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REFLECTIONS ON STRUCTURE AND CONTENT IN BLACK STUDIES

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Perhaps the first thing to note with regard to the nature of Black Studies is that those concerned with these studies today stand squarely on the shoulders of the precursors in the field of Black Studies. Nothing is more untrue than the notion of militant students and teachers involved in Black Studies thinking that what they began to call “Black Studies” several years ago was something they invented.

In truth, there is virtually no area, field, or subject related to the history, sociology, culture, politics, and anthropology of either Old World—Africa—or New World—America and other Western Hemisphere—black peoples that has not received major scholarly and intellectual attention between the late nineteenth century and the end of World War II. Numerous scholars of highest skill and sensitive humanity, both white and black scholars, contributed to the study of these facets of black peoples and societies during this period.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This essay is a revision of a lecture delivered at a symposium on Black Studies at Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts, in March 1971.*

Among the black American scholars who participated in this work, the following are notable:

- (1) W.E.B. DuBois, the Harvard-trained sociologist and historian, whose brilliant book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899, was one of the first urban sociological surveys in America and is a classic in the urban sociology of blacks;
- (2) Carter G. Woodson, also a Harvard-trained historian, whose books were directed to scholars and laymen, who founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1916 and established its organ, *The Journal of Negro History*, the oldest journal dedicated to the study of blacks;
- (3) Horace Mann Bond, a Chicago-trained sociologist and educator, whose book, *The Education of the Negro in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel*, published in 1937, is a classic in the sociology of education;
- (4) Allison Davis, a Harvard and Chicago-trained social psychologist, whose book, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, published in 1940, is a classic in the sociology of education;
- (5) J. Saunders Redding, trained at Brown University in English and Literature, who produced a brilliant example of comparative analysis of Afro-American literature in his book, *To Make a Poet Black*, published in 1939;
- (6) Rayford Logan, a Harvard-trained historian who succeeded Woodson as editor of *The Journal of Negro History*, wrote in 1954 a pioneering study in the history of racist ideas, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir 1877-1901*;
- (7) St. Clair Drake, a Chicago-trained social anthropologist, whose book, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, published in 1945 is a classic analysis of the sociology of the black ghetto;
- (8) John Hope Franklin, a Harvard-trained historian, whose book *The Militant South*, published in 1956, is the major work on the extremist ethos in Southern life and culture; and, finally,
- (9) E. Franklin Frazier, a Chicago-trained sociologist, whose book,

Negro Youth at the Crossroads, published in 1940, had partial collaboration with the white psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan and is a major study of the psychological forces that shape the personalities of black adolescents in cities.

The white precursors are equally numerous, but only several need mention here: *Robert Parks*, the cofounder of the University of Chicago School of Sociology, not only studied Afro-Americans but was early in recruiting brilliant black students into sociology; among those who studied under Parks were E. Franklin Frazier—perhaps the most seminal Afro-American social scientist whose book, *Black Bourgeoisie*, published in 1959, is a classic example of critical sociology; Charles Johnson, first director of urban research for the National Urban League in the early 1920s and a pioneer at institutionalizing research on the Afro-American, which he did at Fisk University; Horace Mann Bond, already mentioned for his classic study of the sociology of Afro-American education in the South; and St. Clair Drake, already mentioned for his brilliant study of blacks in Chicago in the 1940s. In addition to Parks, *Thomas Woofter* deserves mention. He was an economist who spent his professional life studying the economic and social status of the urban Afro-American; his book, *Negro Problems in Cities*, published in 1928, is an early and major social survey of urban blacks. Finally, mention of Melville Herskovits is in order; he was an anthropologist who, in addition to having founded single-handedly the interdisciplinary field of African Studies in America, spent a lifetime studying black societies throughout the world—in Africa (Dahomey), in the American South and Chicago, in the West Indies (Trinidad), and in South America (Brazil). Indeed, Herskovits virtually conceived the field of Afro-American Studies, and his theoretical essays in this area are still among the most fertile writings available.

STRUCTURE IN BLACK STUDIES

WHO SHOULD ADMINISTER THEM?

