ARE STUDENT PROTESTS MAKING A COMEBACK — AND A DIFFERENCE?

STORY BY ZACHARY JASON
On February 16, 2018, two days after a 19-year-old took an Uber to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and killed 17 students and staff with a semi-automatic rifle, 19-year-old Julian Lopez-Leyva held a demonstration alone.

The Phoenix native and sophomore at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston knew gun violence intimately. His cousin had been paralyzed from gunshot wounds; an administrator at his elementary school was killed in a parking lot; a masked man had held a pistol to his head before taking his phone and wallet. But he had scant experience organizing protests. For 17 hours, one for each Parkland victim, Lopez-Leyva stood on a bench in a small park across from the Isabella Student Gardner Museum, waving handmade signs and asking passersby for solutions to “our gun epidemic.” He returned home exhausted and exasperated.

Two days later, Lopez-Leyva watched five survivors of the Parkland massacre announce on CNN that they were organizing a national March for Our Lives to demand stricter background checks for gun buyers and to “Never Again” witness a school shooting. They were teenagers, in the midst of attending their friends’ funerals, but they spoke with conviction, clarity, solemnity, and vision, a maturity unprecedented — from children and adults alike — in the wake of the 193 American school shootings since Columbine in 1999. Their “sudden resilience, the way they stared beyond the camera,” Lopez-Leyva says, “awakened me, gave me a new hope.” A few minutes later he created a Facebook event for a March for Our Lives in Boston. Through social media and visiting nearby campuses, he soon helped connect 94 bipartisan student groups (including multiple chapters of College Democrats and College Republicans), civic organizations, and teachers unions. When he stepped onto Boston Common on March 24, this time he was joined by nearly 100,000 demonstrators, along with some 2 million at 800 simultaneous rallies in every U.S. state and on six continents. In five weeks, students organized one of the largest youth protests since the Vietnam War.

“I was blown away,” says Lopez-Leyva. Still, he was soon asking the same questions he asked after his solo demonstration: “How do we keep this going? How do we get results?”

Millions of students are asking the same questions amid the most forceful surge of youth activism since the 1960s. From the hunger strike, encampment, and football-team boycott demanding the ouster of the University of Missouri’s president; to a New York University student dragging a mattress to
class for an entire year in protest of sexual violence; to marches against visiting supporters of President Donald Trump; to die-ins for racial justice, including one at the Ed School, unrest spreads among American students. In 2016, an annual UCLA survey of undergraduates nationwide found that 1 in 10 expected to partake in protests while in college, the highest rate since 1967.

“We’re in a groundswell moment of youth activism,” says Professor Meira Levinson, who studies civic and multicultural education. In the weeks after the Parkland shooting, to help educate first-time protesters, Levinson co-created the online learning resource Youths in Front (with Justin Reich Ed.D.’12, executive director of MIT’s Teaching Systems Lab, and Doug Pietrzak, Ed.M.’11, founder of the instructional design firm Fresh Cognate). After surveying more than 3,000 high school and college students in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Mississippi, Levinson and her team built how-to guides and fielded video interviews with 30 scholars and activists (Lopez-Leyva included) to answer the students’ most common questions: Why protest? Will I be alone? Will I get in trouble? How can teachers be allies?

By far the most elusive question, Levinson admits, is, how a march can become a movement. “This is depressing, but true,” she says. The mode—the most common outcome—is that activism doesn’t work.” Countless forces keep youth uprisings “permanently fragile”—from distrust and dismissal from adults; to co-optation; to attrition by graduation, infighting, or simply other obligations as students. Especially for low-income students and youth of color, “it’s much harder to get recognized as fighting for positive change as opposed to posing a threat.” Still, “there’s a deep affinity between generational change and social change,” says Mar-shall Ganz, a senior lecturer at the Kennedy School.

“Young people come of age with three tools essential for renewal: a critical eye of the world, a clear view of the its needs and pain, and hopeful hearts that give a sense of the world’s promise and possibilities.” Students have been activists since they’ve been students. From 1229 to 1321, the entire student body at the Sorbonne went on strike, until Pope Gregory IX (a Sorbonne alumnus) declared students were exempt from the city’s jurisdiction. Nearly 1,000 years of protests later, Levinson says, we have found “no magic formula” to affecting change. But we have learned a few causes and tactics that tend to boom, and doom, uprisings.

March 14, 2018: Students at Tucson High Magnet School (opposite) left classes as part of the #ENOUGH! National School Walkout day to raise awareness about gun violence and school safety.

May 8, 1970: In the wake of the Kent State shootings, students from Harvard and other local colleges (below) gathered outside Harvard Stadium.

