

It's Not the Old Days, but Berkeley Sees a New Spark of Protest

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New Protests at Berkeley

Students at the University of California, Berkeley, view recent demonstrations there as a natural embodiment of the campus's culture, for better or worse.

Video by Sean Patrick Farrell and Adam Frelander on Publish Date December 10, 2014. Photo by Jim Wilson/The New York Times.

BERKELEY, Calif. — This is the college town where the Free Speech Movement was born 50 years ago, spreading across the nation with sit-ins, marches, demonstrations and arrests. So at first glance, the demonstrations against police

conduct in Ferguson, Mo., and on Staten Island that gripped Berkeley over the past few days should be no surprise.

But the University of California campus here today is nothing like the one that became the symbol of student activism in the 1960s, with its demonstrations for civil rights and protests against the Vietnam War.

Large-scale activism here is mostly the nostalgic cause of the aging Berkeley graduates who never really left and who talk of the “F.S.M.,” in-the-know shorthand for the Free Speech Movement. A small number of them showed up in October for a subdued and decidedly gray 50th anniversary rally marking the arrest that started it all.

Now, Berkeley is again racked by protests, fueled in part by the student body here. On recent nights, protesters have come out in force — more than 1,500 were estimated to have taken part in Monday night’s demonstrations, in which 159 people were arrested, an Amtrak train was stopped in its tracks, a central freeway was closed down for hours, and the BART system was halted.



A crowd of students, smaller than the one the night before, turned out late Tuesday as protests continued in Berkeley, Calif. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

On Tuesday, the Berkeley City Council — fearful of threatened disruptions — canceled its regular meeting.

Students were certainly among those joining the marches that have swept across the campus, and they were a particularly noticeable contingent on Monday night. The sight of them gave heart to older Berkeley denizens who had despaired — in a “whatever happened to the good old days” kind of way — over what they described as the student spirit of their era giving way to careerism.

But most of the demonstrators involved in the protests over the weekend, some of whom wore bandannas over their faces, appeared to be older and not necessarily from Berkeley. And students who participated said they were soured when the activism veered into civil disobedience.

“We were with the protests all the way to the highway entrance,” said Sameer Abraham, a senior. “Police were blocking the entrance to the highway, and we got the

sense that this would either be the end or that something would happen.”

“So we came back to campus,” he said. “We do not approve of violence.”



A protest on Monday night against police violence blocked traffic in both directions of Interstate 80 in Berkeley, Calif. Credit Noah Berger/Associated Press

These days, there is a cultural divide between the city of Berkeley, still civically dominated by the older people who came out of the antiwar and civil rights movements, and the campus that put it on the map. Students are known for being involved in local causes, and there is the occasional demonstration over, to name one example, tuition increases.

On Tuesday night, a smaller crowd of protesters wandered the streets, stopping in front of the Police Department and a darkened City Hall, where they mocked the City Council for canceling the meeting.

“What a beautiful picture I see before me,” Councilman Kriss Worthington said on the steps of City Hall. “I see people I’ve never seen before at a demonstration.”

For all the historic lore of this city, few political issues have galvanized students as much as the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, both of them unarmed black men who were killed by white police officers.

In one sense, the seeming complacency here reflects the relative lack of activism on college campuses across the nation. But it also offers insight into the changing demographics of Berkeley, one of the most competitive universities in the nation; only 17 percent of the 73,771 applicants were admitted to this year's freshman class.



Demonstrators in Berkeley, Calif., on Monday night protesting the police-involved deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Back in the day of Mario Savio, the best-known leader of the Free Speech Movement, the student body was overwhelmingly white and most of the leaders of the movement were men. Today, just 29 percent of the student population is white; 39 percent is Asian, 13 percent Latino and 3 percent black.

In the 1960s, tuition at Berkeley was almost free; today, it costs \$12,000 a year for Californians and \$35,000 for nonresidents — and the Board of Regents just voted to raise it again, a decision that some people suggested had helped feed the protest.

A walk across Berkeley 50 years ago would find clumps of students demonstrating, a food co-op, and scribbled signs on bulletin boards advertising meetings of Vietnam War protesters and the early glimmerings of the feminist movement. A stroll through campus most mornings these days would find students, head down, rushing to class. By contrast, the city is, by any measure, as liberal and activist as ever. In November, its voters defied a national trend and a barrage of spending by the soda industry to pass an initiative imposing a tax on sugary sodas and drinks. This was the first city to boycott South Africa, and pioneered bans on smoking in public places and plastic food containers. That spirit clearly is fed by the campus at its heart.

You know, some of those people whose windows were broken ARE the unheard. And no, they can't afford to replace their windows. They are small...

These are the same students that tried to disinvite Bill Maher from speaking at the school because of an opinion he expressed, satirical or...

I'm offended that these issues are being trivialized as a relic of the culture of Berkeley and the 60's. Is the CIA doing its part to... s

“The faculty has a lot of touchstones that go back to the '60s,” said [Bruce Fuller](#), a professor of education here. “If you search for the phrase ‘social justice’ in our course listings, scores of things would pop up.”



Mario Savio, leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, speaking to assembled students on the University of California campus in December 1964. Credit Robert W. Klein/Associated Press

Many of the former student radicals have settled in the Berkeley Hills, in costly homes with views of the San Francisco Bay. Although they may grow as excited talking about Chez Panisse, the Alice Waters restaurant that pioneered California cuisine, as about Edward Snowden, who leaked classified government information, there is no shortage of anguish over what they see as the absence of political interest on their campus.

“Protest is in our DNA,” said Nicholas Dirks, the chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, in a recent interview.

Several students interviewed here said they hoped these past few days marked a turn among their peers. “It seemed like a transformation in the movement,” said Pavan Upadhyayula, the student body president.

Students turned out in larger numbers on Monday — there are no classes this week, as

students prepare for exams — but there were signs that they had different views on how to proceed from those of some of the more established demonstrators. At Sproul Plaza, students took to megaphones to urge for peaceful demonstrations. But Yvette Felarca, 44, an organizer from By Any Means Necessary, one of the groups behind the protests, said she thought “militant” actions were justified if necessary.

“Riots are the voice of the unheard,” said Ms. Felarca, a Berkeley alumna. “You can never replace the lives of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, but you can always replace broken windows.”

The Free Speech Movement Café sits at the center of the campus. About 30 students were assembled in front of the cafe on Monday afternoon, but the cause was hardly political: This was Hug-a-Pet time, in which a local animal rescue foundation and the University Health Services brought over dogs for students to pet as a stress reliever. Still, the political reputation of this campus endures.

“I doubt it’s that important in attracting undergraduates, who come because it has long been ranked the best public university in the world and remains affordable,” said Christopher Edley Jr., a professor and former dean at the Berkeley Law School. “But once you are here, there are weird ions in the air.”

Adam Nagourney and Carol Pogash reported from Berkeley, and Tamar Lewin from New York. Barbara Grady contributed reporting from Berkeley.