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Cohen, Robert. (2009). *Freedom's Orator: Mario Savio and The Radical Legacy of The 1960s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Freedom's Orator: Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s, written by educator and scholar Robert Cohen, is a well-crafted biography and wonderful contribution to scholarship on the Free Speech Movement at U.C. Berkeley. Cohen uses a variety of rich primary sources such as interviews, student newspapers, minutes, memoirs, and original speeches by Savio to document the evolution of the FSM and to illuminate the growth and humanity in Savio's life long struggle for social justice. Written within the contemporary context of massive budget cuts for student services, academic departments, and tuition hikes for many students, the book is a response to the argument that, "the new left closed the American mind and damaged the university" (p. 12). *Freedom's Orator* speaks directly into the ears of students and scholars who too often feel the pressure to censor their own creative voices for financial and patriotic purposes.

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Freedoms Orator is divided into four major sections that cover: (1) Savio's working-class childhood, early educational experiences in New York during the 1950s, and the radicalization of his worldview as a college student in 1964 through Freedom Summer; (2) Savio's ascendance to the national stage through his leadership and public speaking as a student activist, as well as the overall evolution of the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at UC Berkeley; (3) Savio's descent from the FSM, and his eventual return to academia and political protest as an instructor at Sonoma State University in California in the Reagan Era; (4) A selection of Savio's actual speeches and writings on various topics from his well known "Bodies against the Gears" speech to lesser known speeches against Proposition 209 and in defense of affirmative action. Throughout the book Cohen seeks to humanize Savio's mythic character and explore the complexities of Savio's continual intellectual and philosophical development.

In the first part of the book, Cohen draws the connections between Savio's early religious and educational experiences and his decision to join the freedom struggle by participating in the Freedom Summer in Mississippi. The son of Italian immigrants during the Cold War, Savio grew up in Queens, NY in a conservative Catholic family. In school, he experienced pressure to obtain good grades and use his academic interests in science to compete in national competitions. This set the stage for his incessant rejection of misuses of education and the type of uncritical thinking that existed under McCarthyism during the 1950s. For Savio, education was about a cultivation of the mind and soul. He used science to question Catholicism as an ideology, yet adhered to his spiritual faith to reject materialism and honor his moral duty to social action. His spiritual faith, rather than blind religious belief, in part served as an impetus for his participation in The Taxco project in Mexico in the summer of 1963, where developed his understanding of social class through serving poor children in Mexico, and in his participation in Freedom Summer in Mississippi in the summer of 1964, which developed his understanding of race and resistance in America. From these experiences, along

with a speech impediment that he experienced since childhood, Savio grew to intimately understand the need to speak out freely against the injustice. For Savio, the 1960s meant un-silencing the spiritual and educational strength of a young baby-boom generation living under the fears of a hegemonic authoritarian state.

In the second part of the book, Cohen makes the connection between the Civil Rights Movement and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. After helping to organize black voters in Mississippi and learning about leadership from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Bob Moses, Savio returned to U.C. Berkeley in fall of 1964 to witness the censorship of speech against the horrors he witnessed in the south. Savio felt that the censorship of speech by UC officials “lacked the courage and integrity of the university” (p. 77). With great care for detail and integrity to represent multiple sides of the free speech debate, Cohen spends Part II of the book delving into the negotiations between the Free Speech Movement and Berkeley’s administration. Through close documentation of the negotiation process and observation of organizational structure of the Free Speech Movement, Cohen shows how methodical Savio and others were in their protest against censorship. For example, Cohen documents how Savio, along with Brian Turner, Bettina Aptheker, Steve Weissman, Art Goldberg, Jackie Goldberg and others organized students and collaborated with faculty to protest existing University regulations prohibiting advocacy of political causes or candidates, outside political speakers, recruitment of members, and fundraising by student organizations. By using interviews from Savio himself, memoirs from Chancellor Clark Kerr and other key figures in the debate, the reader is exposed not only to different arguments, but to the private thoughts and reflections that illuminate the assumptions about the role of students, universities, and democracy at that time.