In the beginning, students fought for their rights with knives, stones, and fists. As the first universities opened in medieval Europe—Bologna, Cambridge, Paris—students often brawled with citizens over their license to roam the town free, which most often resulted in bolstered protections for students. When the University of Vienna was founded in 1365, for example, the Duke of Austria declared that if a nonstudent dismembered a student, authorities were to sever the same body part from the nonstudent.

Until the 20th century, American activism was slipshod and provincial. In 1639, Harvard students testified in court against the school’s vile cuisine and the violent punishments given by inaugural schoolmaster Nathaniel Eaton. The magistrates fired Eaton and his wife, who admitted to serving students “mackerel … with their guts in them, and goat’s dung in their hasty pudding.” American college students wouldn’t stage a real protest until 1766, with Harvard’s Great Butter Rebellion. After Asa Dunbar (class of 1767) allegedly mounted his chair and bellowed, “Behold, our butter stinketh! Give us, therefore, butter that stinketh not,” students boycotted the dining hall for a month until President Edward Holyoke suspended more than half of the student body. Culinary outrages regularly erupted at Harvard until the Civil War.

National student movements began in the 1920s and climaxed during the Great Depression as socialist-oriented organizations such as the National Student Federation and National Student League opened hundreds of chapters and held rallies and conferences on liberal education, democracy, and labor rights. World War II and the antisocialist wave of the Cold War fractured many of these groups and drowned out a generation of student progressivism while conservative organizations such as the prowar Student League of America and the evangelical Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) grew. Founded at UCLA in 1951, CCC had 40 chapters in the U.S. by 1959, and hundreds more in 25 countries a decade later.
Then, in February 1960, four African American freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat at a “whites only” lunch counter in Greensboro. Their nonviolent protest of segregation sparked widespread student involvement in the civil rights movement; the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed later that year and soon had active members at colleges across the country. Among them was Ganz, who dropped out of Harvard before his senior year in 1964 to join the SNCC-led Mississippi Summer Project (a campaign to register black voters) and later spent 16 years as the United Farm Workers’ director of organizing.

Radicalism, over civil rights, the Vietnam War, the free speech movement, and feminism, increased each year until 1968, “The Year of the Student” according to Mark Edelman Boren, author of Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject. Students rioted and took over universities, factories, and government buildings in France, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Senegal, the Congo, and Pakistan. Across the United States, once sleepy, conservative campuses regularly held demonstrations. At Harvard in 1967–68, some 300 students charged into Mallinckrodt Laboratory and held captive a job recruiter for napalm manufacturer Dow Chemical for seven hours; others boycotted their commencement speaker, the shah of Iran; and Law School Professor Alan Dershowitz taught a class on how students could legally dodge the draft.

But 1968 was also the year student movements began to unravel. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy set back the civil rights and antiwar movements. A lack of leaders brought a dearth of tactics and goals. “Leadership is fundamental to growing and sustaining a movement,” Ganz says. “They shift the power balance by empowering a community to come into being. Without strong leaders and leadership development, movements end up embracing structurelessness, and that just produces chaos.” Simultaneously, college administrations and local and state authorities alike grew more aggressive in squashing demonstrations. In 1968 police shot to death three student protestors in Orangeburg, South Carolina,
and one in Berkeley, California. Boren summarizes the subsequent demise: “The increasing militancy of groups such as the Black Panthers, the drug culture ... and even the murders of the Charles Manson gang — all served to exacerbate public disaffection with any ‘revolutionaries.’ … As students were faced with either resorting to violence or retooling their resistance machines for slower, less confrontational tactics, many students chose simply to drop out of the political scene.” Growing conservatism further dampened resistance throughout the 1970s. It reawakened in the mid-1980s, when protest against South Africa’s extreme and often violent racial suppression began in African American church groups and soon spread to college campuses. And today, a renaissance has emerged amid #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #NeverAgain.

Over these historical tides, a few tactics have kept resistance afloat and on course. For one, “the most successful formula students have followed is convincingly making an off-campus issue also a campus issue,” says Julie Reuben, professor of the history of American education at the Ed School. Antiwar protests were most effective not when students marched against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but when they boycotted their campus ROTC chapters. Harvard, for example, downgraded its ROTC program to an extracurricular activity in 1969 after hundreds of students occupied University Hall and 10,000 declared a strike. Anti-apartheid campaigns were most effective not when students marched against the U.S. government’s support of racist policies in South Africa, but when students demanded their universities divest. After Columbia students occupied the main academic building for three weeks, the board of trustees agreed to sell its $39 million in stock of U.S. companies with ties to South Africa, 4 percent of its portfolio. By 1988, 155 schools had divested more than $1 billion, more than half of them after protests inspired by the Columbia campaign. “Localizing an argument is a compelling strategy to engage students and awaken administrations,” says Reuben, who taught the course Campus Activism in the 1960s at the Ed School for many years. More recently, dozens of universities have been quick to dismiss and discipline Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters who’ve staged “die-ins” to raise awareness of police brutality. But students have had more success when directing the racial dialogue that BLM has opened at their own campuses; for example, in 2015, protesters at the University of Missouri and Claremont McKenna College in California forced their president and dean, respectively, to resign over mishandling racial incidents.

