

THE KNOWLEDGE REVOLUTION OF 1968

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A political revolution emerged in 1968 that is no less important for understanding contemporary education than the humanist revolution in fifteenth-century Italy. For like its Italian predecessor, the Revolution of 1968 occurred because of the rise of democratic values, really a democratic consciousness, around the world that insisted on a new sense of civic and republican duty in the nation states of late capitalism (Nauert 1995, 1-94). In 1968, it suddenly became clear that throughout the world the *consent* of the governed was crucial to maintaining the legitimacy of government. Domination of the global sphere had meant the suppression of dissent, the curtailment of human rights, and the silencing of the very people who would be the source of creative ideas for the next century. From the United States to France to Mexico to Czechoslovakia to Vietnam, those who were previously silent, silently oppressed and marginalized in the Cold War consensus, suddenly spoke out and demanded to be heard and their consent sought, secured and won by those who purported to rule them. The actual nature of that consent remained blurred, confused, and at times easily dismissed. But the necessity to find a new way of treating formerly oppressed people—Black Americans and women, to take only two examples, emerged as a key consideration of leadership.

With the sense of a new calculus of democracy worldwide came the sense that a new kind of education was needed to help man and woman face the moral and political questions of how to create a just world in which all could enjoy the fruits of democracy, liberty, and justice. Thinkers of several nations tried to answer this question: what kinds of knowledge are needed to prepare the young leaders of tomorrow to exercise moral judgment, make good political decisions, and grow a world in which human conservation matters as much as global profit? This led to facing a daunting question: how could we craft an educational system that prepared everyone, not just the white, the male, and the elite, to participate, broadly and knowledgeably in a polity that extended beyond our national borders, and that took seriously the notion that “justice for all” meant just treatment for those less fortunate, less educated, and less corporately powerful than we are.

As we move towards the conclusion of 2019, a half century after 1968, we have to acknowledge that many stumbles have occurred since 1968, caused, let us be clear, in part, by a relentless counterrevolution of politicians, corporate interests, and even academics and students, who resisted the democratic vision of radical transformation of '68 because it would reduce if not eliminate their power and privilege. Not least is that true in the realm of education, where today we see a resurgence of the kinds of resistance to a new kind of

education at all levels of the educational establishment, from K-12 to post-graduate higher education. Indeed, during the Reagan administration, a concerted and successful effort was waged to de-legitimize university trained intellectuals and impoverished learners who wanted to change the American educational system and its curricular and broader educational programming to bring more opportunities for earning and more intellectual power to the underclasses of the world. It was during the Reagan administration, for example, that the gains made through affirmative action for placing of women and minorities in management positions in corporations and in universities plummeted (Wolters 1996). In our own time, a concerted campaign continues to discredit public intellectuals and activist thinkers, and continues to make it more difficult for those who are first generation college students to succeed in getting into the best of schools. And now we see that schools that pioneered innovative affirmative action plans have had those rolled back by passage of such extra-legislative fiats like Proposition 209 in California (Nadav and Savio 1996). As if that is not enough, during our current moment in the United States, a relentless Supreme Court has put even programs to promote diversity on life-support while the Secretary of Education attacks even the rights of assaulted and raped women on college campuses (Saul and Taylor 2017).

Nonetheless, despite such setbacks since 1968, despite the missteps we ourselves have made, despite the counterrevolution we have heard shouted in our ears daily, a corner was turned in 1968 that cannot be turned back. An opening has been made, largely by students on campuses like UCSB, and by Black students like those who took over North Hall in October of 1968, that cannot be closed. Once the misguided subject comes out of Plato's cave and sees the light and the world with her own eyes, there is no way that, even if put back in that cage, she will see the world in the shadowy way she did before. A new light inside has been turned on in our students and our educators, and what is needed now, more than ever is a clear, critical assessment of what has been gained, what has been lost, and what we can do now, in the current educational environment, to move our peoples—and they are many and diverse and global—forward.

