

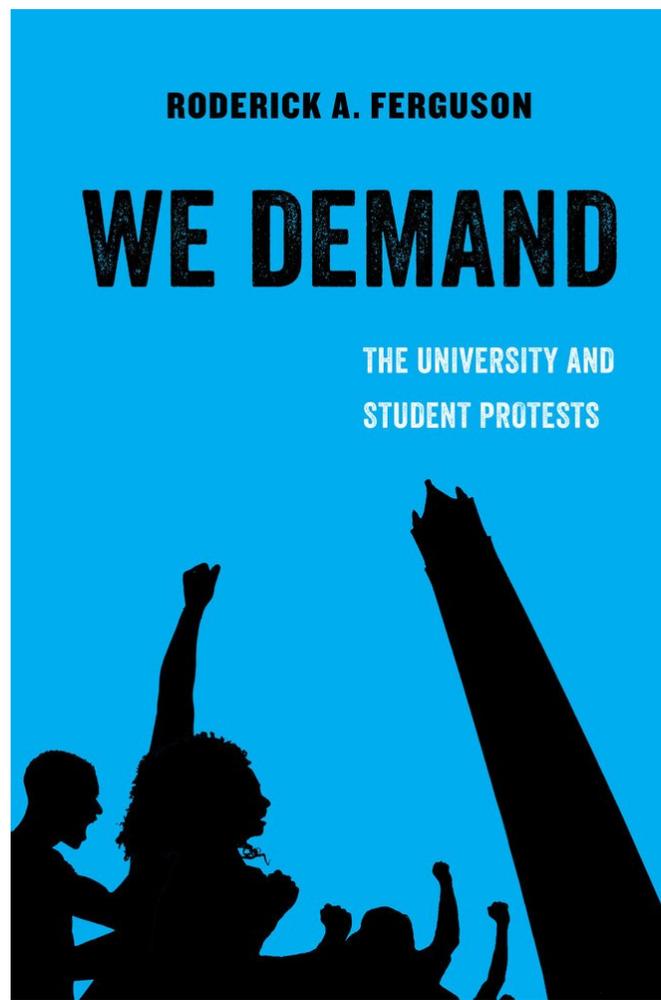
RADICAL TEACHER

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Review

We Demand: The University and Student Protests

by Paula Austin



WE DEMAND: THE UNIVERSITY AND STUDENT PROTESTS BY RODERICK A. FERGUSON

Review of *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* by Roderick A. Ferguson (University of California Press, 2017).

Protests erupted across the world in the summer of 2020. They started with a call to action and yet another call for police accountability in the wake of police officer Derek Chauvin's gruesome murder of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street. Interracial, intergenerational masses showed up and showed out in many city and town centers over several days, eventually also demanding a reallocation of resources from police budgets to other city services. Similarly, faculty, staff, and students called attention to the gap between university statements in support of diversity, equity and inclusion, and the manifestations and realities of DEI on campus. Some pointed directly to the ways in which campus police and university relationships with adjacent municipal police departments helped to create and/or maintained hostile environments for Black and brown students, faculty, and staff on college campuses. Sometime in early June, #BlackintheIvory, a hashtag created by two Black women (one faculty, one student), began trending, resulting in thousands of tweets from Black faculty and graduate students sharing experiences of anti-Black micro and macroaggressions in their departments, in classrooms, at their fellowships, etc. Some white faculty, staff, and students amplified these voices and called on other white university faculty and staff to take note, educate themselves, and begin acting against structures of oppression in the university. Tweets, directly and indirectly called out universities' commitments, in rhetoric only, to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Meanwhile, many university presidents worked furiously to make statements that expressed solidarity with protesters and commitments to diversity, while also centering the university's immediate and future financial long term realities as a result of the Covid-19 global health crisis that had shut it down for much of the spring 20 semester.

Roderick Ferguson's *We Demand* gives us a context for this activism. It begins in the wake of earlier protests that erupted nationally in 2015 after the non-indictments of police officers in the deaths of Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland. Then like now, protesters took not only to the streets, but also to their campuses, from the University of Missouri to Yale University. *We Demand* places these "renewed" campus actions in a historical context of student activism and the neoliberal reaction that discredited it, coopted it, and continues to seek to control it (p.3). Ferguson's 2012 *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* also examined the university's use of its administrative power to mitigate, through absorption, student protest. In this shorter and more accessible publication, Ferguson takes us through some of *Reorders'* same history, minus the archival sources, providing an instructive to a contemporary audience of students, faculty, and staff for both campus and community campaigns for justice. As in *The Reorder of Things*, Ferguson argues that instead of seeing protests as "disruptions to the status quo" or worse, as "collective tantrums" these insurgencies are part of a long history of radicalism, "redistributive efforts

and progressive attempts" for "social transformation (p. 12)"

