

Report on the People's Park Events in Berkeley, by Lew Jones,

June 17, 1969.

Chronology

1. Last week of April - Park is built on vacant lot owned by the University. Gains support from the students.
2. Thursday, May 15 - After "no trespassing" signs are put up, the University builds a fence around the park protected by over 700 police in full battle regalia. Unprovoked, police attack protest march of several thousand. All-day battle rages. Shotguns used, police brutality rampant.
3. May 16-21 - National Guard called in, right to assemble is "illegal" in university area. Several marches broken up, a mass arrest occurs. James Rector dies of shotgun wounds.
4. May 20-29 - University of California referendum overwhelmingly supports the park; faculty votes the same way. Massive march on Gov. Reagan's office in Sacramento. Several colleges throughout the state have support actions. The Bay Area liberals and progressives protest the police actions in different ways - the Berkeley Coalition (liberal Democrats call for an economic boycott of Berkeley). Park supporters announce plans for massive Memorial Day March.
5. May 30 - 30,000 to 60,000 march without incident in Berkeley. In the days following officials beat retreat. State of emergency dropped. Cops and National Guard withdrawn. But fence remains and park is inaccessible. Board of Regents meeting on June 20 has final say on the future of the park.

The park itself represented some of the aspirations of radical youth. Instead of war, killing, hypocrisy, conformity, what they sought was a park, brotherhood, honesty, and spontaneity. Far from being an aberration separate from the struggle against the war, the park was another manifestation of a war-sparked radicalization. In fact, the whole battle was often pictured in the press as being like Vietnam, from Gov. Reagan's "pacification tactics" of overkill and gas bombing of the University to the activists view of themselves as liberation fighters.

Socialism in one park, of course, is not quite adequate to the problems of the modern world, nor is it a very realistic strategy for social change. But the park's three weeks did demonstrate what is ultimately possible.

The park was located in the midst of a heavily concentrated area of students, professors, and university employees. These people, in a rather large area, overwhelmingly supported the establishment of the park. The University staked its position on the University ownership of the property. The park supporters replied that it was public property and those most directly involved had a right to decide what ought to be done with the land. (The most effective leaflet to appear during the struggle outlined how the land had originally been taken from a certain group of Indians and had changed hands several times since through armed force.)

While all the above is true, it is also true that the park was organized by those who have given up on any perspective of mobilizing the American population to change society. To them the park was simply an attempt to establish their own little perfect world, as an escape from the real world. The Park Negotiating Committee, a group of 13 who lead the struggle, was composed almost to a man of drop-outs from the antiwar movement, some from as far back as the Vietnam Day Committee. This includes Stew Albert, Frank Bardacke, Mike Delacour, and Bill Miller. They are not students and not involved in the student milieu. They are strongly inclined to hippyism.

The leaders of the struggle also had other aims (all ultra-left) for the park. Prior to "bloody Thursday", many stated that they thought the park would provoke a confrontation of the Chicago Democratic Party Convention variety. Making the same mistake that was made then, they thought such a confrontation would educate people about the "system."

Accordingly, these leaders avoided mass action around a single, easily understood demand. Theirs was the squadron approach: smaller numbers around a "radical" program doing radical things like battling the cops. Great importance was attached to "spontaneity", but meanwhile a clique-ism Park Negotiating Committee made all the decisions. The tradition of mass decision-making meetings was forgotten.

The park also represented a retreat from real struggles. Rather than mobilize people to fight against the war, for instance, these leaders sought to channel the radicalization into escape-ism. It was a continuation of the "counter-institution" theory of changing society, which so far has provided few results.

Several years ago this theory justified community organizing around questions like poor lighting or bad garbage collection - a bare minimum program. Today, the same theory justifies the park and the recently issued "Berkeley Liberation Program" -- a maximum program.

Throughout the park struggle the leadership avoided transitional concepts and demands, such as a referendum of the south campus area on the future of the park.

It is important to understand that the park itself and its humanism gained wide support from the "student community." The campus referendum is one example of that. The support generated around the simple idea of "why shouldn't people be able to decide things like this; after all, it's public property and not being used."

But the tide of support that forced the officialdom to back down, came in protest of the police terror, the use of shotguns, the killing, the helicopter tear-gassing, and the armed occupation of the city. The resultant trampling of civil liberties and the ongoing brutality were enough to mobilize the angry protest of the Democrats and liberals, etc.

Why did the state, city, and University feel they had to use the measures they did? Certainly the park was not a threat. One can imagine a liberal Democrat, for instance, calling on youth to beautify the state by constructing parks in vacant lots everywhere. Gov. Reagan, however, saw it differently. Reagan and others attempted to challenge and push back the radicalization at Berkeley. The park was purely incidental to the aim of somehow stopping the radicals. Reagan evidently, felt, however, that the park did provide an issue that would gain public support - private property. (Subsequent events showed this issue didn't have much weight.)

Reagan overplayed his hand, and the massive assault on the park supporters only succeeded in building further support. The plan backfired and the officials have been forced to retreat, including rescinding the state of emergency, which up until now stood unchallenged from the last February.

