

University at Albany, State University of New York

Scholars Archive

Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino
Studies Faculty Scholarship

Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino
Studies

2009

Common Legacies, Similar Futures: African American and Latino Studies

Pedro Caban

University at Albany, State University of New York, pcaban@albany.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lacs_fac_scholar



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Caban, Pedro, "Common Legacies, Similar Futures: African American and Latino Studies" (2009). *Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Faculty Scholarship*. 40.

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lacs_fac_scholar/40

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

11

Common Legacies, Similar Futures

African American and Latino Studies

PEDRO CABÁN

Black, Puerto Rican, and Chicano studies programs are the legacy of the militant student movements of the 1960s. In large measure the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements created the conditions for students to challenge the university and call for its transformation. However, the nationalist movements, in particular the Black Power movement, Young Lords, and Chicanismo were the more proximate political precipitants of the nationwide campus protests that established programs to study the oppressed racialized communities in the United States. During the 1960s, African Americans and Latinos forged multiracial and cross-class alliances and confronted the racist practices of public institutions and corporate capital. The Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican student movements of the 1960s were important dimensions of this history of protest. During this period of social ferment, the American university became a pivotal site of political struggle for Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican students because of its undeniable role in legitimating racial inequality and obscuring the history of racial oppression in the United States. They were keenly aware that the university was a repository of political authority and intellectual power, and had enduring connections with the U.S. state and corporate capital. Although students understood that the university was a commanding symbol of privilege and power, they believed it was more susceptible to political pressures for reform than other public and private institutions. The idea that the university was a public good, rather than the exclusive possession of the White middle and upper classes, and that it was capable of rendering service to a multiracial society, was revolutionary for its time.

For more than a century the public university, particularly the land-grant universities, went about its business often in splendid ignorance of the array of enervating forces that daily pummeled the majority of African American,

Mexican American, and Puerto Rican people. The establishment of university-based academic programs in the 1960s and 1970s that presented an alternative historical narrative of the experiences of these racialized communities was a momentous political achievement, and is one of the more enduring legacies of that decade of social upheaval and popular insurrection. The advent of Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies programs inaugurated a sustained period of innovative intellectual production that documented how racial victimization was endemic to the process of nation building and capitalist development of the United States. Moreover, through their scholarship, faculty in race and ethnic studies programs documented the myriad mechanisms through which racism is perpetuated in this society and have provided the evidentiary and intellectual basis for progressive social policy.

Beyond these contributions to the research profile of academe, the Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies posed four challenges to the university. First, scholars wanted to deploy the university's resources and generate new knowledge that could benefit embattled racialized communities. These scholars soon produced scholarship and critical pedagogies that ripped off the veil of self-proclaimed value neutrality and dispassionate pursuit of knowledge the university invoked to cloak it from public accountability. Second, scholars of color revealed how the university reproduced the racial hierarchies extant in society and privileged knowledge that sustained these inequities. The scholarship chastised academe for evolving into a highly insulated site of knowledge production that failed to employ its arsenal of research tools to study the history and causes of political exclusion, economic exploitation, and social marginalization of racialized communities. Third, Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies programs were committed to doing research that was socially and politically relevant. This new scholarship would dismantle the racial barriers between the universities and communities and affirm the belief that particular forms of knowledge were emancipatory and not the property of the university. Finally, Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies programs demonstrated that collective and collaborative interdisciplinary research was necessary to generate a new scholarship capable of radically reformulating the negative histories of racialized communities sanctioned by academe. The coalescence of these challenges or goals into a plan to transform the university, the will and capacity to put these ideas into action, and the realization that African Americans, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans had discovered their shared history of racial victimization in the service of building empire and capitalist development were notable achievements that continue to influence the scholarship on the African American and Latino experience. These four challenges—the production of alternative scholarship and critical pedagogy, elimination of racialized hierarchies in the university, use of knowledge for community empowerment, and cross-racial and

-ethnic collaboration and collective intellectual production—were elements of a campaign to transform the university, or failing this to create autonomous academic spheres in which Black and Latino scholars could pursue innovative research without the strictures of the traditional disciplines.

Initially, the quest to transform the university met with the determined opposition of administrators and faculty. However, the university did gradually heed the criticism that it had become the preserve of White men, and in response established hundreds of academic units in race and ethnic studies and hired thousands of scholars of color. Despite these changes, the American university remains fundamentally unaltered from the institution students targeted for change more than three decades ago. It is evident now that the transformative goals of the heady era of the 1960s have not been realized. Although Black and Latino student movements of the 1960s did not radically transform higher education, their demands became the basis for a normative framework that guided the scholarship of African American and Latino studies.

