What a Free Speech Movement instigator teaches us today

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The origin and the end of the U.C. Berkeley student revolution: interview with Brad Cleaveland, a Berkeley institution

Brad Cleaveland was active on the University of California campus as the 1960s Free Speech Movement gained momentum and soon shook the world. Brad worked with Mario Savio and all the principal activists and celebrities of the movement. The story has been portrayed many times with quite a bit of nostalgia, but the real origins of the events of the mid 1960s included such little-known factors as faculty conflict over the role of science. This was a prerequisite (to use a course term) for the revolutionary tumult to come.

Brad Cleaveland wrote a key manifesto for the budding student movement that was widely circulated, but his involvement stemmed from his tracking for years the intellectual fervor on campus that flowed from Hannah Arendt and her faculty collaborators.

Since the 1960s, Brad never stopped paying attention to the currents of changing thought -- whether from the underground, the Berkeley anti-war communes, the university administrator's complicity with the military and imperialism, or the sad compromising of academic freedom. Perhaps no living observer is as well positioned as Brad Cleaveland to tell us the stories and connections that explain much of the social change that emanated from Berkeley. In this interview he helps us understand what this means for us today.
Jan Lundberg of Culture Change got to know Brad through mutual friends who are long-time Berkeley activists. Brad is a brilliant political analyst who sees behind the curtain of university-related sensitive government programs, so it is a gift for activism and posterity that he did this interview to weave together the tapestry of activism and thought that fought the good fight. Brad also "knows where the bodies are buried," and can regale the listener endlessly with stories about who was doing what to whom and with whom inside and outside the movement, for their personal and political reasons. But it is the body of thought and activism -- what people think of as the political 1960s -- brought to light now in this rare interview, that is our largely hidden, treasured legacy. Here is one of the main players who brought it about for you.

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JL: What exactly were you doing in those historic days when the spark of student resistance ignited on the Berkeley campus in 1964? Also, summarize for us what had been going on in previous weeks.

BC: The resistance was intensive from about the time of my manifesto was published September 10, 1964, by SLATE. Many, including myself, had been working 24/7 until October 2, 1964 when the movement became explosive and hit the national and international press. That was the day we seized the police car in front of the Administration Building.

This event was an astonishing one; explosive even, and in no small part because of the international press coverage. So, the beginning was the two weeks prior to October -- of highly intensive student activism -- and October 2, with the dramatic take-over of a UC police car. It occurred at noon during the heaviest foot traffic in the center of Sproul Plaza. We turned a police car into a speakers' platform and held it for 72 hours.

By '64, and the FSM revolt, I'd been active for 7 years. I was the first treasurer of the first radical student group, SLATE Student Political Party. In '59, just after the top 3-4 leaders of SLATE left Berkeley for points East to grad schools, such as Columbia and NYU, I led SLATE in a "defiance rally," which, in turn brought about the early retirement of UC Berkeley's Dean of Students. In 1960, I was a principal organizer of the anti-HUAC demos in SF, on May 13th, l960. In 1962, I got my MA, under three principal faculty members, in Political Theory. The group formed under Hannah Arendt, who was a Spring '55 Lecturer, in the Political Science Department. The coalescing of the three theory professors propagated and made popular Political Theory, especially to radical activists who filled their seminars. In turn, this group of activist students and three of their teachers can be said to have been the original, informal group which "seeded" the Berkeley student movement -- inside the university structure itself. It moved quickly to the more public domain of Sproul Plaza.

In '63, I led SLATE in putting together the first "underground" paper of the '60's.
I was hired as Editor and was able to attract the support of others, including the previous editor who had just resigned.

JL: Who were the main faculty players in the brewing cauldron of intellectual thought that threatened the Establishment back in the '50s, and how did they end up influencing you and the students in the mid-'60s?

BC: To answer, let me elaborate just a bit on your first question to me. It was quite hierarchical: Hannah Arendt as a UC Lecturer, the three main faculty participants, then the direct connection, or link, between the faculty and the

undergraduate students in the person of Carey McWilliams, the TA of the three main faculty participants.
It's like a little pyramid, in a way: First, at the top, Hannah Arendt; then the 3 main faculty participants, and then the direct link of the grad student, Carey McWilliams. Other professors were inspired to coalesce around the events and were inspired greatly by Arendt and her presence here in '55. They were Sheldon Wolin, Classical and Historical Political Theory; John Schaar; American Interest Groups & American Political Theory; finally Professor Norman Jacobson, Theorist of Citizenship. The core group had its own eminent grad student, a connection between this "troika" of men and the SLATENIKS -- Wilson C. "Carey" McWilliams, who's father had been the NATION Editor (during the McCarthy era), and the famous author of Factories in the Fields, a brilliant radical critique of California agribusiness, and inspirer of author John Steinbeck, who wrote ranking novels about US Agribusiness, e.g. Grapes of Wrath, and a number of novels about California's coast and the area of Monterey. Carey, the son, was a co-founder of SLATE, with myself and others. I call this group, personally...or better, as a Citizen, "The Miracle Group." In a way it was a miracle, given the diversity and size of UC Berkeley. Columbia was the first major campus on the East Coast which took up Berkeley's project of a "national student movement," and Mark Rudd was Columbia's equivalent of Mario Savio.

Beginning in 1965 our movement represented the beginning of a national student movement, with more localization. The Civil Rights movement at that point was mainly in the South, with help from students from Berkeley and Columbia (NYC). If King had not been assassinated, he would have likely succeeded in the creation of a national revolt of immensely greater import than anything thought possible after WWII. His try for a second "March on Washington" was, in some dark sense, the "reason" he had to be stopped, according to the U.S. intelligence community. The march was planned "to stop Washington," period! MLK said it himself. The speech he made the night prior to his assassination was proof of this and to the growing Civil Rights movement's leaders, at that moment, whose intentions were largely focused on that possibility.