I want to suggest that there was a hidden and unacknowledged dimension to the knowledge revolution of 1968 that we have largely overlooked, made visible when 12 Black students seized the computer center in North Hall on the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara on the morning of October 14, 1968 and issued a series of demands to Chancellor Vernon Cheadle to create a Department of Black Studies and a Center for Black Studies as part of the university. For by seizing the computer center, those students point our attention to something no other cadre of revolutionary-minded Black students on other college campuses identified—that the computer already had transformed the university. For the computer and the students who took over North Hall revealed something that would become clearer as the years went on—that the computer was the source of power in knowledge formation for the 20th and subsequent centuries. For unlike the many

other insurgents on college campuses who seized college president's offices or student centers, etc., the administration at UC Santa Barbara, mainly Chancellor Cheadle, reacted immediately with a conciliatory attitude to resolve the standoff and get the students to peacefully exit the building. He knew he could not afford to lose the power in those computers in that building, which consisted of all of the records and billing and pay stubs and student records for the whole university (Stewart 2015).

This was a different kind of power than that which was crumbling in Detroit, the power of the second industrial revolution, as Jeremy Rifkin puts it, the oil and car power that was still driving the American economy. No, this was the power of information and the use of that information to affect the thinking of people, countries, and the world, a power that was building, almost silently. These students saw how dependent the university had become already on that power, and by temporarily seizing the computer, they changed the calculus of power on campus, immediately, and for the next fifty years. Because out of that seizure of computer power came a seizure and transformation of the knowledge disseminated by the social sciences and the humanities on this campus, a transformation that was huge at first, and that has waxed and waned since then, but that resulted in the creation of the Department of Black Studies and Chicano Studies, and the eventual creation of the Department of Asian American and Feminist Studies afterwards. A permanent shift in the knowledge all students at UC Santa Barbara, and arguably at other UC universities, occurred because of seizing the power of the computer on this campus.

There was another aspect to this seizure of the computer by these students that is largely unnoticed. Few if any at the time realized it, but the computer that was mainly thought of as a storage compartment, a calculating machine that kept records and printed out paystubs, in 1968, would become, after the creation of the World Wide web in 1990, the main source of knowledge for students and professors alike (Andrews 2019). For once the computer began to replace the library as the most visited site of knowledge, knowledge at university was no longer something contained in a library in books written by a single or group of authors removed from those who are their reader. No, today, through the web, and the smartphone, knowledge is a dialogical formation, a system of exchange between people who are constantly updating knowledge by input from its consumers. And this is actually in sync with the knowledge revolution that Black students insisted on in 1968 UC Santa Barbara—broadening the community of those who created and disseminated knowledge on campus by admitting Black authors into that community.

For key to Black students' demands for a Black Studies Department and a Center for Black Studies was that the education taught at the university there be *relevant*. This concept is often critiqued, but in fact is the key to the shift from the "banking system of education," as Paulo Freire put it in his classic, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, into a dialogic system of education, in which knowledge emerges from a dialogue between the teacher and the student, that engages the student as an active participant if education, real education, is to

take place. Knowledge has to be relevant to those who consume it. Black students wanted a knowledge taught them that was relevant to the syllabus of knowledge they had gained from living in America's ghettos; and in demanding a Black Studies Department, they were demanding that the knowledge they received in UC Santa Barbara had to be in dialogue with the Black epistemologies they brought into Santa Barbara, as well as those already there for them to learn for the first time.

Now here's the irony: the computer they took over was the ultimate symbol of the banking system of knowledge—it banked the financial records no less than the intellectual property of Western civilization the university force-fed all students who entered the campus. Black knowledge, Chicano knowledge, Asian American knowledge, Feminist knowledge were kept out of most of the books on the shelves in the library and the files in this supercomputer. By seizing the computer, the Black students threatened to destroy a literal “bank of knowledge.” But what the computer created in the 1990s through the web replicated what Black students were doing on campuses in 1968—challenging, critiquing, and revising the knowledge they received on campus. Ultimately, that capacity of constant updating is what the web means to any knowledge we gain from it. Knowledge is never stable, never sacrosanct, and never so certain that its counters were permanent. And this permanent nature of knowledge was precisely what the teaching of so-called Western Civilization was before 1968. Students from Black communities were supposed to come to universities like UCSB and assimilate the knowledge already held in the libraries and classrooms of the university. In effect, the process of challenging received knowledge began with 1968 rebellion, even the knowledge that Black students believed they had when they arrived at university. Because all knowledge, 1968 taught us, was constructed out of racial, class, and gender bias that was subject to critique, and necessarily so, if it was to grow and reflect reality.

