From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline

Fabio Rojas
Final Manuscript Submitted June 20, 2006
Forthcoming from the Johns Hopkins University Press 2007

Table of contents and Selections from “Chapter 1: The Movement that Became an Institution.” For comments or requests for more sample chapters, please email Fabio Rojas at frojas@indiana.edu
From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline

Table of Contents

Dedication
Acknowledgments
Preface
List of Tables
List of Photographs and Diagrams
Note on Terminology

Chapter 1: The Movement that Became an Institution

Chapter 2: The Road to Black Studies

Chapter 3: The Revolution at San Francisco State College

Chapter 4: The Life and Death of Black Studies Programs

Chapter 5: The Ford Foundation’s Mission in Black Studies

Chapter 6: Constructing the Discipline

Chapter 7: Black Studies as the Loyal Opposition

Appendix A: Note on Research Method

Appendix B: Archives Consulted

Appendix C: Newspapers Consulted

Appendix D: Persons interviewed by the Author

Appendix E: Sample Interview Questions

Appendix F: Interviews Collected by Others

Appendix G: Quantitative Data Used

Appendix H: The Survey of Issues in Africana Studies
Chapter 1: Black Studies: The Movement that Became an Institution

On November 5, 1968, black students at San Francisco State College gave President Robert Smith a list of ten demands. The first demand was that the college immediately create a Department of Black Studies. Other demands included the appointment of Nathan Hare, a Chicago-trained sociologist, as department chair and the reinstatement of George Murray, a Black Panther and student who was suspended from the college for attacking the editor of the student newspaper. A few days later, other students calling themselves the Third World Liberation Front issued similar demands for a School of Ethnic Studies. If the demands were not immediately met, the students would strike to shut down the campus. Although Smith supported Black Studies and Ethnic Studies, he would not reinstate Murray or appoint Hare. With that declaration, the Third World Strike started. From November 1968 to March 1969, students fought with administrators until the college’s next president reached an agreement ending the conflict and the first Department of Black Studies was born.

Incidents like the Third World Strike stand out in the popular imagination as Black Studies’ defining moment. However, protest and black power are only the beginning of the story. Soon after militant students graduated and campuses settled down, Black Studies entered a new stage in its development as an academic discipline. Writing in the New York University Education Quarterly in 1979, St. Clair Drake asked, “What happened to Black Studies?” He observed that Black Studies had moved away from its roots in the black-student movement of the late 1960s and begun a new stage in its development:

...what Black Studies were turning out to be was neither what their most youthful, dedicated supporters had envisioned nor what white faculties and administrators had wanted them to accept. The Black Studies movement was becoming institutionalized in the sense that it had moved from the conflict phase into adjustment to the existing educational system, with some of its values being accepted by that system. One of these was the concept that an ideal university community would be multi-ethnic, with ethnicity permitted some institutional expression, and with Black Studies being one of its sanctioned forms. A trade-off was involved. Black Studies became depoliticized and deradicalized.

Drake’s theme is accommodation and compromise within the system of American higher education. Protest created an opportunity within the university system, but the Black Studies movement did not completely transform educational institutions. Instead, black students created an arena for the expression of new values within the university system.

At the time Drake wrote the article, much evidence supported his thesis. Hundreds of students had been awarded B.A. degrees in Black Studies, Black Studies professional organizations had been formed, and there were more than two hundred Black Studies degree programs nationwide, many of which were interdepartmental programs. The field indicated that it was quickly developing the institutional infrastructure normally associated with older academic disciplines.

