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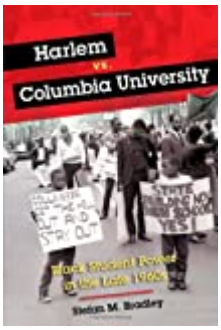

Stefan M. Bradley. *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Illustrations. ix + 249 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03452-7.

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Town and Gown Black Power

Harlem, the northern tip of the New York City borough of Manhattan, has been a predominantly black neighborhood since the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century, and the neighborhood has become synonymous with black cultural and political achievements. However, without access to wealth and resources because of racism and discrimination, black residents of Harlem have remained tenants, and not owners, of the land and buildings that characterize the pinnacle of black achievement. One of the largest landlords in the western Harlem neighborhood of Morningside Heights is the elite Ivy League institution Columbia University. The intertwined histories of Harlem and Columbia have been characterized by acrimony and mistrust, and for a week in the spring of 1968, student and community activists brought the university to a standstill as they protested Columbiaâs aggressive expansion plans. The student-community alliance was chiefly concerned with thwarting the universityâs plan to build a new gymnasium in the adjacent Morningside Park–a swath of precious green space that was primarily used by Columbiaâs African American neighbors in Harlem.

In the first book-length historical study of the Columbia protests, *Harlem vs. Columbia University*, Stefan M. Bradley foregrounds the Studentsâ Afro-American Society (SAS) as the central protagonist in this protest. However, he also discusses the important role that individuals and organizations from the Harlem community played in launching the protest. Additionally, a major focus of Bradleyâs work is the alliance between the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and SAS, as they launched simultaneous protests aimed at different targets. Rather than focus on the park space, SDS wanted to end military recruitment and force Columbia to sever its ties with the military think tank Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA). Bradley describes the two groups as agreeing that their protests should be launched simultaneously and that by offering reciprocal support to one another, they had a greater chance of success. At some point during the week following the initial demonstration on April 23, it became clear that the two groups were not going to work together, and that

their rift was mainly due to different goals and tactics. Most scholars attribute this divide to the growing antipathy that black students felt toward their white counterparts. Bradley also makes this argument and he elaborates on the racial tensions underpinning this rift. He makes the case that the SAS-led protest against the gymnasium in Morningside Park was an articulation of a new Black Power-inflected student consciousness that characterized subsequent student protest movements.

Bradley begins by tracing the intertwined histories of Columbia University and Harlemâs African American residents. Their coexistence had been primarily characterized by an endless battle for square footage in the overcrowded borough of Manhattan, given that Columbiaâs trustees had the power and willingness to evict tenants whose dwellings could serve a valuable purpose for the university. Bradley also details how, in addition to buying buildings and expanding outward at the expense of local residents, Columbia had a growing interest in gaining the rights to public space, such as Morningside Park, so that the university could construct an enormous athletic facility that would be comparable to other Ivy League schools. In chapter 2, Bradley traces the long history of Columbiaâs efforts to build in the park, which began over a decade before the students staged their protest in 1968. The plans for the gym construction had been continuously debated publicly, and Harlem community members became adept at organizing and presenting their opposition at public meetings and protests. As the plan was revised and adapted in the intervening years, Bradley shows, there was some willingness on the part of the university to compromise, but Columbia remained largely deaf to the cries of the Harlem community. By 1968, the plans for the gym had been revised to allow certain portions of the building to be used by Harlem residents, although Bradley notes that the arrangement smacked of Jim Crow segregation, a comparison that led to a community moniker for the project: Gym Crow. Chapter 3 details the growing sense among Columbiaâs small minority of black students that the community struggle against the gym was their fight too. In developing their critique of the universityâs attitude toward Harlem, they found that white radical students on campus had similar complaints about the administration. The alliance between SDS and SAS, as Bradley describes it, remained tenuous, tactical, and ad hoc, and these factors were partly responsible for the rift that developed once the protest was underway.

Chapter 4 describes the action of the protests, which essentially involved demonstrations at the gymâs proposed site (construction was already underway) and the eventual takeover of key administrative buildings on Columbiaâs campus. Bradley describes the power struggle that ensued when SDS and SAS came to occupy Hamilton Hall and inadvertently took the dean hostage. He shows how the high stakes nature of the protest revealed the fault lines that separated the white students from the black students. Black students saw the protest as a personal issue, and they wanted to shut the university down and use their strategic position to force the university to abandon the gym. They were joined on campus by black leaders from around the country, including notorious and militant Black Power advocates, like H. Rap Brown. White students, according to Bradley, were unwilling to make the gym their first priority, and their indifference to the plight of the park and Harlem residents caused the unraveling of the alliance. Bradley argues that when the two groups disagreed and the black students took charge, the black students kicked the white protestors out of the building and remained defiant toward authorities as they vowed to hold the building until the gym project was abandoned. In so doing, SAS chose to clearly identify their issue as a *black* issue and they embraced the tenets of self-determination and empowerment that characterized the paradigm of Black Power, which was ascendant by 1968. As Bradley suggests: âwhen both the white and the black protestors were occupying the building, it was an issue of student protest. When SAS asked the white students to leave, however, the issue was no longer simply a student protest, but rather one of a *black* student and community protestâ (p. 85). Eventually, the black students were themselves forced out of Hamilton Hall, as were students occupying other campus buildings, when a thousand police officers staged a predawn raid on April 30.

