

# Books & the Arts.



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Mario Savio holding an IBM card used as a strike flier by the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, December 1964

## A Body on the Gears

by SCOTT SAUL

In the fall of 1964, with the Free Speech Movement roiling the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, 21-year-old Mario Savio felt, with some pride of ownership, that “this little place had become...one of the central places on the planet.” Four years later, Savio was falling off the map—living a few miles from campus in the West Berkeley flats, working on the assembly line of an electrical parts firm and caring with his wife for their infant son, who’d been born with severe developmental problems. The man the *New York Times* had dubbed “the archangel of student revolt” was finding shelter in quiet

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anonymity. Even the FBI, which named Savio one of fifteen “key activists” in early 1968 and investigated his bank accounts, phone accounts and workplace, concluded in a report that maybe he wasn’t such a key activist anymore.

Yet the distinctiveness of Mario Savio—the particular tone and accent he lent to the New Left in its first years—is disclosed in a small set of details from this same FBI report. Savio, it seems, had taken to listing his phone number under false names (or what the Bureau called “aliases”) in order to avoid harassing calls. In the phone book, Mario Savio was by turns José Martí, Wallace Stevens and David Bohm—which is to say, a late-nineteenth-century Cuban revolutionary-exile and poet who admired the US tradition of free speech yet scoured American imperialism; a Modernist poet who married philosophy and imagination

### Freedom's Orator

*Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s.*

By Robert Cohen.

Oxford. 512 pp. \$34.95.

(“We seek/The poem of pure reality, untouched/By trope or deviation, straight to the word”); and a theoretical physicist who, after helping Robert Oppenheimer develop the atomic bomb, defied the House Committee on Un-American Activities and lost his professorship at Princeton as a result.

The assortment of names plots the wide arc of Savio’s ambitions and identifies the tensions he struggled to master. Savio was a revolutionary and civil libertarian, logician and poet, scientific observer and self-aware partisan—and in his heyday a virtuosic extemporizer who seemed not so much to perform all these identities as to

incarnate them. He was, in short, an icon of possibility for his generation of student activists; and so it's a great historical riddle, tinged with pathos, why he was, in Berkeley in 1964, the lightning rod of his time and, almost immediately afterward, a man who couldn't conduct the energy he'd summoned.

Robert Cohen dedicates much of *Freedom's Orator*, his absorbing and even-keeled biography of Savio, to this very question, peeling back the layers of myth that have enveloped Savio and the Free Speech Movement while substantiating their achievement. By necessity *Freedom's Orator* is a dual biography of a man and his movement, and almost half the book follows less than four months of Savio's life, the pivotal fall semester of 1964. The FSM ran what we might call a textbook student-activist campaign in that interval—if we overlook the fact that the textbook didn't exist yet. President Nixon's 1970 Commission on Campus Unrest termed militant student protest "the Berkeley invention," and rightly so, since the FSM pioneered the use of civil rights strategies of direct action in a university setting, demonstrating how such disruptive tactics could mobilize a majority of students and even win the sympathies of a formerly passive faculty.

The FSM had the benefit of a cadre of experienced organizers, many seasoned like Savio in civil rights work, and an administration that couldn't shoot straight. What began as a seemingly minor dispute over civil liberties on campus—could students hand out political literature on a twenty-six-foot strip of land owned by the university?—spiraled quickly into a battle royal in which the meaning of the university and American liberalism seemed to be at stake. The central events have since passed into '60s legend: the seizure of the police car, wherein thousands of students surrounded a police car holding an arrested civil rights activist, immobilizing it for thirty-two hours while speaker after speaker used the car's roof as their podium; the December 2 sit-in, wherein almost 800 students were arrested after occupying Sproul Hall, the central administrative building, to protest disciplinary action against four movement leaders; and the December 7 Greek Theatre incident, wherein Savio walked onstage to speak to the assembled student body and was immediately grabbed at his throat and arms by police and dragged offstage—an administration fiasco that UC President Clark Kerr called "an accident that looked like fascism."

In all these events, Savio played no small part in the theater of protest. It was he who first mounted the roof of the police car, taking off his shoes so as not to dent it—a quite sincere act of decorum, though not one that prevented him from comparing the police to Adolph Eichmann (they all "had a job to do"). It was Savio who, before the sit-in, famously urged students to "put [their] bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and... make [the machine] stop"—updating Ludism for the age of the Organization Man. And it was Savio who, at the Greek Theatre, publicly offered his own body to the cause, making his "machine" speech seem much more than mere metaphor.

