

The Lessons of People's Park for the Occupy Movement

by Michael H. Carriere

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Though it passed without much fanfare, May 15 was the forty-third anniversary of "Bloody Thursday" in Berkeley, California, a day in 1969 that began with 6,000 people marching down famed Telegraph Avenue towards People's Park, a community-run free space (illegally constructed on land owned by the University of California system) that had recently been enclosed by a protective fence. Some demonstrators hurled rocks and bottles at the police, and the police answered back by firing birdshot and buckshot from shotguns. These blasts seriously injured over one hundred people: two individuals suffered punctured lungs, one was permanently blinded, and five were permanently disfigured with bird shot wounds to the face. Twenty-five year-old James Rector -- a bystander watching the events unfold from the roof of a building overlooking the protest-- was shot and killed by a buckshot blast. As events threatened to spiral out of control Governor Ronald Reagan sent in the National Guard and declared a state of emergency.

Over the next few days demonstrations, and police responses, continued. A march on May 20 in honor of the memory of James Rector attracted close to 3,000. Even though the marchers soon dispersed, a National Guard helicopter sprayed tear gas over much of the campus, sickening those in nearby homes, schools, and hospitals. A May 22 faculty-led march of about 1,000 was broken up by violence, and some 482 individuals found themselves arrested. Building upon such numbers, a Memorial Day march in support of the park attracted nearly 30,000 participants.

As the weather warms up and Occupy movement participants across the country ramp up their activity, the People's Park episode proves instructive to protesters for a host of reasons. Most obviously, the struggle put on stark display the violence that the state was willing to employ to protect its property. At the same time, the battle for People's Park also highlights what can be done with physical spaces of protest: as Occupy participants struggle to define what their movement is about, People's Park provides a blueprint of just how to develop such "occupied" zones. Finally, People's Park reminds us that success may not occur overnight, if it ever fully comes at all. Following the violent confrontations of the late 1960s, People's Park -- today a fully functioning urban park maintained by the university -- has remained a space marked by almost continual

tension and confrontation. The park remains open to “the people,” but such access hasn’t come easy.

In the early 1960s, no one would have predicted that the space that became People’s Park would prove so controversial. The property was originally earmarked for university purchase in 1956 and was meant for student housing. When the university finally purchased the land in 1967, they decided to use it for recreational facilities for students, as the need for student housing was no longer pressing. In the spring of 1968 the university began clearing the space, with the hope of beginning the construction of the playing field immediately. For many in Berkeley, the project soon displayed the negative aspects of urban renewal: residents of condemned houses complained that the university had not offered fair prices for the buildings and had disrupted the work of the student residents by scheduling evictions in the middle of an academic quarter.

By March 1969, Berkeley administrators had tentatively determined that the construction of the playing field could finally begin. On April 4, 1969 the university’s Capital Outlay Review Board told the campus administration that the playing fields had high priority for funding through Centennial Fund contributions and other private gifts. Construction was then set to begin in the summer of 1969, with the hope that much of the area could open for student use during the upcoming fall quarter. The stage was now set for a proposal for an alternative use of this space -- and for the confrontation that would inevitably follow.

The first public announcement for the park was published in the April 18-24, 1969 edition of the *Berkeley Barb*, a publication sympathetic to countercultural and New Left protest activity in the city. In an article titled “Hear Ye, Hear Ye,” the Robin Hood’s Park Commissioner announced why such a park was needed, and that construction on the project would soon begin. From the get-go, the project was intimately tied to the university’s misuse of its wealth and resources. “The land is owned by the university,” the author proclaimed, “which tore down a lot of beautiful houses in order to build a swamp.” After noting that it was now being used as a free parking lot, the article touched upon how the university wished to develop the site: “In a year the university will build a cement type expensive parking lot which will fiercely compete with the other lots for the allegiance of Berkeley’s Buicks.” In contrast to a vision of concrete that served the needs of the automobile, the “Park Commissioner” called for a more humane space that served the needs of the urban pedestrian. Commenting on the system of planning that overlooked the necessity of such spaces, the author simply announced “On Sunday we will stop this shit.”

The park was to be a very colorful and lively place, and it called for a design that was at odds with the aesthetic and planning methods of both the university and the city of Berkeley. “Many colored towers of imagination,” the call continued, “will rise above the forum and into the future of reality. We could have a child care clinic or a crafts

commune which would communicate its wares by having medieval-style fairs, a baseball diamond, a rock concert, or a place to think and sleep in the sun.”