Black youth also added one other element: that knowledge that helped form educated Black thinkers had to dialogue with the community, the Black community, outside of historically-white colleges and universities, in order to be relevant to the Black experience of America. The enlightened Black community was already a World Wide Diaspora of embedded Black epistemologies. That meant that everyone could be criticized by those with knowledge and, depending on how they react to that critique, able to change. A personal story illustrates this functionality of embedded epistemologies in the formation of my knowledge in 1968.

In 1968, at UCLA, I, along with several other undergraduates, went down to Watts for a meeting. It occurred after Dr. King was shot. The late Winston Martin, my dorm's 3rd floor president, had arranged the meeting as part a job-training program called, “Operation Bootstrap.” But there was nothing job training-like about this meeting. Rather, it was threatening critique of our positionality as students at a university in a society that directly subjugated black people. Suddenly, the ivory tower was standing in the wasteland of the

Watts riot of 1965. We were complicit in the oppression of poor black people, and the question was, “What were we going to do about it?” While I had been criticized by my family and friends before, this was the first time that black strangers critiqued my decision to go to college and went further to criticize my role as a bourgeois black student with no other real goal than personal success and aggrandizement. I remember the room like it was yesterday. It was in a cavernous garage (with roll-down steel doors). The confrontational aspect was enhanced by the fact that the visitors were seated on folding chairs in a circle, and standing behind them and against the walls and doors was a congress of young black males with accusatory voices. This trip to Watts was at night, to a place where there were no friendly faces—the feeling of danger was palpable—particularly when the doors rolled down and clanged shut. But mostly I remember the leader, a medium dark brown skinned man who spoke with tremendous energy, as he paced back and forth in front of us, with his words spat out at us like bullets. His anger came from this—that we were about to become agents of oppression for hundreds of people we would never meet and we had a choice. We could reverse course and become the agents, the representatives, the voices of the people in Watts, if we would only dare to open our eyes, unplug our ears, and perceive what was happening in what was then called the urban black community of 1968 America.

We rode back to Westwood largely in silence. But a mini-revolution occurred in me. Afterwards, conversations about what had happened took place in the dorm Weyburn Hall. I attended them and participated in the discussions with others at the Black Student Union. Through those discussions I met a whole host of other black students I had only seen casually crossing campus, and began to engage, timidly at first, in discussions about “what is to be done?” I began to read books not assigned in my classes, but brought up and referenced in these conversations—conversations that spoke to the prospects and problems of black liberation. I also began to participate in demonstrations and meetings where some Negroes I had never seen before showed up on campus with guns. And I want to assure you that I am not trying to romanticize this story, because later that year, I was on campus when two Black Panthers were shot and killed in the basement of Campbell Hall, an incident, along with other considerations, that led me to transfer to the Santa Cruz campus the following year to complete my undergraduate education.

But something interesting had happened. I was transformed.

Jumping ahead to the last class I took at UCLA, an independent study with a political scientist, leads me to another personal, but relevant story. The professor asked me to come over to his apartment the last day of the Spring quarter to participate in an end-of-the-year get together for his graduate students. After snacks in a tiny Westwood apartment with a great view, each of the students presented a critique of a book they had chosen. One student had chosen Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. He criticized the book as advocating violent Black Nationalism, which this student believed was counterproductive to moving the Civil Rights agenda forward. The professor turned to me, expecting me to comment.

Without much thought, I took apart the student's argument, providing a detailed exegesis of the chapter, "On the Pitfalls of National Consciousness," proving that instead of advocating an unreflective nationalism, Fanon critiqued the nationalist dream, warning of the problems ahead if Algerians and other former colonial peoples simply reproduced the nationalist paradigm that the Europeans had extended onto the African continent. After I spoke, there was a brief silence. Then, the professor nodded and went on to the next student.