Savio's gift for decisive action earned him the admiration of many students but the queasy attention of many faculty and administrators: it was one thing to read Sartre and Camus in philosophy class and quite another to apply existential ideas of moral engagement to the Berkeley campus, which they considered a far cry from France under German occupation. Intellectual historian Henry May, who chaired Berkeley's history department at the time, offered this revealing assessment:

Always extreme but never sectarian, at times Messianic—and to adult ears—often skirting the edges of the ridiculous—Savio is the only leader who seems to represent a new genre.... In terms of religious and quasi-religious precedent, modern existentialism seems closer than Tolstoyan non-violence. What Savio was demanding [in his "machine" speech]...was something like an existentialist *acte gratuit*, a gesture of self-identification.

Despite his condescension, May was correct to emphasize how a kind of existential humanism—one that saw alienation as a tragic face of modern life, large bureaucracies as the machinery of quiet death and individual rebellion as a profound form of self-fulfillment—suffused Savio's rhetoric. His "machine" speech turned on the sense that men and women, by their nature, revolt against being turned into "a bunch of raw materials," to be "bought by some clients of the university, be they the government, be they the industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone!" "We're human beings!" he ended emphatically.

Just a few years later, Savio's recourse to ideas of universal human nature would seem imprecise if not presumptuous: how could one person—especially a young white

American college student, bound seemingly for a life of middle-class prosperity—speak for every man and woman around the globe? Then again, why not? At the time, Savio's language tapped into a deep reservoir of aspiration and emotion, calling together all those "people who have not learned to compromise, who for example have come to the university to learn to question, to grow, to learn." In some quarters, such people would be known simply as "nerds"—and in fact, one sociological study of Berkeley undergraduates in 1964 concluded that a key variable separating FSM supporters from their opponents was GPA. (More than half of those with a GPA of B+ or better were self-designated radicals, while only one-tenth were conservatives.) Savio's rhetoric allowed these young people to recognize themselves as a community with higher motives than liberals like Clark Kerr, who was not only the UC chancellor but also the nation's foremost labor-management negotiator, and therefore an expert in the art of compromise. Savio's nerds, by contrast, were proudly impractical: they were those who would "die rather than be standardized, replaceable, and irrelevant."

One of the great virtues of Cohen's deft biography is that it explains how a working-class Italian-American boy, growing up in Floral Park, Queens, at the onset of the cold war, came to embrace this existential vision of life *in extremis*. From an early age, Savio identified with the powerless and voiceless. What postwar sociologists proudly called "the embourgeoisement of the American working class"—its identification with the material prosperity of the middle class—felt to him like a stifling process of repression and violation.

Born December 8, 1942, Savio was given the name Mario but soon lost it. At his Catholic elementary school, one of the priests mocked his Italian-American roots by singing his name as a comic rhyme—"Maaaario Saaavio"—in front of the other children. When his father, Joseph, learned of this humiliation, he forced Mario to adopt the name Bob. Savio's father was dominating and difficult—a Sicilian who banned the Italian language from the home after he returned from service in World War II, a machinist who always felt his job was beneath him, and a paterfamilias who brooked little disagreement within the family (to the point of having to win all card and board games he played with his children). *Freedom's Orator* also relates an early incident of sexual abuse, one that shadowed Savio's later bouts with depression. When he was 7 or 8, Savio was

molested by a teenage uncle. Cohen gives us few details, but Savio captured its impact indelibly to a friend: "One day you are right-handed and the next day you are left-handed and the world has changed."

During these years Savio seemed to register physically the anxiety of self-development: he suffered from a painful stammer, a "semi-paralytic speech blockage" that afflicted him particularly when he hoped to challenge a figure of authority. "[M]y entire vocal apparatus would simply freeze," he remembered, "and my head and neck and much of my body would buck in sympathetic spasm, while my eyes often rolled out of sight.... I occasionally had to abandon my effort to speak." Ironically, Savio's speech defect may have furnished the most intense preparation for his later role as the voice of the FSM. From an early age he studied the tone and cadence of the spoken word, driven by the sense that he needed to master all the components of speech or be defeated by them.