So the student movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the anti-war movement became known as The Movement.

JL: How was the Indonesia genocide of 1965 hatched at U.C. Berkeley, and what is the ongoing cover-up at work to this day? What is the JASON group? You told me of the book The Jasons: The Secret History of Science's Postwar Elite" by Ann Finkbeiner. Does this group affect our lives? Is it an example of a "fascist triumvirate" of state, industry and academia?

BC: It is a group out of Hell, as far as I am concerned. It is a very small group of people who, when it comes to human technology in the broadest sense, uses Scientific Truth to front for further militarization, weaponry manufacture, and it meets clandestinely with the Executive Branch. They are at the heart of US power and, in increasing ways, are the heart itself of our government at its very coldest; its most reactionary. It says, "You want the tools? For WHATEVER; mass murder, war, what would you like?" That's the JASONS. It seems unbelievable; it is! They -- in my humble opinion -- are the incarnation of the fabled "Mad Scientist;" you know, Frankenstein's modern "family!"

JL: You've characterized U.S. cities as work camps. This was always true, but how is it that a generation of students who, in the majority of them according to polls in the years surrounding 1970, went to college to "change the world," and they ended up mostly as Yuppies in the work camps?

BC: Several reasons; each one as powerful as the next. Marx called it "Commodity Fetishism." A gloating love energized by -- as we so openly proclaim (and love) materialism. We Americans cannot get over cars, for example. We, spiritually speaking, all but "lick" them! This is the sort of thing, which crosses a vitally important "line:" the one between enthusiasm and charlatanism. Think Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" Or, any other of our strange, wonderful, but yet contradictory qualities. So religious, we are. Yet? So grotesquely crass.

However, I feel that a giant reality for us is our hurriedness: t. Too busy; always, and without ceasing. It's no accident that our most favorite US "tribe," or more currently, "gang," is the Hells' Angels. Right out of Oakland CA,; "Oaktown!" They're one of the biggest producers of "Speed." Yet, it's as if no American has even heard the wonderful wisdom of that aphorism, "Speed kills!" My grandfather took me under his huge gangly arm for long walks.

My favorite aphorism by my Grandfather, is, "Bradford, now listen! (always with a cheerful tone) Always remember: You cannot do any good while your gritting your teeth!"

Finally, respecting student quietism presently. Maybe there can be a real rebirth of politics here i. Instead of the cancerous and anti- political "growth" of corporate power. In Europe, everyone knows a corporate state is a fascist state. I call them the "three forms." (The first form is) Nazism -- Italy; Germany. (The Second Form is) Communism -- USSR and "the 'East' mainly. And the third? Our rising "Third Form: Commercial Totalitarianism," perhaps the worst form of tyranny of all forms in history -- East and West.

Regarding the question of US students,: Remember, privatization is a decisively fascist movement, if there ever was one. Commercial Totalitarianism is upon us.

JL: What is going on with the U.C. Berkeley campus behind the scenes that tries to assure there will never be another uprising by radical students who could lead great numbers of people to change or dismantle the power structure?

BC: The hardest of all questions. It has to do with all citizens now being moved, nudged, herded, under "the word," as it were. Here is one example: the US Advertising Council, one of the most anti-humanistic realities out there. The European intellectuals have asserted, during the past 50-75 years, "Language = Human. (Or, if you will "Humyn," as the feminists say it.) There's that "great chain of being." First: each prey has its predator. Each predator has its prey. But we humans popped out of this "circle" or chain of being. We're mostly programmed to make a massive, fatal habit, of turning "on our own species" almost wholly. Of course, given the evolution of blood-thirstiness as in present day Las Vegas "fight games" we may have our answer.

Think about our toleration of commercial TV. It is as if some right wing underground gathering decided, "How can we really rid the world of 'Humanism'?" Destroy language; speech. Degrade it completely. Or, it's as if some extreme right idea was put forth (as it actually has - under the intellectual impetus of the Roman Catholic Church's two infamous groups, Opus Dei and The Legion of Christ, under the guidance of the then famous Roman Catholic Teacher Comte Joseph de Maistre, who proclaimed the heroism of The Executioner. Who said contempt for human weakness is a virtue, much like modern Ad Council people argued, during the US '80's, for "The Decade of Greed," and "Greed is Good," etc. DeMaistre's alive and well in the present right wing spirit of our own country.

What's being done to stop Berkeley's students from girding up their loins; from simply standing forth... as citizens? Well, the entrepreneur has pretty much tried to annihilate the citizen. And, continues to succeed in this hateful, mad, undertaking. What with the commercialization of the military itself; the commercialization of prisons, especially. Essentially it is the destruction of "the soul," or just plain "soul," by it's being under siege of -- as Ginsberg might say, MOLOCH! (Look at Ginsberg's poem titled Howl.)

What's being done to stop youth from stirring? Mostly ignorance; and especially political education, in the broadest sense. As in the ancient Roman notion of -- and this would be miraculous presently -- the notion of amor mundi; or worldliness, or love for the world. Machiavelli? He said, "We must love our city more than our soul!" Our U.S. cities are like charnel houses for the lucre of money.

Political ignorance -- as being propagated by universities -- has been spreading like the proverbial "prairie fire!" It is slavering, enthusiastic, and insane greed. Since, after all, to the dominant type in our times, the Entrepreneur, politics must be hated; destroyed -- for once and all. Take this single fact: even politicians, themselves now propagate anti-politics. Increasingly!

No student political movement? So, it's across the board, so-to-speak. The present US reaction to politics is led by our own massive set of institutions of secrecy, and that means, too, our own US homegrown secret police.

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