

# BLACK STUDIES: A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*The two things that we black folk need most  
is a lot of patience and a sense of irony.*

--Junebug Jabbo Jones, Pool Hall Address  
"Don't Let White Folks Run You Crazy,"  
Jackson, Mississippi, October 2, 1964.

Any attempt to discuss the question of what has come to be called "Black Studies," or "ethnic studies" as they say in California, that incubator of meaningless pop jargon, outside of a political perspective is futile. The demands on the part of black students and their activist mentors is a response to political realities in the black community. The considerations out of which these pressures come are clear, so clear in fact, that there should be no need for an essay of this kind were it not for the apparently limitless capacity for the debasement of language and the obscuring of issues demonstrated by the mass media of the society. It is true that in this enterprise, the media has enjoyed the cooperation, witting or otherwise, of any number of hastily discovered "spokesmen" for black studies whose "revolutionary" fervor and extravagant rhetoric is equalled only by their mysticism and anti-intellectualism.

As if this outpouring of definition from the left which serves, more often than not, to obscure more than it illuminates were not enough, there is an attendant motion on the right flank of the black community which is equally uninformed, short-sighted and dogmatic. This faction, which includes such established Negro intellectuals as Andrew Brimmer of the Federal Reserve Board, Sir Arthur Lewis, the West Indian economist presently at Princeton, Kenneth Clarke who recently resigned from the Board of Trustees of Antioch College after they had yielded to student demands for a black residence hall, Prof. Martin Kilson of Harvard, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP (naturally), and a number of old guard Negro administrators from Southern Negro Colleges, seem to have become the cutting edge of the establishment backlash against the movement for Black Studies. The burden of their objections, which reflects very clearly a class position if not their political sentiments--they seem to have no discernible common political perspective save for an acceptance of the "one society myth"--is best reflected in Sir Arthur Lewis' comment that "black studies will not prepare a black student to be president of General Motors." Well, neither will it prepare him to be Pope, but that hardly seems to be the issue since it is not clear that anything short of civil revolution on the one hand and divine intervention on the other will accomplish either.

Equally interesting, not to say informative, in what it reveals of the attitudes of the men currently entrusted (by white society) with the education of young blacks, is the story rather gleefully reported in a recent issue of the *New York Times*. This concerns a "joke" which circulated at a meeting of The United Negro College Fund. While most of the administrators present admitted

rather sheepishly that their schools were initiating "some kind of Black Studies" programs to anticipate and forestall student militance, their attitude toward the undertaking was made graphically clear by the story reported by the *Times* as exciting great mirth among them. The essence of this story has to do with a student applying for a job and being told by a computer that his training in black studies had prepared him only to pick cotton. To quote Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist, "Bledsoe, you ain't nothing but a greasy chittlin' eater."

That this story and the *Times'* prominent and snide presentation of it was the greatest possible indictment of these men, the process of so-called education that produced them, and the alleged institutions of learning that they preside over at the command of racist southern legislatures was perhaps lost on them. But the Bledsoes of this world are distinguished less for their sense of irony than by their ill disguised contempt for the black community and its heritage and traditions.

The most substantive objections coming from the Negro right-- despite a certain intemperance of expression as when he sneers at "soul courses," a phenomenon of his own invention--comes from Rustin. His concern is that white colleges will attempt to cop out of what he sees as their responsibility to the black community by the expedient of hastily manufactured and meaningless programs designated "black studies," taught by semi-literate dahsiki-clad demagogues with nothing to offer but a "militant black rap." Rustin fears that white schools will accept this as an easier and less expensive alternative than providing the massive and costly programs of remedial education which are required. To be sure, there is little in the history of these institutions that would suggest that they are not capable of such a ploy. I know of very few isolated campuses where this is happening to some degree and I suspect that there are at least some others which will not be inhibited by questions of principle, morality or their own internal standards from attempting to follow suit. But the places where this can happen are not educational institutions in any but the most superficial sense and are at present educating no one, black or white. Besides which, it is inconceivable that such programs can survive, and even to exist they require the complicity of self-seeking and socially irresponsible black charlatans and careerists. Though few in number, such a type exists and their destructive potential is great. But it is the responsibility of the students and the adult black community to resist any such development in any institution where it becomes evident. It would be pointless to pretend that this danger does not exist in some small degree, but my impression of the basic good sense of this student generation, and their serious commitment and sense of responsibility to themselves and their community reassures me that this tendency will be a short-lived one.

