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Black and Latino Studies and Social Capital Theory

Pedro Cabán

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Introduction

Three and one-half decades have transpired since the establishment of the first Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies programs. Since then, a substantial body of scholarship on the African American and Latino experience in the USA has been produced. One area of recent scholarly interest is the origins, goals and trajectory of the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movements of the 1960s. New scholarship has generated important insights on the relationship between activist scholarship and community empowerment in the context of the 1960s nation-wide political struggle for social and racial justice. The intellectual and political need to further develop the historiography of the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movement and to assess its implications for community empowerment and institutional transformation is self-evident. This essay hopes to make a contribution to this emerging scholarship. However, it will do so by undertaking a comparative analysis that employs conceptualizations drawn from the social and cultural capital literature. These conceptualizations are heuristically useful for theorizing the movements’ political action and goals in the context of a higher educational system that resisted demands for reform of racially oppressed sectors. This essay will rely primarily on the social capital literature of Pierre Bourdieu, John Coleman and Michael Woolcock.

Students, the University and Social Capital

Although there is an abundance of scholarship on the Black and Latino studies movement of the 1960s, researchers have tended to shy away from
the comparative analysis of these movements. Instead the scholarship demonstrates a pronounced, almost universal, preference for the study of individual movements in the context of biracial political dynamics; i.e. Black studies, Puerto Rican studies, Chicano studies movement versus the university. While such in-depth and specialized accounts are important for reclaiming and contextualizing a history of resistance by racialized communities, they tend to generate only limited insights into the political economy of higher education. Virtually all studies explore a similar array of issues: the nature and content of student demands, the movement’s ideological underpinnings, how universities responded and the political context (the anti-war, civil rights, Black freedom movements) in which Black and Latino studies emerged. Often missing from this analysis is a discussion of how the university is embedded in a social network of powerful institutions (including local, national and state government, corporations and alumni associations) and how its actions correspond not only to its specific organizational interests, but also reflect the interests of economic and political actors in this network.

The conceptual lynchpin of the Black and Latino studies movement was its analysis of the relationship between university-sanctioned forms of knowledge and racial power. Activists for Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies were keenly aware the university was a repository of political and academic power, and of its enduring connections to the US state and corporate capital. Because they understood the university to be directly involved in perpetuating racial and social inequities, activists sought to acquire some of its resources and reinvest these to fight racial oppression. Precisely for this reason they demanded curriculum reform, autonomous academic units, racial and ethnic diversification of the faculty and administration, reallocation of resources to support research relevant to community needs, and much greater access for Blacks and Latinos. The idea that the university could be turned on its head, that is to say function as an agent for racial justice rather than operate on behalf of White supremacy, was revolutionary. Underlying this idea was the conviction that as a producer of knowledge the university was essentially a non-excludable public good. Proponents of Black and Latino studies felt their actions were morally justified since the research the university funded and the courses it authorized to be taught contributed to sustaining an inegalitarian racial hierarchy.

By adopting a comparative approach that employs Bourdieu’s conceptualizations we can rethink the politics of the Black and Latino studies movements. Using Bourdieu’s insights on higher education, the university can be portrayed as the repository of diverse capitals (economic, social and cultural) that are the source of its knowledge-based power. These capitals are controlled overwhelmingly by White administrators and zealously guarded since they are essential to sustain the universities’ function of
reproducing White supremacist society order. The Black and Latino studies movement was national in scope and committed to eroding the White monopoly over mutually reinforcing and interlocking capitals embedded in the university. The movement ultimately sought to democratize the university by reconfiguring the “ownership” of these capitals and reinvesting them in programs to rediscover neglected racial histories and to promote community advancement.¹ By applying some of Bourdieu’s conceptualizations on the use of higher education to reproduce elite domination, we can rethink the politics of Black and Latino studies in the context of unified resistance by higher education, the corporate sector and government to a concerted campaign by racially oppressed members of society to eradicate White supremacy and the racial hierarchies it enforced.

Capital and Power

Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu are arguably two of the major intellectual forces behind the surge in social capital research in the last few years. Their conceptualization of social capital as a resource that enhances the efficacy of voluntary associations has stimulated research in multiple fields. Indeed, the ubiquity of social capital research has led the prominent sociologist Alejandro Portes to comment that, “social capital has evolved into something of a cure all for the maladies affecting society.” Moreover, he contends that the uncritical application of social capital to a vast array of events and in differing contexts is eroding its “distinct meaning.”² Others have countered that accusations of conceptual muddling are common refrains made of new postulates and over time, through continuous empirical application and conceptual refinements, social capital will demonstrate its utility by generating new insights on the role of non-material capital assets in political and social phenomena.³

Bourdieu’s concept of social capital is heuristically appealing for this study because it offers the prospect of generating new insights into the struggle between Black and Latino students and higher education administrators; two groups that subscribed to fundamentally opposing philosophies regarding the production, dissemination and utilization of university-sanctioned knowledge. Bourdieu defines social capital as:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.⁴

The essence of social capital is the combination of regularized interpersonal interactions and an array of personal connections. The system
presupposes a set of shared values, which presumably are continuously nurtured and reinforced through sustained interaction. John Fields points out that social capital is essentially a “relational construct. It can only provide access to resources where individuals have not only formed ties with others but have internalized the shared values of the group.” Presumably power differentials among the members of the social network are minimal, and the networks are not hierarchically configured.

In his comparative assessment of Putnam’s and Bourdieu’s distinctive conceptualizations of social capital and their respective utility for research, Siisiäinen comments:

the choice between Putnam and Bourdieu depends: first, on what problems we are interested in and, second, on our position concerning the dispute between the sociology of integration and the sociology of conflict. Trust and voluntary associations create consensus and economic welfare in Putnam’s approach on the condition that the specific interests of certain groups and conflicts between them are cancelled out. Bourdieu’s sociological focus is on the conflictual fields, including the inside working of voluntary associations, and on the structures of power and violence that are produced and reproduced/destroyed by agents who have an interest in the game that is played in the field in question. 