One notable feature of the black and white precursors of Black Studies mentioned above is that they were all well-trained scholars. They all pursued graduate studies and doctorates. None of these precursors was a charlatan or a dilettante. Nor was any of them an ideologue, or a politician sporting intellectual garb. They all were, to a man, either liberal or progressive, and a few were radical. But they knew that the scholarly study of blacks required special skills and a uniquely disciplined frame of mind—an outlook that enabled the scholar, white or black, to surmount his own prejudices and ideological proclivities in behalf of disciplined knowledge. One of these precursors, W.E.B. DuBois, was indeed a very political man; yet he recognized the need to keep politics in its proper place when he sought the scholarly study of social and historical problems of Afro-Americans.

These attributes associated with the pioneers in the study of blacks must be the basis of the organization of Black Studies curricula today. Thus, only persons of tested scholarly abilities and training should be involved in the organization and administration of Black Studies curricula. This means, of course, that placing undergraduate students on the governing bodies, committees or departments, concerned with Black Studies curricula is out of order. A number of colleges and universities—including Harvard University—have allowed undergraduate executive roles in administering Black Studies curricula. Quite frankly, this is utter nonsense. With rare exceptions, no undergraduate is ready to *exercise scholarly authority* in any field—he would not be a student if he were—and certainly not in as complex an interdisciplinary field as Black Studies.¹

Indeed, granting students—and almost exclusively Negro students—positions on governing bodies in Black Studies represents a profound insult to blacks. Perpetrated by

misguided militant black teachers—often themselves poorly qualified for roles in Black Studies departments, which probably explains their position on student participation, for students' militancy often got jobs for such teachers—and by guilt-ridden white faculty and administrators, the presence of students on governing bodies in Black Studies is disrespectful of the long-run educational needs of the black population. The calibre of Black Studies departments or programs is determined by the quality of the persons who make decisions and teach in these programs; clearly, undergraduates, whose scholarly and technical calibre is necessarily very low, do not aid the calibre of Black Studies programs. They have no tested scholarly and technical skills to impart to other students.

Unfortunately, however, what students can do as executive members of a Black Studies department or program is to turn it into a political affair, exploiting it for a lot of ideological and psychological purposes which are associated with the political style called black militancy. I am not myself opposed to black militancy—let me make this clear: it has its place in a racist society like ours, which has been cruel and vulgar in its social and political relationships with blacks; in this society, militant pressures are required to help change behavior and institutions in more progressive and humane directions. But once militancy has made its point, it should, so to speak, mind its business. What I am saying, in short, is that once militant students helped modify the limitations in college curricula with regard to the study of blacks, these militant students should return to being students. As students, they necessarily lack the trained skills and habits that enable a person to exercise scholarly authority—to teach, research, publish, and make decisions about curricula, and so on. They, therefore, simply have no role in governing Black Studies curricula, or any other curricula. At best, students might be given advisory roles, places on advisory committees in Black Studies—and other departments, for that matter.

could conceivably be opened to students. The purpose would be to tap their feelings about trends in the curriculum and the like. But beyond this, students simply have no place in the administrative and governing structure of Black Studies curricula, and the numerous colleges and universities—both excellent ones and average-to-mediocre ones—who have succumbed to militant threats and allowed students to hold such positions must bring this practice to an end. Such Black Studies departments or programs will remain intellectually and scholarly of doubtful quality until this is done.

ROLE OF ESTABLISHED DISCIPLINES

Any of the major precursors of Black Studies that one can think of had his or her primary scholarly and intellectual training in an established discipline like comparative literature, anthropology, sociology, and so on. St. Clair Drake, for example, was trained in social anthropology at the University of Chicago; Ralph J. Bunche, a pioneer in the study of urban Afro-American politics in the 1920s to 1940s, was trained at Harvard University in political science; Harold Foote Gosnell, a white pioneer in the study of urban Afro-American politics in the same years, was trained at Chicago in political science; and Abraham Harris, a black pioneer in the study of the economic status of the Afro-American working class, taught at the University of Chicago most of his career and was trained in economics at Columbia University. The same holds for the current generation of black and white scholars who study the Afro-American and other black societies: e.g., James Gibbs, a black anthropologist at Stanford University who works on African traditional societies, was trained in anthropology at Harvard University in the 1950s; Andrew Brimmer, a black economist now on the Federal Reserve Board and studying economic problems of blacks, was trained in economics at Harvard in the 1950s; Elliot Skinner, a black anthropologist at Columbia University studying