Whatever unity is to be found in the positions of the black establishment--figures mentioned seem to reside in a thoroughly uncritical acceptance of the methods, goals and the educational practices of white America save for its traditional exclusion of black people. They are joined in this assessment by the overwhelming majority of white academics. There are other critical positions to the left of them in the black community, ranging from a nationalism impractical at this time: "The place for black students is in black schools" (Consequently the establishment of Black Studies programs on white campuses is a delusion luring black students onto white campuses "to be co-opted and corrupted by the 'devil.' ") to militant activism: "All of whitey's education is bullshit; all black people need to know is streetology. Black students should come on home to the streets and take real black studies in the areas of judo, karate, demolitions and assorted martial arts."

The second position speaks for itself, the first is more emotionally appealing until one checks some figures--of the 400,000 black college students in the country last year, fully one half were from the North and were in white schools, many of them as a consequence of "conscience" programs of recruitment and financial aid on the part of these white schools. Few of the black southern colleges can accommodate more students than are currently enrolled even if we ignored their chronic financial problems and the educational philosophy (political control, really) within which they are forced to operate.

At this point in history black students in increasing numbers will either have to attend white schools or no school at all. This being the case, certain problems arise: how can the almost inevitable psychological and spiritual demoralization of the small minority of blacks in an overwhelmingly white institution--which was conceived, created, structured and operated so as to service an oppressive social order--be avoided? Are the educational needs, both psychological and practical of the black student identical with the white? What elements of the society control these institutions and to what ends? What finally, when one cuts through the liberal rhetoric and the humanistic bombast, is the essential social and political function of these institutions? Is this function at all coincident with the necessities and aspirations of the black population as articulated by the growing nationalist consciousness of all elements of the community? Can anyone reasonably expect, in a situation where even the white student, the beneficiary and inheritor of the system, has begun to question its economic and political functions at home and abroad--to reject the yawning gap between its pious, self-justifying rhetoric and its viciously exploitative and murderous reality, and to question the role of the universities in this pattern--that black students who, for the most part have never been allowed the luxury of any delusions about the meaning of their relationship to this society and who are now quickening to a vision however tentative and problematic, of collective black possibility, will find it possible or desirable to make a smooth and easy adjustment to institutions with the historical record and contemporary posture of the Universities? The answer must be, in Stokely Carmichael's cryptic phrase "Hell, No."

And even if they wanted to, the attempt at emotional integration into these institutions would necessitate a process of psychological and cultural suicide. (Last spring during the "troubles" at the City College of New York an incident occurred which is significant. Black and Puerto Rican students came under attack for "vandalism" when they destroyed what was described as "a work of Art." One had to read the press reports very carefully to discover that what was destroyed was a tapestry depicting George Washington receiving the worshipful homage of a group of black slaves. A small incident, but symptomatic of a seemingly endless accumulation of gratuitous, racist affronts.)