Black Studies’ recent history further confirms the contention that the field has accommodated itself to American academia. For example, at least seven universities now offer doctoral degrees in Black Studies, surely a sign that the field has found a place in higher education. The assembly of Harvard’s Black Studies “Dream Team” in the
1990s confirms that administrators have responded to the values promoted by the Black Studies movement. The implicit endorsement of Black Studies by the administration of an elite research university brought the field publicity and legitimacy, enabling Black Studies to be more fully developed in other research universities. Of course, there also has been much tension and conflict over Black Studies. Witness the debate over afrocentrism and Nile Valley scholarship in the 1990s or the more recent disputes over Black Studies at Harvard. Yet, these incidents reinforce the basic point: critics focus on Black Studies precisely because it is located in highly prestigious universities.

Despite the field’s visibility in elite research universities, Black Studies programs occupy an ambiguous position. On the one hand, the discipline is highly visible and well established in America’s most prestigious institutions of higher learning. Multiculturalists interpret the emergence of Black Studies as the first step in a racial diversification of the academy. From their perspective, Black Studies was the discipline emerging from the 1960s that encouraged women, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans to push for their own disciplines. Black Studies was literally the vanguard of the multiculturalism that has become taken for granted in the academy. Supporters see the field as a necessary corrective to an uncompromising mainstream. For these reasons, Black Studies programs are regularly covered in black education journals, popular magazines, and major newspapers. These programs have acquired status within their universities, and some of the most reputable American scholars, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., teach in Black Studies programs.

On the other hand, there are few Black Studies programs, and these units are small in size. Only 9 percent of four-year colleges and universities have a formalized Black Studies unit offering a curriculum leading to an undergraduate or graduate degree. I have estimated that the average Black Studies program employs only seven professors, many of who are courtesy or joint appointments with limited involvement in the program. A few consist of a single faculty member who organizes cross-listed courses taught by professors with appointments in other departments. The majority of these units do not have graduate programs. The small size and scope of many programs show that the field is not what conservative critics make it out to be—the university’s unconditional surrender to multiculturalists. Rather, Black Studies is a limited accommodation of new knowledge that emerged from the 1960s, when professors struggled to create a space for black-centered teaching and research.

What This Book Is About

This book’s central question is how Black Studies achieved this niche in American higher education. My subject is the shift from the realm of politics to educational institutions. This book is an account of how the political fray surrounding Black Studies (protests, the activists, and their political groups) impacted the educational field of the university (deans, college trustees, program directors, and Black Studies scholars themselves). The questions I ask address the institutionalization of social change. How did a radical social movement turn into a stable academic discipline? Why do Black Studies programs exist in some universities and not others? What conditions prevent or facilitate the growth of Black Studies after a program is established? How was the Black Studies profession created from other academic disciplines?
My contention is that the growth of Black Studies programs can be fruitfully viewed as a bureaucratic response to a social movement. Black Studies’ success as an academic discipline depends not only on the actions of students and faculty members, but also on administrators’ choices. Students and faculty members have to navigate the political and bureaucratic environment of universities in order to help programs survive in the long run.

This perspective on Black Studies’ history suggests that attention be paid both to the mobilization surrounding Black Studies and to the bureaucratic decisions following protest. Accordingly, I view Black Studies’ growth as occurring in stages corresponding to early attempts to force the adoption of Black Studies and later efforts to stabilize and defend Black Studies programs. Each stage presented Black Studies advocates with different obstacles and raises distinct sociological questions.

The earliest stage was a preconflict stage, when college students and African American intellectuals developed criticisms of universities and innovated the idea of a college major organized around African and African American topics. The invention of Black Studies was followed by conflict between students and college administrators, perhaps the most well known part of the story. From 1966 to 1973, Black Studies became a pressing issue on college campuses as a direct result of the civil rights movement, a rise in nationalist sentiment, and student mobilization. Groups such as the Black Panthers and chapters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became prominent features on campuses and were at the front of the Black Studies movement. Students formed black student unions that conducted strikes, protests, and riots at dozens, possibly hundreds, of campuses. The strikes had many goals, and the creation of a Black Studies Department was often a key demand. Prominent photographs of college protest from that era, such as the black-student takeover of the Cornell Student Union, depict protests carried out by well-organized black-student groups.