In this essay, I will rely primarily on Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital because they emphasize the relationship between strong social networks and organizational power. Social capital is, apparently for Bourdieu, a resource that is exclusively in possession of an elite. This elite devises processes to reproduce social capital and transfers this resource to those who will perpetuate the structures of domination (their inheritors). For Bourdieu the school system is part of the state apparatus and its primary function is to reproduce the existing social hierarchy. Bourdieu’s insights on how the university functions to preserve elite power through its authority to certify academic credentials (cultural capital) are particularly relevant for this study of the university in conflict. The concepts of social and cultural capital, as developed by Bourdieu, are useful for theorizing the university as a site of political and ideological contestation between two sets of actors that can be distinguished by the types of capital they can deploy to achieve their objectives.

Bourdieu devoted much of his work to theorizing structures of domination in capitalist societies and how power is deployed to maintain social order through non-repressive means. The economic basis of domination is disguised and takes different forms. According to Bourdieu the “reproduction of structures of domination in society” depends on arbitrarily determined cultural values that are presented as universal. The elites retain their control over these structures because they are able to perpetuate the myth that their privileged status is the “result of meritocratic triumph through sheer talent.” Economic domination by the elites is concealed and
the existing social inequities are presented as the inevitable result of personal inadequacies of those who do not constitute the elite (lack of educational ability, talent or ambition). Bourdieu developed the term “symbolic violence” to identify the process through which the elite’s cultural values are portrayed as universal in order to obscure their domination of society. The educational system, one of the primary mechanisms for the transmission of this elite manufactured ideology, inculcates the children of non-elites into accepting the legitimacy of the dominant culture and social hierarchy. This according to Bourdieu is the function of the university, as indeed of all schools. The purpose of the schools is not to reduce social stratification by academically preparing students for a highly skilled labor market. According to Derek Robbins, the notion that the university in capitalist society has as its societal mission to academically prepare people for the highly skilled labor market is an unfounded conception, or stratum, because its “real function is to perpetuate autonomous intellectual labor and to control access to this privileged occupational status.”

Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron observe in their seminal work, *Reproduction*, that the academic institution is “better able than ever to contribute to the reproduction of the established order, since it succeeds better than ever in concealing the function it performs,” which is precisely the “reproduction of the established order” by preserving the privileges of the dominant classes, and it “never sacrifices the technical interests of those classes.” Bourdieu argued that “by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” the educational system contributed to perpetuating the reproduction of a stratified social structure. Bourdieu also seeks to uncover the social mechanisms that are involved in the pursuit of educational and cultural distinction and that take the form of competition for the various capitals. Academic credentials, which are conferred by the university, constitute a highly valued form of cultural capital that individuals compete to accumulate. But given that the education system has been devised to perpetuate elite rule, the children of the elite rather than working- and middle-class sectors are the more likely recipients of the credentials the university confers.

Bourdieu appears to have theorized a rigidly stratified social system dominated by elites who have established impenetrable social networks that are immutable to change. However, Bourdieu and Passeron suggest the contingent and adaptive capacity of the structures of domination, and write that socially stratified societies are selectively permeable. “The mobility of individuals” who are not from the privileged classes, is not incompatible “with reproduction of the structure of class relations,” but conserves that very structure “by guaranteeing social stability through the controlled selection of a limited number of individuals.” This highly selective process of upward individual mobility gives “credibility to the ideology of social
mobility” and to the role of the “school as a liberating force.” In fact, “the scope of the educational system tends to increase” because of its ability to serve as “an instrument of reproduction capable of disguising its own function.” Those institutions can easily incorporate individuals from ostensibly oppositional social groups who aspire to material advancement and have internalized the prevailing elite norms that justify hierarchies. Their selective incorporation into the social networks of the elite legitimizes the prevailing social hierarchies and seemingly renders them neutral.

Bourdieu’s perspective on materiality and concrete reality as the basis for developing a comprehension of the world seems to have much in common with historical materialist precepts. Some have claimed that Bourdieu is “after all, an economic reductionist.” Unlike other theorists of social capital, Bourdieu considers that “economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital” and that “different types of capital can be derived from economic capital,” which is accumulated labor. According to Bourdieu, “capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes) [sic], namely economic capital, cultural capital and social capital.” Bourdieu emphasized that to capture “the real logic of the functioning of capital” . . . one cannot ignore “the brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics.” Social capital does not exist apart from economic and cultural capital. However, as Portes makes clear, Bourdieu observes that while social capital is derivative of capital, the process that leads to its acquisition is not reducible to economic capital.

Capital is differentiated into three specific, but deeply intertwined, forms that are “convertible, in certain conditions.” It is this capacity for “the convertibility of different types of capital” that forms the “basis of the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital.” Yet Bourdieu did not assume that cultural and social capital could be accumulated and automatically converted into economic capital. Some economists note that by having posited that capital is unitary, Bourdieu raised the theoretical question of “how these different appearances of capital transform themselves into each other in order to maximize accumulation.” Bourdieu has been criticized for not empirically demonstrating the convertibility of capitals. Bourdieu’s ideas regarding capital’s interrelatedness—as well as their relative autonomy—are theoretically significant for the analysis of the political struggles that engulfed the universities in the late-1960s.

The school system in capitalist societies rationalizes social stratification and power inequalities. Schools have the capacity to create and perpetuate an ideology that both obscures and legitimizes domination, and inculcates students into accepting the inevitability of these hierarchies. Schools validate specific social and cultural practices, and tend to exclude from advanced training social groups perceived as threats to the stability of the stratified social order. As Bourdieu has demonstrated, higher education
institutions are pivotal because they deploy and regulate access to the capitals they embody with the purpose of preserving the privileged position of the dominant classes.

