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BLACK STUDIES: INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS¹

By RICHARD A. LONG

The Black Studies movement, so recent a phenomenon in American education, is a dynamic and complicated affair. It is taking myriad forms in response to the great variety of pressures which have impelled its translation from student demand to curricular innovation. There is, in keeping with the traditions of American education, little conscious uniformity in the picture we view from college to college, but several distinct typologies are emerging. There is much discussion of aims and methods, and much paper is being consumed.

The dangers always present in human inquiry and human endeavor have naturally enough been present in Black Studies from the start. Such dangers as dogmatism, provincialism, and ritualism are quite manifest, not to speak of charlatanism, that eternal response of cupidity to financial opportunity. Arrogance, whose progenitor is ignorance and insecurity, is seldom absent from a discussion of Black Studies.

The Black Studies movement grows out of a specialization

¹ President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Thirtieth Annual Convention, Royal Coach Motor Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, Thursday morning, April 9, 1970.

of the general student protest movement which broke upon a startled nation a few short years ago. Student protest is an important part of the history of the twentieth century in some countries of the world. To the United States, to which things are supposed to come early if not first—lunar exploration, atomic submarines, actors as governors have indeed come first here—to the United States, student protest came late. It is useful to remember that fact. Who were protesting? None other than the pampered and privileged progeny of the Great American Middle Class, and they were manifesting disenchantment with that Great Middle Class Institution, the University.

In the midst of these protesters emerged a somewhat anomalous group. Black students who had been benevolently earmarked for individual rescue and who, to all intents and purposes, if not in fact, were enjoying the privileges of the pampered. Black students, too, were saying that something was wrong with the University.

The notion that something was wrong with the University did not originate with the recent protest generation. Something has always been wrong with the University. I can recall that an entire unit of the Freshman English course I took over twenty-five years ago was devoted to ritual denunciation of the University, as exemplified in thoughtful essays. The University was whoring after strange gods, they all seemed to say: technology, athletics, materialism. With the passing of time the gods have become stranger and their pursuit more lascivious. A few years ago a resolution of the monster by semantics was attempted and there was talk of the multi-versity. Such is the hard hand of fate that the publicist who launched the term became the first victim of the newly-named animal, much as M. Guillotine is said to have been the first victim of his slicing apparatus.

Nevertheless the New Protest movement found tatters and tears when none had previously been noted in the Great Halls of learning, and curiously, once exposed to view, no one could deny the reality of some of these distressful signs of poverty among opulence. Black students caught up in the mood of protest soon found that their priorities were different from those of white students and there was accordingly a division of protest along classic American lines.

The university has always made the claim—essentially a pun—that its perspective was universal. In point of fact, the American University like its distant European cousin, was simply the vehicle for the transmission of a limited portion of the experience of humanity. This was historically inevitable. The offence to order and to sense was the easy assurance that this limited portion was universal, was indeed Man. The blight of this kind of thinking is no where more manifest than in a series currently being shown about, entitled *Civilization* when in point of fact, it is “selected moments” in the history of Europe.

From the awakened perspective of Black students something was definitely wrong with the claim of the University to universality when it in fact dealt with Black man only as an adjunct to white man or as a topic in social pathology. One short year ago, the most famous American university could not point to a single course in its catalog which dealt positively or affirmatively with the Black experience as a topic worthy of study in its own right.

Today, a great variety of things are going on in the name of Black Studies, and it is not part of my purpose to deplore any of them here, for this is first of all a long-overdue period of trial and error. Pleas for quality and for traditional values come oddly indeed from lips which never deplored the teaching of hotel management or the awarding of college credit for swimming. The catalog of any American college is a cause for wonder and the addition of Black Studies to such catalogs will modify their surreal aspect only in the direction of sobriety.

I do not mean that a blanket approval of Black Studies programs presently in action or proposed can be made, any more than a blanket approval of educational programs generally. In fact, I am convinced that, in the spirit of democracy, we must not be shocked to find all levels of quality and seriousness in Black Studies programs. While hoping for the best, we must be prepared to find something less, more often than not. It is not on the individual character of Black Studies programs that we must take our stand, but on the ground that the experience of Black people must be presented in positive and distinct frames within the current curriculum. Evolution may well lead to a really universalist perspective in which there

may be required no special Black Studies framework, but that will be in the remote future.