What happened to Black Studies after 1968 is less well known and less understood. Following the strikes, more than two hundred Black Studies units were created. Approximately 120 of those units offer formal Black Studies degrees today. Programs clung tenaciously to the institutional space opened by the black-student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These small programs began an arduous and never-ending process of stabilization. Program directors dealt with problems that any academic manager would face—the need to justify the program’s existence, the never-ending search for qualified faculty and talented students, and yearly budget disputes. Program chairs also faced problems specific to Black Studies. Black Studies Departments were thought to have a special obligation to black students on campus and to the communities they served. The tension between service and the traditional academic goal of research was a difficulty with which many programs still cope.

The key difference between the earlier stages of conflict and later stages of stabilization was Black Studies’ new context. The earlier stage was mainly about mobilization and direct action. People were willing to listen to students because of a wider historical shift in race relations. Not only were African Americans demanding the same rights as whites, some African Americans were demanding power to control educational institutions. The push for Black Studies revolved around black intellectuals, student groups, and the debates within the civil rights movement concerning black power and cultural nationalism. Viewing the civil rights movement as a limited and
underwhelming effort, nationalists adopted a more radical position requiring institutions specifically dedicated to serving the African American community.

Nationalists framed their demands within an American tradition of pluralism, ethnic pride, and self-determination. Like immigrant groups, blacks wanted to build their own institutions so that they could participate more fully in American society. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton made this argument in their seminal text, Black Power—The Politics of Liberation:

The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close its ranks. By this, we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can effectively form a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society. Traditionally, each new ethnic group in this society has found the route to social and political viability through the organization of its own institutions with which to represent its needs within a larger society.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Much, although not all, of the justification for Black Studies was framed in similar terms. The African American community needed its own educational institutions for the cultivation of talent and preservation of culture. Because of a long history of neglect by most colleges and universities, African Americans should take the initiative to create their own institutions and knowledge base.

Black Studies’ later development was characterized by a focus on legitimacy. By the mid-1970s, student protest waned, and Black Studies’ main problem was no longer its exclusion from higher education. Instead, the field faced issues of institutional survival, which depended on the ability of Black Studies faculty members and administrators to successfully argue that they were academically legitimate. The participants in this argument were quite different from those who protested in the late 1960s. The debate over the legitimacy of Black Studies was carried on in faculty meetings, conferences with deans, and the boardrooms of nonprofits that supported Black Studies programs.

Writings on the development of Black Studies programs suggest that Black Studies had acquired some degree of legitimacy by the early 1980s. Darlene Clark Hine, then professor of history at Michigan State University, noted the increasing legitimacy of Black Studies in a Ford Foundation report. Early in Black Studies’ history, administrators opposed Black Studies programs because they believed such programs lowered academic standards. By the time she interviewed administrators in the mid-1980s, Hine found that the field’s legitimacy had increased because there was now a pool of qualified scholars:

The tide has turned, there has been a discernible shift among college administrators from amused contempt or indifference to enthusiastic support of Black Studies. Now administrators are eager to improve the quality of their programs and departments. One important factor has been the availability of productive, well-trained scholars willing, indeed anxious, to head and/or work in Black Studies. No longer do administrators have to rely on the local minister or community activist to oversee and teach Black Studies. If they put up the money, administrators can recruit black scholars.\textsuperscript{xv}
Hine then argues that there is also an element of political expediency in Black Studies’ new legitimacy:

Another motivation fueling the change in attitude toward Black Studies is institutional expediency. Faced with the specter of declining black student enrollments, university administrators are increasingly using strong Black Studies departments, programs, centers and institutes as recruitment devices. Moreover, as is often the case, the only critical mass of black faculty working at many of these institutions is housed in Black Studies divisions.xvi

Hine observes that ethnic studies programs are the only source of faculty racial diversity on many campuses. This claim can be hard to assess because there are few comprehensive sources of data on the ethnic composition of the professoriate in the 1970s and 1980s. But it bears noting that Black Studies professors tend to hold joint appointments with other programs (see chapter 6), which suggests that programs might be assembled mostly from faculty who already work at the university. Regardless of the accuracy of Hine’s comments, the basic point remains. For a variety of reasons, Black Studies programs have become an accepted and legitimate feature of many universities.

