

White Money/Black Power

The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education

a book review

by

Ibram Rogers

Ibram Rogers (irogers@temple.edu) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. He earned his master's in African American Studies from Temple University and two bachelor's degrees from Florida A&M University in African American Studies and Journalism.

Rooks, N. *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (2006). 177 pp.

The Ford Foundation, and its president McGeorge Bundy, and the white student movement influenced the discipline of African American Studies during its formative years in the American academy, a history that, among other things, is chronicled in Noliwe M. Rooks' *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education*. Misguidedly though, Rooks, an associate chair of African American Studies at Princeton University, exaggerates and misrepresents these effects. In a sense, Rooks in *White Money/Black Power*, attempts to smear a sizeable amount of white paint on the practically all-black evolutionary portrait of Black Studies.

Rooks centers the book on the flawed arguments that the Ford Foundation, as an organization, and Bundy were the discipline's saviors and that the protest movements that fought for Black Studies were vastly integrated with whites, and to a lesser extent Asians, Latinos and Native Americans. This certainly was the case at San Francisco State College (now University), but Rooks over-generalized non-Black students participation across the country. Therefore, due to the author's flawed perspective, this work is not valuable to the disciplinary discourse. The book is divided into two parts, a historical element as well as one that addresses the legacy of that founding period. The former will primarily be analyzed in this review.

White Money/Black Power contained a narrative about the beginning of Black Studies that included white students in particular, and Asians, Latinos and Native Americans in the protest movement. In reference to San Francisco State University (SFSU), Rooks claimed: "Although the familiar narrative chronicling the beginning of Black Studies generally centers on Black student protest and violence, in reality, at San Francisco State, Black, white, Native American, Asian, and Latino students rose up together, joined forces, and made or supported unequivocal demands" (Rooks 2006: 4). The reader evidently gets the impression that all the white students were striking *for* Black Studies. But in fact, one scholar found otherwise. Karagueuzian (1971) noted:

PL (Progressive Labor Party) was not interested in the issue of Black Studies or in Nathan Hare. Nor was PL interested in an autonomous Black Studies Department. The Marxist-Leninist organization wanted to use the strike to convert students to its doctrine, by first getting them to admit that the system, which includes every institution in this country, serves the interests of only a handful of Americans. (61)

Even worse though, Rooks crafted the Ford Foundation and Bundy's role and relationship to the newly formed discipline as being positively paternal. Rooks concluded: "If McGeorge Bundy and The Ford Foundation had not crafted a strategy to address such concerns and offer solutions to the problem of campus administrators, the field might never have survived beyond that initial rush" (Rooks 2006: 59). Rooks' line of reasoning had essentially two parts. First, she claims that the "integrationist rationale" won out over the other competing rationales "jockeying" for the blessings of "program officers" and "Board of Trustee members" and it would come "to dominate the field of Black Studies as it assumed its position in academic institutions" (Rooks 2006: 22 & 65). Rooks wrote, and it is true, that this rationale was concerned with using Black Studies to *only* integrate the faculty, student body and curricula of American higher education, and it was totally against autonomous departments of Black Studies that were determined to use their scholarship to liberate the African community.

Rooks assertion that this integrationist rationale came to dominate the discipline is not correct. For instance, a study of 200 Black Studies programs in 1973 invalidates that claim. Nick Aaron Ford found that the "vast majority" of those programs had objectives that stressed the "need to promote sympathetic interest and dedicated involvement in the improvement of the black community (local, national and world-wide)," a blatant Black Power thrust (Rooks 2006: 57).

The second part of her contention is that the Ford Foundation and its head McGeorge Bundy “wholeheartedly supported” this integrationist rationale and appeased the academy’s administrators, thus providing a much needed economic lifeline for the new discipline” (Rooks 2006: 66). A reader may have inferred that “*many* programs actually began as a result of white philanthropy,” as the review on the flap of the hardcover edition states, and that this white philanthropy was positive for the discipline [italics added]. Yet, this was not the case. Ford provided funding for 24 programs between 1969 and 1972—a measly 1.6 percent of the 500 programs that Rooks estimates were started during that period (Rooks 2006: 19).