Academic credentials constitute a form of cultural capital "which confers onto its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture." This cultural capital, as other capitals, is according to Bourdieu convertible to economic capital. The ability for elites to acquire, retain, transfer and convert cultural capital is closely tied to the social networks (an intrinsic component of social capital) that these elites build and nurture. These social networks are a "product of investment strategies . . . aimed at establishing social relationships that are directly usable."22

The university is but one among a number of institutions whose function is to confront challenges to the racially constituted social order, and preserving the ideological discourses that allow for the continuance of racial and economic inequalities. By focusing on cultural capital researchers have developed a deeper comprehension on the processes "through which social stratification systems are maintained."23 Higher education institutions confer cultural capital by certifying academic qualifications and achievements. The cultural capital the institution possesses, and can transfer, is sustained through long established social networks comprised of individuals who share common values. From these networks resources are extracted that replenish the economic capital necessary for the university to reproduce its cultural capital (for example alumni associations fund university operations including endowed chairs in specific subject areas favored by the benefactors and foundations). New members who can reaffirm the value of the institutional cultural capital (by virtue of their academic pedigrees or national reputations) are incorporated into these associational networks. Universities, are inherently tradition-bound and conservative institutions that recruit faculty whose academic careers depend on generating scholarship that enhances the institution's stature, financial profile, and strengthens the array of social networks it sustains with non-academic institutions. Academic departments replenish their ranks by hiring faculty who will contribute to the institution's "academic mission" by generating scholarship that reaffirms the unit's epistemological foundations.

Vast qualitative distinctions exist among the various universities in the USA with respect to the value of the cultural capital they bestow on their graduates, and the economic resources they command to hire faculties and create the infrastructure for the production of knowledge. The academic qualifications conferred by certain universities, for example Ivy League institutions, are popularly perceived as qualitatively superior to the qualifications that the majority of budget-strapped public universities and colleges can provide. Individuals who graduate from such prestigious universities are particularly valued since their credentials are provided by institutions
that have a long history of training leaders who are committed to reproducing a socially stratified society built on a capitalist foundation. The convertibility of cultural capital to economic capital (money) appears to vary with the type of higher education institution.

The scholarship on the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movements has tended to explore the objectives, strategies and outcomes of their struggles to transform the university into a more democratic and racially just institution. An analysis that employs the concepts of cultural and social capital suggests that the administrators resisted satisfying specific demands for curriculum reform, diversity in faculty hiring, academic autonomy and community development because they realized that much more than institutional transformation was at stake. At the core of the student movement was the drive to seriously erode a class based social stratification system that privileged Whiteness and was sustained by a White supremacist ideology. Blackness and Latinidad were associated with the economically disenfranchised and poor working class, whose objective material conditions of marginality were perceived to be virtually unalterable. Education, especially higher education, was one of the few routes available to alter the permanent condition of class and race oppression.

Black and Latino Student Challenges to the University

A college education historically has been beyond the grasp of the vast majority of Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican youth. However, during the 1960s overall university and college enrollment was rapidly increased. Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano students were beneficiaries of this “great transformation” of the university system. Increased student enrollments, as well as the expansion of the higher education system, was fueled in part by government interest in building human capital and developing the nation’s capacity to generate knowledge that had social and economic utility. Specific national security concerns such as overcoming the perceived technological gap with the Soviet Union and obtaining information on which to formulate foreign policy toward the so-called Third World also motivated the federal government to increase support for higher education during this period. Domestic political pressure generated by the civil rights movement factored into the decision to expand educational opportunities for Blacks and Latinos. In the wake of increasing racial protest and violence in the USA, state and federal government officials saw the utility of college education as a means to selectively assimilate Blacks and Latinos. Between 1964 and 1970 the Black college student enrollment doubled. Although they comprised a minority of the general student population, the numbers of Black and Latino students in the public higher
education system increased substantially. These students entered college at the tail end of the civil rights movement and on the eve of a tumultuous period of sustained social ferment: massive public resistance to the Vietnam war, the deployment of the National Guard to violently suppress urban uprisings in Watts, Detroit and Newark, the emergence of the Black Power Movement and Chicano Crusade for Justice, and the resurgence of a state-side Puerto Rican independence movement in which the Young Lords assumed a visible role.

Black and Latino students joined militant White students in denouncing the university for its involvement in the military industrial complex, for cooperating with US government officials in developing policies to destroy Third World liberation movements and for its support for the Vietnam war. The Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movements were part of a larger, dynamic, working-class struggle led by people of color to transform their political and social condition. According to Manning Marable, Black studies “was an integral part of the struggle to eradicate racism and empower black people.”27 The breadth, energy and sheer scope of Black and Chicano student activism was unprecedented, and according to one student of the era, the "modern Black Studies Movement" represented perhaps the greatest political and pedagogical opportunity to fundamentally alter power relations in American society."28 With its origins steeped in the dramatic social movements of the day, Black studies “embraced an instrumental mission to change oppressive conditions in African American communities.”29 The political urgency and moral imperative of overturning a racist social order infused the student movements with a militancy and resolve that university administrators had never experienced. Students were convinced that access to the university’s social and economic resources was central to achieving social justice for the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican communities. The Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movement was not isolated and confined to the campus, but rather it was a collective campaign for racial justice that was nurtured by organic links to their communities. These organic links to communities were a vital source of social capital for the student movements.

African American and Latino studies programs are the legacy of the militant and nationalist social movements of this period, a history that ironically is largely forgotten.30 For Robert Allen, “the demand for Black Studies cannot be separated from the rise of the militant black student movements in the 1960s.”31 The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlan, the Black Panthers and the Mexican American Youth Movement exposed the racist dimensions of university-sanctioned knowledge production and education, and portrayed the university as part of the White supremacist power structure. Militant Black activists denounced the university for its role in
perpetuating a dehumanizing and degrading portrayal of African Americans and other racialized people.