It is common these days in Berkeley to hear talk of the "repression" and the "on-rush of fascism." The Black Panther Party and assorted radicals, like Tom Hayden, have called for a mid-July conference to form a "united front against fascism." The Panther paper has declared that Reagan has created a fascist state in California. In the midst of the battles, the Alameda County Peace and Freedom Party put out a leaflet which said in part: "The Peace and Freedom Party of Alameda County...declares that fascism has become the policy of the existing government in California for smashing movements of the people....The People of California no longer may rely solely upon the electoral and judicial processes....THE PEOPLE SHOULD, IN OUR OPINION, CONSIDER ARMING THEMSELVES AS A PEOPLE FOR SELF-DEFENSE AGAINST THE MURDEROUS POLICIES AND FORCES OF THE EXISTING GOVERNMENT..." (their emphasis)

In this view of the great repression, which is common in Berkeley radical circles, the leaders of the park struggle have managed to turn reality exactly upside-down. What in reality occurred was: A park was built on a vacant lot. The state, city, and University attempted to use the park as a pretext for attacking the radicalization. Around (in essence) simple, democratic demands (community control/self-determination, right to assembly and free speech) the protest mobilized wide support and scored important victories, even though the park was not returned. It beat off an attack and defended its rights, and reinforced its ranks.

Repression, let alone fascism, seems a little ludicrous when one saw the fraternization going on with the National Guardsmen. No matter where one saw Guardsmen, there were also park supporters having friendly discussions with them. There were numerous examples of acts by Guardsmen to show their solidarity with the protestors and their disagreement with their occupying role in Berkeley.

It's the vogue among the leaders of the park struggle to frown upon defending constitutional rights and civil liberties. And yet right in front of their eyes has occurred a striking examples of what can be done by fighting in this manner. Even though they sought to lead things in another direction, the park struggle was forced to defend its rights and scored important victories.

And if the momentum is maintained it is not inconceivable that the park could be regained.

Rather than fight in this manner the leadership has sought to turn the Peoples Park supporters into a new movement/organization around the recently issued Berkeley Liberation Program. The 13 point program ranges from "we will make Telegraph Avenue and the south campus a strategic free territory for revolution" to "we will protect and expand our drug culture" to "we will create a people's government." The aim is revolution in Berkeley, to "create a soulful socialism in Berkeley."

The authors are more or less the same as the leaders of the Peoples Park Negotiating Committee. If they are not the same people, they are the same type: graduate SDS/professional Berkeley radicals (Frank Bardacke, Hal Jacobs, Tom Hayden) and the street people/hippies (Stew Albert, Bill Miller).

The program made its first appearance in the Berkeley Barb which was sold on the Memorial Day march. Subsequently, the authors have discussed it on KPFA radio station, passed it out in brochures, and covered Berkeley with posters. (Where the money is coming from is unknown). The press has given it a big play. The program has generally been talked about as a means of "uniting the Berkeley movement."

The program is first of all a betrayal of the fight for the park and against the cops. Instead of mobilizing masses around those simple but profound issues, the leaders have chosen to impose a "revolutionary" program which will only limit their support and their struggle.

Secondly, the program serves as a convenient vehicle for doing nothing, on the pretext of being revolutionary. The conclusion is "We call for sisters and brothers to form liberation committees to carry out the Berkeley struggle." This just happens to be what they were all doing anyway. That is, everyone will now go back to their groups, friends, clubs, or organizations and christen them liberation committees. Meanwhile, nothing will happen.

Thirdly, once again, as after every antiwar march, the ultra-lefts turn their backs on the necessary action and try to put their own organization together. The formation of an organization is unlikely to come out of it. It will, however, be raised elsewhere and be a discussion piece. Undoubtedly it will be presented at the Panther anti-fascism conference and the SDS National Convention.

Fourthly, the program represents the legitimate frustrations of the radical youth who try to change society. Important programmatic questions are raised in it. For instance: Should the Berkeley student radicals attempt to organize themselves as a political and organization center for the general radicalization and as such fight for the right to control its own affairs, instead of being controlled by the city and university? The only answer has to be "yes". But "yes", if it is not done artificially. It cannot be done without the participation and programmatic agreement

of all (virtually an impossibility) and it cannot be done by imposing a program on a movement that grew up for a different purpose. (Our concept of the "red university" enters here, which the program attempts to grapple with.

The principle political criticism of the program is its misconception of the relationship of forces in the United States. The program stems from a view that repression is coming, that there are them and us, and them can do most anything to us. We therefore (?) are calling for a maximum program to overthrow their system. The authors characteristically do not grasp that United States imperialism is in a crisis, of which Vietnam is the critical example. In Vietnam, imperialism is caught on the horns of a dilemma, which they have not been able to resolve, and which is radicalizing thousands, who can be organized into a movement against the war, that already has and will change American society. The program misses this, and manages to not even mention the fight against the war.

The formulation of the program is ultraleft. For example, "We will destroy the university unless it serves the people." The authors of the program scoff at formulating their ideas defensively. Little do they understand that defensive formulation is more than simply protecting one's self and one's movement. Defensive formulations also put the blame where it belongs - on the ruling class. It is they who are running this society and they who are taking away rights, causing violence, etc., and they ought to be blamed for it. Not blamed because they are "bad guys" but so that masses can learn what this society is about.

Hal Jacobs, in a presentation to a mass meeting, referred to the program as a "transitional program", which is interesting in two respects. First, that he would use that term at all shows the influence and pressure from us. (He has hung around us for a while.) Second, his definition of transitional program was, "It simultaneously provides a guide for immediate action and gives a vision of the future." "Vision of the future" is the key phrase. Rather than come up with something that educates people to the nature of this society, he seeks a "vision" of the future and gives transitional program a moral/idealist twist.