Not only was the foundation’s effect embellished, it was distorted to seem helpful for the discipline. Ford’s policy to only support conventional interdepartmental programs that were Eurocentric and not socially responsible, and not support those autonomous, revolutionary, Afrocentric departments put Ford squarely at odds with most Black Studies advocates. In trying to address this conflict, Rooks quoted Robert Allen’s contention that:

By selecting certain programs for funding while denying support to others, government agencies and foundations could manipulate the political orientation of these programs and the direction of academic research. With hundreds of such programs competing for limited funds, effective control of the future of Black Studies was thereby shifted away from black scholars and students, and instead...to the funding agencies—college administrations, government and foundations. Departments that were thought by the establishment to be dangerously independent or radical could thus be crippled or destroyed without the necessity of resorting to violent repression. (Rooks 2006: 117)

Then, in keeping with the distortion of Ford’s effect that was all throughout the book, Rooks disputed Allen’s argument by stating: “This was certainly a very real, *though unintended*, consequence of the strategy pioneered by Bundy and the Ford Foundation [italics added]” (Rooks 2006: 117). What was so unintended about it? Other Black Studies practitioners who had a first-hand glimpse of the relationship between Black Studies and Ford saw these effects as intended. For instance, Hare (1970) wrote:

Whenever the oppressed, for whatever reason, begin to feel too weak to fight their real enemy, the oppressor himself, they turn upon themselves, squabbling over this or that theory while leaving the oppressor free to do just about anything he chooses. The oppressor is the enemy, and he attacks while we argue and continue to play bid whist. The enemy is attacking all the time, in many and subtle ways. The Ford Foundation pumped \$2 million into four leading universities with the most ill-conceived, establishment-oriented black studies programs in the country. (4)

Meanwhile, Blassingame (1969) has noted:

Many colleges are not seriously committed to black studies because they feel the demand will die out shortly. Consequently, rather than setting aside university funds to establish the programs, they turn to foundations for support. This, of course, is not conducive to long-term planning. As our experience with Latin American studies reveals, the cycle of foundation interest in such programs is, at most, ten years. (23)

Rooks should have depicted Ford and Bundy's relationship as negatively paternalistic at best and totally detrimental to the newborn discipline's natural livelihood at worst. One glimpse at Bundy's background before becoming president of Ford in 1966 could easily show that he was coming from a cadre of people who the Black students of the Black Power era were ideologically and politically at war with. Rooks even provided this glimpse of his background in the book. She noted that he was the nation's national security adviser under Kennedy and that he and his brother:

were part of the intellectual establishment that, at least initially, relentlessly pursued [the Vietnam] war. Indeed, the two were part of the group of Ivy League-educated, Skull and Bones membership, young white men who shaped and carried out America's foreign policy during the 1960s (Rooks 2006: 80).

Even though she briefly described Bundy's background, Rooks failed to make the connection between America's foreign policy and Ford's policy for Black Studies. America's foreign policy during the 1960s was simply to disrupt, co-opt or destroy nationalistic movements all over the globe whether they existed in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, the Congo, Vietnam, Indonesia or Ghana. In comparison, Bundy sought to destroy the nationalist movement of Black Studies.

It's important to note here that Ford initially funded nine schools—Lincoln, Jackson State, Tuskegee, Morgan State, the Atlanta University Center, Princeton, Stanford, Vanderbilt and Rutgers—to establish programs, Rooks states. Lincoln, Jackson State and Tuskegee no longer have Black Studies programs. Yale and Stanford had four students combined majoring in African American Studies in 2003 (Rooks 2006: 12). Nevertheless, Rooks continually labels Ford's strategy a success (Rooks 2006: 125, 138, 143, 152), despite the lowliness of its original benefactors.

White Money/Black Power attempts to rewrite the history of the founding years of the discipline by injecting white students into the movement that produced the discipline and by overstating and misrepresenting the relationship between Black Studies and the Ford Foundation. Consequently, this book is not only invaluable, but it is potentially just as destructive to Black Studies as the philanthropic organization it extolled in the book. Nevertheless, on the flip side, it did incite a debate on the role of whites in the creating and shaping the discipline, one that in the end should return whites to their proper place on the margins.

Works Cited

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