African tribal systems, was trained in anthropology at Columbia in the 1950s; and Nathan Huggins, a black historian at Columbia University who studies the social history of the Afro-American, was trained in social history at Harvard in the 1950s.

What I mean to suggest by the foregoing references to the type of academic training received by two generations of scholars involved in Black Studies is that the best approach to a field of such interdisciplinary complexity as Black Studies is through one of the established academic and technical disciplines like economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and so on. I would suggest that no interdisciplinary subject like Asian Studies, African Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, American Studies, and Black Studies (each of which intersects all major academic and technical disciplines) can evolve into a scholarly and intellectually viable field *without the curricular control of an established discipline*. Thus, if students are allowed to approach an intrinsically interdisciplinary subject like Black Studies without the curricular control of a discipline like economics, psychology, and so on, these students will be academically and technically diffuse and disoriented. They will be jack-of-all-disciplines, so to speak, but master of none. In a word, they will be dilettantes at best, and charlatans at worst.

Indeed, it would be tragic for the current generation of Afro-American students, nearly seventy-five percent of whom are now in white colleges, to have them become victims of academically and technically diffuse Black Studies curricula or programs. To allow students in Black Studies programs to pick, for example, in a hit-and-miss fashion among two black economic courses, two black sociology, two literature, one philosophy, one anthropology, two political science, two history, and so on, and then to graduate these students at the bachelor degree level as presumably qualified to apply social science analysis or to apply to graduate schools in history, economics, sociology, and the like is to perpetrate a cruel

hoax on the black students. Unfortunately, this situation is now widespread in colleges with Black Studies curricula. But in view of the present small skill pool of professionally and technically trained Afro-Americans, the black community simply cannot afford this mode of organizing a Black Studies curriculum. Only at the rather low level of undergraduate training, as in training elementary teachers, could this kind of academically and technically diffuse Black Studies curriculum be acceptable. (Though I am told by colleagues in psychology and linguistics that, increasingly, elementary teachers will require more specialized undergraduate training, and they feel that this should already be the situation for teachers who will teach in ghetto elementary schools.) But I doubt that this academically diffuse curriculum would be satisfactory for teachers who intend to teach in secondary schools, for it is necessary in my view that most black secondary school teachers be trained in an academic or technical discipline in undergraduate school (like biology, chemistry, mathematics, or history) so that they can pursue at least some graduate studies both in a discipline and in teaching. Certainly this is the calibre of teacher that must be increasingly recruited into the secondary schools of the ghetto, for without them it will be nearly impossible to alter the currently low level of academic training in ghetto high schools.

Now let me be more concrete about how the interdisciplinary subject of Black Studies should be controlled by the established disciplines when shaping a curriculum. First, the principles underlying my view of the proper curriculum: The principle I employ is that of tracking; a student majoring in Black Studies should be "tracked" through an established discipline like, say, economics, in such a fashion that he would be in effect fulfilling two majors or concentrations. One major, dealing with the established discipline of economics, would require the student to meet at least the basic set of courses required of all economics majors—like eco-

conomic doctrine, principles of macro-economics, principles of micro-economics, at least two primary courses in quantitative analysis (which, of course, would require the student to take the related mathematics courses in the math department), and several more applied analytical courses. The second major, dealing with Black Studies, would require the student to take courses which apply economic analysis to problems related to blacks—like welfare economics, labor economics, urban investment policies, economics of urban education, and related courses. Thus, with this mode of organizing a major in Black Studies, you can ensure against producing dilettantes and students ill-prepared for graduate studies; even if they do not pursue graduate studies, they would at least have a technical basis of some worth in a given discipline, rather than the diffuse set of “skills” provided by the catch-as-catch-can type of Black Studies curriculum I referred to above, which is far too prevalent today.

