
BLACK STUDIES: FORM AND CONTENT

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BLACK STUDIES: FORM AND CONTENT *

By CHARLES H. CURL

Perhaps Armageddon has come! The last decisive battle in our country between master and slave, ruler and the ruled, governor and the governed, teacher and the taught. The college campus is the battlefield. One of the major issues in this conflict in higher education all over America is black awareness. Students—black and white—are the aggressors; administrators, naturally, and selected faculty members represent the enemy. On the black college campus, the battle is led on the one hand by the so-called schismatics and agitators, who are disenchanted with what they call the whole bit of Uncle Tomism in the college, the paternalism of the black professors, and the fraudulent promises of the hereafter of college life. The enemy, on the other hand, is the establishment, the proponents of the status quo, the products of American mis-education, the architects and guardians of ivory towers. Who shall have the balance of power? Who shall have the final control of our institutions? How long before the Day of Judgment comes!

I propose in this discussion to raise some questions regarding three protagonists in this struggle: The college (the black

* President's address delivered at The College Language Association's Twenty-Ninth Annual Convention, Americana Hotel, Virginia Beach, Virginia, Thursday morning, April 24, 1969.

college in particular), the professor, and the students. Also, I shall point up some assumptions underlying the new-found interest in black studies and some of the pedagogical problems inherent in offering such a program in the college curriculum.

The role of the black college in American education seems to be a topic for continuing analysis and debate. Is the black college, as some would suggest, essentially a step-child of the American system of white racism and bigotry rather than a product of humanism and philanthropy? And does it therefore still operate as a necessary concomitant of that system, committed to weeding and feeding, so that the "white" universities can satisfy quotas, egos, and SDS demands? Does the black college also, conversely, operate in effect to foster black racism and black polarization, tending to separate itself from the white majority, on the one hand, and to alienate itself from the black masses on the other?¹ Does the Negro college, as E. Franklin Frazier puts it, continue to devote itself "chiefly to the task of educating the black bourgeoisie?"² And is the black college so hopelessly held by the tentacles of the mentality of white America (and its pocketbook) that it can hardly rise above its original ennobling mission, which was in effect to provide a token, middle class education for the sons and daughters of slaves who are still confined within the walls of segregation?

And what about those of us black professors who remain, in the South primarily, in the black colleges? Did we choose teaching in these institutions "by default?" Do we have an inordinate "concern with power and a willingness to exploit?" Are we likely to become "mute robots" who make a parody of the whole teaching process? Are we concerned chiefly with maintenance of tradition, increased salaries, and lightened class-loads?" Did we "accept our positions because of social status and economic security only?" Authors Jencks and Riesman,³ E. Franklin Frazier,⁴ a Morehouse college senior,⁵ and Nathan

¹ Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (New York, 1968), pp. 420-23.

² E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, 1957), p. 84.

³ Jencks and Riesman, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

⁴ Frazier, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁵ Robert L. Terrell, "Black Awareness Versus Negro Traditions: At The Atlanta University Center," *New South*, XXIV (Winter, 1969), pp. 29-40.

Hare⁶ said we did. If we believe what we read, we are likely to conclude that the black teacher in the black college is bordering on the bottom of the academic scale—being just a notch higher than one other unfortunate, the black administrator in a black college. We can certainly view these criticisms with a kind of levity (which helps us maintain our sanity), but also we must view them with the sobermindedness, introspection and self-evaluation these criticisms should generate. The status of the black professor in the black college is changing.

The black student in the black college is likewise a subject recently deserving of “empirical research.” One allegation is that the average black student just does not meet the admission standards of the lowest white college in his own backyard. The “Literature,” controlled—if not written by the white press—describes him as a functional illiterate who through the process of evolution was awarded a school diploma even though he cannot or will not read and cannot verbalize beyond the level of an average white seventh-grader. Using the all-powerful SAT score as a criterion for measurement, “researchers” such as Coleman and the ubiquitous team of Jencks and Riesman conclude that the student’s “verbal and mathematical aptitude scores at most Negro colleges are lower than those at even the worst white colleges in the same state.”⁷ And even among the “Negro Ivy League” schools very few freshmen average above the 25th percentile for white freshmen.

Laboring under the double jeopardy of condemnation for his stupidity and battling the all-pervading and insidious inefficiency of his schools, it is a miracle that the black student still worships the myth of “the rewards of education.” The truth of the matter is that education has not worked significantly to make for blacks a reality of the American dream; education does not insure commensurable jobs and economic power. What education for the Negro has been is an attempt figuratively to transfer him from black to white. And the most tangible result it has produced is to make him dissatisfied. Out of his resentment has evolved a kind of student who is likely to agitate the most significant reforms our institutions have

⁶ Nathan Hare, “The Legacy of Paternalism,” *Saturday Review* (July 20, 1968), p. 45.

⁷ Jencks and Riesman, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

experienced since the New England missionaries founded the first schools for Negroes in the South. Let's be grateful for his courage and move along with the business at hand.