At the student initiated 1969 Yale Symposium on Black Studies, Abdul Alkalimat (previously Gerald A. McWorter) commented that “the university has functioned as an agent of racism in these United States,” and called on the university to “use the powers that it has for the kind of positive change that it must become involved in.”

The Black Power Movement’s portrayal of the university as inherently racist resonated with Black and Latino students whose impressions of the institution were heavily influenced by their experiences as racialized subjects. Many students were convinced of the universities’ indifference, if not hostility, to their communities. Black and Latino student feelings of marginality and inferiority were undoubtedly intensified by an almost exclusively White male professoriate that was ignorant of the histories of racialized and oppressed communities. This professoriate taught a curriculum that reaffirmed the origins and legitimacy of a White supremacist depiction of the development of the USA, and that diminished the Black and Latino contribution to mere footnotes in this history. In the context of popular resistance by communities of color, students grasped the political necessity of organized protests to effect institutional transformation. Perry observed that most Black studies proponents “incorporated an ethical imperative,” and some emphasized improving the material conditions of Black communities, while for others “it meant preserving and developing a black cultural ethos that would ultimately lead to such change.”

In the late 1960s, the battle lines between the Black and Latino studies activists and university administrators were drawn on the basis of fundamentally antagonistic values regarding the moral obligation of the university to mitigate rampant racial injustice. For student and community activists, the university’s seemingly benign role as a cloistered enclave of scholars objectively engaged in the pursuit of knowledge was a cynical chimera to safeguard the university’s Whiteness. The refusal of the university to acknowledge its deficiencies and indifference to its own role in sustaining a racialized social order further intensified the student’s inclination for militancy. Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican student demands varied, but their goal was to effect sweeping and lasting changes in the academic mission of the university. Student activists undoubtedly heeded Eldridge Cleaver’s demand to transform the university: “we’re not reformists, we’re not in the movement to reform the curriculum of a given university or a given college or to have a Black Student’s Union recognized at a given high school.” The Black student movement was a militant antiracist campaign that “sought to counteract the effects of white racism in the area of group evaluation and to generate a strong sense of black identity and community as a way of multiplying the group’s leverage in the liberation
Activists accused the university of complicity in the oppression of racialized communities. Proponents of Black and Latino studies wanted to dismantle the barriers that conveniently shielded the university from accountability to poor and politically marginalized communities. For some critics, the university’s insensitivity to the societal concerns of racialized communities was compounded by the tentativeness with which it moved to redress its abysmal record of hiring faculty of color. University administrators were dismayed that their cherished institutions were being cruelly lambasted as capitalist tools of racial oppression and genuinely could not comprehend why the university should assume any responsibility to confront racial oppression.

University officials were pressured to hire Black and Latino faculty who would work to transform the institution. Activists opposed faculty hiring if the purpose was merely to demonstrate the university was pursuing affirmative action to achieve racial diversity. Rather than hiring faculty of color to be absorbed into the traditional departments, advocates for Black and Latino studies promoted “collective integration” of faculty—hiring a cohort of faculty who would undertake collaborative research in autonomous academic units. In these “liberated zones” students would be exposed to scholarship that countered the derogatory portrayals of the histories of racialized people. Here, also, collaborative research would be produced for service to the communities.

The model of collaborative research was predicated on the idea of racial unity and ideological compatibility. This stood in marked contradiction to the philosophical underpinnings (which was more myth that reality) of the Western system of higher education that privileged disciplinary specialization, advanced training and individual investigation undertaken in an environment of academic freedom. According to James Steward, one of the key goals of interdisciplinary Black studies was “to resurrect a formal linkage between the academic and social formations... and reconceptualize the social fabric and rename the world in a way that obliterates the voids that have inevitably occurred as a result of artificial disciplinary demarcations.” He argued for interdisciplinary research that would have social applications for racialized communities. The linkages between the Black community and educational change is, according to Adams, historically rooted. “The energy for change in the content of black education has tended to originate within the black community.” The Puerto Rican studies movement shared this vision. In San Francisco State College, Chicanos called for a “powerful force in the renovation and reconstruction of the entire system of education... to provide the community with the resources to deal with the problem it faces.” How to effectively deploy university-based knowledge production for community development was an essential task of these activist and revolutionary scholars. In an article on the origins
of Chicano and Puerto Rican studies, I wrote: “Historical rediscovery, national affirmation, and knowledge for political empowerment and community development fueled the incipient intellectual project of creating a new Puerto Rican and Chicano subject who was imbued with agency and capable of using the existing institution.” University administrators were pressed to hire faculty of color who were trained to undertake critical social policy research in areas relevant to the goals of racial and economic justice. Activists also demanded that the university provide Black and Latino scholars with the requisite resources to undertake research that could be used to empower embattled racialized communities. James Jennings observed, “community service and related efforts to develop programmatic linkages with neighborhood institutions and organizations represent a key component in the theory and pedagogy of black studies.” The Puerto Rican studies movement called for “applying new knowledge and the intellectual capacities and other university resources to struggles and issues in the community, not as intellectual elites but as university based, intellectual workers.” For proponents of Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies the “non-academic community” was an indispensable agent in this “new social fabric” and would become a vital agent in the production of policy relevant knowledge.

Activists envisioned using resources to generate an emancipatory scholarship the purpose of which would be to overcome the vast gulf between university priorities and the needs and aspirations of racialized communities. Indeed, problematizing the racial dimensions of knowledge and community power was one of the most critically important theoretical achievements of the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies movements. The university was linked to other structures of racial oppression, and complicit in devising social policies, adopting ideologies of social legitimation to changing circumstances, and a host of other activities that were vital to sustaining White supremacy. By insisting it had a social responsibility, if not a moral obligation, to work toward ending racial oppression, the Black and Latino studies movement transformed the university into a site of intense ideological contestation.

