ONE AFTERNOON THIS PAST APRIL, a group of more than fifty students and faculty at the New School for Social Research filed into a room on the second floor of the graduate faculty building for an open meeting with New School president Jonathan Fanton. For months, the students had been clamoring for a drastic revision of the New School’s curriculum and minority hiring policies, and the mood in the room was tense. Before Fanton arrived, the group prepared the atmosphere by lighting candles, burning incense, and draping an Indian tapestry over a portrait of former New School professor Ernst Wolff (a “dead white male”). They also read aloud a statement declaring their “solidarity...against this University’s discriminatory employment practices and its abhorrence of genuine democracy.”

When Fanton arrived, the protesters erupted in anger. As he attempted to defend the university’s record on diversity, the president was interrupted by cries of “shame” and “liar.” One student warned, “There’s going to be a detonation!” After two hours of heated exchange, several protesters presented Fanton with a long list of demands and grimly announced a hunger strike—a measure they said was necessary until the university agreed to change its “racist” ways. When Fanton tried to leave the room, the protesters swarmed around him, detaining him for half an hour until he agreed to a second meeting. Mustafa Emirbayer, a New School sociologist who watched the drama unfold, recalls a scene of “jaw-dropping surrealism” as students blockaded the door and jeered the president. “My own knees were rubbery,” he says. “It was as if the king had been temporarily deposed.”

Thus began a springtime of insurrection at the New School. Six days after Fanton was detained, two more administrators—Executive Vice President Joseph Porrino and Provost Judith Walzer—were held hostage for five hours by the same group of insurgents. By the end of April, the facade of the graduate faculty building was blanketed with signs bearing slogans like RACIST, SEXIST, ANTI-GAY, NEW SCHOOL POLITICS GO AWAY! Inside, members of the fifty-strong coalition of disgruntled students and professors that came to be known as the Mobilization gathered within the “New University in Exile,” where alternative classes were held, a People’s Reading List was posted, and, for nearly three weeks, candles burned for a dozen hunger strikers.

IN THE increasingly odd annals of the Nineties culture wars, none of these events may seem particularly surprising. In recent years, student activists have launched hunger strikes for diversity on campuses ranging from Stanford to Columbia, UC-Irvine to Cornell. But the New School uprising was unusual in degree if not in kind: It was a sustained siege that for several months poisoned relations among professors and students and turned the graduate faculty building into a virtual war zone. And it was taking place at a proudly progressive institution, where John Dewey and W.E.B. Du Bois once taught, and where earlier in this century scholars fleeing fascist Europe had organized their own “University in Exile.”

Throughout the semester, students in the Mobilization resorted to extreme—and sometimes ugly—tactics. In February several of its supporters demonstrated against a New School exhibition of Holocaust photographs that took place during Black History Month. And one afternoon in late April, the protesters blocked the entrance to the graduate faculty building during a collective “die-in,” chanting slogans as their colleagues stepped awkwardly around them. Even in more placid moments, a committed vanguard of several dozen activists occupied the main lobby, passing out jargon-laden leaflets protesting the New School’s “police-state measures” and accusing...
numerous left-wing faculty members of racism. James Miller, the Foucault biographer and director of the New School’s Committee on Liberal Studies, describes the lobby tableau as “Monty Python does PC.” But he also found the drawing of battle lines painfully ironic. “Most of the faculty are veteran activists and people on the left,” he says. “I once organized a demonstration to demand that my own college create a black studies program. So it’s just plain weird to be called a racist and reactionary. In the real world, you know, we’re not gonna be confused with Jesse Helms.”