The young Savio found refuge, at least at first, in the Catholic Church and in his studies. An altar boy, he inherited what he called a "somewhat dreamy religiosity" from his mother and two of her sisters, who were nuns, and considered entering the priesthood. Meanwhile, he compiled the strongest academic record in the history of Martin Van Buren High School. (His mother had been disappointed when he graduated second in his junior high class, and he had vowed to keep her from "hav[ing] to endure that sort of 'humiliation' again.") Yet by the end of high school, Savio was turning against the church and the educational establishment—or rather, in a pattern he would repeat, holding them to the high standards they ostensibly set for themselves. He wondered why the church had retreated into a dogmatic anticommunism, distancing itself from its commitment to aid the afflicted. Didn't it recognize that the Marxist phrase "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" had "a certain biblical purity"? And he questioned, even as a Westinghouse Science Talent Search finalist, the Sputnik-fueled drive for scientific know-how. Why, he asked its organizers, did they celebrate technical achievement but never invite "a philosopher" to assess its moral value?

By the time he matriculated at Queens College, "Bob" Savio was Mario again, and was involving himself in antipoverty work, spending a summer in Central Mexico helping to build a town laundry as part of a Queens College volunteer mission. It was only upon

his transfer to Berkeley in 1963, after his family's move to Southern California, though, that he connected strongly with the civil rights movement, which satisfied a spiritual hunger in the former altar boy. While his classes seemed a "meaningless ritual," mere "memorizing of meaningless lists of information," the movement was meaning itself—"like God acting in history.... Like God was going to trouble the water." Arrested at a sit-in at the Sheraton Palace hotel in San Francisco, Savio heard from a cellmate about the Freedom Summer Project, which looked to import hundreds of college students into Mississippi to assist the voter registration work there. Soon he was Mississippi-bound.

Notably, his application to join Freedom Summer was received with reservations by the civil rights activist who evaluated it. Savio, he thought, was "not a very creative guy altho he accepts responsibility and carries it through if you explain to him exactly what needs to be done." Savio was not yet the organizer and strategist he would become—but his two months down South, in the thick of the work of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), would change that.

Savio was sent first to Holmes County, a black-majority county where, in 1960, there were only forty-one black voters out of a black population of 19,488. Though he would later be assaulted by two white men with billy clubs in the streets of McComb, Savio recalled that the key event of that summer was an elderly black farmer's attempt to register to vote at a county courthouse:

[The registrar] started in on him: "What do you want, boy?" He was a man of sixty or seventy. We were just standing there. "What do you want, boy?"

"I want to redish, ma'm." It's part of the dialect. They say "redish." You get used to it....

"What's that you say, boy?"

"I want to redish, ma'm."

"What's redish? What are you talking about, boy?... We don't got no redish around here...." And on and on and on about the fact that he couldn't say [register], and she knew perfectly well, he knew perfectly well, what he was there for.... He never gave up. She finally had to give him the form. But she made him eat shit for it.... Here's somebody, who because of something I had done, was maybe risking his [life and his] family[']s, facing that kind

of humiliation. He must have been afraid. I know I was afraid. Yet he stood his ground.

This moment would be a moral touchstone for Savio throughout his life: the child who grew up straining to pronounce words to those in authority had witnessed a much more severe and politically resonant version of his personal struggle. Over the course of Freedom Summer, Savio came to feel that he had bonded himself to the fate of local folk like this farmer. When he came back to Berkeley and discovered that university administrators, out of their aversion to controversy, had banned political advocacy on campus, then he felt that he had no choice but to defy the ban. And given that he had encouraged poor blacks to risk their lives and livelihoods, the university's disciplinary action against him seemed trifling by comparison.

Freedom Summer strengthened Savio's backbone, yet what Savio gained from the experience was less a sense of moral outrage (which, as Cohen notes, seems to have predated his interval down South) and more a repertory of methods for harnessing that outrage and turning it in a constructive direction. From the example of SNCC's Bob Moses, he learned a particular form of public speaking, direct and unadorned, aimed at allowing an audience to put together the pieces for themselves, so that they could take ownership of the movement. "There'd be no harangues," he observed. "It was a rhetoric of telling it like it was, a kind of a Will Rogers rhetoric" of "great concreteness." In the FSM, Savio's speeches often recounted, in exacting detail, the give-and-take between administrators and FSM leaders, allowing his audience to work inductively along with him. He also learned, from SNCC workers who had to face the possibly violent consequences of their organizing, that it was better to admit one's personal struggle than to repress it. As FSMer Jann Wenner has noted, "Savio seemed to embody not just will but also doubt, and the need to speak and act in the face of doubt."