For the transformative endeavor to succeed the Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican academic units needed autonomy to devise and implement their teaching and research mission. Maulana Ron Karenga, in a veiled allusion to decolonization, called the university a political institution that “seeks to maintain the power base of American society, and for this reason must follow a policy of ‘non-intervention’ in the black community. If we are to be a free people ... we cannot be under the external influences from white people.” Chicano activists emphasized that “the self determination of our community is now the only acceptable mandate for social and political action; it is the essence of Chicano commitment.” They demanded that
academic programs "must have the maximum autonomy feasible within the context of the institution." All of these objectives were interrelated components of a larger strategy to transform the university with the ultimate goal of employing its resources for community empowerment and creating a politically progressive and independent Black and Latino leadership.

University and Foundation Responses

The following analysis is informed by Bourdieu's insights on the use of education to sustain elite rule and social hierarchies. University administrators responded in various ways to the demands for Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano studies. While a number of factors explain the different responses—ranging from outright rejection to the establishment of departments—administrators and faculty appear to have reacted most negatively to two critical components in the calls for university reform. The demand for separate academic departments and the proposal to employ university resources to empower racialized communities proved acutely worrisome. University officials feared that autonomous Black and Chicano studies departments would generate alternative, critical scholarship aimed at eroding the institution's academic authority. They also feared the "politicization" of the university if these departments succeeded in building vibrant links with racialized communities, and the resulting demands for continued reform that would emerge from this new force in academe. These were serious challenges to the university's control over the content of intellectual production and its freedom to allocate resources according to its institutional priorities. At stake here was preserving the university's legitimacy in the face of persistent claims that it reproduced racial hierarchies within the institution and that it perpetuated inequities in society.

Black and Latino scholars did not underestimate the ability of university officials to comprehend the severity of the challenge posed by Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano studies. Robert Allen observed that the faculty correctly assessed that the establishment of Black studies would "widen educational democracy," and "pave the way for the introduction of new and revolutionary ideas into the curriculum." Frank Bonilla, an early proponent for Puerto Rican studies, similarly noted that much more was at stake for the university than what administrators dismissed as:

a simple assault by primitives on an institution these intruders do not understand. Were the matter as simple as some would like, the sense of threat to the established order of disciplines, research domains and lines of organization would, of course, not be felt so deeply.

The Black studies movement waged an effective epistemological attack on the university. The movement was national in scope and had deep roots
in communities that believed in the value of education. Proponents of Black studies were unified in mounting an epistemological challenge to the tradition-bound, disciplines that dominated the academy. The Ford Foundation’s decision to influence the direction of Black studies was a telling indication the nation’s elite realized the movement posed a genuine threat to higher education. Moreover, the influence of the Black Power movement on campus politics, the appeal of demands for democratizing the university, and the growing influence of nationalist and separatist tendencies in a politicized and increasingly impatient Black population, suggests that the Ford Foundation was acting on behalf of the nation’s corporate and political elite to deflect a potentially revolutionary movement. The Foundation’s action suggests the necessity for a national policy on Black studies that would supplant piecemeal responses by besieged university administrators.

The 1968 Yale Symposium on Black Studies in the University was a bellwether on how academe would respond to the Black studies movement. Ford Foundation President McGeorge Bundy cautioned advocates of Black studies against the quest for identity as the basis of scholarship; a scholarship that he termed “therapeutic”:

> If you undertake to study a subject because of the subject’s importance, then at least you are doing something real. If you undertake to study a subject because of the importance of the act to you, then in the long run what you are doing is unreal. Therefore, it is of no value, in the long pull, to erect, to construct, to create a subject which is not there, or to study it simply because the act defines you.

The statement revealed a strategy to influence the development of Black studies that entailed undermining the validity of its scholarly project, particularly research that would redefine the history of the Black experience. Moreover, by implying that Black scholars potentially might be unable to discern “real” from “unreal” scholarship, Bundy was indicating that the university faculty would be the ultimate arbiters of serious scholarship. Thus, he validated the hegemony of the traditional disciplines and reaffirmed the validity of their epistemological foundations. Bundy criticized Maulana Karenga for declaring his interest in Black studies a “political interest,” and lectured the audience that “there is a difference ... between the political view of a set of historical events and the historical view of those events.” Bundy reaffirmed not only the dominance of positivism in the academy, but also the myth that the pursuit of knowledge was an objective, value neutral intellectual endeavor. His rejection of one of the central philosophical arguments of Black studies—that knowledge production was not neutral but racialized—was unambiguous and determined. When Bundy spurned the notion that serious Black scholarship could exist outside the established academic paradigms, he affirmed the Foundation’s opposition to the establishment of autonomous Black studies academic units. By bringing
Black studies within the “fold” of traditional academic life, the Ford Foundation sought to sever the ties between a Black revolutionary intelligentsia and the mobilized Black communities. In the long term, the goal was to deradicalize Black studies and incorporate its emerging intellectual leadership into the traditional disciplines.

Nationally, university administrators tended to adopt the Ford Foundation’s strategy of academically undermining Black studies. Faced with continuous intellectual and political challenges by radicalized Black and Latino students, the university reacted by asserting the legitimacy of its academic enterprise. In contrast to the “politicized scholarship” the university accused the activists of advocating, it reasserted the academy’s obligation to the objective, value neutral pursuit of knowledge. The White academy virtually derided Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies by portraying the field as particularistic, narrow and atheoretical, and expressed doubts that given its militant orientation it would ever attain the requisite academic validity to become fully fledged members of academe. The battle over epistemology was seemingly a depoliticized academic matter of minor import. However, it was anything but. The battle was over the university’s control of the academic labor market and the types of knowledge that would be funded and disseminated. Darlene Clark Hine wrote that the “battlefield remains the minds of students and the goal is control or liberation depending on one’s perspective, through the development of an oppositional consciousness.”53 She observed that the central objective of the Black studies movement was the “intellectual and often overtly political commitment to the liberation from European, or more crassly white categories of thought and analysis.”54