Bradley later discusses the fallout of these protests and the arrests that followed, including the legal fight over punishment and the philosophical reckoning that Columbiaâs administration and faculty endured as they began to chart a future course for the school. Bradley provides explanations for the ultimate victories that the protestors achieved, namely, that the university eventually dropped their affiliation with the IDA and they scrapped construction of the gym. The triumphant strikers were both a harbinger and an example of the controversial racial struggles that erupted on college campuses at this time.

The first half of *Harlem vs. Columbia University* relates the story of the campus protest that gave rise to a coalition of students and community members who

united to stop the encroachment of an elite institution into their neighborhood. In so doing, Bradley argues, they overcame class differences and demonstrated the influence of Black Power theories and tactics, which were particularly prevalent in the decision to oust white students from their takeover. Bradley grounds this discussion in the particulars of the Harlem milieu and the unique position of Columbia University within a predominantly black urban neighborhood. As a case study of the influence and implications of emergent Black Power ideology, this is a great discussion, although it does have some limitations, primarily in its discussion of Black Power. For instance, Bradleyâs understanding and explanation of what exactly Black Power is tends to be facile and one-dimensional. In the introduction, he states that âby 1968 Black Power, which advocated separation along racial lines, had reached its pinnacleâ (p. 18). This sentence is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, Bradley does not define his use of the term âBlack Power,â so readers are left to wonder how 1968 represented a pinnacle (and many scholars would disagree with this periodization). Second, those who study Black Power routinely dismiss the notion of racial separatism and they identify a nuanced position regarding the philosophies of integration among Black Power advocates. Black Power scholar Jeffrey Ogbar explains this nuance when he says that Black Power âdemanded inclusion while advocating autonomy and self-determination.â[1] Indeed, while there may be a dearth of current resources on the black student movement and interracial protests, the field of Black Power studies is surging with activity and scholars are energetically debating the meaning and implications of the term.[2]

Later, during his discussion of the perception of violence during the campus protest, Bradley compares the Columbia example with the anger of urban black rioters. âThat sentiment [violent anger],â writes Bradley, âprovided the vehicle for the transition of the Civil Rights movement to the Black Power movementâ (p. 60). This rendering of the relationship between civil rights and Black Power as pivoting around violence can be problematic, and Bradley seems to have sidestepped the vibrant dialogue that scholars of Black Power are having about this very issue.

While Bradley offers an important in-depth look at the racial dimensions of the Columbia student protest in the first half of his book, the second half moves significantly away from this story, and the result is a loosely connected set of concluding chapters. In chapter 6, Bradley addresses the subsequent protest by black students at Columbia over their demand for more courses on the history and culture of African and African diasporic peoples. This chapter provides interesting information about the epistemological dimensions of the black student movement, but it drifts from the compelling discussion of coalitional relationships between students and community members. Furthermore, Bradley introduces the framework of Black Power delineated by Charles Hamilton and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) in their classic book (*Black Power* [1967]) on the topic. He attempts to use this framework to explain the activism that unfolded at Columbia on the issue of black studies courses, though it was never established whether there was an actual connection between the students and this particular text. It would have been helpful to learn what texts these students studied, what philosophies they admired, and what formed their ideological foundation.

As Bradley expands his outlook on the Columbia protest, he later shifts to the story of black student protest at Columbiaâs fellow Ivy League campuses. To his credit, Bradley deftly shows how other Ivy League institutions encountered similar problems in their efforts to expand their elite campuses in the face of community resentment. The fact that several other Ivy League schools became embroiled in racial controversy in this period provides an important context for Columbia, although similar racial issues were as prevalent at public colleges in this same period, including black and Puerto Rican student protests at City College of New York, just a few blocks north of Columbia. While occupying buildings, delineating demands, and striking were all tactics that had been used in previous student protests, Bradley shows how students harnessed these tactics in tandem with community efforts. In so doing, they succeeded where generations of community activists had failed. Their example, Bradley concludes, led students of color at other Ivy League schools to recognize their position as elite students and lend their support to issues affecting the community. In this discussion of other black student-led protests at Columbiaâs peer institutions, it would have been helpful if Bradley had described the communication networks that students were using to exchange information, tactics, or other advice about their protests. In the absence of this context, the reader can only infer that such communication was taking place.

Bradleyâs book is billed as the first book-length historical examination of the Columbia protests, and the strengths of the book lie in this discussion. The sources that Bradley uses to illuminate this struggle include local newspapers, community leaflets, a dozen interviews, and

other archival documents. Bradley uses these sources with great effect to bring the studentsâ experiences âin the trenchesâ to life, although with such rich sources, one might suggest that there is even more to be said about the town-gown relationship to gain greater insight into the complicated nature of such alliances. Indeed, without offering a definition of Black Power and what it meant to students and community members in this moment, the overall analytical value of the work remains unclear. Still, Bradleyâs efforts to include the Columbia protests as an important element in the development of âthe Black Power movementâ are largely successful and persuasive. Scholars of similar topics will find much of the book helpful, particularly the way that Bradley frames the protest within local, national, and international contexts.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2.

[2]. Peniel E. Joseph, âThe Black Power Movement: The State of the Field,â *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (December 2009), 751-776.