---


xii As of 2006, the following universities offer doctoral degrees: Temple University; The University of California, Berkeley; Michigan State University; the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Northwestern University; Harvard University; and Yale University. This list is drawn from various editions of the Index of College Majors and the E-Black Studies Web site (www.eblackstudies.org), which lists graduate programs in African American Studies and related areas.

xiii The Harvard “Dream Team” refers to the professors hired by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to teach in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University in the late 1990s. Following two decades of decline at the campus, Gates was asked to chair the program and rehabilitate it in 1991. An outstanding administrator, Gates hired some of the most well known African American scholars to teach in the program, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (Cambridge-trained philosopher), Cornel West (religion scholar and progressive activist), Larry Bobo (sociologist and expert on racial attitudes), William Julius Wilson (originator of the declining significance of race thesis), and Michael C. Dawson (perhaps the preeminent student of black public opinion). The Harvard program is discussed in detail in chapter 4.

xiv During a confidential interview, one Black Studies program chair called this the “Harvard effect.” Administrators were much more likely to provide funding for Black Studies once Harvard revamped their program. The Harvard effect is not discussed in this book much, except to note that it occurred. Future research can assess the impact of Black Studies in elite universities on the well being of Black Studies programs in lower ranked schools.

xv Nile Valley scholarship claims that the Western cultural tradition comes from black Egyptian culture. Unsurprisingly, this thesis has been strongly disputed. The most well
known version is the one proposed in *Black Athena*. See Bernal (1987). Afrocentrism is an approach to knowledge and social change that places African interests at the center. Afrocentricity is not only an epistemic claim, but an ethical stance as well: “Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus, to be black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination.” Page 2 in Asante, Molefi. 2003 [1980]. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. Chicago: African American Images. The other well-known exposition of afrocentrism is Molefi Asante’s *The Afrocentric Idea*, published in 1987 by Temple University Press.

These beliefs have been attacked by scholars within the academy and by conservative critics. For example, National Review Online editor John Derbyshire succinctly stated the view of Black Studies’ most aggressive critics when he wrote that “like most nonblacks, I guess, I have, anyway, always thought that ‘Afro-American Studies’ is a pseudo-discipline, invented by guilty white liberals as a way of keeping black intellectuals out of trouble, and giving them a shot at holding professorships at elite institutions without having to prove themselves in anything really difficult, like math.” (Column published at www.nationalreview.com on January 11, 2002. Permanent URL link: http://www.nationalreview.com/derbyshire/derbyshire011102.shtml.) For other critiques of Black Studies and ethnic studies more generally, see Syke, Charles. 1989. *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*. Regnery Publishing; or D’Souza, Dinesh. 1991. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press. The latter targets multiculturalism more generally, although Black Studies is mentioned as an example of multiculturalism gone amok.

vi A detailed examination of the conflict at Harvard must wait until more time has passed. According to news reports and accounts published in academic journals and books, the conflict seems to have been centered around Harvard University President Lawrence Summers, who, for better or worse, chose to confront Professor Cornel West in a private meeting. This meeting followed a period when relations between Summers and some Harvard professors were allegedly strained because of Summers’ views on campus diversity.

The *Boston Globe*, which broke the story in December 2001, reported that Summers chastised West for a variety of activities. West declined to be interviewed for that specific article; when contacted by the *Globe*, Summers refused to provide details of private meetings but said that “grade inflation is a general issue in the university that should be considered by faculty members in all departments with no specific focus.” Summers also tried to distance himself from the report that he criticized West’s public writings by saying that “many mediums of intellectual expression are appropriate and not for the university to judge, and that . . . public intellectual debate on many issues, including race, is a great strength of Harvard” (Abel, David. December 22, 2001. “Harvard ‘Dream Team’ Roiled, Black Scholars, Summer in Rift.” *The Boston Globe*. Page A1.)