Of course, what is primary to the type of Black Studies curriculum I am proposing is that a student must decide first of all in favor of a particular discipline. He must be required to decide after his first year whether he wishes to be a sociologist, economist, political scientist, or whatever, and on the basis of this choice he has his curriculum in Black Studies “tracked” through an established discipline. To take another concrete example of tracking a student through a discipline within an overall Black Studies curriculum or program, let us say a student decides to be a sociologist. This student should first be required to fulfill at least the basic prerequisites required of sociology majors: thus, he should take statistics, social theory (e.g., Pareto, Parsons, Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, Merton, and so on), political sociology, social structure (e.g., kinship, formal organization, and the like), and demography. Solid grounding in these or other basic sociological subjects would be a prerequisite for the courses that apply sociology to the study of blacks. Once this is obtained—and some of these prerequisites could be taken

simultaneously with courses specifically related to blacks—the student pursues a range of courses, available both in the Black Studies program or department and in other departments that relate to blacks. These courses might include demography of the ghetto, urbanization in the ghetto, Afro-American family structures, sociology of Afro-American health, deviant behavior among Afro-Americans, Afro-American leadership patterns, Afro-American voluntary organizations, and so on.

Another key feature of this model of Black Studies curricula is that a good number of the courses comprising the curriculum I suggest will be taught in the established disciplinary departments, while others would be offered explicitly by the Black Studies program or department. Of course, the average American college that is concerned with Black Studies could hardly afford to acquire all the different social science skills required in a single Black Studies department. Even the elite and wealthier institutions like Harvard, Yale, Chicago, and the University of California system will for the most part not be able to afford such a concentration of skills in the humanities and social sciences in a single, compact Black Studies department. Indeed, I consider it much more desirable intellectually and academically that the scholars who teach in the Black Studies curriculum be represented in all the established departments like classics, comparative literature, philosophy, and economics, and that to the extent there is a Black Studies department at all, it will be a composite body of those scholars who are in the established departments but teach a Black Studies curriculum. Perhaps the best way to realize this is to adopt the policy of joint academic appointments for scholars in the established departments who teach in the Black Studies curriculum. This is quite feasible at the wealthier colleges or universities, though again at the average college what is called the Black Studies department will be in effect a committee of scholars who teach in the established

departments but also participate in the Black Studies curriculum.

But, of course, the important matter is not whether the Black Studies curriculum is housed in a department of its own, realized through coordination of existing departments and divisions or through some other means. The significant issue is to guarantee that students—especially those marked for graduate schools and professional schools—who pursue Black Studies are simultaneously grounded in an established academic and technical discipline. A Black Studies curriculum, like other interdisciplinary curricula (American Studies, Asian Studies) cannot stand alone: it must, so to speak, be clothed in the tested scholarly and technical garment of an established discipline.

WHO SHOULD MAJOR IN BLACK STUDIES?

First of all, there should be no political or other extraneous qualification for majoring in Black Studies. Efforts by authoritarian and xenophobic militant black students to discourage white students from pursuing Black Studies—which occurs at some colleges—must be criticized and opposed. Although some black militants prefer the fantasy world on which their political style thrives, it is clear that blacks and whites in American society have a profound interconnection, and neither white racist nor black racist ideology can alter this. Happily, this is already becoming more apparent to some militant black students at white colleges who several years ago shed associations with white peers, but today are restoring these relationships, which, of course, are fundamental to the black students' efforts to gain the optimum benefit from white colleges. This trend, however, is far from complete, and currently there are many black students who persist in imposing a separatist pattern upon their education at white colleges, and especially upon