The university resisted demands for a new model of collective and collaborative research undertaken by scholars deeply committed to Black and Latino communities. The idea of collaborative intellectual work rooted in the experiences of working-class and poor Black and Latino communities was antithetical to the established modes of scholarly production. The reward structure in academia is highly individualistic and the research that is validated conforms to the strictures of the traditional disciplines. Academic recognition—conferred through tenure and promotion, grants and fellowships, publication in refereed journals and university presses—was, and continues to be, ruthlessly competitive, and highly individualistic. University administrators actively discouraged “advocacy” scholarship. If the university succumbed to pressures to endorse collaborative interdisciplinary research that was motivated by goals of community empowerment—a position that essentially repudiated the prevailing method of highly individualistic promotion of one’s academic career through discipline-based intellectual production—it would relinquish one of its most powerful mechanisms for asserting control and discipline over the professoriate. The university would
in essence relinquish its control over the criteria for deciding who would join its faculty, the standards for conferring credentials and professional validation, and endorse a type of research that would compromise its role in preserving a social hierarchy it claimed was established on the basis of merit. If the demands for Black and Latino studies were adopted, the university’s monopoly over institutional social and cultural capital would be broken.

University opposition to Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies was not the reasoned outcome of serious deliberations regarding the scholarly contributions these new fields of study could potentially make to academe. The opposition was borne of the frustration of administrators and faculty who resented the assault on “academic standards.” Activists rejected the “academy’s fundamental insistence that established disciplines represented ‘universal’ truth and knowledge.”55 According to Floyd Hayes, African American studies “undertook to unmask the power/knowledge configuration of Eurocentrism and the White cultural domination characteristic of the American academy.”56 University officials took umbrage with the assertion that their revered accreditation process was biased, and dreaded the possibility of having to relinquish their absolute control over academic resources and standards. The notion that the professoriate in Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies was academically qualified and capable of independently evaluating the quality of scholarship was preposterous to many White faculty. The deeply held value was that only the tenured professoriate possessed the requisite academic cultural capital to establish a rigorous accreditation process and determine who was meritorious of the rewards the university could bestow (from certification of completion of degree requirements for student to granting of promotion and tenure to faculty). The university zealously guarded its authority to confer credentials to individuals who it deemed had complied with the institution’s educational requirements. It resisted any proposals that could dilute the institution’s monopoly of cultural capital—the knowledge it sanctioned through the accreditation process (graduation, tenure, etc.).

The strategy of appointing Black and Latino scholars whose work was acceptable to the traditional disciplines, and either not hiring or marginalizing scholars who were advocates for the emerging field of Race and Ethnic studies, had serious implications for higher education.

By privileging the traditional scholarship, the university hoped to socialize potentially oppositional young scholars into the professional norms of the academy. The university relied on “integration” to challenge claims that it purposefully cultivated a hostile environment for Black and Latino scholars, and to refute the charge that it was part of the White supremacist social order. At stake was preserving the university’s increasingly fragile legitimacy in the face of a persistent intellectual and ethical assault on its moral foundations.
The moral basis of the university’s cultural capital was the deeply held belief that it adhered to academically objective standards to evaluate and reward scholarship. The integrity of these “universal” standards was unquestionable and inclusive of social reality. Control over how knowledge was produced, disseminated and validated constituted the bedrock of the university’s political power, as well as its source of the cultural capital. The Black and Latino studies movement jeopardized this carefully nurtured myth by exposing how racism rendered the evaluative process arbitrary, and threatened to expose the university’s ideological function in sustaining a racially stratified social order. By destroying the myth that university advancement was purely merit-based, but was highly racialized, Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican studies activists damaged the institution’s moral authority and claims to professionalism. Their actions, in Bourdieu’s terms, revealed that the university, despite its protestations to the contrary, was complicit in sustaining the practice of symbolic violence.

Assessing Social and Cultural Capital

I began this essay by proposing that Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital could generate new insights into the dynamics of the Black and Latino studies movement. Bourdieu’s discussion of symbolic violence and the role of the university in reproducing social processes of domination are theoretical formulations of critiques that were developed by revolutionary Black and Latino activists and scholars during the immediate post civil rights era. The movement’s portrayal of the university as part of the institutional matrix that sustained racial inequities and perpetuated White supremacy is consistent with Bourdieu’s assessment of the school system in capitalist society. The movement’s assessment of the university as working to disguise the social processes of class oppression, reproducing the bases of elite power, and in perpetuating a myth of meritocracy were theorized by the French social philosopher as intrinsic functions of the university.

Bourdieu and Black and Latino student activists held the view that the university disguised its role in the service of the state and capital. However, Bourdieu theorized that the elite was able to reproduce social hierarchy because the dominated participated in their own domination. Since non-elite sectors internalized the belief that social stratification and economic disparities were legitimate, they were incapable of seeing their oppression as arbitrarily determined. Consequently they lacked the capacity to challenge the hegemonic practices that perpetuated elite-sanctioned symbolic violence. Bourdieu was criticized for portraying the non-elite as passive and lacking agency. “For all the richness of the Bourdieun system, once again agency, struggle and variety have been banished from history.” Bourdieu
"offered no theoretical basis for the policies of change, for the production of alternative radical consciousness." 57

The Black and Latino studies movement revealed the inability of the elites to unproblematically reproduce structures and processes of domination. This raises a series of questions regarding the limitations of uncritically applying social and cultural theory to rethink the racial politics of the student movement. Accepting at face value Bourdieu’s notion that elites effectively resist challenges to their legitimacy because they virtually monopolized social and cultural capital, could lead to overestimating the power of symbolic violence as a mechanism of social control and legitimation. 58 Since Bourdieu postulated that social capital is an exclusive and transferable property of the bourgeoisie, non-elite actors are thought to lack the agency that this capital bestows. However, Bourdieu’s definition of social networks suggests the contrary, that in fact, non-elite actors can accrue social capital as well. Integral to the concept of social capital are regularized, institutionalized relations—membership in groups—which provide each member the support of the collectivity. Group solidarity individually pools assets and provides members access to information, material resources and enhanced organizational skills. If social capital is defined as extensive, associational networks that can be mobilized for a variety of purposes, then it follows that social capital is not necessarily the exclusive possession of elites.