These sides of Savio—the hyper-democratic leader who wished not so much to lead as to generate a consensus grounded in facts and moral values; the *engagé* thinker touched with a sense of self-doubt—were invisible to the FSM's opponents in the Berkeley administration. The chancellor, in his first conversation with Savio, deemed him "an intractable fanatic" and never changed his mind; a graduate dean thought he spoke



Mario Savio speaks at a "People's Park" rally on the Berkeley campus, June 26, 1969.

"the language of the gutter." What they failed to comprehend—and what Cohen emphasizes against the grain in his instructive account—was the deliberateness behind Savio's vehemence: it was as if it existed on a lower frequency that they couldn't hear, jarred as they were by the agitation around them, and so they consistently misjudged the nature and strength of their antagonist. Yet the movement's success depended upon this quality. Had Savio and the FSM leadership only been existentialists par excellence, throwing their bodies on the gears of the machine, they would never have been able to win the allegiance of the largely liberal Berkeley student body, much less the only moderately liberal Berkeley faculty, who came after the Greek Theater debacle to back the FSM's demands.

This deliberateness took many forms. It was embedded in the decision-making style of the FSM leadership, whose meetings were marathon efforts in consensus-building, with one lasting almost twenty-four hours—"hyperdemocracy as only the young could practice it," as Cohen says. It shaped the FSM's rallies and sit-ins, which were earnestly educational in spirit: when a large group of fraternity members began hurling lighted cigarettes, eggs and vegetables at the students who had surrounded the police car, Savio did not turn the much larger FSM crowd against them. Instead he explained the principle of civil disobedience to the fraternity brothers, asked if they thought "there are times when questions of conscience exceed in importance questions of law," then invited them to climb atop the police car and speak their mind too.

Lastly, this deliberateness inflected the "freedom" that the FSM seemed to be asking for. At the FSM rally celebrating the faculty endorsement of the movement's demands, Savio pulled back to consider the self-discipline that students would have to exercise now that the university was not restraining them. Students had won, he said,

an enormous amount of freedom; and people can say things within that area of freedom that are not responsible. We've finally gotten into a position where we have to consider being responsible because...now we've got the freedom within which to be responsible. And I'd like to say at this time I'm confident that the students, that the faculty, of the University of California will exercise their freedom with the same responsibility they've shown in winning their freedom.

Arguably it was the demand for this sort of "responsible freedom," rather than the more libertarian ideal suggested by the movement's name, that allowed the FSM to carry the day. In March 1965, just after its victory, the FSM leadership was divided when the administration arrested a nonstudent for holding up a "Fuck" sign on campus, and was not able to rally the campus even after the administration suspended students who, in protest, used strategic obscenities (for instance, passages from *Lady Chatterly's Lover*) at an anticensorship rally. A month later, rather than continue this narrower version of its fight, the FSM officially declared itself dissolved. The leadership decided that it had won what it had first

demand—student advocacy rights—and that it was time to move on.

*Freedom's Orator* leads us, then, into a historical paradox: the radicalism of the FSM—its disruption of campus decorum through sit-ins and the like, its assertion of students as citizens rather than charges of the university—rested on a liberal foundation that much of the FSM's rhetoric insistently undermined. From one perspective, the FSM was reanimating liberal ideals of participatory democracy—the freedoms of speech and association, exercised with consequence—that established liberals seemed to ignore in practice; it offered a true believer's liberalism. From another, it was joining with the Goldwater campaign to delegitimize postwar liberalism, rallying like the Goldwaterites against state-sponsored bureaucracy and helping to popularize the phrase "well-meaning liberal" as a term of disrepute. "Liberal" is a dirty word here," said FSM leader Jack Weinberg. "Liberalism is a trap. It's the impotence of having principles that make you opposed to something and other principles that keep you from doing anything about it."