Black Studies departments or programs. But this must be openly and firmly opposed by all scholars who take the life of the mind seriously. Indeed, the only possible situation in which an all-black separatist educational pattern would be somewhat justified is under circumstances where black militants *formed and paid for* their own all-black college or Black Studies institute. Elements among other American ethnic or particularistic groups who were, like militant blacks today, obsessed with their ethnic particularism founded separatist educational arrangements. For example, some Catholics, obsessed with their Catholicness, have done so; some Jews, obsessed with Jewishness, have done likewise; *though, instructively enough, these are among the minority of these and other major American ethnic or particularistic groups; the majority, tuned in to reality, have sought their education in the pluralistic context of the elite American colleges like Yale, Princeton, Harvard, or of the great American state colleges and universities.* Clearly, then, only in an all-black institution that is funded by blacks can those militants obsessed with their blackness justifiably pursue a policy of rejecting white participation in Black Studies; only in this situation can they justifiably indulge their special all-black educational and psychological life-style. *In the white colleges, both private and state, where now over seventy percent of all Afro-Americans in college are in attendance, the exclusion of whites from Black Studies is unjustified.*

Another aspect of who should take Black Studies is the issue of what proportion of black students in white colleges should major in this curriculum. Some militants among Negro students and teachers appear to support the majority of black students concentrating in Black Studies. This would be an enormous error, I think. We now have the majority of blacks in college attending white institutions, and this situation will persist. The opportunity this affords Afro-Americans at first-class institutions like Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, in the University of California

system, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and elsewhere to major in the scientific and technological fields like chemistry, engineering, architecture, computer sciences, and biology should not be lost because of some ideological and psychological proclivity toward Black Studies. As Professor Arthur Lewis, perhaps among the top ten economists in the world and clearly the leading black economist, now at Princeton University, has pointed out in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* last year, the road to the top and middle jobs in American society is through the sciences and technologies, not through the humanities and social sciences, of which Black Studies is, of course, a part. Professor Lewis also noted that today Afro-Americans, while twelve percent of the American population, hold only two percent of the top or elite jobs in the society and only one percent of the middle-level jobs, but some sixty percent of the lower-level jobs. The black community can change this weak position in the structure of jobs (and thus of power) in American society only by entering in much larger numbers the technological and scientific fields. No amount of psychological, therapeutic, or symbolic dependence upon Black Studies should be permitted to prevent this development; if it does, the road to group suicide awaits us, for in the coming decades American society will be more, not less, dependent upon scientific and technological skills.

It is even doubtful that that large segment—perhaps the majority—of black students who become school teachers should major in Black Studies. *I am particularly concerned with high school teachers, for the need in urban ghettos throughout the country is for high school teachers in mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, mechanical arts, and so on.* It takes organized effort to get more black high school teachers trained in these crucial areas, whereas, in Black Studies, which is a part of the social sciences and humanities, there is a natural and easy proclivity among black students to enter this field. I would suggest, therefore, that it

is actually necessary to discourage Afro-American students who intend to become high school teachers from entering Black Studies as a major field, and encourage them to choose a technical and scientific subject instead. There is certainly no need to encourage them to enter Black Studies.

Thus, one might ask me who, then, should major in Black Studies, since I have excluded a sizable chunk of Afro-American students from this major. My reply is that those special students, black and white, who have a serious appreciation of and good aptitude for the social sciences and the humanities are the ones who should major in Black Studies. This major, moreover, should be pursued simultaneously with a part-major in an established discipline; or, as I put it earlier, the Black Studies curriculum should be "tracked" through an established discipline. Major intellectual, scholarly, and practical problems remain to be solved by the bright student of the social sciences and humanities who has a special interest in Black Studies. The desire to help solve these problems is, to my mind, the only valid reason for a student to major in Black Studies.

DEPOLITICIZATION OF BLACK STUDIES

Perhaps the major obstacle to the realization of the type of Black Studies curriculum that I have in mind is the extensive politicization of Black Studies departments or programs in the past several years. Militant political action by black students, often involving both threats of violence and actual violence, was of course fundamental to the rapid spread of Black Studies in white colleges in the past several years. I believe this militancy went much too far; it became an end in itself, rewarding especially in psychological and therapeutic terms, but clearly divorced from the academic and technical issues of establishing Black Studies curricula that would be effective. *Militancy opened up the floodgates, so to speak; it*

allowed a wide variety of basically ill-trained persons—a kind of para-professional category—to enter Black Studies departments and programs as teachers of so-called black subjects, whereas in fact few of these persons were academically trained to the point where they could exercise scholarly authority in the academic and technical disciplines of anthropology, economics, sociology, comparative literature, and the like. This situation has occurred, moreover, not only at average and mediocre colleges, but at elite institutions like Dartmouth, Harvard, the University of Michigan, and elsewhere.