The success of the Black and Latino studies movement in forcing a national debate on university reform owes much to the social networks these supposedly powerless actors were able to build, and suggests that these actors had accumulated a substantial stock of social capital. These networks were not confined to the locality of struggle, nor limited to only those students enrolled in the university under siege. Neither were the movements necessarily uniracial. In fact, cross-racial social networks were an important resource for insurrectionary student movements. In a number of universities and colleges (San Francisco State, City University of New York, Columbia, UCLA) Black and Latino students formed alliances and worked jointly to effect changes to the university. The point here is that the Black and Latino student movement was not merely a spontaneous epiphenomenon based on rage and frustration at institutionalized racism. The Black and Latino studies movement demonstrated that non-elite actors could decipher the ideology employed by the bourgeois to disguise the illegitimacy of its rule that was necessary to non-violently reproduce its hegemony. This combined with its readiness to challenge the institutions of elite rule, despite the remarkable disparities in power, reveals that non-elite actors had much more agency than Bourdieu theorized. While the educational system can inculcate the working class and poor with false consciousness, education itself has a potential for liberation.

Perhaps Putnam’s formulation of social capital is more fitting for this
Putnam envisions rich social networks in which individuals voluntarily and collectively pursue activities that enhance their civic consciousness and leads to the formation of a politically engaged citizenry. The problem with this formulation is that social capital is theorized in the context of a pluralist political system in which actors abide by the rules of the game and have equal access to relevant information. These actors believe the political leaders legitimately exercise their authority, and that social hierarchies can be surmounted. Actors in Putnam’s political world voluntarily build extensive social networks to gain access to valued resources and enhance their security. On the contrary, their actions endorse the system through which the elite exercises its authority. Putnam’s writing assumes that class antagonisms do not meaningfully explain social inequality. A limitation of liberal social capital theory is the presumption that durable associational activity (social networks) can be the basis for peacefully acquiring and accumulating economic capital. In this formulation there is no racial dimension to the inequitable distribution of capital. Putnam’s view of benign associational cooperation leading to enhanced social and economic status is deeply at odds with Black and Latino students’ perception of hostile institutions that were opposed to racial equity and equal opportunity.

Bourdieu’s neomarxian formulations are also found somewhat wanting because the very existence of the Black and Latino studies movements demonstrated that the institutions were unsuccessful in disguising the practice of symbolic violence. Moreover, these movements revealed the capacity of the oppressed, and presumably powerless, to break through the ideology of oppression. While the Black and Latino student organizations may have lacked social capital as defined by Bourdieu, they obviously were not devoid of political agency. Admittedly the political power students marshaled was contingent and specific to the transformative task at hand, but it emerged from the extensive and durable social networks racialized communities had established locally, regionally and in some instances nationally. The ability of the activists to mobilize resources, coordinate action, develop public relations campaigns, formulate coherent objectives, employ legal maneuvers, and develop and devise strategies, demonstrates that ostensibly marginalized political actors can accumulate social capital from their communities. Through their campaigns for institutional transformation the student movements demonstrated organizational capabilities and political acumen administrators thought beyond their capabilities. But in contrast to the elites who could draw on mutually reinforcing social, cultural and economic capitals to protect their privileges, the social capital the Black and Latino studies proponents possessed was limited to the strength of the activist social networks.59

This failure to explore how racial stratification alters the dynamics of
social capital, as well as an inability to theorize the role of racism as a mechanism for empowerment, are limitations in both Putnam’s and Bourdieu’s version of social capital theory. This limitation is particularly apparent in Bourdieu’s race-neutral theory of symbolic violence, as well as in his insights on the ideological and social mechanisms that sustain elite rule. The racially derived class privileges that are embedded in Whiteness, indeed the very concept of White supremacy as a component of class oppression, are not analyzed in his work. According to Esch and Roediger, racism can be deployed not only as a mechanism for oppression, but to racially empower economically disenfranchised sectors of the population. They criticize certain Marxian analysis of the political economy of racism that reduce racism to labor market competition; “racist acts” ... can be ... “acts of racial empowerment, rather than class disempowerment.”(6) The role of racism in sustaining a highly class stratified society is not a component of social capital theory.

University administrators were ill prepared to respond to the wave of Black and Latino student protests in part because they failed to comprehend the revolutionary authenticity of the students’ demands for racial and social justice. Moreover, these administrators may have underestimated the extent to which the campus student organizations preserved their links to their local communities and developed ties with social movement organizations regionally and nationally. Although politically marginalized and seemingly lacking organizational capabilities, Black and Latino student activists drew on the resources of extensive social networks—many of which were community and family based. The failure of university officials to assess the potential challenge to their authority is consistent with Bourdieu’s description of the arrogance of the elite in believing it can disguise the arbitrary basis of its rule. Given the elites’ certainty that the marginalized lacked the capacity to comprehend the basis of their domination, opposition from this sector was not anticipated.

Conclusion

The Black and Latino studies movements were political campaigns, quite often militant, that entailed the mobilization of extensive social networks aimed at transforming the university. Activists accused the university of complicity in sustaining White supremacy by refusing to acknowledge systematic racial discrimination, and argued that racial oppression was constitutive of capitalism. One way of challenging racial oppression was for the university to terminate its complicity with the state and business in sustaining a racially stratified social order. Activists pressured administrators to support relevant teaching and research that was drawn from their
experiences as racialized people. They believed that the university could mitigate the consequences of racism by funding policy-oriented research and community service programming. However, it is evident that the university, the state and corporate capital did agree the demands for university reform were modest, but saw them as revolutionary in scope and potentially threatening to national security.

