Dismantling Africana Studies at Rutgers University

Additional findings of the Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association

February 2012
Racism in the academy can be largely understood as hegemonic control over desired resources rather than as expressions of enmity, hostility, or hatred towards people of color. This conclusion is supported by events at Rutgers University. Specifically, the Rutgers events underscore the lack of entitlement assigned to members of lower ranking social groups and the subordinating consequences of being excluded from informal power networks.

The issue of racism in the academy presented itself dramatically at Rutgers in 1995 when our president, Francis Lawrence, declared that African Americans did not have the “genetic hereditary background” to do as well as European Americans on the SAT exam. This was a surprising “slip of the tongue” as Rutgers was recognized nationally for excellence in enrolling and graduating students of color and in bringing African Americans into the faculty ranks. Semester-long demands for Lawrence’s resignation—especially the spectacular student disruption of a televised NCAA basketball game — brought the issue of racism in academia to national and international attention.¹ Twelve years later, though much less dramatically, my resignation as chair of Africana Studies to protest the department’s continuing dismantling once again highlighted the role of racism in the ivory tower.

¹ Many Americans dismissed the utterance as misspeech. Lawrence was not forced to resign in spite of the fact that during the next 10 years he oversaw the elimination of the affirmative policies which had distinguished Rutgers.
Although “race” is ultimately at the heart of the treatment people of color often experience in American institutions of higher learning, unsophisticated ideas about “race” and racism fail to capture the multifaceted nature of the forces which render us second-class citizens in communities which are supposed to be fiercely egalitarian. Max Weber’s general approach to human social organization helps us move beyond simplistic assessments of our experiences. All societies, he says, evolve and sustain social groups so that some of their members can monopolize valued economic, political, and social resources. Also aiding a more sophisticated conceptual framework, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) rightly employ the term “hegemonic group” when referring to the resultant “dominant” groups and “negative reference groups” when referring to the “subordinated” groups.

Weber’s analysis explains how complex techniques of social closure both invent groups and erect barriers to protect them. Gender and age grouping are the most common socially created groups. In addition, though, most societies create groupings on more culture-specific criteria. “Race”—like ethnicity, ancestry, nationality, religion, social class, age, and gender—is one of the markers that signals relative entitlement and prioritized access to a society’s esteemed resources. Systems of hegemony generate ideologies which facilitate institutionalization and legitimization of these arbitrary pecking orders. Racism is one such ideology. Institutionalization also necessitates a monopoly on power and authority by members of a hegemonic group.

Social network theory adds another crucial conceptual insight into racism in our universities. By calling attention to the informal ways individuals are connected and to how these connections are utilized in social action, social network theory describes how people enjoying higher social rank interact with one another to pursue their hegemonic inclinations. Being ascribed to hegemonic status makes one entitled to “the good things” in the society and eligible for full membership in social networks that control those assets. “Old boy networks,” for example, advance the interests of in-group men over all women. Being ascribed to negative reference group status not only means lack of full entitlement to prized resources but it also means exclusion from the social networks that distribute those prizes.

In 1969, when the Rutgers faculty inaugurated the Department of Africana Studies, three distinct curricular were subsumed in its purview—African languages and literatures, Africana Studies (sometimes referred to as Black Studies or African American Studies), and African Studies. Because these disciplinary areas were not highly esteemed, negative reference group scholars were allowed to control them. Indeed, many scholars with hegemonic credentials accepted their inclusion in the curriculum on “political” grounds although skeptical or dismissive of the intellectual ones.

However, when these disciplinary areas became desired by those with hegemonic power at the university, they were excised from the control of their socially lower ranking colleagues. This explains how and why over the decades the
discipline of Africana Studies at Rutgers has been slowly dismantled.

It is highly instructive that the series of destructive acts towards Africana Studies were not limited to one or two individuals. They were undertaken by a wide range of individuals, over decades. There was no apparent coordination; it was just part of the atmosphere. Nor were the consistent assaults acts of enmity. They were manifestations of the Weberian thesis that desired resources are garnered by those with hegemonic status. Among otherwise equally qualified professors, "race" was the marker which indicated superior/ inferior social rank and greater/lesser entitlement to resources.

As "things black" became less taboo in the 1980s, a slow, imperceptible dismantling of the Africana Studies discipline began. This included hiring faculty with Africana expertise into other departments, approving the teaching of Africana courses in other departments, denying Africana Studies the opportunity to share in resources intended for departmental growth and development, preventing the deserved promotion and recognition of Africana faculty, and ignoring the interests of Africana Studies when academic decisions were being made. The usual hegemonic validation of these actions was the need to diversify the other departments. While this was clearly a meritorious objective, there was no consciousness of the destructive impact these actions were having on the discipline of Africana Studies.