While UC administrators consistently underestimated the strength of the FSM, FSM leaders consistently overestimated the strength of the liberal order represented by such figures as Kerr, California Governor Pat Brown and President Lyndon B. Johnson. The FSM abominated Brown as the governor who called in the police to arrest students at the December 2 Sproul sit-in. But at the same time that the FSM was stirring the campus in the fall of 1964, Brown was spending the accumulated political capital of his career gamely trying to rally Californians to defeat Proposition 14, an anti-fair housing measure. The notoriously bad polling numbers of the FSM among the California electorate—74 percent did not approve of the FSM—are brought into a new perspective when we consider that 65 percent of Californians also voted that November for Proposition 14. The glory days of the Brown administration—which, among other things, had presided over the massive expansion of public higher education in the state—were numbered.

Like many political observers of the time, Savio dimly perceived the danger of this gathering conservative storm. In 1966 he dismissed the possibility that the election of Ronald Reagan as governor would have a meaningful impact on California, much less national, politics: "The whole system functions in such a way that nothing new ever happens. It's

designed to keep new things from occurring...to institutionalize the end of all historical change." This was naïveté masked as cynicism, but on the other hand it's hard to know how Savio and other FSM leaders might have engineered a coalition with liberals in the state and beyond: few entreaties were forthcoming from the other side, and meanwhile the liberal establishment was busy leveraging its credibility into the war in Vietnam, an investment that agitated the campus left into a permanent opposition. Sproul Plaza—the central space on the Berkeley campus, which the FSM had won for free speech—was consumed for the rest of the decade by Vietnam.

The late '60s and early '70s were a troubled time for Savio. He was seized by panic attacks and sank into a deep depression; the ordeals of his childhood and the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood weighed on him intensely. When his marriage broke up in November 1971, he recalled, "I did too. I spent a long time in a psychiatric hospital." The death of his mother triggered a suicide attempt. Cohen is careful not to over-speculate on the exact causes of Savio's depression, registering the reticence of Savio's friends and family on this interval in his life, but he convincingly adduces that it had a political dimension. The FSM had centered Savio's life, and its late-'60s transformation left him swimming against some of its strongest currents.

Even as Savio understood that the Vietnam War called for a systemic analysis of American power in the world, he reacted strongly against what he saw as the creeping dogmatism of the left. "For an apostate Catholic," he recalled, "shopping in the dense...thicket of neo-Marxist sects was altogether too painfully like selecting a Protestant denomination." And: "It became increasingly difficult to know what the speakers were saying.... I found it increasingly difficult in fact [to believe] that *the speakers* knew what they were saying." Yet the mode of speaking that Savio had honed over the course of the FSM—based in vivid reporting of his encounters with administrative power—was hard to adapt to the antiwar movement, where the masters of war were sealed away far from the protesters. And a mission to Hanoi held little charm for him: Savio admired the Vietnamese National Liberation Front for its struggle against US imperial power, but as a lover of free speech he could not idealize life under its regime.

Savio's relationship toward the late-'60s left was bittersweet, not hostile. With his dual commitments to nonviolence and par-

ticipatory democracy in the movement, he looked askance at groups like the Black Panthers, with their rhetoric of freeing Huey Newton "by any means necessary." "I don't think the revolution in America depends on burning down half the city of Oakland to free one man," he said. "Almost all are in jail unfairly." But he recognized that he had not been able to square the circle himself: the project of articulating a united New Left, bound by its commitment to nonviolence and its resistance to inequality, eluded him. He planned to write a book in which he would translate Marxist insights on imperialism and inequality "into ordinary American English," while criticizing more doctrinaire formulations, but never completed it. A campaign to run for mayor of Berkeley in 1971 was similarly abandoned before the race began.

Notwithstanding its declaration of victory in 1965, the FSM also left behind a good deal of unfinished business. Its most clear-cut legacy is the liberalized atmosphere on the Berkeley campus and others across the United States. Despite early attempts by Berkeley administrations to shut down the political carnival of Sproul Plaza, it has become a mostly shared point of pride—a public sphere that offers a bazaar of causes, from the Campus Crusade for Christ to the International Socialist Organization, as well as a venue for large-scale mobilizations.

**B**ut is "free speech" truly free? On the one hand, the polarization of US politics has meant that, on the Berkeley campus at least, conservative speakers have a difficult time getting a respectful hearing. Savio, for one, objected when audience members booed US Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick off a Berkeley stage in 1983, despite his loathing of the Reaganite policies toward Central America that she sponsored, because he felt that her free speech rights had been violated. Making a distinction that contemporary campus administrators would appreciate, Savio drew a line between "heckling" (raising hard questions in a challenging manner) and "disruption" (preventing speakers from delivering their remarks), and asked protesters to stay on the heckling side of the divide.

