

THE FUTURE OF BLACK STUDIES

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THE FUTURE OF BLACK STUDIES \*

BY RICHARD A. LONG

It is commonplace to rise among a group of educators and to announce that education is in a state of crisis. And the commonplace may indeed be a verity, such as is, for example, the assurance that—in the temperate zone, at least—the weather will change. Crisis may well be a necessary component of education, or an inevitable concomitant of its procedures. However we choose to view it, a glance at the newspapers for any short segment of time during the last three years will confirm the assertion that at the present time education is indeed crisis-laden.

The entire sequence of formal education from the nursery to the graduate seminar shares in this status quo. Other educational agencies the home, the church, Boy Scouts, and, I suppose the Campfire Girls, show appropriate cracks or strains. Cracks if you think of education as an edifice; strain if your preferred metaphor is that of the assembly line.

\* President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Thirty-First Annual Convention, Downtown Holiday Inn, Tallahassee, Florida, Friday afternoon, April 23, 1971.

In the midst of this crisis the complex phenomenon called black studies has arrived and attempted to take a place at the very moment when everything called education in this country is in question. What is the place of black studies in this maelstrom? Black studies is at once part of the question and part of the answer.

The anthropologist carrying his note books, cameras, and tape-recorders to a remote people over the hill, untouched by the eddies of the outside world, assumes a functional relation between every formalized pattern of that society and every other, and moreover that these patterns converge into the totality of that society's aims and goals. Its child-rearing practices, its initiation rites, its celebration of birth and death will all at the end of a scrupulous analysis be seen to be almost fatalistic reflexes of the inexplicable underlying skeins whose holding power keeps the society together despite human perversity and natural calamity.

The anthropologist faced with the crisis of American society would not be surprised by the consequent turbulence of each of its major institutions. And we must not be. But our refusal to be surprised, our resolve to be cool, in no way frees us of the responsibility for full participation in its solution.

Black studies, I have said, is part of the question and part of the answer in respect to the crisis of American education; the freedom of black people is part of the question and part of the answer to the crisis of American society. Black educators have a major and inescapable role to play in the analysis and the restructuring of both American society and American education. To hesitate in this matter is to permit the crisis to deepen, the inevitable dynamic tendency of any crisis; to hesitate is to acquiesce in the passive structure now undergoing convulsion and to share its fate, which is unlikely to be survival in good health.

What are some of the questions which are present in the current crisis? The most fundamental is, what is it all about? Do we go through years of childhood and adolescence, plied with vitamins and anti-biotics, stepping to the rhythms of schooling, to emerge at the door of the automobile dealership, the door of the real estate salesman, the door of the organiza-

tion, the door of the country club (for them) or the social club (for us)? There is a way of looking at this society which seems to indicate that this is what it is all about for the vast millions. For many other millions, of course, the realization of even these vapid goals is frustrated by various means and processes. Of these many thus frustrated millions, the majority are black. But what of those who are well on the way to attaining the goals—through no merit of their own, oh Lord—and the strange spectacle they make in proclaiming the goals no longer theirs. We now have the middle-class drug-culture, the greater part of it non-hippie, but now including professionals of all types. I cannot share the view that this phenomenon is an extension of the booze-culture. It is something new. And in a way that booze has never done, it enunciates a disenchantment with the society.

The question posed in American education is what do we learn, why, and for what? Is learning the chemistry of napalm a respectable human activity? Is teaching the chemistry of napalm a respectable human activity? Are there humanly neutral activities in learning and teaching? Are learning and teaching humanly neutral activities? It has been comfortably so supposed by several generations of sophisticated educators. The opinions of the learners were presumed to be non-existent; at any rate they were unsolicited. One of the crises of American education is the sudden articulateness of learners from the the elementary school to the graduate school. There are even rumors of nursery revolt. We need not be surprised. Revolt itself becomes a fashion, a formula, a mode, a goal, and, lamentably, a routine.