The first major act of dismantlement occurred in the mid-1990s. American culture was tiptoeing towards an acceptance of some "things black." Africa’s resources were becoming more important to the United States. Most importantly, individuals who had hegemonic qualifications developed interests in these “black” subjects. Furthermore, although Africans were black, acknowledging them in the academy and putting their subject matter in the curriculum did little to upset the color hierarchy governing relations among Americans. So, teaching about Africa and Africans became more acceptable in our universities.

In 1996, led by some members of the Africana Studies department, Rutgers made a major commitment to African Studies. The university had the opportunity to become the residential home of the African Studies Association (ASA), the very first national academic association to be headquartered at Rutgers. So, acquiring the ASA was a big deal in terms of the University’s rankings. There was also the lure of being able to compete for a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education for a major Center of African Studies. The following year, although other centers within the university existed within the host disciplinary department, the Center for African Studies was created outside the Department of Africana Studies. Naively, in order to trigger the university resources and in a genuine desire to improve the teaching of Africa, the Africana Studies faculty agreed to this act of dismantling.

5. The Center for African Studies did not succeed in its bid to become a Title VI center.
The next major act in the dismantling of Africana Studies occurred in exactly the same way and for the same reasons. Those with hegemonic status wanted a resource which was controlled by negatively referenced colleagues. This time, it was the African Languages and Literatures curriculum.

Swahili and Hausa had been the mainstay of the African language program during the 1970s. Yoruba was added in the 1980s. Also, in the early 1980s, Africana Studies began teaching Arabic, at first with its own meager resources but later with support from the central administration. Arabic was a low status language in the 1980s and was of little interest to those with hegemonic control. Teaching Arabic in Africana Studies continued for over 20 years.

The Africana Studies development plan, mandated and approved by the Dean in 2005, included development of the African Languages and Literature curriculum. With funding from the Dean’s office, the department made three hires who had expertise in this part of the discipline. Africana Studies majors were required to take at least two semesters of an African language. African languages expanded rapidly. Children of African immigrants enrolled at Rutgers in increasingly larger numbers. Many had a keen interest in African languages. Similarly, “heritage” students from the Middle East wanted to learn Arabic or to improve their Arabic fluency. By 2006, the African languages and literature curriculum was at its strongest, led by one of the largest and most successful Arabic programs in the Northeast region. Our languages were in such demand that Africana Studies made numerous attempts to establish a minor in African Languages and Literatures—a request which was consistently ignored by the Dean’s office because, as we now know, higher status colleagues were coveting Arabic.

With changing world affairs, in 2006 a thriving program in Arabic had become a plum. But because it so clearly belongs to an African language family, merely taking Arabic from Africana Studies could not be conceptually justified. So, the entire African Languages and Literatures curriculum became the target of hegemonic interests. Several conferences and meetings had rightly focused on improving the teaching of lesser taught languages throughout the university. Intended or not, these meetings served as camouflage for hegemonic designs on Arabic. On the pretext of improving the teaching of lesser taught language, African Languages and Literatures was simply removed from Africana Studies.

In reality, Africana Studies had been one of the very few departments that was teaching lesser taught languages and requiring its majors to take them. It seems evident that, although it was ahead of other departments in this regard, “race” imputed a social ranking to Africana Studies that prevented its acceptance as a model for the rest of the university or its being entitled to the succulent plum of Arabic. Just as with the removal of African Studies, ceasing African Languages and Literatures was rationalized on the grounds of being beneficial to students and to Africa, of improving the university’s status and of better positioning Rutgers to receive Title VI grants.
The new language thrust appears to have been part of the university’s master plan. Like other major universities, Rutgers links its stature in part to international activities. Therefore, dismantling Africana Studies and using African Languages and Literature as the core of a new language department was approved at the very highest levels of the university. The Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs involved himself in the process and was kept advised by the Executive Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences on a regular basis. As Weberian theory would predict, the interests and well-being of a negatively referenced group was not a consideration when it came to resources wanted by those with hegemonic authority.

Underscoring the critical role of informal networks in the academy, the Executive Dean of School of the Arts and Sciences created an ad hoc committee in the fall of 2007 to endorse the creation of a Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian languages. This cabal had no standing as a faculty body, was composed of hand-picked people who had a vested interest in the outcome, and its mandate was to move forward with the idea. Because the School of Arts and Sciences bylaws explicitly charges the curriculum committee with considering and recommending the creation of new programs and departments, this informal in-group in effect bypassed serious faculty deliberation of the Dean’s initiative. The Dean included the tenured members who were teaching African languages in the cabal, but its existence was kept secret, even from the chair of Africana Studies.

Several months later, the Executive Dean, the Vice Dean, and the Area Dean responsible for Africana Studies summoned me, in my capacity as Chair of Africana Studies, to inform me that African Languages and Literatures was being taken from our department and to initiate discussions about the compensation the department was going to receive. No mention was made of the fact that the plan had existed for some time and that an ad hoc cabal had met and reported on the idea. The Dean did not ask for Africana faculty input on whether African Languages and Literatures should be excised from their department. As is characteristic of all audacious hegemony, those who were being subordinated were allowed no agency, even in matters that directly affected them. To economize on this narrative, the following is a summary of some of the other relevant facts:

1. Arabic belongs to an African language family. Africana Studies was mandated to teach in 1969. It was the most promising area for attracting grants and other outside resources into the Department;
2. Teaching African languages was a distinguishing feature of Africana Studies at Rutgers. Only relatively recently have African languages begun to be included in other Africana Studies programs;
3. Africana Studies requested copies of the correspondence (e-mails, memos, reports, etc.) pertaining to the excision of African Languages and Literatures from our department. The Executive Dean refused to provide these communications, claiming that they were ‘private’ even though they were exchanges between administrators acting in their official
capacities. Even the report of the Dean’s cabal was not acknowledged or shared;

4. The Executive Dean was aware that this action constituted serious dismantling of Africana Studies. The department wrote, “No matter how it is dressed up or what is proposed by way of restitution, taking away one of Africana Studies’ two remaining academic curricula and 40% of its full-time faculty (including its last three hires) is dismantling the Department. Being prepared to talk about compensation is a tacit admission that you are doing serious harm to the Department.”

5. The Africana Studies’ language program had served the rest of the New Brunswick campus for many years. Arabic, for instance, was cross-listed with the Center for Middle East Studies, which had its own curricular number for each level of Arabic instruction. Middle East Studies provided a comprehensive program to its students, drawing upon languages in our department. An analogous situation existed with the Center for African Studies, which more thoroughly incorporated our African languages into their offerings. Furthermore, the language curriculum provided otherwise unavailable opportunities for graduate students in every department to take the African languages they would need when going to do their field research. Many were not regular offerings but were taught on an as-needed basis only.

Apropos “institutional racism” and a “culture of racism” in academia, it is noteworthy that Rutgers’ administrators were not the only ones to adopt a hegemonic posture towards Africana Studies. The School of Arts and Science’s Council of Chairs was informed of the substance of Africana Studies’ objections to the dismantling plan and it was reminded that the School of Arts and Sciences bylaws required matters of this kind to go before its curriculum committee. While I heard that there was behind-the-scenes discontent, there was never open dissent by the Chairs and the Council failed to object to the procedural irregularities.

Other faculty bodies behaved in similar fashion. Over many years, the New Brunswick Faculty Council, representing all faculty on the New Brunswick campus, had expressed concern about the unjustified intrusion of administrators into matters of an academic nature. Citing the improper procedures by which the new department was being created and by which an existing one was being dismantled, a petition to the Council argued that these actions were a matter of faculty governance, that creating and dismantling departments should only occur as a result of faculty deliberations and that the principle of faculty governance was at stake. The Council was not asked to oppose the creation of the new department or reject the dismantling of Africana Studies. It was simply urged to insist that the decision on these matters be made by the faculty using the appropriate faculty bodies. These arguments were made in writing as well as verbally. Here too, I am told there were rumblings of discontent but the New Brunswick Faculty Council did not insist on the faculty exercising its governance authority over academic decisions.
The Dean’s office needed approval of the School of Arts and Sciences faculty before the dismantling plan could be submitted to the higher levels of the university. At one of the early meetings, I circulated my letter of resignation in order to publicize the points I felt were relevant to the faculty decision. The Executive Dean countered by contending the new department would help meet the school’s need to improve the teaching of lesser taught languages. In support, she called upon Africana Studies faculty who taught in the language program and who had served in her secret cabal. They were people of color, so the role of “race” in these actions could be easily overlooked by those who were anxious not to see it.