In a recent book (*Democracy Matters*, 2004, Penguin Press), Cornel West claims that Summers angrily confronted him with a long list of complaints, such as the fact that he supported Bill Bradley’s presidential campaign, recorded a rap CD, and allegedly canceled classes. Furthermore, Summers allegedly wanted West to publicly criticize
friend Harvey Mansfield: “When I entered his office, Professor Summers seemed nervous as he shook my hand; frankly, he seemed uneasy in his own skin. Then, to my astonishment, this man I’d never met before started our conversation by saying that he wanted me to help him f*** up Professor Mansfield, a leading conservative professor who has openly disparaged the sizable presence of black students and women at Harvard. President Summers apparently assumed that because I am a deep black democrat I would relish taking part in bringing Professor Mansfield down. To his surprise, and I would imagine embarrassment, I told him that Professor Mansfield is a friend of mine, my former teacher, and a respected colleague, and that in fact I had just congratulated Mansfield at the faculty club on his superb translation (with his wife) of Tocqueville’s two-volume classic Democracy in America.” West’s account of the meeting and its aftermath can be found in an excerpt adapted for the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education. 2005. 47: 64–69.


The timing of the conflict is the most interesting aspect of the Harvard incident. Black Studies programs have been surrounded by conflict since their inception. However, it would seem unwise to invite controversy when an academic program is at the height of its international reputation, especially from a university president who had been in office for only approximately four months. Normally, the nearly impeccable academic credentials of the Harvard African American Studies faculty would protect them from bureaucratic interference. Perhaps the faculty’s sudden prominence in the 1990s, after years when the department was nearly extinct (see chapter 4), invited attention from the department’s enemies. Historical research will have to assess this conjecture.

The Boston Globe recently reported that the Harvard African and African American Studies faculty is considering bringing Cornel West back, who left in the wake of the dispute with Summers (Marcella Bombardieri. June 6, 2006. “Some Seek Scholar’s Return.” The Boston Globe. Page B1.) The end of Summers’ tenure as university president has encouraged some faculty members to believe that Harvard will be a more hospitable place for West. The department would benefit because West is a charismatic instructor who can fill the introductory course. It is unknown whether the Harvard administration would approve another job offer or if West would accept. This episode shows how Black Studies at Harvard is a project under constant revision.

The relationship between Black Studies and multiculturalism is multifaceted. As the first form of ethnic studies to emerge from the 1960s, Black Studies certainly has been a model for other forms of ethnic studies and multiculturalism more generally (e.g., Gutierrez, Ramon A. 1994. “Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities.” In Multi-Culturalism: A Critical Reader, edited by David Theo Goldberg,


See chapter 6 for a thorough analysis of which universities offer Black Studies degrees and an analysis of the Black Studies professoriate.

I would like to thank one of the manuscript’s anonymous reviewers for suggesting this language.


I consulted reference guides such as the College Board’s Index of College Majors and found about two hundred universities that offered degrees, including minor concentrations and certificates. Among those that were listed as having programs in which students could major in Black Studies at the undergraduate or graduate levels, many did not officially offer “Black Studies” but permitted students in other majors, such as American Studies or self-directed independent studies, to write theses on Black Studies. At other universities, Black Studies designated a program of study in which students would take courses in history or sociology, but there was no independent academic unit. In total, I found about 125 universities that had a distinct academic subunit labeled as Black Studies (or a variant like Africana Studies) that offered bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degrees. Since I conducted this research, a few more universities have established programs and departments. Therefore, the total number now may be as high as 140.


xvi Ibid., 17–18.