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Privatize Now! Ask Questions Later: UCMeP's Unauthorized Performance of Administrative Authority

Sproul Plaza. The birthplace of the free speech movement. The plaza steps were made famous by Mario Savio's legendary "Bodies upon the gears" speech in 1964.¹ Between the rows of London plane trees that line the space, thousands of activists have been arrested, beaten, and gassed over the past half century for protesting everything from U.S. imperialism to apartheid in South Africa. Without a doubt, Sproul Plaza is the emblematic site of UC Berkeley's reputation for being what Ronald Reagan once called "a rallying point for Communism and a center of sexual misconduct."² The Gipper would certainly be thrilled to learn that today Sproul Plaza is up for auction.

Well, kind of.

It's Thursday, September 24, 2009. More than five thousand UC Berkeley students, staff, union employees, and faculty have walked out of their classes and jobs to protest the increasing privatization of the nation's most renowned public university system. They are gathered in Sproul Plaza for a rally that occupies nearly every inch of the famed square, as well as the balconies of nearby buildings. They bear picket signs, banners, and T-shirts with slogans such as "Save UC" and "Crisis of Priorities." As the massive rally approaches the close of its second hour, a small and smartly dressed contingent storms the makeshift stage on the lower landing of Sproul steps. The group's corporate attire of power ties and suits elicits more than a few suspicious glares from the thousands looking on. Baffled murmurs circu-

late among those close enough to read the group's posters, which carry messages like "Diversify Your Portfolio, Not the Student Body!" and "Public Education = Communist Putsch."

A haughty-looking man in a dark suit with hair neatly slicked back strides to the front and takes the microphone. The rest of the apparently well-heeled group assembles behind him; five of them hold placards, spelling out U-C-M-e-P. The man's amplified voice echoes across the densely packed space: "Like so many other faculty, staff, and students at the University of California, we here at the UC Movement for Efficient Privatization (UCMeP) are extremely concerned by the pending privatization of the University of California. Yet unlike those of you gathered here today to whine and moan about the direction of privatization, UCMeP is deeply troubled by the snail's pace at which this inevitable transformation is currently proceeding." Boos resound throughout Sproul Plaza, punctuated by scattered pockets of knowing laughter. The speaker takes a moment for the jeering to subside before he continues:

Yes, yes, I imagine all of you are very excited today. [*He pauses to gesture for everyone to be quiet.*] As we all know, President Yudof, the UC Board of Regents, and the state legislature have been working tirelessly and getting paid top dollar to sell off the UC's worldwide reputation of providing excellence in public education. To help make this process more efficient and swift, UCMeP is taking direct action by auctioning off key campus landmarks to the highest bidder!

The joke begins to land as the placards spelling out U-C-M-e-P are flipped to reveal giant monopoly cards, each one a deed for a different campus landmark. The ensuing auction is a sight to behold as students, faculty, and staff scramble to purchase their favorite piece of property for fire-sale prices. "Last up for auction today, folks," UCMeP's auctioneer proudly announces, "historic Sproul Plaza! How much is your free speech worth?" As the auction concludes with Sproul Plaza selling for a bargain \$2.35, a student takes the microphone from the leader and declares loudly: "This is not a joke! This is what is happening to our university!"³

Together with its overripe corporate rhetoric and overwhelming confidence in the ineluctable privatization of the UC, the impudent tone UCMeP took when advocating its "Buy-In" was hardly unfamiliar to those at the rally. In the months leading up to the September 24 walkout, the UC administration had conveyed a sense of inevitability to justify rigid austerity cuts that included employee furloughs, course reductions, and mas-

sive fee hikes. In addition, administrators all but suspended shared governance with faculty and good faith negotiations with labor unions. To lend such draconian measures a veneer of legitimacy, the UC administration unleashed a tortuous discourse of efficiency and profit maximization more suited to the boardroom of a Forbes 500 company than to a public university. UCMeP's Buy-In was, of course, an absurd take on the UC administration's myopic vision for public higher education. Yet it is also emblematic of an exaggerated form of satiric engagement that a number of activists—not just those involved with UCMeP—have employed at many of the UC's ten campuses in their struggles against the cuts to public education in California.⁴