At the decisive School of Arts and Sciences faculty meeting, the agenda included a motion to create a Department of African, Middle East, and South Asian Languages. I circulated a memo again reminding the faculty that their bylaws as well as regulations within the University required that creating a new department be done through the operation of several faculty committees. I argued that they therefore could not properly approve the creation of a new department until the appropriate faculty bodies had acted. I argued, in addition, that the motion before them was actually two motions. One was the explicit motion to create a new department. The other motion, implicit, unacknowledged and undiscussed, was to alter the mandate of a department which was created by the faculty forty years ago. I reminded them that the university also has firm regulations about altering departments and that there should therefore be open discussions about this implicit motion. The faculty did not acknowledge the implicit motion and voted almost unanimously to approve creating the new language department.

I was bewildered by the failure of the various faculty bodies to act in accordance with the established regulations. I interviewed several people as part of the preparation for this article. One senior professor explained that there was a logic in the faculty behavior. Creation of the new department made sense to her: (a) because over the decades, language teaching had gradually diminished; (b) because this Executive Dean was highly respected and had a great deal of personal capital; (c) because a visible foreign language program was important to Rutgers’ standing in the Association of American Universities; (d) because language programs were important for strong graduate programs; and (e) because the principal actors in the scheme were impressive women scholars who had proven their value to the University by helping build and sustain an impressive Women’s Studies Program.

She said the question for her was, “Are you going to give this Executive Dean the initiative or are you going to obstruct her?” She was impressed with the fact that “This is what the bright young faculty wanted to do” and she was not at all concerned about the abrogation of university procedures. In this particular case, she felt that an appeal to bylaws, rules and procedures was little more than “the hobgoblin of little minds.” “It was easy to go along with the Dean. She had lots of good will and
sympathy. It was a question of being good colleagues.”

This shows how social networks and social capital intersect with hegemonic intentions in our universities. Indeed, the entire development, promotion and implementation of the dismantling plan was conducted through informal, exclusive university networks which rely on mutual assistance, friendships, the exchange of favors, and connections. Socially lower ranking colleagues are always excluded from these resource-allocating cabals and therefore cannot amass the social capital to protect themselves.

These forces apparently operated all the way to the Board of Governors, which had to approve the new department before it could come into existence. When the matter came before it, this supreme body was formally asked to send the proposal back to the faculty for proper review and evaluation. The following excerpt from University regulations—posted for a while on the School of Arts and Science’s webpage—was reiterated.

The underlying principle that informs the entire program approval process is that academic decisions at a university are best made in a collegial fashion, with full and open discussion among all relevant parties at the departmental, college/school, campus, and university levels. The program approval process is designed to encourage collegial discussion at all levels of the University. The process usually begins in the faculty/departmental level... it is anticipated that all appropriate parties will communicate with one another from the earliest planning phase... It is important to be aware of the schedule of meetings of the faculty bodies that need to review the proposal... Program proposals usually originate with the faculty... The relevant faculty group should review and approve the program before it is sent forward within the University for approval... The relevant Dean will work with the campus leadership to initiate any necessary reviews by faculty governing bodies... These processes are intended to guarantee that all affected parties have an opportunity to comment, and that approval is granted by the appropriate oversight bodies... The creation of new departments is ordinarily accomplished by consensus among the appropriate faculty...

But like the faculty bodies, The Board of Governors was not persuaded and approved the creation of the Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages.

I believe the outcome would have been different at each stage of the decision-making if the English Department, History Department, Philosophy Department, or any other department at Rutgers comprising socially higher-ranking faculty had been in an analogous situation and had made the same arguments. The objective facts and established procedures clearly did not carry the day in this case. Other forces were operating. One of these forces was certainly racism, in the sense that “race” was the negatively referencing marker that conveyed lack of entitlement for Africana Studies as a discipline and that deprived Africana Studies faculty of acceptance in the networks that decided their fate.

Understanding racism in academia in terms of hegemonic monopolization of valued resources, negative referencing of socially lower ranking colleagues and exclusion from powerful social networks is supported by the treatment of Hebrew
and Jewish Studies at Rutgers. Hebrew belongs to the same language family as Arabic. If there were a cogent intellectual rationale for a Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages, Hebrew would have to be included as one of the constituent languages. The School of Arts and Science’s plans for the new department, however, did not remove Hebrew from the Department of Jewish Studies. Only later, as the entire plan became vulnerable to this huge inconsistency, was action taken with regard to Hebrew. Even then, however, Hebrew was not excised from the Department of Jewish Studies as Arabic and the other African languages were from Africana Studies. Hebrew was merely cross listed with the new department. Very significantly, Africana Studies had proposed this kind of cross listing arrangement as a compromise between losing the African languages altogether and opposing the formation of the new language department. Indeed, cross listing had been the model Africana Studies had used for years to share the languages with other academic units. In the end, cross listing was instituted for Hebrew while the existing cross listing was eliminated for the African languages.

