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WRITINGS

"THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES"

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THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES

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The demand for Ethnic Studies programs cannot be separated from the rise of the militant student movement in ethnic communities in the 1960s. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the establishment of hundreds of Ethnic Studies curricula in colleges and universities across the land was a major achievement of the militant student movement. This is not to suggest that there was no ethnic educational thrust before 1960. On the contrary, access to higher education has always been a central concern of ethnic group activism. Access to higher education has often been advocated as a means of social advancement.

What was new about the 1960s was that (1) for the first time masses of students became involved in the struggle for educational change, and (2) it was widely recognized that not only were students and teachers of color largely excluded from American higher education but the totality of the experience of racial minority groups was not to be found in the curricula of the vast majority of colleges and universities. It was these two factors that led to the demand for Ethnic Studies departments as vehicles for incorporating people of color and the study of ethnic group experiences into American higher education.

I would argue that the demand for Ethnic Studies was therefore in essence a democratic demand and even integrationist, although it took a form that was superficially separatist. Ethnic Studies was a response to educational racism-- that is, the virtual exclusion of people of color and their history and culture from higher education in the United States. By demanding greater admission of students of color and the establishment of Ethnic Studies departments the student activists and their faculty supporters were in effect calling for group or corporate integration into higher education rather than token integration of a few individuals. This was certainly a militant demand but not revolutionary, since at its core it simply called for a widening of American democracy, it did not require not the institution of a totally

new educational or social order. However, by widening educational democracy Ethnic Studies could pave the way for the introduction of new and radical ideas into the curriculum, and this was correctly perceived as a threat by conservative administrators and faculty.

It was the students' political experience in confronting the power structure in off-campus demonstrations and protests (for example, civil rights demonstrations) that led them to question the political function of college and universities and higher education in general. They began to understand that despite all the talk about developing a critical intellect, higher education in practice served also to inculcate the cultural values and behavior patterns of the dominant society and to channel young people into professional slots in the economy. In short, higher education served to strengthen and conserve the prevailing social order. Therefore on many campuses militant students and teachers began demanding not only curriculum changes but a restructuring and reorientation of the colleges themselves. The student activists sought to turn college campuses into political bases for organizing the surrounding communities. To this end they wanted classrooms and other school facilities made available for community use.

Many colleges and universities quickly set up Ethnic Studies programs. But the very hastiness with which some programs were patched together suggested that they were being offered as pacification programs to cool out the students rather than as serious academic programs. Some schools simply took all their courses touching upon race relations and minority groups, lumped them together and called this potpourri Ethnic Studies. Others hired a few consultants to come in and design some courses dealing with ethnic history and art. The serious question of what constitutes Ethnic Studies was all but lost in this mad scramble to come up with something -- anything--that could be *called* Ethnic Studies.

Ethnic students and scholars were themselves far from agreed on what is Ethnic Studies. One school of thought viewed Ethnic Studies as no different from other academic disciplines, like history or sociology, except that its subject matter would be the

contributions of ethnic minorities to American society. Other activists considered Ethnic Studies to be an instrument of cultural nationalism specifically concerned with criticizing the ethic of integrationism and providing a counter-balance to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Still a third viewpoint saw Ethnic Studies as a vehicle for social change. According to this viewpoint Ethnic Studies should try to break down the "ebony tower" syndrome of alienated academic intellectuals who are separated from their communities. Instead academics should serve their communities by teaching courses, developing theories and doing research that contribute to progressive social change.

Although Ethnic Studies is still a relatively new discipline whose future is uncertain, I think it has already registered some important accomplishments:

1. -- Ethnic Studies has played an important role in bring more students and faculty of color onto college campuses. It has also made colleges more receptive to other innovative programs such as women's studies. Thus, Ethnic Studies has made the campus more democratic and reflective of the general society.

2. -- Ethnic Studies has promoted a public discussion about the nature of education in a democratic society. Should higher education be mainly concerned with preparing an elite of managers and technocrats to control the society? Should higher education provide a critique of society? Should higher education be limited to those with the highest GPAs? or those with the highest SAT scores? What should be the role of higher education, and who should it benefit?