On the other hand, campus administrators continue to see direct-action protests as seedbeds of anarchy, and are quick to deploy squadrons of police rather than

engage substantively with dissenting members of the campus community. This past November 20, a student-led occupation of a Berkeley classroom—a response to campus budget cuts—prompted the administration to surround the building with a ring of police from Alameda County and the city of Berkeley, which in turn prompted a crowd of more than a thousand to gather around the building. In the tense stand-off, police fired rubber bullets at one demonstrator and injured the hand of another, who had made the mistake of holding onto a barricade so that she could keep her footing.

Meanwhile, thirty years of conservative counterrevolution have made even some campus progressives yearn for the lead-

## FSM leaders consistently overestimated the strength of the liberal political order.

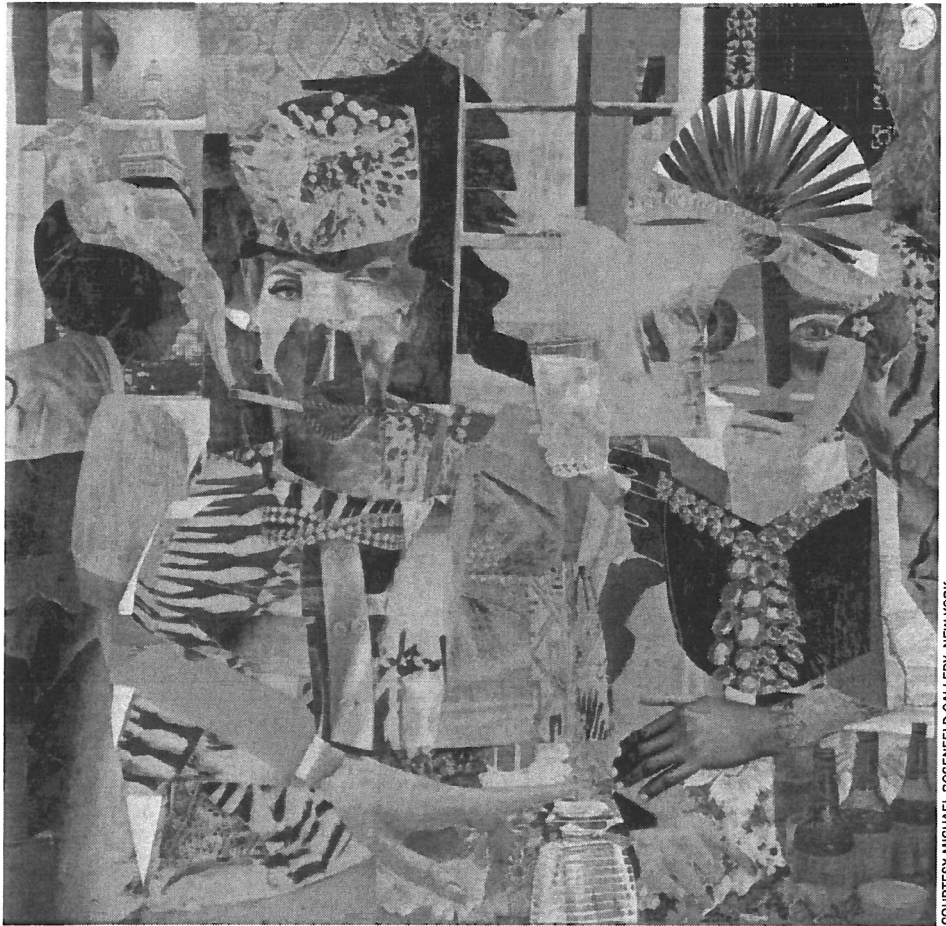
ership of Clark Kerr, the "Machiavellian Quaker" who pushed through a (in retrospect) stunning public investment in higher education. In October labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein launched a UCSB teach-in on the crisis of public higher education in California with a paean to Kerr's "forgotten legacy." Savio saw Kerr as a bureaucrat who believed that history had ended; Lichtenstein claimed him as a "visionary" who believed that "mass higher education" was "the key to a dynamic, harmonious society based on skill and knowledge"—and who secured public financing for a history-making expansion of the UC system, adding three entirely new campuses and greatly expanding another, while holding to the principle that no students should have to pay tuition to attend the university. Speech may not have been free in Savio's time, but public higher education largely was (at least for the predominantly white young people tracked into the system): Berkeley undergraduates in the fall of 1964 paid only \$220 per year in fees, or around \$1,500 in today's dollars. By the standards of our age, the administrative Kerr of 1960 was a brazen utopian, predicting that Americans in 1984 would have a four-day workweek and 50 percent more income, and imagining a vastly more equal economic order in the United States.