FOR MEMBERS of the Mobilization, however, the behavior of faculty and administrators this spring smacks of hypocrisy not irony. “The New School has been involved in a certain kind of institutional deception for decades,” says M. Jacqui Alexander, a feisty and charismatic visiting professor in the gender studies program who was in many ways the catalyst for the violent eruptions at the university this spring. Although the Mobilization’s agenda eventually encompassed all aspects of university life—from wages for maintenance workers to student representation—its members initially came together over Alexander’s unsuccessful bid for tenure. (“The university structures as constituted could not secure a permanent position for me,” she explains with characteristic aplomb.) A lengthy February 2 memorandum that Alexander identifies as the Mobilization’s founding document elaborated the ways in which “entrenched white institutional power” perpetuates “racism” and “other forms of inequality” at the university. (Alexander is of Caribbean descent.) Taking issue with President Fanton’s assertion that Alexander would not serve as the “litmus test of the university’s commitment to diversity,” the memo countered indigenously, “Professor Alexander is the litmus test.” This was a view shared by the hunger strikers who listed Alexander’s immediate tenuring as an urgent priority. After she was accused of acting purely out of self-interest, Alexander removed her tenure bid from the list of demands and then joined the fast herself.

Sprawled across the floor of the lobby, Mobilization hunger strikers and supporters recounted to anyone who would listen the history of the New School’s broken promises on diversity. In 1990 the university had announced its intention to become “the most diverse private university of excellence in the country.” Seven years later, its critics point out, there is still only one tenured African-American scholar (Terry Williams, a sociologist) on the entire graduate faculty. President Fanton and other administrators acknowledge this, though they point out that the percentage of full-time faculty of color in all divisions of the university (19 percent) is higher than the national average (12 percent), as are the overall numbers of women. But Alexander and others in the Mobilization are not impressed. As proof of gender bias, they cite political science professor Adamantia Pollis, who won a sex-discrimination suit against the university in 1996 on the grounds that she was forced to retire at age seventy while several male contemporaries on the faculty had been allowed to continue teaching. (The New School has appealed the verdict.) Just as egregious, argues Alexander, the university’s “faculty of color,” unlike white professors, are relegated to part-time, marginal status through a “revolving door” policy of short-term appointments.

Many deans and faculty who do not sympathize with the Mobilization admit that the university has been slow to implement affirmative action in the graduate division. One reason, they say, is that there are no separate guidelines for affirmative-action hires. In the past, minority candidates championed by individual departments have failed to win job offers
because they didn’t meet the university’s tenure criteria: one book published and reviewed and proof of significant progress on a second. “We’re not going to make mediocre appointments, be they black or white,” says Judith Friedlander, dean of the graduate faculty.

Although some funds for minority hires have been available since 1991, departments have been reluctant to draw upon them. The recent loss of several treasured—and internationally renowned—scholars, including Eric Hobsbawm (who retired) and Ira Katznelson and Charles Tilly (both of whom are now at Columbia), has apparently left a number of departments fearful that restricting new searches solely to minority candidates might limit their ability to maintain both standards of excellence and a range of expertise. In fact, money for all appointments is tight: The New School receives no state funding and has virtually no endowment.

Nevertheless, this winter the university appeared determined to stop dragging its feet on diversity. In March, Fanton’s office unveiled a plan to bring five scholars of color to the graduate faculty in the next three years. It was an ambitious goal, but it seemed late in coming, and, more disturbing to members of the Mobilization, it did not include the immediate result they wanted: tenure for Alexander.

In flyers and memos, the Mobilization described Alexander as a “world-renowned feminist scholar of color.” At numerous events, students spoke of how “inspirational” she was, how she “represents a different kind of learning,” and how she “changed their lives.” In the classroom, says Professor Emirbayer, who followed the Mobilization closely this spring and plans to write an ethnography of the movement, Alexander stressed that education is “about choosing to live a certain way marked by honor and integrity and answering back when those things are challenged.”

Yet Emirbayer also understands those who take a more jaundiced view of Alexander. More than one Mobilization critic says that what developed around her resembled “a cult of personality”—a cult that she was perfectly willing to exploit by allowing herself to be an issue in the hunger strike and a “litmus test” of the university’s commitment to diversity. Displays of adulation from her students were not unusual: A December e-mail from Erich Dewald, for instance, urged New School students to nominate Alexander for the Distinguished University Teaching Award. “Submit a 2 page summary of how Jacqui rules,” he advised. “You don’t even need to have taken a class with her. Just tell them she rocks your world!!!!”