Organized into four chapters, Ferguson begins with the violent state attacks on anti-war and civil rights demonstrations at Kent State and Jackson State Universities respectively. Additionally, coast to coast, students organized calling for a transformation to the intellectual climate of the academy, with demands that "signaled an interest in the reorganization of institutional life and the reorganization of knowledge." The list of demands at schools like San Francisco State College, UC San Diego, Howard University, and City College of New York included Ethnic and Black Studies departments, more inclusive curricula, open admissions, community accountability, and increased hiring of faculty of color (p.17). In response to this wave of campus activism, President Richard Nixon's administration produced *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* which blamed students for the violence and called them "potential criminals" (p. 18). Nixon would later mobilize civil rights discourse in the service of law and order. Universities also responded by coopting the language of "diversity" in order to discredit students as "intolerant" and as "threats to ... liberal democracy" (p.22). Universities thus emerged as "defenders" of diversity and tolerance and in doing so expanded "administrative procedures, offices" and other apparatuses including campus police departments, creating both social control mechanisms and "diversity bureaucracies" (p. 27). Ferguson provides readers with a useful navigational table of contents that outlines each chapter and a glossary of terms inclusive of "capitalism," "neoliberalism," and "diversity," making it clear that this last term was (and continues to be) "in tension with student activism and demands for racial, gender, sexual, and class justice." (p.116).

Chapter two spotlights the Powell Memorandum, written by Louis Powell, who would later become a Supreme Court justice. Powell's memo further weakened the possibilities for student activism and student calls for changes in campus climate, culture, policies and practices to "ensure minority personhood and environmental protections" (p.36). Just as Nixon's *Report* positioned student protests as a danger to American democracy, the Powell Memo argued that students' "progressive critiques" were actually "demands for social chaos" that "threatened" both "free enterprise" and political systems (p.37). The Powell Memorandum along with the *Bakke* decision in California, laid the groundwork for the concept of corporate personhood (and the *Citizen's United* decision). It expanded the possibilities for university-corporate partnerships, resulting in a growth in administrative positions and salaries.

Ferguson's third chapter takes us backwards to situate student activism in a history of radicalism. He introduces Jacques Ranciere's power and significance of *demos*, "the uncounted," those "excluded from the national ideal of the unified citizenry," but through whom we get an accurate accounting of societies' inequalities, "and the arbitrary powers of ... rulers" (p.55). Chapter three reminds us of what identity politics and intersectionality meant during the Rights Revolutions and Black Power eras: "relational politics,... [and] a way of understanding the conditions and possibilities of [coalitional] revolutionary practice" (p. 58). Here he

includes the 25-day occupation of San Francisco's Department of Health, Education and Welfare by disability rights activists, the leaders of which were also Black Panther members. The BPP not only fed protesters during the occupation, but provided valuable media coverage in their newspaper. Ferguson equates community campaigns with the campus campaigns covered earlier. Both were sites of "relating across social differences"; coalitional politics, and "broadening [of] political and imaginative horizons" (p.60).

In chapter four, Ferguson brings into relief the role of neoliberalism and its economic, ideological, and political project in stopping student attempts to transform the university. Ferguson moves forward in time to look at University of Missouri, Yale, and Syracuse University protests against academic "regimes of alienation" (p.77). Not unlike the activism of the late twentieth century, students also cited structural issues, but here they included demands that considered both physical and mental health (p.79). In the last section Ferguson concludes with a reminder of his intended audience: students on campuses, "who believe that we can or should do better than the world that we've inherited" (p.1). He provides some guiding principles listed as "soft rules." These include the importance of historical and institutional contextualization, of "push[ing] against the limits [of the university]," of relational politics, of the life of the mind, saying "human recovery requires deep and committed thinking," of staying wary of "the bureaucratization of difference" and the university's ability to coopt transformational politics, and finally, to see ourselves as part of a long radical tradition of student organizing (p. 86 - 87).

The strengths of *We Demand* lie in Ferguson's ability to position contemporary student movements in a radical past and to draw out the structural responses. Maybe most important, though, is the way that *We Demand* highlights campus activist strategies, tactics, and ideologies that can inform us in our current moment. While the university responded by "widening [its] powers against the kinds of social transformations that minority visibility demanded" and mobilized and coopted diversity in order to "bolster" institutional inequities rather than "abolish them" (p. 62), student activism of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s revealed a belief that "knowledge could be reorganized and institutions could be changed for the good of minoritized communities" (p. 63). *We Demand* provides us with a more complex framework from which to examine our current and on-going protests. If readers are interested in looking more deeply into origins, ideologies, strategies and tactics, and coalition building, consider pairing *We Demand* with Martha Biondi's *Black Revolution on Campus* (UC Press, 2014) and Amaka Okechukwu's *To Fulfill These Rights: Political Struggle Over Affirmative Action and Open Admissions* (Columbia University Press, 2019).



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