African Americans and Latinos identified three areas for research and theory building that were derivative of the transformative goals advocated by the student movements. The three areas of intellectual engagement that have proved to be remarkably durable are: the subject of historical and political inquiry and the construction of identity, citizenship and the role of racialized communities in the building of empire, and cultural nationalism and class identity. These three areas can form the basis for a comparative research agenda in contemporary African American and Latino studies. It is clear that race and ethnic studies programs have been the site of significant research and writing that have transformed our understandings not only of the African American and Latino experiences but also of the larger history and politics of the United States. But in the context of the ongoing assault on African American and Latino studies programs it is also necessary to reaffirm the need for collaborative comparative research undertaken by autonomous programs of study on racialized communities.

Student Movements to Democratize the University

Although they emerged in different regions of the country and in different types of institutions, the Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican student movements advanced similar academic objectives and shared transformative visions. Students faulted the university for failing to study the history and intellectual production of African American and Latino contributions, while it cavalierly dismissed the rich field of African American scholarship and literature as unworthy of a place in the college curriculum.

Throughout the 1960s American higher education underwent rapid expansion, and deepened its involvement in the corporate sector and government

affairs. However, rampant discrimination largely excluded Black and Latino students and educators from the university. The curriculum was notable for its exclusion of “the totality of the black experience”—and, I should add, the experience of all oppressed racialized communities.¹ A report commissioned by the Ford Foundation explained that one goal of the rapid expansion of higher education was to increase the numbers of Blacks and Latinos attending the nation’s colleges and universities. This new student population, which has historically been excluded from higher education, generated demands for Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies programs. Some of these demands resonated with liberal faculty and administrators who believed in the integrationist ideals of the civil rights movement and believed the university had an obligation to promote social justice and improve conditions of “disadvantaged groups.”²

The Black student movement did not promote the integrationist goals of the civil rights era. It was heavily influenced by the militancy and nationalism of the Black Power struggle for social and economic justice. According to Robert Allen, “The demand for Black studies cannot be separated from the rise of the militant black student movement of the 1960s.” Indeed, in 1966, before the Black Panther Party had demanded an “education for our people that expose[s] the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.”³

The Black Power movement erupted as a militant alternative to the integrationist and reformist aspirations of the civil rights campaign and resonated deeply with educated and alienated Black youth, who viewed the university as an embodiment and defender of White privilege. Indeed, the student movement was “an institutional representation of the contemporary African American struggle for collective survival and human rights.” Manning Marable observes that one of the central educational objectives of Black Studies was to advance an understanding of the “collective experience of the African diaspora” that would be the basis for a “corrective of the dominant myths, stereotypes and misinterpretations of the Black experience that prevailed.” Black Studies was also proscriptive because of “its efforts to suggest paths for the constructive resolution of problems which confronted African American people.” A radical critique revealed that university-sanctioned scholarship obscured the role of the state in oppressing and persecuting this segment of the American people, and facilitating the exploitation of the Black labor force by capital. According to Floyd Hayes, Black Studies “undertook to unmask the power/knowledge configuration of Eurocentrism and White cultural domination characteristic of the American academy.”⁴

The Black student movement exposed the hegemony of a White supremacist mind-set—the presumption of a superior western European intellectual culture

that was progressive, scientific, and neutral—in the U.S. academy. Before the advent of the Black student movement, African American history was interpreted through a “race relations paradigm” that privileged the White experience and was the basis for portrayals of African Americans as “passive victims rather than active agents.” The Black student movement forced the university to cede a space for research and theorizing that “accentuated the self activity of African American people. In the new scholarship African Americans were subjects rather than objects.”⁵

Many of these same concerns motivated the activism of the Puerto Rican Student Union of the City University of New York during the late 1960s. The Puerto Rican Student Union wanted to “bring the services of the university to the community which is denied the knowledge behind those ‘ivy walls’ because of jive requirements, that are made to keep the majority of the people ignorant.”⁶ The students insisted “on applying university resources to struggles and issues in the community as university-based, intellectual workers” and to empower the “non-academic community as a central subject and agent in the production of policy-relevant knowledge.”⁷ The transformation of the institutions of higher education, its “content, practice and focus as it related to disenfranchised sectors of society,” was an explicit goal of the Puerto Rican studies movement.⁸

Puerto Rican studies research would ideally be conducted as a collective enterprise intended to produce practical solutions for the societal ills that afflicted the community. This collaboration would displace isolated individual scholarship and ensure that public resources would be used for socially relevant policy rather than for the pursuit of personal professional advancement. The Puerto Rican activists called for an end to U.S. colonial rule and exposed the role of university-supported social science research in legitimizing colonialism. Puerto Rico studies would generate knowledge to promote the self-realization of an independent Puerto Rican political subject in the United States who would work to effect the decolonization of Puerto Rico. According to Frank Bonilla, one of the preeminent scholars in the field, Puerto Rican studies must “set out to contest effectively those visions of the world that assume or take for granted the inevitability and indefinite duration of the class and colonial oppression that has marked Puerto Rico’s history.”⁹