Critics note that since earning her Ph.D. from Tufts in 1986, Alexander has published no books of her own—though she has penned several articles and co-edited two volumes of essays. Mobilization members counter that her work focuses on “marginalized” subjects not taken seriously by journals and publishing houses. But in fact, her scholarly concerns—evident in articles with titles like “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy” and “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Post-Coloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas”—are standard fare in cultural studies. “Erotic Autonomy,” an exploration of “heteropatriarchy” in the Bahamas, is awash in trendy rhetoric: “The paradoxical counterpart of erasure in the consolidation of hegemonic heterosexuality is spectacularization. State managers relied heavily on biblical testimony in order to fix this specter, using reiteration and almost incessant invocation to God and Sodom.” After independently reviewing her curriculum vitae this spring, three departments in the graduate division—political science, sociology, and anthropology—each voted against recommending Alexander for tenure.
IN THE Mobilization's view, the battle for Alexander's tenuring was closely linked to the larger hope of forging an alternative to the New School's allegedly Eurocentric curriculum and faculty. "Traditions of decolonization, anti-sexism, anti-racism, gay and lesbian liberation, transnational capitalist critique and the like...have been systematically delegitimized, marginalized and 'minoritized," explained the Mobilization's memo of February 2. To what degree "capitalist critique" is marginalized at the New School is open to question—one might get a different assessment from economists at the University of Chicago. It is also worth noting the more than two hundred courses exploring race, gender, and other cultures offered each semester. Still, though the university has always welcomed Marxist scholars, it has never been particularly receptive to postcolonialism or identity politics—or even student activism for that matter. Indeed, some of the school's most famous Left-wing professors—including Eric Hobsbawm—were discomfited by much of the student radicalism of the Sixties.

Soon after releasing their memo, several Mobilization members found what they believed was further evidence of the School's Eurocentric bias: the Holocaust photography exhibit set up in the main lobby of the graduate faculty building. "The University needed to understand that they had done something wrong," explains Bahiyih Maroon, a student activist who led a demonstration against the exhibit that quickly devolved into an emotional confrontation between student protesters and elderly Jewish women. It was "disrespectful," Maroon explained later, for the New School to stage a Holocaust exhibit in February in place of activities commemorating Black History Month. In fact, the New School did honor Black History Month in several ways, including hosting a discussion with Harvard's Kwame Anthony Appiah, a lecture by visiting professor Emmanuel Eze, and a reading of correspondence between Marcus Garvey and William Pickens. But these events failed to deter the protesters.

The centerpiece of the Mobilization's campaign to remake the school's curriculum was a six-page document posted on a wall in the main lobby entitled "Rethinking Europe." Conceived before the hunger strike began, it proved almost as powerful a magnet for devotion and outrage at the New School as Alexander herself. In May 1996 several graduate faculty members—Rayna Rapp, an anthropologist who heads the gender studies program, Vicky Hattam, then chair of the political science department, and Steve Caton, also an anthropologist—approached Dean Friedlander with a proposal to expand the New School's curriculum and bring several scholars of color to the graduate faculty. Friedlander seemed receptive and in September 1996 circulated "Rethinking Europe" to various senior professors for their consideration. Written in consultation with Jacqui Alexander and several other faculty members, the document called for recruiting minority scholars to study the "trans-Atlantic" (the geographic area spanning Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas). In the spirit of Paul Gilroy's influential book The Black Atlantic (Verso, 1993), the minority scholars would examine "the ways in which information, peoples, commodities, and cultural forms flow back and forth across borders," with a particular focus on "power relations."

