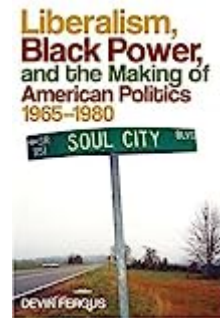


**Devin Fergus.** *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980.* Politics and Culture in the Twentieth-Century South Series. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. Illustrations. 364 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3323-6; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3324-3.



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## Soft Power in Pursuit of Black Power

Devin Fergus, in his first book *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980*, offers a reassessment of the Black Power movement by exploring the extent to which liberalism co-opted, modified, and acquiesced to the nationalist ideology. To demonstrate his case that Black Power sought to ally with and gain support from liberalism, Fergus grounds his analysis in North Carolina, using a variety of new and interesting sources. His main thesis is that the survival, funding, and continued relevancy of Black Power beyond the sixties is owed not to its dogged pursuit of nationalism by any means necessary, but rather to its willingness to be open and to engage with mainstream liberalism. Rather than see this as the dirty little secret of Black Power, Fergus finds this an underappreciated and lamentably absent element of Black Power studies. The premise that Black Power maintained a continuous, though tenuous, alliance with liberalism for decades is a provocative thesis. This thesis has serious implications for the mainstream narrative history of American politics, as well as the extraordinarily popular history of Black Power.

By claiming that Black Power sought and cultivated copasetic relations with white liberals, the book aims to undermine the predominant narrative of this topic, which maintains that Black Power was a movement cultivated outside of and in opposition to mainstream American politics. Indeed, the very popularity of Black Power studies rests on the premise that this was a radical social movement that challenged basic assumptions about race and class and threatened to undermine the political status quo. While consensus on this may not be uniform, most Black Power scholars adhere to this basic tenet, even as they seek to broaden our understanding of the ideology and debunk some of the myths of the movement.[1] In challenging this common ground, Fergus claims to locate a continuum of activism on the part of Black Power, which includes the radical (and rhetorically revolutionary) elements alongside those who sought an advantageous relationship with state power.

So how does Fergus make his case that Black Power openly sought to ally with liberalism? He begins, rightly, by defining his terms. Black Power is used interchange-

ably with black nationalism, while liberalism is used interchangeably with soft power. While this may raise some eyebrows, the vocabulary is not as important as the ways in which these two terms, and their appropriated meanings, relate to each other. Black nationalism is the object of soft power. In other words, there is antagonist separatism (Black Power), which through attraction and funding (soft power), can be reformed and incorporated.

From there, Fergus offers a series of case studies of events in North Carolina that demonstrate the interplay between liberalism and Black Power. The first two chapters provide the setting and context for politics in North Carolina and explore the creation of Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU). Chapter 3 examines the local Black Panther Party branch. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the case of North Carolinian Joan Little, a black female inmate accused of killing the prison guard who sexually assaulted her. Fergus explores the manner in which Little's case offered North Carolina liberals a chance to bring Black Power into the fold in their quest for a cosmopolitan state. He also uses her trial as an opportunity to discuss the sexual politics of Black Power. Chapter 6 looks at the effort to build a self-sufficient industrial city (Soul City) that would create jobs and encourage black capitalism. In addition, this chapter expands on North Carolina to demonstrate the larger effects of liberalism's association with Black Power, which Fergus contends was at least partially responsible for the success of the New Right.

In relating this series of events, Fergus employs a variety of sources, including many new collections as well as his own interviews with key people involved. His sources are used to great effect to shed light on each of the events described in the book. While much has been written about the trial of Little, the bibliographies of MXLU and Soul City, by comparison, are short. Thus, Fergus's careful description and exploration provide new points of interest for the reader. Fergus's arguments are laid out using a similar theme for each event: Black Power elements maintain a defiant stance toward state intervention, until operatives of the liberal state—Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the North Carolina Fund, the Ford Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Episcopalian Church—convinced them through investment or the provision of operational space (which could be literal in the sense of actual office space, or figurative in the sense of money, influence, or power) to abandon their extremism in the pursuit of a shared goal. Fergus explains the motivation for Black Power adherents as a Machiavel-

lian calculation of their long-term goals and the short-term sacrifices necessary to achieve them. While this is a provocative claim, Fergus manages to convincingly argue that black radicals stood to gain from the investment and protection provided by their alliance with liberal institutions. What is not as convincingly argued is the impetus for liberal organizations to engage with Black Power.