Chicano studies was the product of the Chicano movement and represented an extension of *el movimiento* into the academy.¹⁰ The Chicano movement began as a civil rights movement that was inspired by the United Farm Workers and quickly developed a strong community and student base that waged multiple social justice campaigns in California and the Southwest. Chicano community activists fought to improve the working conditions of farmworkers, worked to end police repression and Jim Crow segregation, organized anti-Vietnam War protests, campaigned for access to quality education, and lobbied for political

representation and participation.¹¹ In 1969 the Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education developed a comprehensive plan of action for Chicano community empowerment. The “Plan de Santa Bárbara” was a profoundly influential foundational document that guided the strategy of the Chicano student movement. The plan criticized the colleges and universities because “they have existed in an aura of omnipotence and infallibility,” and should “be made responsible and responsive to the communities in which they are located or whose members they serve.” The university was not perceived as a neutral site, but instead “has contributed mightily to the oppression of our people by its massive one-sided involvement in agri-business, urban dislocation and war, as well as by its racist admissions and employment policies.”¹² The Black, Puerto Rican, and Chicano student movements developed an analysis of exploitation and marginalization of racialized communities in the United States. But their immediate task was to create a liberated zone from which to launch sustained initiatives to democratize the university and make the ivory tower accessible and responsible to people it had historically excluded. The success of these movements is measured by the willingness of the university to establish novel academic programs in Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican studies. The scholarship developed in these programs helped rewrite a university-sanctioned historical narrative of the United States that privileged male Whiteness to the exclusion of racialized communities. However, as these programs became institutionalized in some universities, they increasingly produced academically focused scholarship and relinquished the idea of the academy as a center for revolutionary activism. I will turn now to consider the three areas of intellectual engagement that helped define Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Black Studies.

Racialized Communities and the Construction of Identities

White supremacy relies on myriad practices to justify the subjugation and exclusion of racialized communities. Denying the humanity of the oppressed by using denigrating signifiers is a powerful device to sustain the racist social order. For this reason self-identification and identity formation are important areas of inquiry and theorizing in African American and Latino studies. African Americans and Latinos share a history of creating independent self-identities to counteract racist labels that are meant to demean and degrade their humanity. They have challenged racially denigrating signifiers by creating their own racial or ethnic designations or reaffirming the integrity of a historically situated national identity. African Americans, more so than Latinos, have a history of periodically assessing the power of the prevailing self-designations, African solidarity and political consciousness. When these are found lacking, African Americans tend to define a new positive identity. Domestic political and social

transformations, cultural and intellectual production, economic readjustments, and global dynamics that reverberate domestically prompt African Americans and Latinos to interrogate the utility of the prevailing identity labels. Each shift in the nomenclature is an attempt by the leadership of these communities to re-create a positive collective racial identity in a hostile environment.¹³

African Americans share a collective legacy of enslavement, political disenfranchisement, and economic exploitation. In order to deny them agency, the ideology and practice of racism methodically sought to deprive African slaves of an identity as a distinctive people, "leaving them with a sense that they were lacking a fundamental wholeness as human beings."¹⁴ Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans have also been positioned as subordinate racialized groups within the U.S. social and economic order. Puerto Rico was annexed in 1898, and its people remain colonial subjects of the United States. During the immediate post-World War II era, hundreds of thousands of displaced Puerto Rican agricultural workers migrated to the industrial centers of the Northeast and Chicago. Mexicans were victims of Manifest Destiny, their lands and properties were expropriated, and they were converted into foreigners within their former nation. The national and territorial governments supported efforts by Whites to eradicate Mexicans as viable political and economic forces in Texas, California, and New Mexico. Mexicans have served as an expendable, low-paid wage-labor force in the U.S. economy.

Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, both victimized by the practice of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, were, like African Americans, constructed in the popular imagination as a people without a viable culture and lacking historical significance. Although Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans have not typically been identified as a race of people, they are a racialized community in the United States by virtue of their presumed distinctive cultural, linguistic, or physical traits that differentiate them from the norms of Whiteness.¹⁵ Through most of their history in the United States, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have been portrayed and treated as inferior to White ethnics. As a racialized and economically oppressed people, they have been victimized by a panoply of discriminatory practices.

Unlike African Americans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were not an enslaved people, and formed a cultural and political consciousness that was partially shaped by their recent experiences in their native lands. The term *Chicano* was a politically constructed ethnic label of the late 1960s, the product of a search for a new identity forged by militant community activists and students as an alternative to the one created by the Mexican American Generation. The Mexican American Generation was composed of U.S.-born Mexicans and led by the middle sectors (professionals and small business), and by members of the working class who led labor unions and community organizations.¹⁶ The goals of this generation were criticized by nationalist Chicanos as assimilation-