But when the proposal was discussed at a September 24 faculty meeting, several professors disouted from it. Feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser argued that, while expanding the curriculum was a worthy goal, the project outlined in the document was oddly parochial. "It was an inappropriately narrow proposal," Fraser says, "both in its thematic focus on the trans-Atlantic and in its methodology, which I can only describe as Sokalist—as though someone had tried to parody the trendiest, most obfuscatory jargon in critical theory and make..."
this the basis for hiring people. You would get such a narrow pool of applicants, and, because of the New School’s limited funds, our ability to hire people of color in, say, psychology or political science would be left unaddressed.” Richard J. Bernstein, chair of the philosophy department, felt similarly, expressing his objections in a strongly worded five-page memo that eventually made the rounds of the university. What troubled Bernstein most was the conflation of an affirmative-action plan with a proposal for curricular reform. “There is a constant slippage in this document from ‘diversity’ to ‘scholars of color’ without any critical reflection,” he complained, pointing out that “there are many ‘white’ persons... whose research and interests focus on the issues discussed in this document.”

There was another reason that Nancy Fraser and others at the New School rejected “Rethinking Europe.” The proposal, says Fraser, was “a thinly disguised ploy to write a job description and stack a search for one particular person.” That person was Jacqui Alexander, a co-author of the document who was conspicuously praised in its pages as “the only scholar [at the New School] whose research engages” the issues under discussion. “I didn’t know Jacqui Alexander’s work very well at the time,” Fraser admits, but she believed that any decision about hiring Alexander should be made after a thorough review of her dossier by an individual department, not the special ad hoc committee envisioned in the proposal.

When Fraser voiced her objections to the plan, she didn’t know she was participating in what “Rethinking Europe’s” authors deemed the “collective murder” of a campaign for justice. In late January, apparently unaware that she had blood on her hands, Fraser stepped out of a seminar room at the University of Wisconsin at Madison where she was giving a guest lecture, and was handed a copy of an e-mail that had just been sent to a progressive student organization in Madison. “On Friday, January 31,” it began,

Nancy Fraser, a faculty member at the New School in NYC will be giving a talk at the University of Wisconsin at Madison on international feminism. Fraser is being used by her administration to tout the New School’s “diversity.”... However, Fraser was instrumental in defeating a proposal to hire more faculty of color and make the New School less Eurocentric. The obvious racism and hypocrisy of this woman... needs to be immediately exposed and addressed.... If you live in Madison... please act on this.

Word of the inflammatory e-mail message quickly spread to faculty members and acquaintances of Fraser in Madison and New York. Flooded by a barrage of requests for substantiation of the charges, the Cambridge-based Center for Campus Organizing, which had posted the message, issued Fraser an apology. It turned out that a lone employee who had been in touch with activists at the New School (and who has since resigned) had acted without authorization. At the New School, members of the graduate faculty circulated a memo denouncing the attack on Fraser: “We strongly reject the idea that legitimate disagreement over curriculum or personnel should be construed as opposition to diversity or as racism.”

But on February 25, the Coalition of Concerned Faculty, Students and Staff, which would soon merge with the Mobilization, struck back with a scathing memo of its own. The university’s defense of Fraser, the memo opined, “is a brilliant example of the swift ways in which white power is deployed to insulate itself from critique and to protect white interests.” As for Fraser herself (whom Cornel West has termed “one of the most creative social philosophers of her generation”), her criticism of “Rethinking Europe” revealed that she was merely a loyal servant of a regime of
Behind the anger on both sides, the fallout from “Rethinking Europe” exposed a fundamental difference of opinion over what curricular diversity actually entails. To the Mobilization, it means incorporating “new knowledge” into the curriculum: not just more courses on non-European subjects, or even more faculty of color, but whole new fields of study that focus on the experiences of different identity groups (black studies, Latino studies, queer theory), with the implicit assumption that one’s epistemology and one’s identity are closely, if not causally, related. For faculty members like Fraser and Bernstein, however, who insist they are open to bringing new fields and methodologies to the New School, this kind of identity-based epistemology restricts the acquisition of knowledge to individuals who meet preestablished requirements for gender, skin color, and sexual orientation. This is certainly the way some members of the Mobilization conceive of “new knowledge”: Welcome to the “world of anti-queer ideas,” one of its flyers mockingly proclaimed, where “faculty members who have same-sex lovers...think who they fuck doesn’t influence what they write, how they teach, the way they live.”