For many of those that participated in the construction of the park, the space became a living example of participatory democracy, a well-respected ideal that many in the New Left nonetheless had great difficulty adequately defining. Here was a literal example of such a phenomenon, as everyone seemed to have a stake in all decisions being made regarding the park. Flowing from this sense of engagement was the creation of a true sense of community. According to one young person who participated in the construction of the space, “[o]ld formats just didn’t exist” at the park. The People’s Park, according to this participant, was a “liberated zone,” one that truly “belonged to everybody.”

Many other observers also stressed the heterogeneity of those that the park brought together: the community created through the park consisted of Berkeley “street people,” university students, families, elderly residents, and numerous radical groups -- and they all seemingly got along. Black Panther leader Bobby Seale showed up and, according to the *Berkeley Barb*, “kept laughing in total and happy amazement.” “We got to have some Panthers down here working,” he announced, “this is really socialistic.”

Making the park even more appealing to many Berkeleyites was the fact that the park allowed them to actually enjoy physical work -- in an age when such toil was becoming to be seen as less-than-important. “For the first time,” commented one observer, “hundreds of young people felt the sense of performing meaningful work towards creating a place of their own.” At their core, those involved with People’s Park simply wanted a space -- and a city -- that spoke to their shared sense of humanity. “They do not want a world made for automobiles,” found Berkeley faculty member Thomas Parkinson, “but one made for men.”

And what did the park actually look like? Trees, flowers, and vegetable gardens were quickly planted in the park’s early days; a dug-out amphitheatre was soon after added. By early May the park had a working swing set and other playground equipment, tables and benches, a barbeque pit, and a multi-colored wooden stage (which featured shows by the Lunar Society of Drama and the Berkeley mime and satire troupe). A writer for the *Berkeley Barb* described “a miniature Mexican garden with a grass plaza and shaded walkways among the geraniums and sweetpeas.” Just beyond these flower beds one found beans and tomatoes planted in homemade clay pots. Seesaws for children were made from wood, rather than steel, and benches were constructed not from cement but from hollowed redwood.

Yet at the core of the philosophy of People’s Park was a new understanding of urban property -- and how best to use such space. Private ownership mattered little to park developers. According to the *Berkeley Barb*, “The idea that the people can take an ugly barren lot and convert it into something useful and beautiful strikes at the very heart of

capitalistic concepts of private property.” Many even called into question the very idea of ownership in the twentieth century. Who, many park developers asked, decides who gets to own a plot of land? In a piece titled “Who Owns the Park?” the *Barb* outlined how the property in question had been originally stolen from the Costanoan Indians by Catholic missionaries, who were then relieved of the site by the Mexican government. The American government then took control of the property, and sold it to white settlers. Park developers simply saw themselves as taking back something that did not belong to the university.

Going hand-in-hand with such an approach to private property was the belief that “the revolution” needed space. In a comment that should resonate within the current Occupy movement, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver once told the Berkeley left that they needed to develop a “territorial imperative,” that the only way to get serious about the revolution was when the left “had something in the soil to defend.” The People’s Park would serve as such a bulwark. “We have struggled for rights, for space,” proclaimed park developers, “and now we struggle for land. We need the park to live and grow, and eventually we need all of Berkeley.”

The movement would never capture all of Berkeley, but the struggle for People’s Park continued throughout the 1970s. In 1972, the fence surrounding the park finally came down, a victim of a protest against President Nixon’s policies of escalation in Vietnam. Throughout the 1970s, the university allowed a group called the People’s Park Council to make plantings in the east end of the park. In 1989, the city of Berkeley and the university signed a memoranda of accord that allowed the city to lease a portion of the university-owned property for the Park. This five-year University/City lease agreement ended in 1996, when the University took sole jurisdictional responsibility for the park space.

Since then, park advocates have worked diligently to protect the gains they have made. In late 2011, the university began a campaign designed to improve the sanitary conditions of the park, a campaign that included removing compost bins and a beloved pergola that was erected over twenty years ago by park volunteers. This campaign, which many park users condemned as both unannounced and unnecessary, illustrates that almost eternal vigilance is needed to ensure that such spaces remain under the control of the people. 2012 may not be 1969, but events from over forty years ago have much to teach us about the possibilities -- and hard realities -- of protest movements.

- See more at: <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/146437#sthash.mxyvRfs1.dpuf>

Michael H. Carriere is an assistant professor at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, where he teaches courses on American history, public policy, political science, and urban design.