Younger students, however, have a better chance to build a movement with the opposite tack. “High school activism takes place best when it's focused on the outside community, not the school itself,” Reuben says. “Whereas college students are often considered adults, teenagers are often dismissed as acting out when they challenge adult authority within their administration.” (There are rare exceptions. Sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns’ walkout in protest of disgraceful conditions at her all-black high school became a foundational case in Brown v. Board of Education.)

The sight of children addressing national issues, however, has captured the country’s imagination. In 1917, a white mob killed 38 and injured hundreds more African Americans in St. Louis. In response, hundreds of black children dressed in white and marched hand-in-hand, leading 10,000 African Americans through Manhattan in the Silent Parade, which aimed, as The New York Times reported, to make President Woodrow Wilson aware of the “lawless treatment” of black Americans nationwide. It became a blueprint for the civil rights movement. In 1963, when more than 1,000 children skipped school to march in Birmingham, Alabama, images of police spraying fire hoses and unleashing attack dogs on them ignited a furor that forced the city to desegregate and paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Children’s Crusade, as it became known, “turned around the entire civil rights movement,” Levinson says. And today, the vigor and anger of children who had just watched their classmates bleed to death in their hallways has propelled the most serious national debate over gun control in years.
No youth movement has succeeded without adult allies. “Faculty provide internal pressure that students can’t,” Reuben says. The Berkeley free speech movement, the first major act of campus civil disobedience of the 1960s, quickly galvanized thousands of students to advocate for their rights to assemble and to academic freedom. But students gained leverage only when a group of faculty agreed to create the Board of Educational Development (BED) in 1964 and allowed students to help create experimental curriculum. And it was the 1968 elimination of the BED — which then-Governor Ronald Reagan demanded — that quashed the free speech movement. Fifty years later, faculty are generally much more diverse, liberal, and willing to aid student resistance. “The downside is it’s often too easy to gain faculty allies,” Reuben says. “Today it doesn’t necessarily provide the insider-outsider dynamic useful for making change.”

The quintessence of this trend: In 2015 a University of Missouri communications professor protesting with students was fired after she was approached by a video journalist and yelled, “Who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle.”

The Never Again movement begun by Parkland survivors contains many ingredients to draw wide support. There were the years of tragedies and political inaction that fomented frustration. According to The Washington Post, since the Columbine massacre on April 20, 1999, more than 187,000 students have experienced a shooting at their school. (Dozens of other mass shootings in the same period — at a movie theater, nightclub, concert, church, etc. — enflamed the anger.) There are charismatic student leaders, all born after Columbine, with impassioned, morally grounded messages, such as Parkland survivor Emma González citing a litany of excuses NRA-supported politicians have made for inaction, and shouting “We call B.S.” after each. “Framing the issue as a moral question can grant students a certain moral authority over the authorities,” Reuben says. Ganz adds, “It takes a lot of moral resources to respond to loss in the way that they have. Narrative storytelling is essential to building a movement, and the story the Parkland kids are telling is a redemptive pathway to hope.”

It also helps that the student leaders lived in a town that was 84 percent white and with a median household income more than double the national median. As Reuben notes, even though “non-whites are much more affected by gun violence, the issue is deeply racialized.” Black student activists had campaigned against gun violence even years before the Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013, but they’ve often been overlooked, demonized, and criminalized. “They’ve had to push against the fear white Americans feel when they see large gatherings of youth of color,” Levinson says. Parkland students, however, have been “able to speak to audiences who in the past have dismissed this issue.”

As the Never Again movement received millions in donations and celebrity support, and when Florida Governor Rick Scott agreed to meet with survivors to discuss policy changes within a week of the shooting, many contrasted the response with the reception of the Dream Defenders. After the shooting of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, the student-led Dream Defenders formed to campaign against police brutality and to end Florida’s “stand your ground” defense law, which states that a person who is present at a place where he has a right to be also has the right to use deadly force on another if he “reasonably believes” it is necessary to protect himself or others. For a year and a half they held demonstrations, even occupying the capitol for 31 days, but Governor Scott refused to meet with them.