- 3 -- Ethnic Studies has promoted a public discussion about the nature of American society. Is it possible any longer to think of American society as monocultural? What does assimilation means? What does pluralism mean? How can a diversity of cultures and peoples form one nation?

WHILE THE PURPOSE of Ethnic Studies was being debated by educators, the future of these programs was being decided by other--not necessarily friendly--forces. Just as Slavic Studies rose to prominence following World War II when the United States was

seeking ways of opposing the communist thrust in Eastern Europe, it soon became apparent that Asian Studies, African Studies and Ethnic Studies were to become focal points of government and private foundation interest. By selecting certain programs for funding while denying support to others, government agencies and foundations could manipulate the political orientation of these programs and the direction of academic research. With hundreds of such programs competing for limited funds, effective control of the future of Ethnic Studies could thereby be shifted away from militant students and scholars, and instead given over to the funding agencies, college administrations, government and foundations. Departments which were thought by the establishment to be dangerously independent or radical could thus be crippled or destroyed without the necessity of resorting to violent repression. At the same time, departments which were more moderate or conservative might find themselves being used as tools for researching better ways of manipulating and controlling ethnic communities. These dangers did not immediately become apparent in the flush of early successes.

However, the illusion of quick success was soon to be shattered. In 1972 the counterattack against Ethnic Studies started in earnest. Cutbacks in department budgets and student aid, especially at public institutions, forced the dismantling of many programs and curtailed student enrollments. Cutbacks were the means used to attack Ethnic Studies but they do not explain why this attack came. For this it is necessary to look to the larger political economy of which the educational system is a part. The attack on Ethnic Studies coincided with the consolidation of reaction under the Nixon regime. On the one hand, the domestic economy was in trouble--plagued by chronic stagnation, rampant inflation, and rising unemployment. On the other, the the United States had been beaten in Vietnam and placed on the defensive internationally by the socialist countries, revolutionary struggles in the Third World, and contradictions with its capitalist allies. Faced with these problems the Nixon Administration, as the mouthpiece of America's rulers, launched a campaign to shift the burden of economic instability onto the working population in general while singling out ethnic minorities

and other potential dissidents as scapegoats for intensified repression (code name: law and order). Great efforts were made to convince any doubtful whites that (ethnic) militants, (ethnic) "welfare chiselers," (ethnic) AFDC mothers, (ethnic) "criminals," (ethnic) student radicals, etc., were the cause of the whites' present economic and political distress. This ideological assault served to cover the malicious attack (code name: benign neglect) being made against the minority community as social welfare and education programs were slashed, public funding for housing undermined, and prices and unemployment allowed to skyrocket. Academic racists were trotted out and used to justify this attack on the ground of the "inherent inferiority" of the racial minorities.

ON campus a similar kind of scapegoating took place, and served to obscure the racism in the cutback process. It was "militant minority students" who were accused of making trouble. Moreover, according to the critics, these "marginal and ill-prepared" students were often aided and abetted by Ethnic Studies departments of "questionable" academic validity. From this it was an easy step for college administrations to rationalize shifting cutbacks to Ethnic Studies programs and minority student enrollment in the secure knowledge that the enemies of Ethnic Studies would provide ample justification for the attack.

The intellectual arguments against Ethnic Studies centered on several points:

1. -- Ethnic Studies as political, not academic. Ethnic Studies Departments have been accused of "politicizing" ethnic students and encouraging militancy and confrontations with the administration, while ignoring the need for "academic achievement." In this way the responsibility for political and racial tensions on campus is shifted from the conservatism and racism of the university and instead blamed on the militancy of minority students and Ethnic Studies. Such a charge serves to obscure the political function of the university as servant of the established social order, preparing an academic and professional elite that can "manage" America on behalf of the white power-holding classes. The university is not apolitical

and to call for the "depoliticization" or Ethnic Studies simply obscures and confuses the issue.

2-- Ethnic Studies as intellectually bankrupt. Ethnic Studies is sometimes accused of having no proper subject matter, and of being merely an attempt to boost the collective psyche of minority students by glorifying ethnic history and culture. However, the critics never point out that such a charge could be leveled against any new discipline in its early formative years. Whereas many other academic disciplines have required decades to clarify their subject matter and establish a standard curriculum, