A YEAR IN THE STRUGGLE



FIVE LESSONS FROM THE POPULAR UNIVERSITIES

The protesters should consider that an encampment, with all the etymological connections of the word to military origins, is a way of using force of a kind rather than reason to persuade others.

– Paul Alivisatos

Make every wound a weapon.

– Yahya Sinwar

I. The student movement's main obstacle is that it understands itself to be a student movement.

It relies on recognition from the university, the promise of administrative redress, buy-in from popular teachers, the spectacle of confronting speakers or administrators – all at the expense of its effectiveness. In the sixties a Detroit Panther said: "I believe working people are the blade of the revolution and the students the handle. No matter how hard the thrust is, the action will be useless unless the blade is sharp." The 'popular university' implies a move we've constantly struggled to make – from the campus to the city, and from the students to the people. The allure of taking the campus, whether by flooding the quad or occupying a building, has determined where we work, who we work with, and what we imagine is possible. But a really popular university wouldn't limit itself to the shadow of the schools we attend, or which we happen to live near.

How should we get off campus? Self-interested nonprofits and movement incubators market themselves as our only path to the neighborhoods around us. This helps make the campus seem like the only habitable environment in the city for radicals. But it's not true. In the sixties and seventies, the radical edge of the student movements involved themselves in fierce, autonomous struggles by working people, fought over the conditions of their lives. In the early seventies, the Sojourner Truth Organization went into the factories and steel mills on Chicago's South Side and ran an office on 87th street. In Paris, anti-imperialists formed Vietnam Base Committees which connected anti-war struggles in the high schools and colleges to poor Algerian and Palestinian laborers, laying the groundwork for France's massive 1968 general strike. **Our first order of business: forming semi-permanent, autonomous collectives at the neighborhood level, to split political thinking and action off from the universities, and to orient ourselves by the actual demands and needs of the people around us.** We should be looking to the poor and oppressed masses where we live for the questions that any revolutionary movement has to answer.

II. Our inherited organizational models are fetters, not neutral resources.

During the encampments, the general assemblies were totally disconnected from strategic decisionmaking, and at the University of Chicago, internal to the 'core' group of organizers who were making those calls, two individuals took it upon themselves to break ranks with the majority and initiate negotiations. A press release refusing to negotiate had to be scrapped. It's easy to get hung up on individual betrayals, but it's more important to ask ourselves: how did we let that happen? Even at the most advanced camp in Chicago, DePaul, the campers adopted a "spokescouncil" model: working groups handled their own areas of expertise and political disagreements were "de-escalated" while an unelected and unaccountable clique of legacy organizers directed things from behind the scenes. When it came time to defend the camp, the people in charge of defense were bypassed by a 'core' organizer, and CPD cleared it without resistance. These organizational models all channeled political discussion and debate away from the people participating in the camp. They depended on a quiet distinction between the rank and file and a clique of 'core' organizers who ran things.

The most promising moments during the camps were when masses of people made ambitious, concerted decisions under pressure, and the cliques of organizers who really managed the strategic direction of the camp couldn't bring themselves to get in the way. This is how all of the most important sequences began. Take Columbia, for example:

> *At the nightly camp wide meetings, young students began to demand transparency and accountability about the negotiation process. They were dissatisfied with what we all understood as attempts at containment from the clique who was negotiating on everyone's behalf behind closed doors. The radical partisans continued to plan. We smuggled in crowbars, chain, angle grinders, bolt cutters, hammers. Pockets of inexperienced protestors got curious about the possibility of taking a building. We started gathering our numbers inside the camp. A Barnard grad made an announcement that we needed to break open the gates and let all of Harlem inside, she was promptly recruited.*

As we experiment with new ways of organizing ourselves into autonomous, semi-permanent groups, it's crucial that we redefine good leadership: our job is not to make decisions for other people, it's to

give them space to make decisions for themselves, and to understand themselves not as followers but the protagonists of their own lives. **Democratize all political thinking and decisionmaking.** Help give expression and autonomy to the radical edge of the movement. Because – as an exiled revolutionist put it – "a story of revolution without the nameless mass as its 'hero' is not a story of revolution."

III. There are no non-symbolic actions.

The boldest and most decisive moves of the last two years' movement seamlessly combined their message – divest, globalize the intifada! – with their tactic – occupy, encamp, drive back the police. The two can't operate without one another. A victory against the police that no one hears about and a well-attended movie screening that doesn't advance the movement's concrete aims are both worthy of criticism, and we've all seen examples of both.

Connect the two layers of the movement. Build smart, secure relationships between a movement-oriented aboveground, capable of crafting smart narratives, handling press and media, spreading slogans, orienting political discussion and appropriately responding to state repression; and a belowground capable of planning, organizing, carrying out and getting away with bold, ambitious actions that set new baselines for the movement. These relationships can be built at every level of the struggle, whether it's in trainings and teach-ins, sitting around at jail support, or among groups that tend to find each other at big protests.