By contrast, the current UC president, Mark Yudof, has been intellectually uninspired, politically clumsy and administratively heavy-handed—a combination that has alienated faculty, staff and students, and

left the UC system reeling from the \$600 million slashed from its budget by the state. Even Savio, who accused the university of being an “autocracy,” might have been dumbfounded when Yudof publicly claimed “emergency powers” as his first response to the budget crisis; when he appointed no faculty with recent experience in an undergraduate classroom to a much-heralded “Commission on the Future” of the UC system; and when he saddled students with the bill for the budget gap, raising undergraduate fees by 32 percent (to \$10,333, up from \$2,896 a decade ago).

Aptly, Savio’s last political fight involved this very issue of increased student fees. Part of his life’s noble second act—in which he made up for his earlier nonchalance about Reagan’s ascendancy by throwing himself into campaigns against US policy in Central America, the dismantling of affirmative action and the denial of immigrant rights—the fee controversy might seem minor. The administration at Sonoma State University, where Savio taught in the 1990s as a math and philosophy instructor, had proposed a \$300 fee hike to help cover annual budget shortfalls. But Savio saw the fee increase as a sign of a broader movement away from the promise of accessible higher education—a promise broken just as California’s college-age population became unmistakably more racially diverse—and rallied students to defeat the measure. On November 1, 1996, he debated the fee hike’s proponents at a public forum. The next day, after feverishly working to prepare a set of legal documents on the fee increase, he collapsed from a heart attack and fell into a coma, dying four days later in the hospital. Two weeks after Savio’s death, at 53, Sonoma State’s students rejected the fee hike, formerly a popular measure, by a 58 percent majority.

During the fall of 1964, Savio carried in his pocket a copy of J.L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia*, which argued that speech did not merely describe reality but shaped and invented it. The FSM—and Savio’s oratory within it—made Austin’s point blazingly clear. But Savio also inscribed the book with a quote from Spanish baroque dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca that suggested, with a certain melancholy idealism, the competing allure of the world of dreams: “I am dreaming, and I want to do good. For the good you do is never lost. Not even in dreams.” If public higher education is going to thrive beyond the current mean season, we will need to draw upon both Savio’s actions and his dreams—all while finding even better strategies for uniting the two. ■



Romare Bearden's *King and Queen of Diamonds*, 1964

COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK

## Dimensions of the Abyss

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

In October 1699 a ship called the *Liverpool Merchant* set sail for Africa, preceding thence to Barbados with a cargo of 220 slaves, and returning to home port nearly a year later. Among the ship’s owners was Sir Thomas Johnson, who that same year was largely responsible for the act of Parliament making Liverpool an independent parish. And so a port city in what was then still part of Lancashire was initiated into the Triangular Trade. By 1799 the quantity of slaves reaching the New World in ships setting out from Liverpool hit an annual peak of 45,000. Controlling 40 percent of the European slave trade and a similar proportion of the world’s trade in general, Liverpool’s wealth rivaled that of London.

Today, the grandiose architectural offspring of the city’s former shipping might are still visible on its waterfront. One of the more recent is the Cunard Building, completed in 1917 in ornate Italian Renaissance style. The Canadian-born Samuel Cunard had parlayed

a contract for transatlantic mail shipment into the world’s most prestigious passenger cruise line; he represents an era in which Liverpool’s maritime industry had sloughed off the shame of the slave trade. His great-granddaughter Nancy Cunard became an energetic promoter of literary and artistic Modernism as well as one of the leading white activists for civil rights. One of her many projects was editing the 1934 collection *Negro: An Anthology*, a landmark of the Harlem Renaissance era that has been called “the first publication to voice freely perspectives and ideologies from diaspora blacks and Africans.”

If there is any doubt that coming to terms with this history remains painful, consider what happened in 2006 when the Liverpool city council decided that street names linked to the slave trade should be changed to honor abolitionists. When it emerged that Penny Lane, the subject of the famous Beatles song, which was named for an eighteenth-century owner of slave