Although *Freedom’s Orator* infuses Savio’s personal life through his public work, part three delves more in-depth inside the private life of Mario Savio from 1965 until his death in 1996. Cohen documents how, after the FSM ended,

returning to “normal” academic life was difficult for Savio who “seemed to be arguing with himself, seeking to overcome his guilt about walking away from leadership amidst from the crisis of a war-torn nation” (p. 255). Savio would be hospitalized multiple times for mental illness over the course of his life. After discussing the beginning of Savio’s battle with depression that seemed to parallel the political crisis of the New Left in the late sixties and early seventies, Cohen writes about Savio’s two marriages, children, unstable employment, and his eventual re-enrollment as a student at San Francisco State where he earned a B.A. and eventually an M.A. in Physics in 1989. By 1993, Savio was an instructor in mathematics, logic, and philosophy at Sonoma State University.

This final section of the book also delves into his re-emergence as an intellectual and activist despite the personal crisis of the loss of his mother to cancer, continued battle with depression, and uncertainty of his role as a student on a college campus. Through Savio’s poetry, the author depicts the toll that emotional, political, and intellectual dependence on the movement had taken on Savio. However, Cohen guards against over “psychologizing” the impact that emotional depression and a speech disability played in Savio’s life. Cohen shows Savio’s resiliency to continue to address social inequality on campus. With the passage of conservative bills such as Propositions 187 in 1994 and 209 in 1996, which bared educational benefits to undocumented immigrants and ended affirmative action in California, Savio drew on his experiences at Berkeley to take on more of a political role as faculty and denounce what he called, ‘fearful propaganda of xenophobia and racism.’ (p. 291) Savio also used his political experience, this time as faculty, to work with students who opposed fee increases at Sonoma State.

Despite the book’s fresh new account of the life of Mario Savio, one weakness of the book is that it perpetuates the idea that the Free Speech Movement at U.C. Berkeley “was the first revolt of the 1960’s to bring to a college campus the mass civil disobedience tactics pioneered in the civil rights movement” (p. 1). Although Cohen dedicates a whole chapter to Freedom Summer, nowhere does he mention any

of the already existent student activism at any of the Black colleges nor does it answer whether Savio interacted with black students living in Mississippi at the time. As Joy Williamson-Lott points out in *Radicalizing the Ebony Tower: Black Colleges and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (2008):

black college students of the Black Power era described their actions as part of the larger and older freedom struggle...and quantitative studies found students at Southern black colleges highly active and facing the most punitive forms of punishment when compared to any other group of students. (p. 5)

To Cohen's credit, in his study of student radicalism of the 1920s through the 1940s, in *When the Old Let Was Young* (1993), he does acknowledge student activism on black campuses. He states that "On campuses where there were a sufficient number of blacks to form their own organizations, these groups helped bring discriminatory acts to the ASU's [American Student Union] attention" (p. 220). However, by not including this historical relationship in *Freedom's Orator*, readers may wonder whether Savio had working relationships with black student activists at southern colleges, what these relationships were like, and what U.C. Berkeley's connection was to the black freedom struggle already underway on southern black campuses. This criticism is not take away from the time and effort spent researching this book, the life of Mario Savio, or U.C. Berkeley as a major site of student protest. Yet, not contextualizing Savio's activism in Freedom Summer within the history of black student activism in the South creates a common historiographic problem that *Freedom's Orator* does not resolve (the absence of black students and black colleges in histories of college activism), and perpetuates an essentialist re-telling of Berkeley's radicalism in the 1960s.

Perhaps best of all, *Freedom's Orator* treats the reader to transcripts of actual speeches made by Savio. To not include this final section "In His Own Words: A Selection of Mario Savio's Speeches and Writings," which includes over 100 pages of Savio's own speeches, would have taken away

the ultimate gift that Savio gave to the world, and left this book absent of his core mission of free speech. The over 400 pages that Cohen uses to map-out Savio's intellectual development—from his early notions of American republicanism and democracy while he was in high school, to his use of Marxism to challenge the Catholic Church's uncritical stance on capitalism, to his later rejection of the increasing determinist Marxist analysis used by the New Left in the Anti War Movement— shows how Savio continually held on to the idea of democratic principles and Catholic egalitarianism which guided much of his challenges to poverty. Cohen states, "Tributes to Savio as the Avatar of sixties radicalism tend to capture the politics, not the person, and not the relationship between the two" (p. 318). This book approaches Savio's life as a continual process of reflection on actions, negation of absolute certainty in thought, and educational maturity rather than just the accumulation of historical facts into a fixed icon. *Freedom's Orator* is well worth reading for teachers, scholars of education, and those simply interested in the fight for free speech against acts of aggression and injustice. It is a very thoughtful and sensitive tribute to both Savio and the Free Speech Movement that in a way continues Savio's goal of putting humanity back into the Academy.

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