UCMeP was founded in early September 2009 by a small group of graduate students and alumni at UC Berkeley (myself included). Since then it has developed a performance-based repertoire of contention that includes a mix of satiric manifestos and memorandums, elaborate online hoaxes, and sardonic public performances. Its tongue-in-cheek acronym (pronounced “You See Me Pee”) is only one clue to the group's dissimulative seriousness. Be it visiting lectures to raise enough money to buy UC president Mark Yudof a private jet, releasing outlandish YouTube videos that depict innovative tactics students can use to cross picket lines, or even renaming prominent campus buildings in honor of particularly pernicious administrators, the strategy behind UCMeP's various interventions has remained constant: take the logic of the UC administration to its absurd extreme. Instead of “speaking truth to power,” UCMeP ridicules authority through playful yet earnest performative manipulations of the authoritative discourses used by the UC administration to legitimate everything from tuition increases to the criminalization of student activism.

Rather than a group with particular aims and interests, UCMeP is best understood as one of myriad tactical repertoires that activists have started to use in their struggles in the UC system. Since the September 24 walkout, the UC has seen further mobilizations, including strikes, marches, and rallies, as well as escalated tactics like building occupations, hunger strikes, and freeway blockades. Many activists have also turned to institutional channels by lobbying lawmakers in Sacramento and pushing tax referendums aimed at restoring funding to public education in California. This diversity of tactics has at times caused rifts among different activist communities at Berkeley, but nonetheless a strong coalition has emerged whose actors come from various parts of campus and include

union workers, students, faculty, lecturers, and alumni. Within this ever-changing coalition, UCMeP is not so much a grouping with defined aims than one tactic used by some of the activists who constitute this coalition.

Outside of UCMeP, the tactical preferences of the dozens of students, faculty, and alumni who have worked with the group are diverse, just like the academic departments from which we come. UCMeP calls a number of disciplines home, ranging from my own department of performance studies to chemistry. Those of us involved in UCMeP are also engaged on a variety of fronts on campus, such as building solidarity between students and the university's labor unions, defending the right of students to protest, mobilizing graduate students, and making connections with allied education movements in other states and countries.

This is all to say that UCMeP does not operate outside the various forms of organizing being done on campus but most often operates in coordination with—and sometimes at the request of—other activists. UCMeP in no way replaces the necessary work of day-to-day organizing and planning. Instead it complements the organizational efforts of other groups. In the weeks leading up to the September 24 walkout, for example, UCMeP countered the many teach-ins and public forums with its own marketing campaign, which it disguised as a philanthropic endeavor: the Adopt-a-Regent Campaign. Pairs of energetic UCMeP representatives visited lectures, discussion sections, and seminars to gather donations for California's most unappreciated and undercompensated public servants, the UC Board of Regents. In doing so, they explained to students that the best thing to do to ensure the swift privatization of the UC was to not do anything at all. The consciousness-raising objective of these classroom visits was similar to other mobilization efforts. The approach, however, was strikingly different, reaching students with humor and irony in ways that direct rational argument could not.

