

MONEY CHANGES EVERYTHING: THE DIVESTMENT BLOCKADE AT COLUMBIA, INC.

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When Education Secretary William Bennett justified the Reagan Administration's proposed student aid cuts, he said the cuts might force some students into the "divestiture" of stereos, automobiles, and vacations on the beach. His very choice of the word "divestiture" was, one imagines, a deliberate attempt to trivialize the main center of student political activism during the last few years: the campaign to get universities to divest themselves of holdings in companies that do business in South Africa. To anyone who has seen the growth of the divestment movement on the campuses in the years after Soweto, the three-week blockade of Hamilton Hall at Columbia University in April is not a surprise; it was not a spontaneous resurgence of the spirit of 1968 (nor even the return of the repressed, as the Columbia administration seemed to see it) but the latest turn in a nationwide struggle opposing American support for the apartheid regime.

Take only the history at Columbia. The Coalition for a Free South Africa, formed in 1981 as a committee of the Black Students Organization, became a multiracial group to educate the university community and to mobilize opposition to apartheid. Its activities—forums, rap sessions, petitions, vigils, and a successful University Senate election campaign based on divestment—culminated in institutional success in March, 1983, when the University Senate unanimously passed a resolution asking the Trustees to "develop and implement a specific plan for the divestment of all its holding in corporations which have operations in South Africa." In the two years since that vote, the trustees have refused to act on it. On March 25, 1985, members of the Coalition began a fast to protest the university's South Africa-related investments. The moral witness of the fasting students became the spark that mobilized several hundred students; on April 4, as part of nationwide protests against apartheid and for divestment on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination, Columbia students led by the Coalition blockaded Hamilton Hall and chained its front doors, renaming it Mandela Hall. The fast ended after fifteen days when University President Michael Sovern finally met with the fasters; the sit-in ended on April 25 with a series of demonstrations. Despite the stalemate with the administration, the dramatic mobilization at Columbia and on campuses across the country gave a genuine sense of victory.

There were two central issues at Columbia: the question of divestment and that of university decision-making. The heart of the divestment argument is that money

changes things. If economic sanctions against South Africa were pursued with the vigor of, say, the destabilization of the democratically elected government of Allende in Chile, the regime might well be prevented from prosecuting the war in Namibia, and forced into negotiating with the African National Congress. Divestment, as an act of solidarity with the black trade unions and the United Democratic Front in South Africa, can help make South Africa ungovernable. The university's position is that American investment should be governed by the Sullivan Principles. But its argument that these principles—which focus on discrimination at the workplace and effect less than one percent of South Africa's labor force—could act to reform the regime represents a corporate paternalism that the repressive events of the last few months have shattered. As the Columbia Coalition points out, "IBM is still supplying computers which keep track of blacks under the pass law system, Mobil is still providing oil to the South African military, and all companies are still obliged under the Key Points Act to offer their factories to the military in case of black unrest." At present, Columbia's investment policy looks more and more like the Reagan administration's "constructive engagement"—which has meant backing IMF loans to South Africa, sending 2,500 electric shock batons to apartheid's police, and encouraging American investment. Indeed the changes that have taken place in South Africa—like the heavily-boycotted "Coloured" and Asian Parliaments—are, as Stanley Greenberg of Yale's Southern Africa Research Program has argued, signs not of the success of "constructive engagement" but of the vulnerability of the apartheid regime.

But the Columbia blockade was not only about divestment: since the University Senate had unanimously voted for full divestment, the blockade focused attention on the unaccountability of the university trustees. In the course of the blockade, two visions of the university came into conflict: on the one hand the humanistic ideal of the university as a community, which, if not quite democratic, still recognizes the rights and responsibilities of its several bodies—faculty, students, staff, alumni; and on the other hand, the reality of the university as a real estate corporation, directed by a corporate board, increasingly dependent on corporate monies, and selling a service to student consumers. Students at Columbia became particularly aware of the second Columbia—Columbia Inc.—when the administration bitterly resisted recognizing the clerical union earlier this school year. They have seen it again in the trustee's resistance to the university community's decision for divestment. And during the blockade, the support from community and tenants groups included an education about Columbia as landlord and gentrifier. The various lived experiences of the corporate university was the ground for the reciprocal support between students and clerical workers, and for the two major marches: one from Harlem to Hamilton Hall, the other from Hamilton Hall to Harlem. As Tanaquil Jones of the Coalition said, "We're going to give back to the Harlem community what they've given us."

Throughout the blockade the press and the broadcasters reached for the already

written stories of 1968 to tell this story. And indeed the administration's response to the blockade might well be seen as the Eighteenth Brumaire of Michael Sovern, the violent arrests of 1968 replayed in the farcical videotaping of students by university security. The farce found its climax when Sovern draped himself and Columbia with the mantle of Bishop Tutu, only to have the Bishop salute the students for their action. However, the students themselves are aware that this is 1985, not 1968. The Free South Africa Movement has brought together several strands in contemporary student life: a historical memory that draws less on the student movement than on the civil rights movement, echoing the accents and non-violent tactics of Martin Luther King; a generational witness to the events in South Africa since Soweto; and even a material consciousness that made a financial counselor advocating "socially-responsible" investment one of the most popular speakers at a faculty-sponsored teach-in. In the immediate context of the killings on Sharpeville Day and the highly-publicized arrests at the South African embassies, the Coalition created a multiracial movement for a change in university policy that has both symbolic and economic effect. In a movement that has been short on revolutionary polemics and long on computerized fact sheets and press releases, the students on the barricades expressed surprise at their own commitment and willingness to take risks, risks that are far greater than those facing Congressmen or professors arrested at South African consulates. But the prior organizing and educational work of the Coalition gave them confidence in the legitimacy of their position as they sat down.

The Columbia blockade sparked sit-ins, demonstrations and arrests at campuses across the country: among them, Berkeley, Rutgers, Purchase, Cornell, Princeton, Santa Cruz, and Syracuse. Though each of these has their own history and internal dynamics, and all of them, including Columbia, are part of a larger history of actions against American support for apartheid, the events of April do provoke the question: "why divestment?" The divestment movement has uniquely condensed the unquestioned opposition to the apartheid regime of the mass of students, a focus on a specifically university issue of investment, and, perhaps most strikingly, the possibility of multiracial action, the prefigurative politics of a rainbow coalition.

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