I wondered afterwards exactly why the professor had invited me to the meeting. But even later, I was struck by the ease with which I took apart the graduate student's argument, and then I remembered that I had read the book and had debates about it in small group sessions in the Black Student Union. I read *Wretched of the Earth* quite differently and devastatingly, because I had been part of a conversation outside of the classroom about the text and its meaning for a revolutionary new world we imagined as possible, if the right kinds of thinking were engaged. By participating in those sessions and having those conversations, I had developed a certain kind of criticality that had been embedded in the Watts' garage experience, but was amplified and theorized in readings and discussions I had had on campus. This professor, I realized many years afterwards, had brought me to that tiny Westwood flat to function as the *native theorist*, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres would put it (2007).

In retrospect, what I realized is that I was exposed to the epistemology of the Black working and lower class Los Angeles community on that trip to Watts, and in a way that is uninterrogated in American intellectual or educational history, admitted, if briefly, to a community of practice of criticality that had been going on under the radar, so to speak. Michel Foucault would call it a *subjugated knowledge*—a tradition of literate and discursive practices with political intent that was unacknowledged and dismissed soon after the 1960s passed (Foucault 1980, 78-92). Those ways of thinking, then, were amplified and augmented on campus in the small group discussion sessions I participated in at UCLA.

Now, I want to conclude that something like that went on in students all around the world in 1968. While emerging out of the particularity of Southern California, one of the 12 Black students, Dalton Nezey, who seized the computer at UC Santa Barbara, recalled that the sense of isolation he and other Black students experienced on the lily-white Santa Barbara campus generated a tight-knit sense of intellectual collaboration among the alienated students that led up to the decision to take radical action. Almost six thousand miles away in Nanterre, France, outside of Paris, a group of French students, led by Jean-Pierre Duteil, launched the March 22 movement with a similar sense of alienation and anger. Jean-Pierre recall that at his French university in the working class suburb of Nanterre, "there was nothing, we had to create everything. A social life, a cultural life, a sense of belonging, social relations, places, means of expression . . ." What race imposed in Southern California, class imposed in Nanterre. This alienation bestowed on students an urgency to create a "way out

of no way” to transform the educational contract in France in ways similar to that in America. As Jean Pierre recalled, “Just like any other political family, a strong Nanterre identity: we felt we were different from everybody else” (Duteil 2008: n.d.).

A transnational analysis of 1968 student activism breaks down the segregation of knowledge that keeps most of us from linking Black student activism in America to student activism in France. What linked the Black UCSB students and the French Nanterre students was how they were treated and how they responded. They were treated as if there were nothing, as if they had no intelligence, no knowledge, that as working-class youth they brought nothing to the table of learning worth knowing. Their jobs as students were to sit and listen and take in, not question, not react, not rebel against the lies and misrepresentations they were forced-fed by what went for university education in 1968. Instead of deference, however, students of ‘68 took the demand that the consent of the governed must be obtained in order for a democracy to exist and applied it to their educations—the consent of the student would be the criteria on which education, especially higher education, would rest moving forward from 1968. There was a sleeping giant alive in these students that refused to be treated as an inferior, a ward of knowledge. That giant awoke and asserted their rights as equal partners in the production of knowledge, as educational citizens who can, if they wish, withhold their consent, their obeisance, their agreement to swallow whatever shit a university wants to force down their throats, and demand something relevant to their knowledge of the world. Students asserted their right to question, not only the knowledge, but also the world, the system, that that knowledge sustained, and to reject that knowledge if it led to fundamentally cruel and dehumanizing outcomes. This was the revolution in the form of knowledge that is sometimes ignored by our legitimate focus on its content—that the relationship between the student and the school was fundamentally changed by 1968. The educated had a right to withhold or give consent to what they learned if they found it illegitimate.