In its literature, the Mobilization repeatedly stressed the “lived experiences” of marginalized groups—African Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and women. And when Camille Atkinson, a graduate student in philosophy, took the floor at an open forum to explain that she had become increasingly troubled by the Mobilization’s strident rhetoric, in particular its casual use of phrases like “white supremacy” and “racism,” a Mobilization member in the audience responded, “It’s not all a matter of inter-

THROUGHOUT the spring, the phrase “called to account” surfaced again and again. Mobilization activists used it to denote those individuals they judged “complicit” with the university’s official stance which, in practice, seemed to be anyone who disagreed with the Mobilization’s tactics or demands. During the nineteen-day fast, hunger strikers huddled in blankets, some holding aloft signs declaring, WHITE FACULTY, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? THE HUNGER STRIKE IMPLICATES YOU! On other occasions, individual white professors were singled out for criticism. At an open forum in April, for example, David Plotke, a professor of political science, was berated by Amit Rai, a professor in the undergraduate division, for opposing the Mobilization’s tactics. On the afternoon of the die-in, Plotke had clashed with those who were blocking the entrance to the graduate faculty building. “What bothered me about the open forum was the personal nature of it,” he says. “As that evening developed, it was clear there was no room for real political discussion—either you agreed with the ideas of this group or you weren’t opposed to racism.”

Alexander justifies “calling out” individuals by saying that “institutions don’t simply operate by themselves—they operate through people.” The faculty’s opposition to “Rethinking Europe,” she says, revealed “the profound fear...of people of color taking over the institution at all levels.”

In response to an anonymous flyer posted in the graduate faculty building denouncing the attacks on Nancy Fraser, for example, a group within the Mobilization called END (Education Not Domination) wrote: “As a white woman...[Fraser] should be aware that part of being involved in struggles for justice sometimes entails being called out by people of color, who may have certain kinds of epistemic privilege to recognize racist behaviors and racist tendencies that white people sometimes overlook.” What if Fraser and others at the New School thought the attacks on her were simply baseless? Too bad, the memo implied, the whites in power lacked the “epistemic privilege” to determine this.

Ironically, in her most recent book, Justice Interruptus (Routledge, 1997), Fraser herself grapples with the question of how to sort out demands for recognition by different ethnic and racial groups. Straining for a middle ground between those who celebrate cultural difference and those who fear its balkanizing consequences, Fraser argues for the development of a “critical theory of recognition, one that identifies and defends only those versions of cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the politics of equality.” It’s a laudable ideal yet one that leaves the most difficult question unresolved: Who determines which movements fit the stated criteria? Fraser states unequivocally that the Mobilization at the
New School “was not a struggle for social justice,” but clearly its members thought that’s what it was.

More ironic still is that, despite the group’s identity-based rhetoric and practice, many of the Mobilization’s own members happen to be white, while many of its critics are not. At an open forum on May 6, several students from Latin America spoke out against the Mobilization, as did Zosera Kirkland, an African-American graduate student in political science. Initially, Kirkland was a member of the Mobilization, but by mid-April she was convinced that “if you didn’t get with the new orthodoxy, there really wasn’t a place for you” within its ranks. When Kirkland tried to raise some of her objections—to “preaching about white supremacy to the administration, which I thought was unconstructive and inappropriate,” for example—she grew frustrated that no one in the Mobilization wanted to listen. In late April, she helped write a statement titled “An Alternative.” Signed by more than forty graduate students and faculty members, including Richard Bernstein, Nancy Fraser, and James Miller, the document attempted to forge an alternative to both the Mobilization’s and the administration’s views on diversity. On the one hand, it criticized the New School as “procedurally inept” and “complacent” in its approach to affirmative action and expressed “unwaver ing” support for hiring five scholars of color at the graduate division (though Alexander was not mentioned) and for a “critical reappraisal” of the curriculum. On the other hand, the document argued against the conflation of affirmative action and curricular diversity and pointedly criticized the Mobilization for a political style that amounted to “a confusing, invidious and politically unsophisticated morass of ad hominem attacks, alienating tactics, and moral grandstanding.”