Black studies asks the question, what are the claims of education and what do they mean to black people who seem to be absent from any of the thinking and planning which supposedly underlie educational activity? The operational answer is of course that education is really for everybody and the apparent scarcity of black folk in the hitherto sacrosanct echelons of power and planning is of no essential importance, since their problems are considered. This is what I call the surrogate claim: you need not be present to have your interests represented. This is as likely as the finding that the truth about

slavery is contained in *Gone with the Wind*, that the study of Africa is the study of Europe, and that unemployment is employment. Out of the amazing discrepancy between black reality and the academic orthodoxy of the American dream, black studies has come to a tumultuous birth. Considering the size of the infant, it is no wonder that the mother is not doing well.

Black studies questions not only the assumptions of American education, just as black man questions the assumptions of American society, it questions also its programs and their content, its administrators and their procedures, its professors and their profession. And I re-emphasize, black studies is part of the question, not the whole question.

Nevertheless we cannot permit the distinctiveness of that part of the question posed by black studies to be annihilated by being integrated into some general postulation of the ills of American education. That we cannot permit for this would be to condone a practice that experience teaches us is inevitably destructive of the interests of black people, and in the field of education we are the stewards of that interest. There are no others. If we neglect our role, then the old dance will again begin, and I say to that possibility, better a year of Africa, than another cycle of Europe. American education must not be permitted to relapse, after a superficial upheaval, into the role of idealizing a system calculated for our exclusion. Black studies is a part of the question and our interest in the answer to that part of the question must not flag.

I have already said that black studies is also part of the answer to the crisis in American education, even as the freedom of black people is part of the answer to the crisis in American society. The answers are not ready-made, nor even self-evident; the answers will develop only in response to the most searching exploration—an exploration that the pragmatist traditions of American society and American education are incapable of undertaking without severe trauma. So be it. We must accept as the very minimum expectation imposed upon us that of severe trauma. This is not a comforting thought. The fact is that our situation can inspire no comforting thoughts.

The usual mode of dealing with crisis, real or imagined,

in American society and in American education, is that of making an adjustment, essentially a mechanical reaction triggered by a mechanical sensibility. This is no longer sufficient, and hence what has been in the past the pragmatic reaction is no longer pragmatic. It is the end of the road for one method of problem-solving. Another is demanded. It must be forthcoming.

Participation in this immense task of helping American education solve its crisis, taking full cognizance of the interaction between that crisis and the general crisis of American society, is the immediate task impinging upon the future of black studies. In the college, its most urgent challenge is in the realm of general education. Professors who have served more than a few years usually shiver when general education is mentioned. Unpleasant recollections of committee meetings at which the relative excellences of foreign language study and physical education were shouted out come to mind.

They will ask, are you serious? You mean, general education again? But I say again and again. For if the fundamental purpose of the college is not found in its general education program, where is it? The malaise from which general education has never aroused itself lies at the center of the crisis. It is the central theme running through American higher education and by reflex at all levels of education. It was one aspect of the Washington-DuBois controversy. In one form or the other the question of general education is international, but we need not take that into account in affirming that this is where black studies must make its impact, must provide answers if we are not to be dupes of the pragmatic solution which announces a list of black studies courses, a black studies department, or if you will, an autonomous institute.

Such procedures, if permitted to become institutionalized, will become little more than devices of re-segregation, and therefore once more a triumph of the system over legitimate revendications.

The vision of a world in which the black man is content to open the curtain, bring on a tray and silently efface himself, is a vision which American education has, true to the genius of the society it served, been content to proselytize. Such a

vision we have now consigned to oblivion, and American education, must bring itself into line with a new and developing view. The future of black studies lies in its contribution to the wholeness and sanity of the new view. For outside of the central direction of American education, black studies will slowly assume the status of a digression and a backwater. This must not be permitted to happen. It will not happen if we accept fully the responsibility we have in this matter of our common survival.

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