As the current academic year opens there is some evidence that a reaction against the concept of Black Studies is beginning to take form from another and possibly more troublesome source--the faculty and administration of the universities. The two groups need to be considered separately for their interests, although congruent, are not identical. In every case with which I am familiar, the administration has adopted a posture that can best be described as interested neutrality. That is, they take no substantive position on the issues, being more interested in peace-keeping operations with the parties to the action, namely the black students and their supporters and conservative elements on the faculty which see the agitation for black studies as threatening their

class prerogatives and traditional jurisdictions. In every case the rhetoric coming from these pockets of resistance has been couched in terms of lofty liberal principles, and considerations of the highest academic and professional integrity, but the rhetoric barely conceals a most vulgar political and professional self-interest and occasionally an overt old-fashioned white paternalism. One canard, coming most often from the least informed members of the faculty, maintains that there is simply not sufficient material in the field to support and justify Black Studies as a major field of academic endeavor. This statement reveals more than the ignorance of its authors because were it in fact true, it would constitute the strongest possible confirmation of the covert racism and cultural chauvinism which informs the intellectual and scholarly establishment. And the patent absurdity of the "insufficient material" assertion does not really absolve the scholarly establishment because the existence of this basic research is due to the lonely and heroic efforts of past generations of black scholars and a few whites--Herbert Aptheker, Melvin J. Herskovits, Sydney Kaplan come to mind--in the face of the active opposition and indifference of the "profession." And in the case of the black scholars who had to endure the condescension, skepticism and disparagement of their efforts by white colleagues and publishers, our indebtedness is beyond expression or recompense. It is some small consolation that some of these morally courageous and dedicated pioneers, men like C. L. R. James, Sterling Brown, John H. Clarke, George Padmore, Arna Bontemps, and many more whose works are only now being "discovered" and published are present to witness the turning of the tide and the recognition and vindication of their efforts. And we have inherited from such men as W. E. B. Du Bois, J. A. Rogers, E. Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, Edward Wilmot Blyden, James Weldon Johnson, J. Carter Woodson, Kelley Miller, Leo William Hansberry both a scholarly example and the legacy of a distinguished tradition upon which to build.

Let us, for the moment, ignore this tradition and pretend, as those who make the charge of insufficient material must be doing, that these men never existed and their work had never been done. Would this in any way affect the necessity of this generation of black intellectuals to engage and demolish the racist mythology and distorted perception and interpretation of the black experience, culture and reality which constitutes the intellectual underpinnings of white racism in the society? The political struggle for liberation and cultural integrity must be accompanied by an intellectual offensive--and this is one of the tasks of black studies. The most obvious and pressing imperative is the reexamination and rehabilitation of our cultural heritage and political history--African and American--from the intellectual colonialism that has been imposed upon it. This is merely the first responsibility. The next level of responsibility accruing to black studies is related integrally to "issues" raised by its white academic opponents and has literally to do with the decolonization of education in this country. We need to examine these objections in the context of necessities and goals of the black community. There is the procedural objection to separate, autonomous departments of black studies. It is important to note that these objections come most often from white academics in those disciplines most clearly affected by what we are about, which is to say history, the humanities and the social sciences. Frequently they come from the upper echelons of these departments and include the faculty mandarins, the men least involved in teaching, and whose reputations and prestige derive from their roles as advisors and resource personnel to the political, military and industrial managers of the society.

Their style is as constant as is their approach. First they trot out their liberal credentials as friends of "The Negro." Then they proceed to the startling admission that there have been errors of

omission on the part of the white scholarly and educational community. Next they demonstrate how little perception they have of the mood or aspirations of the black community by presenting an analysis and a solution based on the fallacy of an integrated society and of identical interests. Certainly, they say, black literature and history should be a part of the curriculum. (Two years ago this faction was denying that the concept of black literature or history had any validity. On the question of a distinctive black culture, they still are not sure.) In fact, they say, there should be courses dealing with the black experience in every relevant discipline. But, to set up an autonomous entity--be it department, program or institute--of black studies is antithetical to everything we believe. It creates a false dichotomy, smacks of separatism, not to say black racism, creates a serious problem of standards and violates the concept of academic *objectivity*. Also, what assurances will we have that what will take place within that autonomous entity will be *education* and not indoctrination? (This is said without ironic intent.) And besides that--these black instructors that you plan to bring in--what acceptable (to us) academic credentials do they have? We would not want to short-change these black students! (That this concern for the academic well-being of black students is a recent development and consequently suspect can be seen by the fact that few if any of these men ever expressed any concern at their absence from that institution in the past.) How will you guarantee the ideological purity of this autonomous department? All of these questions are predicated on the assumption of a culturally homogeneous society, the myth of scholarly objectivity, a rejection of history, the denial of conflicting class interests within the society, and differing perceptions of necessities by the black and white community. The consequences of these objections, if followed, would simply be the perpetuation of their control over the education of black people and the imposition of their definitions of social and political reality upon the black community. This is precisely the issue, white cultural and ideological terrorism, and the right of black people to define for themselves the meaning of their past and the possibility of their future.