Whatever the character of the college or the college professor or the college student, one fact is evident: we can no longer expect to carry on business as usual. And if we as "enlightened professors" do not respond to the changing times, new ideas and new proposals, such as the "black" university and the "free" university will blossom in settings not bound by faculty, trustees, alumni, and state legislatures, and they will break new ground in making education relevant.

The question of relevance has become crucial to higher education for black people. Perhaps its just a fancy word for realism. But what it calls for is a kind of education that will equip black people to live as self-respecting and self-supporting humans in white America. And black studies, it seems to me, is a viable approach to realism or—if you prefer—relevancy in education. Hence, the theme of this conference—"Black Studies: Form and Content"—is timely, and its implementation is crucial. Few topics in higher education command more attention; few areas are more compelling; and few needs are more eminent than those relating to this theme.

How ironic that the situation in our colleges was of such a nature that the dropouts and academic failures, the campus agitators and militants—and not the curriculum specialists and the academic community—had to regenerate this interest. Two decades ago, W. E. B. DuBois made the unpopular prediction that "time will come when a course in American Negro Culture will be a central study of students not only in Negro colleges but in white colleges and in the universities of the world."⁸ But even a decade ago, colleges that offered courses in Negro Literature were suspected of fostering activities which violated the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1954 Supreme Court's decision by supporting the unpopular separate but equal pattern of learning. Now offering one or more courses in black studies has become a status symbol for colleges and universities across the nation.

⁸ W. E. B. Dubois quoted in *Integrated Education: A Report on Race and Schools*, VII (March-April, 1969), p. 26.

The band-wagon approach to black studies curricula seems often to be undergirded by certain speculative, if not, tenuous assumptions—accompanied, no less, by some forewarnings and fears of adverse outcomes. There are those who believe that black studies could foster separatism, draw hardened racial lines, plough fertile soil for black militancy or at least reinforce a negative identity among the young blacks the program would aim to exalt. One publication asserts that “many Negro educators reject this idea (that is, a black curriculum in the humanities and social sciences) on the political ground that it would look like capitulation to Stokely Carmichael and other flamboyant advocates of Black Power and separatism.”⁹ “Many feel,” the writers continue, “that it would provide some students and faculty with an excuse for avoiding competition with whites.”¹⁰ They suggest that the most serious obstacle to a black curriculum is, however, “the almost universal feeling of both black and white faculty at Negro colleges that it would be academically indefensible in strict scholarly terms.”¹¹

How tragic, if all these years—before and after DuBois, we have expended so much valuable time and energy in an “academically indefensible” pursuit. Certainly we have assumed that certain “non-academic” benefits should accrue from the study of black culture—but we would be hard put to defend a course in hotel management as more academic than Negro poetry.

In the face of the jeremiads and the prophets of disaster, perhaps we should examine some of the assumptions we are making and some of the problems we see ahead. One assumption is that black studies serve an altruistic or humanistic purpose; that they will perhaps on face value generate in blacks a self-identity which will result in self-respect and at the same time arouse in white Americans some kind of guilt which in some “magic” way will be redemptive. Some proponents of black studies argue that such endeavors will enhance racial understanding; help eradicate racial stereotypes; and, as

⁹ Jencks and Riesman, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

a recent writer in the *English Journal* conjectured, "destroy group prejudices" and bridge communication barriers.¹²

Further, it may be presumed that black studies will somehow make black people less alienated in a country rightfully theirs. It may be predicted that on a person-to-person basis, such studies—being relevant to black students—will therefore be an effective instrument for recapturing sagging interests and increasing general academic performance; that as a result drop-outs will decrease and achievement levels will rise. It has likewise been alleged that the study of black history and culture will somehow, by forcing the student to view his environment more realistically, prepare him for community service and for actual job opportunities.

The most defensible argument for black studies in our institutions is that such studies do constitute a solid academic discipline. And, as such they can provide for the institution and its students outstanding and enduring benefits. Students and teachers who pursue these studies with the rigor that a bona fide discipline deserves should help to purge the record. And by this accomplishment, they should earn the benefits of research and study conducted with objectivity and accuracy. An institution conducting the study of black culture can enhance our understanding of the whole corpus of history and culture. Admitting, therefore, that black studies should be pursued as a legitimate educational endeavor—having potential ethical and social values—we are free to examine some of the pedagogical problems involved.

One problem with far-reaching implications deals with the definition and scope of the discipline itself. What are the legitimate aspects of the area? Does it include the arts, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, religion and philosophy? What emphasis should be placed on African studies as related to Afro-American studies? Should other black peoples of the world be included? What about black people as pictured from the vantage point of white people—in history, in literature and other subject areas? At what point does enrichment end and proliferation begin? (At one institution, for example, North-

¹² Nancy L. Arnez, "Racial Understanding Through Literature," *English Journal*, LVIII (January, 1969), pp. 56-7.

western students have asked for at least 30 courses, including the study of Core and SNCC and "Introduction to the Preparation of Soul Food.")

How do the courses classified as black studies relate to the total curriculum of a college or university? Obviously, the least desirable approach is simply to offer more courses in history and literature or to introduce courses in Ibo and Swahili as isolated electives inserted in the catalogue as an eleventh-hour effort to avert student reprisals. Each institution, being unique, must face—among others—these curriculum questions: (1) How do these studies reflect or advance institutional philosophy? (2) Can the college offer such studies as an academic major meriting a distinct and separate degree? (3) At certain levels of student sophistication should the courses be interdisciplinary? (4) At what point should independent study and research be initiated? (5) To what degree and for what purpose should community participation be introduced?