The Ford Foundation, at the time the most politically influential and wealthiest foundation in the USA, acknowledged the significance of the Black studies challenge to the university when it decided to use its substantial resources to influence the development of the field. After the failure of the civil rights movement to moderate the intensity of Black resistance to racial oppression, the Ford Foundation declared that finding solutions to America’s “racial problems” was a top priority.\(^6\) The success of the Black studies movement—particularly its more radical and separatist elements—in disrupting university operations, and forcing administrators to confront the institutions’ complicity in sustaining institutional racism, convinced the Ford Foundation of the urgency to intervene.

As others have noted, the Ford Foundation attempted to undermine the militant and transformative components of the movement in favor of an integrationist position that left intact the university’s role in sustaining a racially stratified, albeit less conflictive, social order.\(^62\) According to Noliwe Rooks, the “Ford Foundation wholeheartedly supported an integrationist rationale and refused to fund programs and groups that couch[ed] their request within the rhetoric of Black Power.”\(^63\) The Foundation’s emphasis on individual advancement was designed to erode the strong networks between militant educational reformers and grass roots social movements, and in the process to undermine the potential for collective political activity. While publicly the Foundation’s declared goal was to promote social justice, McGeorge Bundy, who advised President Kennedy on national security issues, was determined to deploy the Foundation’s resources to eliminate disruptions to the harmonious functioning of the US political economy by militant Blacks. Bundy “agreed that everything the Foundation did could be regarded as ‘making the world safe for capitalism’—reducing social tensions by helping to comfort the afflicted, provide safety valves for the angry, and improve the functioning of government.”\(^64\)

The Ford Foundation involvement in Black studies is a testament to the movement’s ability to accumulate social capital and effectively deploy it to challenge the authority of the academy. The Ford Foundation hoped that the university would be pivotal to socializing an emerging Black and Latino leadership into finding peaceful solutions to the country’s racial crisis that did not fundamentally disrupt the long-standing racial hierarchy. Bundy commented that the “generation now in college” would be able to resolve the racial problem.\(^65\) One of the legacies of the Black and Latino studies
movement was holding the university accountable for benignly neglecting racial oppression, and forcing it to modify its curriculum so that students could be afforded alternative, empowering narratives of the histories of racialized communities.

Bourdieu's theoretical writings on the role of education in reproducing social stratification and inequities in capitalist societies are useful for comprehending the nature of university resistance to demands for Black and Latino studies in the USA. But the history of the relations between the Ford Foundation and Black studies does point to limitations in his work, particularly the presumed lack of agency among the dominated and the absence of any discussion of racial and gender oppression. These shortcomings are a function of the tendency for Bourdieu to contextualize his theorizing. Bourdieu bases his insights on the European system of higher education that is portrayed as highly elitist, socially restrictive, intellectually unassailable, overwhelmingly private in its origins and operating within a relatively racially homogeneous society. This contrasts markedly with the American system of higher education that is comprised of highly selective private elite research units, state funded land grant universities, public urban universities and colleges, and a variety of other types of institutions. With the possible exception of Ivy League institutions, the American public universities, particularly the land grant universities established by the Merrill Act, were not conceived as institutions whose purpose was to reproduce and protect hereditary class privilege. In fact, public universities were relatively accessible institutions with a civic mission to educate (primarily a White male) citizenry. With the “great transformation in higher education,” the children of the Black and Latino working class came to believe that a college education was a right, and not the privilege of the well to do. During the 1960s, a period of intense social ferment against systemic racism, the colleges and universities were expected to socialize a restive Black and Latino student population into the norms of dominant society. Although Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican activists lacked the elite’s resources, they creatively exploited the relative openness of the higher education system during a period of profound social activism. The Black and Latino studies movement succeeded in converting the university into a highly visible site where the struggle for racial equality was waged.

Notes

1. James Jennings notes that in the “field of black studies ... community service focuses on changing system-based and dominant/subordinate social and economic relations and improving living conditions for blacks, and thereby, other communities.” In J Jennings (2000) “Theorizing Black Studies. The Continuing Role of Community Service in the Study of Race and Class”, in M Marable (ed.) Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellec-


30. Joseph, op. cit., p. 182
33. Stephen Alan Jones, described the situation as follows:

They found themselves, deeply alienated, not just by racism and insensitivity they experienced at the hands of white students, faculty, administrators, and bureaucrat institutional procedures, but by a curriculum that virtually ignored the lives and experiences of African Americans. And so raised on the Civil Rights Movement, inspired by the rising rhetoric of cultural nationalism and Black Power, enraged by the murder of King, black students began with increasing urgency to demand Black Studies Programs.

34. Hall, op. cit., p. 36.
35. Quoted in Jones, op. cit., p. 20
45. Nathan Hare may have been one of the few revolutionary Black scholars to write that university officials failed to comprehend the community component of the Black studies academic initiative. He observed that when the universities established Black studies programs they chose to "omit in their program the component of community involvement and collective stimulation. They fail to see that the springboard for all of this is an animated communalism aimed at a Black educational renaissance." Quoted in J. Bunsel (1968) "Black Studies at San Francisco State", Public Interest, 13: 29.
46. Allen, op. cit.
48. Hall, op. cit., p. 36.
49. J. Edgar Hoover characterized the Black Panthers "as the greatest threat to the internal


54 Quoted in Hall, op. cit., p. 43.


58 Bourdieu is concerned with “the arbitrariness of the imposition and the arbitrariness of the content imposed “ With the social and institutional conditions capable of imposing misrecognition of this de facto power and thereby its recognition as legitimate authority” in Bourdieu and Passeron, op. cit, p. x.

59 The university also drew freely on the police authority of the state to suppress student movements when cooptation and inducements failed to stem the resistance.


65 Ibid


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