UCMeP has been particularly active on campus in defending the right of students to protest on campus. The UC administration's criminalization of dissent has provided much fodder for the group's interventions; particularly provoking is the rhetoric used by administrators to depict student activists as "criminals not activists."⁵ UCMeP's emblematic action on this front includes naming UC Berkeley spokesperson Dan Mogulof the Top Outstanding Oratorical Leader (TOOL) of the Year. In its award letter to Mogulof, UCMeP lauded him for speaking "courageously and eloquently" on behalf of the Berkeley administration and for "indiscriminately

denounce[ing] Berkeley students . . . as criminals, vandals, and/or extremists (sometimes all three at once!).”⁶ When the honoree expressed concern over UCMeP’s plans to hold a public award ceremony in his office, the two parties reached a compromise: Mogulof would attend a small-scale private celebration as long as the location remained secret and the guest list was tightly controlled. The carefully staged gala (which included a strict dress code) featured moving speeches, a special song and dance performance, a slideshow, a cake-cutting ceremony, and the presentation of a giant gold hammer to the man of the hour. The nearly ninety guests included a mix of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. To prevent any disruption of the celebration, UCMeP’s private security subjected all guests to a thorough screening before allowing them to enter the venue. Even the chief of UC Berkeley’s police department underwent two full bomb screenings. Despite leading the audience in a rendition of “Kumbaya” to close the ceremony, UCMeP did not succeed in building bridges between activists and administrators. But the question-and-answer session with Mogulof that directly followed the ceremony gave students—many of whom were facing conduct charges for their protest activities—an opportunity to express their anger with the administration’s vilification of student activists in the media.

Not all of UCMeP’s actions have gone off without a hitch, however. For example, when UCMeP created its own convincing (albeit entirely fake) online version of Berkeley’s student newspaper to declare UCMeP’s victory in Berkeley’s student government elections, the paper’s editorial staff threatened to file a lawsuit against the group. And in response to UCMeP’s plans for a spectacular candlelight vigil on the lawn of the chancellor’s house, I received a series of frantic phone calls from UC police wanting assurance that UCMeP was not a cover for an anarchist cell looking to set fire to the residence.

The headaches caused by these mildly amusing reactions notwithstanding, uncertainty and provocation are key components to UCMeP’s satiric approach. As activist and communications scholar Stephen Duncombe astutely notes, satire can be a uniquely potent tool for activists. Not only does it make an activist’s message “more palatable and thus popular, it also makes political sense in another way.”⁷ And for those of us behind UCMeP, staging these satiric performances has made the hard work of activism seem less like labor and more like having fun with friends—something that is essential for building and sustaining a movement.

Notes

- 1 Mario Savio, "Sit-in Address on the Steps of Sproul Hall," delivered on December 2, 1964, available at *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariosaviosproulhallsitin.htm (accessed October 22, 2010).
- 2 Reagan quoted in Gerard J. De Groot, "Ronald Reagan and Student Unrest in California, 1966–1970," *Pacific Historical Review* 65.1 (1996): 111.
- 3 Documentation of UCMeP's performance and writings—including videos, photographs, texts, and news articles—can be found at UCMeP's Web site, <http://ucmep.wordpress.com> (accessed July 28, 2010).
- 4 Some other examples of satire as a tactic include the UC San Diego group Billionaires for Fee Hikes and the Twitter feeds UCPresident and Yudofsmom. At UC Riverside, lecturer Ken Ehrlich caused a minor scandal when he published a fake resignation letter purported to be from Yudof the week before the March 4 Day of Action. See the letter at *b.a.n.g. lab*, <http://bang.calit2.net/markyudof/> (accessed July 28, 2010).
- 5 UC Berkeley chancellor Robert Birgeneau characterized the dissenters in this way, following a demonstration held outside his home on the evening of December 11, 2009, at which a planter and window were broken. See "Protestors Attack Berkeley Chancellor's Home," *UC Berkeley News*, December 12, 2009, http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2009/12/12_uhouse.shtml (accessed July 28, 2010).
- 6 UCMeP, "UCMeP Selects UC Berkeley Spokesperson Dan Mogulof as the Top Outstanding Oratorical Leader (TOOL) of the Year," December 20, 2009, <http://ucmep.wordpress.com/2009/12/20/ucmep-selects-uc-berkeley-spokesperson-dan-mogulof-as-the-top-outstanding-oratorical-leader-tool-of-the-year/>.
- 7 Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007), 131.