

Rojas, Fabio. (2007). *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Fabio Rojas's new book on Black power and the Black studies movement is a comprehensive analysis of the field of Black studies. Documenting the development of the field from its birth in the student protests of the 1960s to its present institutionalization, the book is based on a series of case studies of Black studies departments and on an original survey of Black studies scholars. Readers well versed in the Black power movement will find little that is new in the historical narrative. Nevertheless, the original survey of Black studies scholars reveals interesting facts. And while the book is not without its limitations, it nonetheless represents a well-written, carefully documented narrative important to the current debate on the future of Black studies.

A book intended primarily for sociologists, particularly those who study social movements and bureaucracies, its orientation is not so much historical as theoretical. Its ambition is to uncover how bureaucracies (i.e., the U.S. academic system) respond to crises and how social movements become institutionalized into bureaucratic systems. Whereas others would focus on the transformation of racial politics over the 20th century, or the history of the Black intellectual, or the philosophical debate over the possibility of an Afrocentric knowledge, Rojas argues that "the growth of black studies programs can be fruitfully viewed as a bureaucratic response to a social movement" (p. 4).

The book is arranged chronologically, and the first few chapters discuss the emergence of Black studies. The first empirical chapter chronicles the preconditions for the development of Black studies departments: the large influx of African American students onto college campuses in the 1960s, the disappointment among many with the pace of civil rights movements, and the rise of political groups such as the Black Panthers. The next chapter centers on the formation of the Black studies department at San Francisco State College (SFSC), the first college to institute such a department. After detailing the role of Black activists in California and the Black Panthers, Rojas argues that a little noted structural condition made the birth of the department possible: the Experimental College, an academic unit within SFSC in which alternative forms of instruction were encouraged and in which students were

even permitted to teach their own courses. Rojas believes that this organizational condition was crucial, because it offered “a space where movement participants creatively refashion[ed] existing institutional practices” (p. 59). It is an interesting argument: While giving proper due to the agency of student activists, it nonetheless provides a structural account as to why their actions produced institutional results so quickly and so effectively. The Experimental College provided a space within the bureaucracy of SFSC for the relatively easy introduction of early forms of Black studies thought and pedagogy.

The subsequent chapters address Black studies as a bureaucratic unit and (to a very limited extent) as an academic discipline or field. In chapter 4, Rojas examines how the Black studies field was framed and how it survived within the university by studying three Black studies programs, those at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University. Rojas explains that he “chose these three schools because all are urban research universities, all experienced black student protest, and all had black studies programs that suffered in the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 95). Some readers will question this rationale, especially given its neglect of institutions that, successfully or not, attempted to develop strongly Afrocentric programs. In fact, given the chapter’s conclusion—that whether the programs succeeded depended on the ability of leaders to negotiate their local bureaucracies—one would think that Afrocentric programs, being the form of Black studies scholarship most radical and therefore most difficult to institute, would have represented a stronger test case. And while the Harvard program has always been in the public eye, readers will wonder whether the programs at University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Chicago were historically important enough to merit close attention.

But the chapter that might attract the most interest, and perhaps incite the most controversy, among Black studies researchers is the one reporting the results of a survey of about 180 Black studies scholars nationwide.

Rojas seeks in this chapter to document several interesting facts. For example, he finds that most current Black studies professors received their PhDs from Yale University and the University of Michigan, with Columbia University a near third and three California institutions—the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of California, Berkeley; and Stanford University—fourth, fifth, and sixth. (Temple University may have granted more PhDs overall; according to the author, it has granted 19 to people who have gone on to become and currently are Black studies professors.) The development of sustainable Black studies programs, Rojas convincingly argues, has been a pattern among the top research institutions in the country, not the average college. And while many observers assume

that almost all Black studies appointments are jointly shared with other departments, 37% of Black studies faculty members hold full appointments exclusively in Black studies departments. Many researchers will also find interesting the author's tabulation of the Black studies cannon, the rank-ordered list of the most important books in the field as reported by Black studies scholars. (Atop the list, not surprisingly, is *The Souls of Black Folk*. Others include *Black Atlantic*, *Ethnic America*, and *The Racial State*.)

However, the chapter reveals a disappointing lack of sensitivity to the intellectual debates that have raged within Black studies over whether it constitutes a distinct discipline, with its own methods, or an interdisciplinary field defined largely by a subject matter. For example, Rojas makes what many would find an implausible claim: "Most black studies professors believe their discipline has its own unique methods" (p. 168). While scholars such as Molefi Asante have convinced many of the existence of an Afrocentric method, many do not believe this to be true, arguing instead that their own fields—history, sociology, political science, anthropology—have effective *methods* but have failed to incorporate successfully the African American condition as a *subject matter*. Still others would argue that the problem is the failure by traditional disciplines, such as literary criticism, to recognize creative works by African American *authors* or *artists* as part of the established canon. It is only after carefully reading Rojas's evidence that one realizes he refers to many scholars believing in a *need* for independent methods (p. 197), which is far from confirmation that, in the minds of practitioners, the status of an independent Black studies methodology has been achieved. Considering how significant this issue was for many scholars over the 1980s and 1990s, the period of the institutionalization of the field, it is surprising that a study of the institutionalization of Black studies glosses over this issue.

Nevertheless, experts on Black studies would be remiss in ignoring this book. Rojas's organizational perspective, informed by a strong foundation in sociological theory, provides valuable insights. As a study of the major issues surrounding the birth and development of Black studies, the book works very well, covering most of the important controversies, often in careful historical detail. And while scholars still working to refine the intellectual foundations of an Afrocentric field may be frustrated by the cursory treatment of their issues, they will no doubt respect the insights that derive from a careful attention to the dynamics of institutionalization into a bureaucratic structure.

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