One pressing problem which causes continuing debate is, in whatever department or area they are offered, should black studies be offered as a separate discipline or part of a total culture? At what point does isolation end and correlation begin? James Baldwin says that teaching black history and culture is unrealistic unless one teaches American history "in a sense, then, for the first time."¹³ Ralph Ellison came to appreciate literature by reading T. S. Eliot as well as Waters Turpin; Karl Marx and Richard Wright; Sterling Brown and James Baldwin but also James Joyce and Earnest Hemingway.¹⁴ And Richard Wright proposed the study of Negro Literature through the culture of French Quebec, where there are practically no Negroes in residence.¹⁵

Another pedagogical problem concerns selecting the most appropriate and most effective staff for a black studies curriculum. Should black studies be taught exclusively by black teachers? Some contend that, not having experienced the slave's past history, white teachers are not qualified to lead students to appreciate the products of that history.

An assistant professor of English in one of our major uni-

¹³ James Baldwin, "The Nigger We Invent," *Integrated Education: A Report on Race and Schools*, VII (March-April, 1969), p. 15.

¹⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1953), p. 169.

¹⁵ Richard Wright, *White Man Listen* (New York, 1957), p. 106.

versities is quoted as having said, "Honesty in teaching black students cannot be achieved by white teachers who stain their psyches with walnut juice," in an effort to make themselves over as black.¹⁶

The white teacher offering black studies faces a number of hazards: simply by being white he may find himself in a slave-master situation. And as John O. Killens said, "Slaves do not integrate with their masters."¹⁷

Another hazard the white teacher faces is that of being classified as a "liberal," or a "missionary"—in which case he may be suspected and denigrated by both his black colleagues and his students. Baldwin expresses the feeling clearly:

"I don't trust people who think of themselves as liberals . . . I don't want anybody working with me because they are doing something for me. What I want them to do is work with their own communities."¹⁸

But the practice of assigning black studies to black teachers only presents its own peculiar set of hang-ups. The subjects comprising a curriculum or the content of a course can be mutilated by the assumptions and the attitudes of the teacher, white or black. Someone has said that black studies can be emasculated if taught from a white point of view. What happens if the black educator has not been able to extricate himself from the master-slave syndrome and his feelings of inferiority and self-hate are inflicted upon or transmitted to his students? What happens if the black educator has himself the kinds of academic limitations associated with segregated, inferior education? Do we perpetuate the status quo?

Obviously, more than in any other discipline, black studies—if they are to rise above mere fadism—should be manned by the type of teacher-scholar, black or white, who has an innate empathy with the subject matter and has the skills of research and teaching to focus upon essential issues and movements as well as to inspire students in the direction of independent study and logical thinking.

A final pedagogical problem I wish to identify is that of

¹⁶ Quoted from a brochure advertizing *Change Magazine*, Published by Science and University Affairs, 59 East 45th Street, New York.

¹⁷ Killens was quoted in *Black Consciousness and Higher Education* (Winter, 1968), p. 21.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, "The Nigger We Invent," *op. cit.*, p. 17.

preparing and selecting appropriate materials. We decry the tendency of the Ivy Leagues and Top Tens to pirate our ranks and comb our syllabi for resources, human and otherwise. We are displeased when publishing houses suddenly resurrect the forgotten black classics, such as *Up From Slavery*, and put them between new and contemporary covers and designs. But are we as black educators producing enough source material fast enough? We must concede that our graduate professors seldom approved the study of Negro language and literature as subjects worthy of doctoral research. And we become so brainwashed that, until recently, even the pages of the *CLA Journal* were often covered with black commentary on white writers. We must concede also that the other journals and the publishing houses have, in effect, mitigated against the production of manuscripts in black studies. But one cannot expect the textbook industry, being commercial, to put itself out of business for moral or altruistic reasons.

And now, with the gullible public having been duly bathed in guilt, the publishers race to satisfy a ready-made market. And the non-Negro author, supported by the psychology that white is right and having access to the press, continues to succeed in the area of black studies. One ceases to wonder why Robert Bone, Herbert Hill, Theodore Gross and others have such a fertile market while J. Saunders Redding; Brown, Davis and Lee; and Hugh Gloster go out of print.

What lies ahead? Will we bear so hard doing our own thing in black awareness that we lose sight of the educational purpose of our own institutions? Will black people become so possessive of black culture as to exclude all white professors from black institutions, all white students from the study of this culture and effect segregation and discrimination in reverse? Will we allow our curricula to be violated by the intrusion of frivolity and tokens of capitulation? Will we permit our courses to be so watered down as to degenerate into workshops and institutes in human relations and keeping the peace? Black studies is all too often used as a peace pipe on our campuses. Black studies is all too often used as a means of uniting enemy camps. Let's make it what it should be: a necessary ingredient in the education of all Americans, young and old, black and white.

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