“Even the most transcendent movements never fully transcended prejudice,” Levinson adds. She points to the “profound misunderstanding” today that Martin Luther King Jr. was “always widely respected, even cuddly.” In a 1968 Harris poll, after the bus boycotts, the March on Washington, and the Selma to Montgomery Marches, three-quarters
of Americans disapproved of King. Whereas the Parkland survivors drew immediate, widespread support, when students of color have built movements, “it has always been in spite of prejudice, in spite of fear, in spite of skepticism,” says Levinson. Youth of color also face greater risks from police when protesting — clubbed in Greensboro, hosed in Birmingham, pepper-sprayed in Ferguson.

The Parkland students also benefit and suffer from social media, which wields the power to burgeon and bludgeon global movements within minutes. Just as student activists of the 1960s used the latest technologies — the mimeograph and laser printing — to spread the word from campus to campus, today’s students build coalitions with Google Docs and camera phones. During a national school walkout one month after the Parkland shooting, for example, 15-year-old Justin Blackman was the only student to participate at his high school in North Carolina. But a self-made video of his lone protest garnered more than 6 million views, 14,000 Twitter followers, and an interview on CNN.

Social media also bears “the risk that activism will start and end online, and achieve little,” Levinson says. Though organizing the March for Our Lives in Boston would have been “impossible” without social media, Lopez-Leyva saw much higher turnout from the student groups he met with than the ones he tweeted to. “When you’re seeing the faces of tragedies among cat videos, the seriousness of these issues can get nullified,” he says. And the more visible student leaders become, the more they subject themselves to trolling. Fake stories “exposing” Parkland survivor and Never Again leader David Hogg as a hired “crisis actor” were widely spread through Google, YouTube, and Facebook. On the other side, after posting a photograph of herself holding a graduation cap and an AR-10 rifle, a gun rights activist at Kent State University received hundreds of death threats. “Social media is as essential to student activism today as it is impossible to control,” Reuben says.

In *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Zeynep Tufekci, a faculty associate at Harvard’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, compares the relationship between protesters and the internet to that of climbers of Mount Everest and Nepalese Sherpas, who “give a boost to people who might not otherwise be fully equipped to face the challenges.” What once took semesters’ worth of meetings and debates can now be achieved in a few keystrokes. But without the slog of on-the-ground grassroots organizing, Tufekci writes, activists who begin online often lack the “collective capacities that could prepare them for inevitable challenges they face and give them the ability to respond to what comes next.”

In the age of social media, youth activists have struggled to enact change. Considering four of the most prominent youth-led movements this decade — Occupy Wall Street (#occupy), (Black Lives Matter (#BLM), deferred action for deportation (#Dreamer), and protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) — Levinson says, “Each has had a tangible effect on the world: slowing down DAPL, raising awareness of the 1 percent, Justice Department investigations and consent decrees in a number of cities including Ferguson and Baltimore, DACA — but none yet has a solid, permanent win.”

Most recently, the student survivors of Parkland named their movement Never Again, aiming to end all school shootings. There were 10 in the two months after Parkland. On May 19, after 10 students were killed at a high school in Santa Fe, Texas, a local newscaster asked 17-year-old survivor Paige Curry whether she was surprised by the shooting. “No,” she said. “It’s been happening everywhere. I’ve always kind of felt like eventually it was going to happen here, too.”

Hearing these words, Lopez-Leyva felt “heartbroken, and recognized that our movement remains incomplete.” While organizing the March for Our Lives in Boston, he missed many classes, his grades slipped, and much more strenuous work remains to secure the movement’s larger goal of voting out of office opponents of stricter gun control. “Making change requires a long-term commitment on multiple fronts. The work is often boring and almost always slow. What we have on our side,” says Lopez-Leyva, “is patience, perseverance, personal liberties, and the ballot.”

Ganz says that “because the status quo is always going to have more money and political power, failure is an inevitable, and in some ways essential, part of youth movements. The challenge is to turn them into learning opportunities and have the moral resources for the resilience that it takes to do that.”

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, quoting an 1853 speech from the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Throughout his 13 years as a civil rights leader, King often invoked these words to maintain activists’ hopes and fervor. Fifty years after his death, even amid a new Year of the Student, they are words in constant need of repeating.

**ZACHARY JASON IS A FREELANCE WRITER. HIS LAST PIECE IN ED. LOOKED AT THE BATTLE OVER CHARTER SCHOOLS**

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**December 9, 2014: Dozens of students and others from the Ed School staged a die-in (opposite) on the first floor of Gutman Conference Center following non-indictments of the police officers who killed Eric Garner and Michael Brown.**

**LINK TO MEIRA LEVINSON’S YOUTH IN FRONT SITE, WHICH INCLUDES VIDEOS FROM JULIAN LOPEZ-LEYVA AND MARSHALL GANZ: YOUTHINFRONT.ORG**

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