Colleagues interviewed for this article explained, “the perception is that Jewish Studies is a productive department.” “The Dean had spent time building Jewish Studies.” “Even though it is an obvious contradiction, Hebrew is fully integrated into Jewish Studies.” “Jewish Studies was proactive in defending its position and it was active in other SAS matters.” “Jewish Studies is regarded as an important intellectual resource.” “They are engaged in Ph.D. programs.” By contrast, “Africana Studies doesn’t have a graduate program…They were in a poor position to defend themselves.”

Throughout the episode, rationalizations for hegemonic action abounded. “It was not an evil plot. It’s just that the idea behind the plan was a good one. It was a good intellectual opportunity… It was a good thing for Africa and African culture.” In one of the most convoluted legitimizations, the Vice Dean wrote to the Africana faculty saying the dismantling plan was actually intended to strengthen Africana Studies. This argument was repeated in many of the meetings with the deans. Every time I heard it, I was reminded of Carlos Sluzki’s explication of how social violence is reformulated by the perpetrators and how the tremendous psychological damage to the victims is largely due to being asked to believe that the violence they are experiencing is actually in their interest. Sluzki (1993:179) wrote

> The effects of violence acquire a devastating quality when the violence is relabeled (“This isn’t violence, it is education”), its effect (e.g. the pain) is denied (“It doesn’t hurt you as much as you say”), its moral corollary is redefined (“I’m doing it for your own good”; “I do it because you deserve it”), the agent’s role is mystified (“I do it because I love you”), or the causal agency is misdirected (“You make me do it”).

What does all of this suggest in terms of racism in the academy? The Rutgers faculty and administrators were not “racist” in the sense of deliberately setting out to harm the discipline of
Africana Studies. Yet, virtually all of them were deeply racist in this sense of engaging in hegemonic behavior where “race” was the marker of subordination. One of the interviewees seemed to concur, conceding “… the initiative may have been racist in its consequences but it was not racist in its origins.” Another interviewee also seemed to agree, acknowledging that “… ‘race’ was the active marker of lack of entitlement in this case.”

The feelings of hegemonic entitlement and negative referencing at Rutgers resemble the “visceral racism” about which Thalberg (1972:45) talks.

“To the visceral racist does not want to think of himself as hostile toward blacks or indifferent to their individual and collective aspirations… Our most noticeable proclivities are, first, to structure and report such events in a manner that ‘screens out’ social inequalities which are glaringly evident to black observers; and secondly to represent black people as helplessly dependent upon the white majority…. the visceral racist unconsciously imposes a norm of submissiveness upon black people… He both expects and requires them to be unusually passive, or else to have superhuman control over their frustrations.

“Visceral racism” describes the kind of racism that seems to be widespread in most American universities. If the Weberian/social network-type analysis I have posited has validity, it may be difficult to curb racism in academia. There is at least one hopeful note however. For ethical people, hegemonic behavior comes at a psychological cost because it undercuts the actor’s image of being a fair, non-discriminating individual.

Scholars are particularly likely to experience this disturbing side-effect. The psychological conundrum of acting hegemonically but wanting to be egalitarian explains why racism in the academy has a distinctive character and why many of our colleagues so vigorously dispute the presence of racism. It is why there was perceptible unease on the part of some Rutgers faculty members with the treatment of Africana Studies. This is also probably why none of the deans who implemented the dismantling plan were amenable to being interviewed for this article. One of them wrote,

“Thanks for thinking of me re this, but I don’t want to do that. I don’t see how it could help to lead to a better outcome … And on a more personal note, all of this was pretty hard for me (as it was for all concerned), and I don’t want to reopen wounds that have healed a bit with time.

Nonracialism is still the dominant ethic in our institutions of higher learning. We just have to find a way to make it work.
Bibliography
Haslam, Nick, ed.

Scott, John

Sidanius, Jim and Felicia Pratto

Sluzki, Carlos

Stone, John

Thalberg, Irving