

# **Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Perils and Necessity of Producing Innovative “Minority Focused” Scholarship**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this brief discussion paper I want to outline some of the difficulties likely to be encountered by scholars, particularly scholars of color, who are committed to conducting research focusing on the experience of groups that are deemed to be “marginal” to “mainstream” research agendas. At the same time I want to underscore the absolute criticality of non-traditional research grounded in internal cultural understandings as a necessity for confronting existing patterns of intellectual hegemony.

In good post-modernist protocol I address these issues by recounting selected experiences from my own career. In examining this narrative I ask that you focus on the following issues that can serve as the basis for our discussion: (1) How do the theories or paradigms in your field contextualize the experiences of peoples of African descent and other peoples of color? (2) How often do articles focusing on the experiences of peoples of color appear in the top 5 ranked journals in your discipline? (3) What are the demographic characteristics of scholars publishing articles about the experiences of people of color in top-rated journals? (4) Do articles focusing on the experiences of people of color published in highly ranked journals cite works by scholars of color published in lesser-known journals? and (5) How do non-traditional approaches to the study of peoples of color gain credibility in your discipline?

My formal career in collegiate-level teaching and research has always been bifurcated between the fields of Economics and Black/Africana Studies. Like many of

my generation, I have formal certification in a traditional discipline (Economics), but only self-taught expertise in Black/Africana Studies, per se. My initial faculty appointment at the University of Notre Dame was as an Assistant Professor of Economics and Director of the Black Studies Program. The Black Studies curriculum consisted totally of courses focusing on various aspects of the experiences of peoples of African descent offered through a few traditional departments.

This situation was untenable to me and I committed myself to contributing to the development of Black/Africana Studies as a cognate field/discipline. As a consequence, I pursued a publication strategy that gave the same priority to research and publication in non-economics related Black/Africana Studies journals as to economic journals, per se. Moreover, my research interests in the field of Economics were highly skewed toward examining labor market discrimination against Blacks. As a consequence, *The Review of Black Political Economy*, founded in 1970, was a natural outlet for my research.

When I came to Penn State in 1980 as an Assistant Professor of Economics and Director of the Black Studies Program. I was advised by the Head of Economics to take no years of credit toward tenure because my publication record to date was unlikely to enable me to be tenured. For the purposes of tenure and promotion my assignment as Director of Black Studies was treated solely as an administrative assignment outside the department that accounted for 50% of my time. The implication was that I was expected to publish only half as much as faculty with no administrative assignment, but in the same “quality” publications. Despite these directives I continued to publish simultaneously in Black Studies and Economics journals. My publications in Black Studies journals were summarily ignored by review committees in the Economics Department. This was the case even though I included a document entitled, *A Scholarly Guide to Publishing in Black Studies*, in my publication file designed to neutralize the traditional stereotypes about Black Studies journals, namely that they are “non-rigorous” and/or “unrefereed.” The only positive feedback I received from the Economics Department was in response to an article published in *The Review of Economics and*

*Statistics* that was cited favorably in a review essay in the *Journal of Economic Literature*.

The situation reached a crisis stage in 1985-86. Besides my political value to the institution, my salvation was the fact that Carol Cartwright, to whom I reported in my capacity as Director of Black Studies, had come to understand that Black/Africana Studies was an emergent discipline and not simply an appendage or extension of traditional disciplines. The outcome of the struggle was my relocation to a more hospitable academic home, the Department of Labor Studies and Industrial Relations. This department can be described as a multi-disciplinary department whose faculty have terminal/professional degrees in a variety of traditional disciplines including history, law, economics, sociology and psychology. Although a variety of traditional disciplines are represented, the discipline of Labor Studies and Industrial Relations provides the overarching paradigm by which traditional disciplinary perspectives are modified, integrated and synthesized to produce a unique approach to the examination of the employment environment distinct from that associated with any one or combination of traditional disciplines.

In 1987 I assumed the editorship of *The Review of Black Political Economy* and continued in that capacity until 1995. During my tenure I attempted to do three things: (1) Elevate the “status” of the journal within the hierarchy of economics journals, (2) to facilitate the efforts of junior scholars to establish a solid publication record, and (3) to expand the public policy impact of the research published in the journal by reprinting some of the more important work as edited monographs. The ranking of an economics journal is determined essentially by the frequency of citations of articles published in it. Journals that focus on theoretical, particularly mathematical, contributions are ranked higher than those with a more applied orientation that examine real-world problems. *The Review* not only is not theoretically oriented, its practical orientation is focused on a “marginalized” population. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the most recent rankings of economics journals placed *The Review* at 121st although it is the most frequently cited journal focusing on race/ethnic issues in publication.

To complete the circle, last year I was asked to write a letter in support of tenure and promotion for a young Black economist at another institution who was jointly affiliated with the Black Studies and Economics departments. (I was asked by the Black Studies Department head - not the Economics head). He had published two articles in *The Review* so I was familiar with his work. He was supported strongly by Black Studies but initially rejected by Economics. As the appeal progressed I was asked to supply various detailed information about *The Review* including the percentage of articles submitted that were accepted and a copy of my own vita. Clearly the critical issue from their vantage point was, this person's work has been published in a low-ranking journal that must be scrutinized with extra care. In addition, his relationship with the Black Studies Department was suspect. While I did supply the requested information, I also took the opportunity to "go off" on the committee that made the request, attacking this increasingly quantitative approach to decisions about tenure and promotion and the relative value of alternative research agendas. Some of my anger was engendered by the fact that *The Review* actually has a more refined and objective review process than some of the most prestigious economics journals (double-blind). I was told by the Chair of Black Studies that my tirade turned the tide and I am happy to report that my colleague was awarded tenure and promoted.

The moral of this story is twofold: (1) the more things change the more they remain the same, and (2) if you decide to pursue minority-focused research in any discipline, department or other venue I can assure you that life for you won't be no crystal stair. The culture of traditional disciplines is such that studies of race and related constructs are force-fitted into traditional paradigms, often distorting the essence of the experiences under scrutiny beyond recognition. But this is often the approach required to publish in "higher quality" journals. At the same time, publishing truly innovative work in less highly ranked outlets can be professionally suicidal. Being located in a self-standing departmental unit such as a Black Studies department is no panacea because the devaluation of minority-focused scholarship is simply moved to a higher level in the review process.

In my current position, I find myself providing counsel to colleagues in various departments caught up in a version of the drama that I have just related. As I listen to them an adaptation of the lyrics of the Last Poets' song, "The Message," often goes through my mind, "Sometimes I wonder, how we keep from going under." This then is the dilemma of being between the rock and the hard place, and it engenders a variety of responses. Some scholars will choose to maximize the chances for tenure and promotion by focusing exclusively on mainstream scholarship. Others may try to establish some type of quasi-formal relationship with an academic unit that is devoted to minority-focused scholarship to complement their work in a traditional discipline. And still others will attempt to transform their discipline and department from within and refuse to conform to traditional cultural expectations. I suspect, however, that whatever path is pursued, eventually the rock and the hard place will have to be navigated, not once, but over and over again. In my own case, I have much satisfaction that my trajectory has allowed me to serve two terms as Vice-Chair of the National Council for Black Studies and a term as President of the National Economic Association. But my road is not one that I could, in good conscience, recommend to any young scholar of color facing the challenges of survival in the world of academe at the end of this 20th century when the problem of the color line described by W.E.B. Du Bois is increasing in both intensity and complexity.