In order to deal with this position it is necessary to remind ourselves of some basic history. The black experience in this country is not merely one of political and cultural oppression, economic exploitation, and the expropriation of our history. It also includes the psychological and intellectual manipulation and control of blacks by the dominant majority. The liberation of blacks requires, therefore, the redress of all of these depredations. The relationship of the white community to the black has been and continues to be that of oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized. To pretend anything else is merely to prolong the social agony that the society is currently experiencing.

Scholarly objectivity is a delusion that liberals (of both races) may subscribe to. Black people and perceptive whites know better. The fact is that the intellectual establishment distinguishes itself by its slavish acceptance of the role assigned to it by the power-brokers of the society. It has always been the willing servant of wealth and power, and the research done in the physical sciences, the humanities and social sciences has been, with very few honorable exceptions, in service to established power, which has, in this country, always been antithetical to the interests of black people. The goals of the research undertaken, the questions asked, the controlling assumptions governing it, and consequently, the results obtained have always fitted comfortably into a social consensus which has been, by definition, racist.

Look at two examples affecting black people in the history of the institutions of higher learning. In 1832 a young professor named Dew, at William and Mary College, published a widely-circulated and -praised pamphlet which was to propel him to the presidency of that institution. The thesis of this piece of objective scholarship was ". . . It is in the order of nature and of God that the being of superior faculties and knowledge and therefore of superior power, should control and dispose of those who are inferior. It is as much in the order of nature that men should enslave each other, as that other animals should prey upon each other."

This example of objective scholarship and the attendant upward mobility which greeted it was not lost on a Professor named Harper at the University of South Carolina. His work published in 1838 proclaimed that "Man is born to subjection. The proclivity of natural man is to domineer or to be subservient. If there are sordid servile and laborious offices to be performed, is it not better that there should be sordid, servile and laborious beings to perform them?" Professor Harper ended his career in the office of Chancellor of his institution. Needless to say, the style as well as the issues have changed with history (witness Prof. Jensen), but has the basic dynamic of "academic objectivity"?

The "let the established departments handle it" proposal is as specious as it is fraudulent. These departments have, over the years displayed no interest in incorporating the black experience, a black perspective, or even Negro faculty-members into their operations. What should now dispose us to trust them? And even if we should, how will they, after centuries of indifference, suddenly develop the competence and sensitivity which would enable them to do an acceptable job? Will they really undertake to adjust the entire intellectual ambiance, the total perspectives from which they have operated? This is not likely, and for our purposes nothing less will do.

Such an adjustment on the part of these departments, though quite improbable, is at least conceivable. But this approach--leaving the responsibility to individual departments to proceed at their own pace and in their own unique styles--will merely institutionalize and perpetuate the fragmented, incoherent approach to the subject which has been the only approach in the past. Besides which, this would deprive the black community of any effective organ within the structure of the university which would be principally directed to the educational needs in that community. It is important that we emphasize the two equally important considerations which are basic to the concept of black studies. The first requires an autonomous interdisciplinary entity, capable of coordinating its curriculum in traditional disciplines, to ensure an historical, substantive progression and organic coherence in its offerings. The second function, which is no less crucial, requires this entity be sufficiently flexible to innovate programs which involve students in field study and social action projects in black communities.