Fergus is fond of saying that liberalism saved Black Power from the brink of political violence and philosophical nihilism. For Fergus, the idea that liberalism would be the savior of racial extremism is an extension of the ways in which soft power operated internationally: namely, that in an effort to diffuse anti-Americanism and cultivate allies, the United States attracted, rather than attacked, the enemy. It is clear, from a national security standpoint, why a liberal foreign policy like soft power would make sense to some. However, extending that argument to domestic policy does not translate as efficiently as Fergus would like. And therein lies the most serious flaw in the argument of the book: what does liberalism stand to gain from attracting, modifying, and incorporating Black Power? Fergus argues that liberalism diffused and contained the power of black nationalism by attaching strings to their provision of operational space (he also unconvincingly argues that the reverse was also true: revoking funding caused revolutionary Black Power to flourish). Their intent was to disarm Black Power and prevent them from being a political liability. However, Fergus argues that the opposite effect was achieved: by providing aid and incorporating Black Power, liberalism opened itself up to criticism from the Right, and unwittingly provided fodder for the emergent conservative revolution.

What Fergus fails to account for in this argument is the fact that the Right, by the time his story unfolds, had already made significant inroads into the political mainstream and had seen its coalition achieve national victory with the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968. Thus, by the 1970s, when the bulk of Fergus's action takes place, liberalism was already on the defensive against ascendant conservatism. A political calculation to attract and diffuse Black Power in the face of the New Right's powerful national consensus is a somewhat facile explanation for liberalism's engagement with Black Power. Had liberals felt an overwhelming need to do something about Black Power, it would appear that ignoring or distancing themselves would have been a more effective means of appealing to moderates and gaining electoral traction. Thus, the central argument that Fergus poses—that late century American liberalism had an over-

arching desire to build a political coalition with a kinder, gentler Black Power—is less than successful. This conceptual gap is further exacerbated by the reliance on North Carolina as a case study. Fergus does not convincingly demonstrate that North Carolina can be an example of a nationwide trend. While elements of the liberal establishment certainly engaged with elements of Black Power in North Carolina, it is unclear whether larger political lessons are necessarily contained in these interactions.

Beyond the problems with the central thesis of the work, there are several moments where Fergus contributes excellent insight and demonstrates the utility of expanding the scope of Black Power studies to include dalliances with mainstream liberalism. For instance, the role that the Episcopalian Church played in funding MXLU is a surprising story that should cause many to rethink the role that the church played in later years of black activism. Another instance in which Fergus manages to apply his framework of the liberalism-Black Power alliance to great effect is in the case of Little. Fergus argues that North Carolina liberals were determined to prove that their state was cosmopolitan, and by extension not racist and sexist, by working to exonerate Little. To do so, they courted Black Power activists to gain legitimacy for their case and momentum for the defense. Black Power activists in North Carolina, eager to capitalize on the publicity of the case, allied with white liberals and used their newfound leverage to promote their agenda. Fergus uses this opportunity to deconstruct the gender politics of the Black Power movement, by showing how male activists leaped to the defense of Little and publicly denounced sexual violence against black women, while at the same time many of the same men were themselves caught up in allegations of sexual assault. Fergus acknowledges the misogyny of Black Power, in reality and in myth, and offers a refreshing look into the evolving role that women and feminism

played within the movement.

Fergus's conclusion contains the bulk of his historiographical analysis, and in it he extends an ultimatum to specialists of Black Power studies: acknowledge the relationship that Black Power had with the liberal state, or risk obscurity. Fergus explores the twin historiographies of Black Power specialists and American history generalists, and concludes that the latter have been much more willing to acknowledge this fact, but are less equipped than specialists to understand and explore the full implications. Fergus desires to see Black Power specialists and American history generalists engage in vibrant dialog and interchange about the nature of American politics. More specifically, however, Fergus would like scholars to be unafraid of confronting the truth that Black Power received substantial monetary and operational support from the liberal establishment. While Fergus's work offers a first crack at understanding this relationship, I too hope that others choose to take up the study of Black Power's financial reliance on the white, liberal state.

In all, Fergus offers a compelling read that poses many provocative questions, and offers well-researched case studies in support of his arguments. The style and syntax can be obtuse and repetitive at times. The narrative flow is somewhat disjointed, and the text leans heavily toward analysis at the expense of storytelling—no effort is made to develop suspense in the trial of Little, which could have been an excellent opportunity to flex a literary muscle and entertain the reader. However, chapter and section titles offer witty and clever signposts, such as "Speaking Truth to Black Power," "The Edifice Complex," and "Soul City on Ice."

#### Note

[1]. See Charles Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

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