

K. Radcliffe “Black Studies in the Academy”

CIVIL RIGHTS BLACK POWER AND THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK STUDIES IN THE ACADEMY

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Abstract

San Francisco State University had historically been recognized as the birthplace of the first Department of Black Studies in the nation. Its' emergence coincides with a shift in the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent call for Black Power among young African Americans. However, there is an interesting trajectory, a prelude to power, between 1961 and 1968 that gives great insight as to why San Francisco would become the center of such a movement and the locale for, “a cross fertilization between university struggle and urban political struggles “ (Murch, 2010)

Malcolm X having visited the Bay Area in 1961 and in 1963, inspired black students to not only affirm their identity but also their relationship the larger Black Diaspora. He brought a Pan African and nationalist perspective to the Civil Rights table dominated by the push for integration. His was a call not so much for turning the other cheek, but for revolution. Malcolm also made the intellectual link between African American struggles with other Third World struggles. His discourse on racial pride, economic uplift and love for community were crucial in helping a generation define the meaning of Black Power. This is evident in the establishment of the Black Panther Party (BPP) as well as of off-campus student led organizations like the African American Association (AAA) founded in 1962 and the San Francisco State, Negro Student Association (NSA) also founded in 1962 and its subsequent evolution toward becoming Black Student Union (BSU) in 1966. The BSU would become the prime instigator in the San Francisco State Strike of 1968.

Secondly Between 1961 and 1965 the Bay area Civil Rights Movement organized successfully around economic injustice often overlooked by the national Civil Rights organizations in it's tendency to focus on social and political justice. Primarily, the San Francisco based Congress of Racial Equality -CORE as well as NAACP (both of its local membership increasingly identifying with black nationalism and less beholden to the national leadership) spearheaded these efforts attracting participation from both black and an overwhelming majority of white college students. These early activities of

radicalism spearheaded the Free Speech Movement at Berkley and the Experimental College at San Francisco State.

The Experimental College was utilized to address the paucity of courses related to the black experience. The first course to taught in the Spring of 1966 was entitled Black Nationalism. Many have argued that it marked the beginning of black Studies program at San Francisco State. These courses were proposed and designed by students under the aegis of a faculty advisor. The program was so successful that by the Fall of 1966 a second series had been launched entitled “Black Arts and Culture Series”, designed to reeducate and sensitize black and white students who were working within the local black community as tutors and mentors. According to Sherman Williams, “The success of these early efforts served to generate a groundswell for a broader more comprehensive and permanent program of black Studies at San Francisco State.” He goes on to say,

“Predictably the move on the part of black students to achieve a sense of educational relevancy was met with resistance...On one hand, it emboldened black students to directly challenge the educational systems relevance, or perhaps more accurately –lack of relevance to the aspirations of black people. On the other it brought home to educational power structures the tremendous potential for destruction that had been produced in black people by a system that was unwilling to assimilate them into the whole of the social Structure.” –(The Baraza Papers 1974)

On November 6 1968 San Francisco State’s Black Student Union (BSU) in alliance with the Third World Liberation Front {Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), the Asian-AmericanPoliticalAlliance (AAPA), the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), the Philippine American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE) and the Latin American Student Organization (LASO)} began their strike with a list of 10 demands a few of which included establishment of the Department of Black Studies, a bachelors degree, and a special admissions program to increase and maintain black enrollment. The strike would last for 5 months, one of the longest held university strikes in history. It would inspire similar strikes and demands for black and Ethnic Studies departments all over the country. What emerged was a demand for an alternative yet powerful epistemology that had the ability to inspire agency and transform whole communities economically, politically and socially.