Another issue which is frequently raised is that of the "racial" and academic qualifications of the faculty for these programs. Some groups insist that the presence of white faculty contradicts everything that black studies represents, i.e., the freeing of the black community from the tyranny of white experts and their endless definition of black reality. *The fact is, however, that there are few academics, white or black, who are qualified by their training in "traditional" white-culture-bound graduate schools to undertake the aggressively radical transformation of their fields that is the purpose of these programs. In fact, almost the reverse is true: the cultural condescension and chauvinism that has dominated graduate departments, coupled with an*

*absence of racial consciousness and cultural nationalism on the part of most traditionally-trained black academics, makes them little more qualified than their white peers.* This means that an effective black studies faculty must be recruited from the handful of academics who have a particular radical stance towards the reevaluation of the treatment of the black experience in their disciplines, and from among the ranks of active black intellectuals with experience in the political and cultural battlefronts of this country and the Third World.

There have been attempts by affluent white schools to attempt to lure the most able and committed black scholars from southern Negro schools. The faculty in black studies programs on white campuses have the responsibility not to allow themselves to be used by white institutions to recruit blacks away from predominantly Negro colleges, and the prohibition of recruitment from this source should be a stated policy of every such program. The same conditions hold true for black schools in the Third World. The black academic community of this country must not participate in expanding the brain drain from these countries. Rather, what should take place is that exchange programs for students and professors should be established between black studies programs in this country and Third World universities. Thus will the academic community lead the way in the reaching out to the black nations of the Third World and reuniting the black community in American exile with the African and West Indian nations.

These alternatives are admittedly not a permanent solution to the problem of faculty. This lies in the establishment of institutions for the training of the kind of aggressive, culturally nationalist intellectual that is needed. Given the urgency of this need, established black studies programs should invest some resources in the creation and support of these institutes, in return for the privilege of sending their best students to these centers. An excellent start in this direction has been made by Dr. Vincent Harding of Atlanta and his associates at the Institute of the Black World. This is a crucial and timely development and promises to be of great importance in the creation of a national network of black educational institutions.

It is not possible to over-emphasize the historical importance of this movement to control and define the quality and terms of black education in the nation at this time. It has been clear for some time that white educational institutions are in grievous default so far as black people are concerned. What we project is nothing less than a coordinated effort to secure our just portion of the educational resources of the country and make it over in our own image. The extent to which we are able to do this will determine the form, the reality, and the role of the black community for generations to come. If the black community is able to establish here--in the intellectual center of western technology--a series of institutions devoted to the training of a generation of dedicated, proud, and culturally liberated black intellectuals and technicians whose commitment and energies are dedicated to the service--in whatever way is necessary--of the international black community, then perhaps the travail of centuries, the dues paid in America by generations of our ancestors will not have been in vain. What is at issue is the cultural survival of a nation of people, a nation without borders, without land, and without government, but nevertheless a nation with a population greater than many European countries.

The present generation of black college students is perhaps the most important generation of black people ever to live in the United States. They stand poised between two cultures, their loyalties are being besieged, they must choose between a culture and a heritage they have been

taught to despise and a social establishment that, having rejected and oppressed their parents, is now making a determined bid to dissolve history and obscure reality. The vision that this generation leaves college with, the commitments they espouse, the decisions that they take, will determine not only the future of the black community in America, but will affect the nature of the struggle in the motherland and other areas of the Third World. The obstacles are formidable, the opposition great, the goal, to some, perhaps quixotic, but history is full of surprises (particularly to bourgeois historians) and while the consequences of failure are dismal, it will be an unspeakable dishonor to this generation of black intellectuals if the effort is not made. We have, quite literally, nothing to lose.

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### NOTES

Dr. Professor Bledsoe, the autocratic yet servile college president in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, cooperated with the white managers of the society in destroying the spirit and emasculating the consciousness of his students. As used here it is a generic term for all of his too numerous tribe.