Altering the political processes that allowed this situation to occur in Black Studies departments and programs throughout the country will not be easy. But alter it we must—that is, those of us who understand the necessity to place the training of students in Black Studies on academically and technically viable foundations. There are some forces, happily, working toward this alteration. First, a growing number of Negro students at white colleges—especially males—are slowly but surely retreating from the more stark, anti-white, separatistic black nationalist behavior they acquired several years ago. From Dartmouth to the University of Minnesota and beyond, more black students—males in particular—are restoring their ties with white peers; and some black males, even former leaders of the militant separatist nationalism of the past several years, are again dating white female students. All this suggests that the kind of psychological and therapeutic dependence that black students had with regard to Black Studies departments that excluded whites is fading. As this happens, it will be easier to redress the extensive politicization of Black Studies that occurred over the past several years.

Another factor facilitating the depoliticization of Black Studies is the growing evidence of disenchantment of the brighter black students—often middle-class students—with the poor quality of the charlatans and the paraprofessional staff

in Black Studies programs. Students who several years ago felt constrained, either personally or for reasons of pressure, from criticizing the quality of Black Studies programs, now do so. In some colleges where this situation has been observed, students do not attend courses by those on the staff they consider of poor quality. In other colleges, the students have requested that faculty of superior training and qualifications be added to the Black Studies program or to the departments that provide courses for the program. Happily, there is presently a major increase in black graduate students who pursue the doctorate, and this will certainly facilitate better-qualified faculty in Black Studies.

Yet despite these hopeful trends, the general situation with regard to the quality of Black Studies is not satisfactory. Perhaps the most disturbing thing in this unsatisfactory situation is the growing tendency among white faculty and administration—whether conservative, liberal, or radical—to apply double standards to the academic organization of Black Studies and to the appointment of black faculty. Although white faculty and administrators were in the first instance virtually coerced into having Black Studies programs, as the threats and violence from militant black students have abated, the white faculty and administrators have not made a serious effort to return to acceptable academic standards and procedures in Black Studies programs.

Indeed, at numerous colleges and universities white faculty and administrators have been far too ready to accept the most outrageous demands from militant black students and teachers with regard to Black Studies. This behavior by white faculty must be seen, in fact, as blatantly patronizing, comparable to one's tolerance of the antics of a child. What is equally disturbing, the black militant students and teachers in white colleges quickly accept the concessions granted by white faculty. Militant blacks at white institutions have, it seems, a pathetic dependence upon the psychologically satisfying but academically disastrous concessions they wrench from white faculty and administrators.

I would like to conclude with a warning, if I may. Unless this psychological immaturity, nearly endemic to the militants in the Black Studies movement, soon ceases, a large section of blacks who seek intellectual status will be relegated to the backwaters or the trash-heap of American academic and intellectual life. Perhaps, alas, this is the unconscious wish—a kind of death wish—of large segments of militant black students and intellectuals. Lacking the stamina and special stuff required of first-class students and scholars, these militant black students and teachers sport a fashionable and psychologically gratifying militant style in order to achieve a protected and segregated (but academically undemanding and inferior) educational niche called a Black Studies program.

NOTE

1. To make a brief personal reference, I was valedictorian of my college graduating class in 1953 and, if I may be immodest, I was fairly smart—at least I thought so. But I was no more capable than the man in the moon of exercising scholarly authority on the governing body of a political science, sociology, or any other department. Even after five years of competitive and intensive graduate studies at Harvard, I was not at all certain about my ability to exercise scholarly authority. Surely it is nonsense for students, black and white, to hold authoritative positions on Black Studies departments or programs.

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