The greatest danger I perceive now in the generality of Black Studies discussions and proposals is the provincialism of circumscribing the study of the Black man to the study of the Black man in the United States. In other words, a kind of American hegemony or imperialism, but Black, if you please, now seems ready for manipulation. There is an obvious reason for it. Most newly-begotten experts in blackness know nothing about any other Black people in the world, and indeed little about Black people in the United States. There is a more subtle reason in the unconscious arrogance with which all but the most cultivated Americans approach anything beyond their shores. Far from being exempt from this attitude, Black Americans are conspicuous for the easy assurance with which they wear this American mantle. They are instant experts on the correct Black response to any and everything, and yet Black Americans constitute merely a respectable percentage of the Blacks of the world. The Blacks of the world, I would hasten to add, are far less numerous than the non-Blacks, a fact that has recently gotten lost in some woodpile.

I am aware that there is a great deal of rhetoric about Third World and Black World perspectives. And two circumstances seem to favor such rhetoric. The first is the immediate access which the dominant American media give Americans—even Black ones—to the ears of the world. Consequently many brothers around the world believe things are happening here which have not yet happened. The second favoring circumstance is that Black intellectuals around the world, who owe a great deal to such Black Americans as W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Marcus Garvey, and Langston Hughes, are predisposed to find new signals, if not new leadership, coming from this branch of the diaspora. Neither of these favoring circumstances will long mask the incapacity Black Americans are prone to manifest in dealing with and understanding their Black brothers. This very incapacity is an index of how deeply encoded the American values are in the Black American psyche. Black commonality is most frequently preached by those who are most imbued with the individualistic ethic.

But where do we really stand on the international dimensions

of Black Studies? The common experiences of the Black people of the world have seldom until now invited the attention of any save a few, anthropologists for the most part. Historians, linguists, sociologists, and psychologists have preferred to define and study isolated groups of Black people asserting blandly that no important external links exist. Black people were either cultural isolates or cultural adjuncts of non-Blacks. On the other hand there have always been sensational generalizations positing a unity of separate traits: low intelligence, criminality, musicality, sexuality. The former stance has been the "scholarly" one, with some scholars not hesitating to work the second in.

One does not have to take a position on the importance of the common experience of Black people to insist upon examining the question with something other than the optic of bland or furious assertion. It is further a reasonable proposition that the common experiences of Black people are at least as important as their diverse experiences. It is on this premise that we propose two principles in teaching and research; one the diachronic principle of the African continuum; the other, the synchronic principle of the African extension. Here we are following in the steps of DuBois who demonstrated in his life work both as scholar and activist, a continuing dedication to all people of African descent. His Pan-Africanism was scholarly as well as political.

The principle of the African continuum is, that historically radiating from the Black Core, the Black peoples of the world have carried with them modes of dealing with and symbolizing experience, modes discovered and refined through millennia in Africa itself, and that these tactical and symbolic modes constitute a viable nexus of Black culture, one of the major traditions of humanity. The principle of the African extension is that the cultural legacy of the Black Core brought into contact with a second culture, whether in the New World or Africa, can be perceived meaningfully as a model of interaction, only when compared with other such models, and hence that the study of the Afro-American family, for example, is incomplete to the extent that it takes no account of the Afro-Brazilian family and so on.

That Black Studies should be international in its orientation

and scope is not only required by the nature of the inquiry itself, but is also in the general tradition of internationalism to which thinking men always have subscribed in theory, no matter how weak their practice. It is the ideal of *humanitas*. To approach Black internationalism, as some would do, as a separatist enterprise, is a romantic indulgence fraught with the usual outcomes that beset such religious enterprises—the development of cult and ritual and catechism. The role of the University is to call for open teaching and research, with the provision that each student construct his own ideology, his own religion of blackness, if you will.

What are the immediate implications for CLA in the light of the foregoing? I think that CLA must steadfastly support the development and growth of Black Studies in the University; that it must deal charitably but firmly both with the scoffers and the exploiters; that it must insist upon a really international or Pan-African dimension in such studies. Specifically in the study of language, literature, and folklore, CLA members must extend their range of inquiry and analysis to include the principles of the African continuum and the African extension. It must, of course, carefully scrutinize generalizations in this domain, directly condemning the casual and the adventitious. The road ahead for Black Studies, like life itself, will be no crystal stair. There will be tacks in it, and places with the stairs torn out. But you and I will, because we must, keep climbing.

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