Soon after they were posted around the New School, copies of “An Alternative” were torn down. Replacing them was a response from the Mobilization titled “Factionalism Is No Alternative,” which denounced the opposition’s “arrogant attempt to weaken a popular struggle”—as though a plot had been hatched to derail the Cuban Revolution. “The current counter-mobilization,” a Mobilization e-mail of the same period explained, “has remained true to the mandate of hegemonic white power in its efforts to undermine and condemn the legitimate struggles of marginalized people for justice.” Single out for special criticism were the “few people of color” who had “fallen victim to” the administration’s white-power agenda. The not-so-subtle implication was that Kirkland and other people of color who opposed the Mobilization were Uncle Toms. As Ursula Wolfe-Rocca, a student at the New School’s undergraduate college, explained later, “Part of the critique is of ‘whiteness,’ where power coalesces in certain ways. Clearly there will be some people of color who share in that ‘whiteness.’”

Kirkland was taken aback by the hostile treatment that “An Alternative” received at the university and by the allegations of racial betrayal directed her way. “Intellectually and politically, I can substantiate what I did, but emotionally I feel distraught,” she says. Kirkland adds that she still identifies with Mobilization members such as Leslie Hill, an African-American political scientist who was deeply alienated by her experiences at the New School. Brought to the university under its Diamond Post-Doctoral Fellowship Program, which was implemented in 1991 to recruit minority scholars, Hill explains that she was tucked into a small office on the fourth floor of the graduate faculty (though her department is on the second floor), rarely spoken to by colleagues, and burdened with a much heavier teaching load than had been implied in the original description of her fellowship. In a scathing assessment of the program submitted to the university in April, Hill called on the New School:
School to go beyond mere “window dressing” and “cultivate a context in which [scholars of color] can develop and thrive.” Despite her sympathy with such demands, Kirkland says that she would rather take a stance with people who are “critical and rational” but who may not share her politics than with undemocratic movements that do.

Daniel Delaney, an African-American graduate student in political science and a Mobilization member, speaks from the other side. His goal is “to push the New School on affirmative action, which, despite some available funds has not, he feels, been a priority in the past. ‘There are a lot of people at the New School who’d be the first ones to sign a petition saying diversity is a good thing,’ Delaney observes. ‘But when it gets to zero-sum decisions, they make arguments [for other departmental needs] that are completely sound but that mean diversity is not the first priority.’”

By the end of the semester, opportunities for substantive dialogue on such issues had virtually disappeared. The May 6 open forum, designed to spark conversation between people with conflicting views, quickly deteriorated into bedlam. Andrew Arato, a New School sociologist, bluntly informed the students that the “halcyon days” were over, implying that the administration had been too lenient with them and provoking a Mobilization activist to denounce the “slimy white liberals” in her midst. A Peruvian student taunted the Mobilization by asking, “What color am I?” and declared, “This place is not to be turned into a circus—it’s absolutely infantile.” No sooner had he said this then a student from the Mobilization seized the microphone and screamed “Fuck you!” at Arato. Others denounced the signatures of “An Alternative” as “traitors” and “submissive women.” “What I’ve seen in this room tonight has reminded me of why I left the Mobilization,” Kirkland exclaimed. “You are out of control and a disgrace.”