There was something more. Black students in the UCs went beyond even Freire to argue that knowledge was not something that erupted only in the process of formal education, when literacy gave the peasant power over his or her world. That was important. But that was not all. For the takeover of the computer center at UCSB and the demand to teach a history and culture ignored in American education also meant that those occupying students demanded that the knowledge they already possessed from sites of epistemology like Watts needed be taught at UCSB to make it a more perfect mirror of American society. I experienced that subjugated knowledge in Watts myself—an embedded criticality that educated *me*. That subjugated knowledge made under the conditions of racism, urbanism, and the built environment of commodity enslaved ghettos, had to be part of the dialogue of higher education in America. By analogy, in the suburbs of Paris, the ghettos of Buenos Aires, Detroit, London, and Beirut, other epistemologies existed of how the global system of subjugation works. And that knowledge is transformative if learned and disseminated

throughout a system of education, especially one heretofore designed to keep the oppressed silent, marginal, and unknown.

After 1968, higher education would usually ignore that knowledge; but it could never be sure it would not raise its ugly head of criticality once the oppressed gained their voice, again, and demanded to be heard. After 1968, the knowledge of American and global domination would always be worried that this knowledge would once again speak its truth in embarrassing situations of dialogic confrontation. It meant that no matter how often American university education repeated to unwitting student triumphant discourses of America as the beacon of freedom, teachers also would have to be prepared for student articulation of the counter assertion that America was also the home of slavery.

Students today need to reclaim that sense that to become educated means to be self-conscious about the embodied knowledge they bring to college and university. Students are embodied dialogues with their communities of origin as they engage their university educations. Even if they are turned off from such knowledge from their past, the current moment brings a plethora of knowledge from oppressed communities and the criticality associated with them through the smartphone every day. One's knowledge is constantly being updated in new and spectacular ways often with so-called illegitimate sources of knowledge as much as that from university presses. Verification, of course, is the new challenge. Our job as thinkers today is to assess critical opinion using the very tools 1968 brought into being—the Internet of our communities, who, like those men in the garage in Watts, critiqued me. Our system of embedded criticality has expanded into an Internet knowledge formation today—a collaborative, risky, porous, but perpetual system of update that makes the twenty-first century a new epoch in world intellectual history. Through that process, certain important things traceable to 1968 are important, and I close with three.

First, we are witnessing the expansion and attempted universalization of due process as one outcome of the expansion and attempted universalization of access to knowledge. What do I mean by that? The injured have the right to be compensated, redressed, by transforming unsanctioned knowledge into a system of reparations. This is emerging today in the #metoo movement by which testimony by those injured, deeply, can be disseminated through social media as truth to power. The right to redress, to compensation, and to be made whole after devastation by some person or some institution is broader today than ever before. Despite the attempts of the dark web to crush those who speak out against abuse, the abused can get a hearing by taking over the computer center of social media and demanding to be heard.

Second, those who protest abuse can marshal a worldwide community through social media and the Internet to support them and buoy their confidence despite the almost inevitable counter-attacks that result. We are seeing this in the #metoo movement and also with the #blacklivesmatter movement, despite the babble of those who say the latter is dead (Taylor 2019). We know, for example, today, almost every time an unarmed black

person is shot and killed by a police officer or by the private guards of white private property, a minute later the information is beamed all over the world. People who have never met become a community of protest, just like the students who brought to a halt, if only briefly, universities in the France and United States, in March and October of 1968, that pressures those responsible about what has happened. Even as we lament that this marshalling has not stopped the practices of sexual assault and state supported racial murder, there is some redress: even though the policeman who killed Michael Brown got off scot-free, the prosecutor who defended his decision not to bring charges against the officer was voted out of office.

Third, through mastery of social media and web-based knowledge platforms like Wikipedia and others, students have the power to produce knowledge relevant to them, to their communities, and to their emerging political consciousness, disseminate it and have it critiqued and revised in a matter of days, if not hours. For one of the lessons of 1968 is that students have the power to self-organize, to create programs, conferences, forums, governments, even, just as students of May '68 ran major services in Paris for almost a month! Students can take an organization like the graduate student organization of AISNA and transform it into a university on line for those without enough money to go to university on the ground. Students can publish their own papers, create their own peer review boards, bind papers together in virtual volumes, and distribute them all over the world—showing the world knowledge-making talent among graduate students in Italy. And if they do so they will be operating out of a '68 model and show that, rather than dead, '68 is more alive than ever in 2019.

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