This process should cultivate a degree of indistinction and mutual respect between the movement's militant, street-oriented edge and the people who handle its public messaging. One aboveground organizer in Atlanta was asked to condemn a series of arsons that targeted police motorcycles, used for traffic stops. She responded:

> *If I'm being honest with you, Atlanta deserves more than that… This city is lucky. This country is lucky. Atlanta has its hands in literally murdering Palestinians right now. You think we give a damn about – some equipment? Not at all. Not at all. But some of us, we can't take that risk. And those who can, bless them, bless them. I cannot take that risk, but lord knows I sit with my lighter, and be like, 'Damn.'*

IV. Not everyone needs to be an ally.

A moment from the University of Chicago's encampment is relevant: at first, when we were starting to build and train with shields, we tried to go through the camp's self-selected group of student-activist 'leaders.' Someone said, "we're going to be putting these things together over there, if you want to let other folks know." The 'core' organizer stared back in confusion, then wide-eyed anxiety. "Can you wait on that? We need to talk about it first." That 'we' named a position, not a group that includes you. **The best way to do anything on a college campus, in your workplace, in your neighborhood or anywhere else is to circumvent entrenched, conservative leadership.**

Compose yourselves intentionally. As you pull together a group, make sure you're clear about common principles, what you can and can't expect from each member, and delegate responsibilities accordingly. Do not confuse friendship for political development or good sense. Be patient with yourselves and others, because the most important part of all of this is learning to fight smarter and better – but be realistic, too. Don't ignore bad behavior – it will become a bigger problem if you wait to address it – and don't be afraid to set political boundaries regardless of friendship. Critique each other, and yourselves! A hallmark of good organizational culture is the ability to change directions or revise expectations, both collectively and individually.

V. Learn to separate moral righteousness from strategic intelligence.

In New York over the past year and a half it was common for people to throw down, get arrested, get processed, leave the station and throw themselves right back into the street movement. On the one hand, this de-exceptionalized state repression and maintained a protest culture that was highly mobile, tactically ambitious, and which protagonized its participants more than anywhere else. On the other, at some point over the summer, direct actions began to be pursued for their own sake. The urgency of the moment and the moral compulsion to sacrifice everything for the cause overtook anyone's ability to think strategically about what another arrest, or another twenty, would get the movement – and what future opportunities it might foreclose.

At the same time, over the past year, the language of safety, security and care has been leveraged against radicals across the country, from California to New York. The organizers who abandoned radicals to the police at the DNC have replaced the word 'peaceful' with 'family-friendly' in their trainings. And the Trump administration can count on this paternalistic line of thinking to amplify its fear-based repression strategy, as acquiescence to state terror ends up counseling self-deportation or silence instead of fighting back.

Collectives should not just exist to push forward this or that campaign, and campaigns shouldn't just be pursued for their own sake. In the years before 1917, Russian workers fought revolutionary battles over the temperature of their tea – so it's not only the stated goal of a struggle that makes it revolutionary. But those fights over hot water helped produce a revolutionary force which was capable, when the moment arrived, of overcoming the existing state machinery and opening up a revolutionary horizon for the people of Russia, however long or short you might think it lasted.

Choose your issues, plan and act with a similar goal in mind.

To date, revolutions have given us nothing but defeats. Yet these unavoidable defeats pile up guarantee upon guarantee of the future final victory. There is but one condition. The question of why each defeat occurred must be answered. **– Rosa Luxemburg.** // There will be a special page in the book of life for the men who have crawled back from the grave. This page will tell of utter defeat, ruin, passivity, and subjection in one breath, and in the next, overwhelming victory and fulfillment. **– George Jackson.** // Palestine, in my opinion, is actually the most beautiful place; not because of her greenness, blueness, yellowness, redness, crops, bounty, or nature. Her beauty is that she is the one who answered my search for meaning, and she is the one who answered my existential questions, and who justifies my existence and cures my chronic anxieties. **– Basel al-Araj.** // We are all responsible for our dream of storming the heavens. We cannot turn ourselves into dwarves now, after having dreamed, elbow to elbow, each feeling the others' heartbeats, of attacking and overthrowing the gods. This is the dream that makes power afraid. **– A. M. Bonanno.** // 'Hope' is not a scientific category. Nor is it a necessary obligation in polemical writing. On the other hand, intellectual honesty is and I try to call it as I see it, however wrongheaded my ideas and analyses may be. I believe that we have arrived at a 'final conflict' that will decide the survival of a large part of poor humanity over the next half century. Against this future we must fight like the Red Army in the rubble of Stalingrad. Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely. **– Mike Davis.** // It must be admitted that Brown assumed tremendous responsibility in making war upon the peaceful people of Harper's Ferry, but it must be remembered also that in his eye a slave-holding community could not be peaceable, but was, in the nature of the case, in one incessant state of war. **– Frederick Douglass.** // Extermination or communism is the choice – but this communism must be more than just the sharing of wealth (who wants all this shit?) – it must inaugurate a whole new way of working together. **– Antonio Negri.** // The next 50 to 100 years or so, beginning from now, will be a great era of radical change in the social system throughout the world, an earth-shaking era without equal in any previous historical period. Living in such an era, we must be prepared to engage in great struggles which will have many features different in form from those of the past. **– Mao Tse-Tung.** // The crisis is permanent, the government is but provisional. **– Karl Marx.**