

## The Philosophy of a Young Activist

By David S. Busch

At Sonoma University in 1993, a professor of philosophy gave a public lecture titled “The Philosophy of a Young Activist.” About a quarter a way through his lecture, he stepped away from his podium to examine the logic behind what is often referred to as the 1964 Free Speech Movement at the University of California. With a philosopher’s tact, he picked apart the University of California’s administrative stance on the ban against leafleting on campus in the early 1960s. The issue at Berkeley, the professor argued, was that such advocacy reflected a moral and value position. University administrators deemed such advocacy as antithetical to the university’s neutral position.

The Sonoma professor knew the intricacies of the Berkeley protest well. Why? His name was Mario Savio. The face of 1964 Berkeley protest, Savio was closely involved in the planning, debates, and discussions of the sit-in. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that Savio became a professor later in his life. A reflective, passionate person, Savio’s activism was always rooted in a deep, philosophical understanding of the self and the world. As he explained in his lecture, Savio believed that the sit-in at Berkeley exemplified one of the most important lessons a young person can learn: “to teach ourselves how to make value judgments.” He argued that it was a lesson neither found in the curriculum nor in the university.

Savio’s argument about the university is important to consider today in the context of renewed student activism across American higher education. Social commentary on student activism have tended to offer boilerplate narratives of student politics and ideas. College students in the 1960s became too radical. In the 1980s, they were perceived as apathetic. Today, they’re too focused on identity politics. Even the 1964 Sprout Hall sit-in at University of California, which has received extensive scholarship and has been cited across the political spectrum, tends to be treated simply as an issue concerning “free speech.” Such interpretations mask student activists’ moral argument about the university. Through campus protests, sit-ins, and teach-ins, student activists since the 1960s have attempted to push the modern university to take a moral stand on issues confronting American society. The key issue as students return to college campuses isn’t an issue of free speech, or as some commentators crudely misinterpret, as the “coddling” of students. The issue, as it has always been, is about the moral position of the university.

Savio’s argument about the university grew directly out of his experiences in the civil rights movement. As an activist with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in San Francisco and as a volunteer with the Freedom Summer project in Mississippi, Savio learned immensely from black student activists. Savio saw in activists from CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) a model of being in the world. Confronted by violence and threats, student activists within CORE and SNCC developed a moral understanding of the social and political world that required not only judgment, but action.

A [similar dynamic](#) has emerged today, especially among student activists involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. Seeing their friends and loved ones die in the street, an irresponsible government and police force, and a prison system that destroys families, they too are compelled to make moral judgments about the world. They have chosen to mobilize, organize, and act and have set profound moral examples of bravery and love for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. American students are also part of a global struggle by students and young people. Since the

Arab Spring beginning in 2010, students have been on the front lines of movements for social change, from the Umbrella Movement in [Hong Kong](#) to more recently the “Green Helmets” in Venezuela.

And, like Savio, many students today have returned to campus with a deeper understanding of the relationship between society and institutes of higher education. In South Africa, students in the “[Fees Must Fall](#)” movement have pushed for increased access at South African universities, where black South Africans make up less than one-quarter of the student population. At Jawaharlal Nehru University, Indian Students have advocated for their right to organize and protest on campus. “Dancing to the tunes of power and punishing voices of dissent is your privilege,” students within the Jawaharlal Nehru Students’ Union declared, “Defending the Right to Education and fighting for justice is our duty.” And, in the United States, students have demanded their universities to serve the concerns of local communities. As students at the University of Minnesota argue: “We demand the university fundamentally reorganize its goals and priorities to include access and justice for local communities.” These efforts are part of a range of other demands, including the creation of campus spaces to discuss issues that affect students’ social and political lives, protesting campus visits by white supremacists, and calling for divestments from fossil fuels.

Social commentary on student activism and responses by university administrators have tended to interpret student demands as antithetical to the university as a “marketplace of ideas.” The history of student activism brings to the surface the hypocrisy of the “market place of ideas” argument. Often overlooked in the literature on the civil rights movement was student activists’ stringent critique of American colleges and universities, not only in the American South, but across the United States. On the heels of the 1964 Freedom Summer, Bob Moses and Jim Forman, two key figures within SNCC, sent a letter to the Harvard Crimson concerning the university’s investments in Mississippi. The letter highlighted the university’s investment in Middle South Utilities and Mississippi Power and Light Company and how those investments supported and sustained the Mississippi Democratic Party and the White Citizens’ Council. In the letter, Forman and Moses ultimately concluded: “We wonder whether education is only incidental to the Board of Trustees of Harvard University.”

Since the 1960s, students maintained this critique by protesting a range of other issues concerning the university’s relationship to society, including the development of military technology on campus, CIA and NSA recruitment efforts, and investments in South African firms during the Apartheid. All of these issues were morally questionable practices and make clear that the university isn’t simply an arbiter of ideas. The university is deeply connected to the political world and taking value positions all the time. Abstract defenses of the “marketplace” only serve to obscure the university’s relationship to society and protect political power.

But student activists didn’t just critique their universities. Their movements have always sought to create new models of education. In 1963, Moses and Forman helped develop a model of education that prioritized the social struggle of the movement over academic goals. Partnering with Tougaloo and Miles College, SNCC connected the classroom to voter registration and community organizing work. Howard Zinn, an adult advisor to SNCC, believed the program constituted the “union of moral commitment, social action, and intellectual inquiry, which education should give.”

Student activists have replicated this model today. Inspired by the legacy of the civil rights movement, [Freedom University in Georgia](#) was established in 2011 by a coalition of undocumented students, immigrant rights activists, and four professors at the University of

Georgia. The mission of the Freedom University is not only to provide tuition free education to undocumented students, but to provide “social movement leadership training.” These student activists and faculty members have created an educational space that makes real abstract ideas of civic engagement, democracy, and morality. On the fifty-sixth anniversary of the Greensboro sit-in, these students walked onto three public campuses in which they were banned and conducted a class. As a powerful form of civil disobedience, they challenged a morally bankrupt and unjust law in the state of Georgia. In doing so, they also made their education relevant, to themselves, to each other, and to the world they inhabit.

When Savio made his infamous “machine speech” in the Fall of 1964, he was well aware of the Tougaloo College program and referenced it amidst the sit-in at Sprout Hall. He saw in the Tougaloo program a college and an administration that took a moral stand and sought to support its students to become agents of social change in the world. He believed the University of California should do the same. And, in many ways, the 1965 Berkeley Student manifesto echoed this ideal. Written In 1965, one year after the Sprout Hall sit-in captured national headlines, Mario Savio and other student activists made clear what their movement was about. “Our stand has been moral,” the manifesto began, and the students argued for a free university that sought to “bring humanity back to campus.” Student activists have continued that struggle today. We should heed their voices.