But perhaps the climactic moment at the forum occurred when James Miller read a prepared statement harshly critical of Jacqui Alexander: “When a hunger strike was begun, in part on her behalf, Professor Alexander did not do the decent thing immediately and remove herself as an issue. I have witnessed hunger strikes before; in the 1960s, I met Cesar Chavez, a great activist of genuine spirituality. Jacqui Alexander, to put it mildly, is no Cesar Chavez.” Nor was the Mobilization, in his view, blameless for embracing Alexander’s tenure campaign.
“Unfortunately,” Miller said, “by using attitudes toward Jacqui Alexander as a litmus test of this faculty’s alleged racism, the Mobilization has tied itself to a record of academic publication that is indefensibly weak.”

Miller was immediately denounced as a “racist” and then, as the meeting adjourned, drawn into a tense, face-to-face standoff with Alexander herself. “What authorizes you to speak?” she demanded. Miller responded tersely: “I’ve read your work.”

For many Mobilization activists, the public attack on Alexander—by a white faculty member, no less—was a final outrage. At a cathartic May 12 mock graduation ceremony, which took place just after Alexander taught her last class at the University in Exile, students cried, hugged, banged spirit drums, and denounced the racism of Alexander’s critics. Several students gave an oral history of the struggle, and one, reflecting on the imminent loss of Alexander, confessed that the major lesson she had learned from the events of the spring was “I can’t trust white people.”

JACQUI Alexander failed to win her tenure battle at the New School this spring. (In June, she became a Guggenheim Latin American and Caribbean fellow for a project on memory and spiritualism in nineteenth-century Trinidad.) But what about the Mobilization’s other demands? Beyond the call for diversity, many of the planks in the Mobilization’s platform—enhanced student representation in university decision making, an increase in financial aid, higher pay and benefits for part-time faculty, improved working conditions for the security and maintenance staff—suggest a sincere attempt to hold the university to its stated ideals. The students have already won representation on the university’s search committee for minority scholars. And even some of the Mobilization’s fiercest critics, such as James Miller, believe the group’s actions will probably push the university to implement affirmative-action initiatives more quickly.

Ultimately, though, the New School will be hard-pressed to satisfy its critics in the Mobilization because much of what these critics abhor about the university—the fact, for instance, that its mostly white faculty and students do not “reflect the demographic reality of New York City”—is rooted in broader social and educational inequities that will not easily change. The Mobilization’s failure to recognize this points to a disturbing trend in student politics: the tendency to focus on the immediate issue and not to consider the underlying structural problems that must be addressed in order for true progress to be made.
on what’s happening on campus to the exclusion of the more egregious injustices committed outside its walls.

Only from such a myopic perspective can the New School be seen as the “white supremacist” cauldron of bigotry that its critics allege it is. Such hyperbolic language begs the question of how the white supremacy of liberal institutions like the New School differs from, say, the politics of David Duke. At the May 6 open forum, a student from Latin America strongly objected to the insinuation that the New School was “authoritarian”—perhaps because this student has seen the real thing at home. Some New School faculty members, recalling their own student days, experienced a certain déjà vu watching the Mobilization movement emerge. “I’m old enough to have seen versions of this before,” says David Plotke. “It was at the tail end of the New Left and its relationship to Third World radicalism and domestic black militancy. People would say, ‘This is it,’ and if you didn’t identify, you had no grounds for speaking.” Like others, Plotke expects the turbulence to die down. “If the New School were as racist and intransigent as the students claim, nothing would change. But there’s actually quite a lot of flexibility and openness.” He remains receptive to identity politics, he hastens to add, just not to “hypermoralizing based on authoritarian claims.”

Such hypermoralizing contains its own irony. At the May 6 open forum, a student elicited howls of derision for expressing ambivalence about affirmative action. Perhaps the Mobilization would like to see the New School turn into a utopian island where people with ambivalent or dissenting views do not exist. This, of course, is not the vision of a diverse community where differences are allowed to flourish, but the vision of an artificial, homogenous community where they are effaced.

Eyal Press, who studied political science at the New School for two years, has written frequently for The Nation and other publications. His article “Unforgiven: The Director of the Cambodian Genocide Program Rekindles Cold War Animosities” appeared in the April/May 1997 LF.