctance to make any noise about death in Vietnam was too well-mannered, and thus also whether it is a model to be avoided now. Some will no doubt suspect Wallerstein of sacrificing his political commitments on the altar of academic autonomy. He could reply that the choice, as he sees it, is not so simple. Is his employer

working hand-in-glove with the war machine? It is. Is he himself nevertheless loyal to the university as an idea and an ideal? Yes. It's in the name of an ideally de-nationalised universality that he asserts the right to scrutinise and perhaps reject the university's collaborations with the government. (Thinking of endowment-less European universities, he targets collaboration and not merely the characteristically American issue of where endowment funds are invested). Such scrutiny is entirely fitting and proper, he suggests, for an academic citizen. The university, properly conceived, is a political institution, a place of both intellectual and social conflict. Conflict is what he is engaging in. You may think it impossible to remain civil while arguing that your colleagues, under cover of intellectual autonomy, are defending a murderous status quo. If so, watch and learn. That's the moral of his performance.

Rationality, academics agree, is necessary to the protocols of the academy. But it is just as necessary, Wallerstein would add, to politics itself. How else can you discriminate between demands that are worth pressing hard on and demands that are self-defeating? Activism, unless it is content with noble defeat, needs to recognise that it is taking place within a geopolitical framework that both enables and constraints it. Wallerstein proposes such a framework.

In his introduction to *Student Power*, co-edited with Robin Blackburn and also published in 1969, Alexander Cockburn wrote: "The emergence of the student movement promises a renewal of revolutionary politics as well as the arrival of a new social force." For Cockburn, "student insurgents", rejecting parliamentary politics, are that new revolutionary social force. For Wallerstein, becoming a revolutionary force is more than students can justifiably claim. "Insurrection… makes no sense as a tactic of university reform as long as the university exists within a reasonably enduring political system." Wallerstein had not yet arrived at a definitive formulation of world-systems theory, which would make him famous in the 1970s, but the framework he applies to the student protests is a draft of that controversial revision of Marxist internationalism. Thanks to its metropolitan location in the world system, siphoning off surplus from the periphery and using it to tamp down social tensions at home, the US is and for the foreseeable future will remain a conservative society. And thanks to its location in that conservative society, the American university cannot be turned into a revolutionary institution. Trying to make the US "a bastion of world revolution" is "a non-issue and nonsense". The same holds for America's organised working class, and it is also holds for the American university. The university is and will remain "a bastion of the center… kept squarely in the center and in tension with the right because of the strength of the left". In other words, it will never be a bastion of the left, and if the student radicals try to push it in that direction, things will not end well. What the university can be for the left is what it turned out to be for him, as for Edward Said and Noam Chomsky: a "refuge and a point of sortie".

If the university is to remain a bastion of the centre in a society that is itself centrist at best, what can the student protests reasonably hope for? They should not expect much support from a majority of the faculty. And they cannot expect to have much impact on what Wallerstein calls, in an awkward sociologism, "resource allocation" – that is, the revolutionary goal of economic justice at a global scale. On the other hand, they can legitimately try to shift the centre leftwards. That would include achieving some reform in the governance of the university itself, including curbing its misconduct as a property owner, and taking some steps towards racial equality. They might even get (on the model of certain European universities) an administration elected by the faculty. In order not to endanger such projects and accomplishments, the left should beware of extremist language. Wallerstein gives advice: "Any tactic that cuts off communication of the left with the centre (the latter being the majority of university professors, large segments of the professional classes, most skilled workers) is self-defeating."

This argument will not inspire many young activists to get up and put their bodies on the line. It speaks less to the burning motives for activism than to its discouraging limits. Yet it makes an exception for organised outrage at the war in Vietnam. For Wallerstein, the violence in Vietnam has already achieved a shift of the centre to the left. Organisationally speaking, it is a success story, and this is true even if it is not (what Wallerstein wants most) a major blow against global economic inequality. Violence speaks in a loud voice, and that is arguably the most relevant aspect of Wallerstein's account of 1968 for the pro-Palestinian demonstrators of 2024.

Though the aiming of dumb bombs at densely occupied blocks of flats seems distinct from the global misallocation of economic resources, successful protest against the one (as in Gaza) would clearly have effects on the other. It's hard to say what the cap might be on a move towards greater transparency in international investment and the possibility of subjecting capital flows to moral scrutiny, as demanded by protesters today. This may be one reason why resistance to the Gaza encampments and the demand for divestment has so often met with brutal, knee-jerk appeals to the police. It is not just the defenders of Israel who will fight hard to protect capital's right to do its work in darkness.

The images of violence in Gaza, available to young people on social media without the usual editorial censorship, have arguably created a unique organising opportunity. One moral of the comparison of Columbia in 1968 with Columbia in 2024 is that violence, whether by the military or by an increasingly militarised police, can work organisational wonders. Before the police were summoned in 1968, a clear majority of the students voted to continue allowing the CIA and the marines to recruit on Columbia's campus. There was no widespread support for the protesters' demands. Then heads were beaten by the police, seven hundred students were arrested, and the movement exploded.

In 2024 as well, there were hundreds of arrests. The police were invited to stay on campus, and what followed has been the politicisation of a student body the majority of which had seemed, until then, more indifferent than not to the cause of the visibly non-violent protesters. A petition presented last week by 92 undergraduate majors to the department of English and comparative literature, where I teach, did not just ask for faculty support for their fellow students who had been suspended. That is what one might have expected. It asked for faculty attention to the issue of divestment from Israel. As I write, students are

picketing the homes of three members of Columbia's board of trustees. Commencement has been cancelled. Perhaps most surprisingly, the faculty of arts and sciences is voting on a resolution of no confidence in Columbia's president, Minouche Shafik. One should never underestimate how much can be accomplished by a clueless administration that appeals to brutality in defence of brutality.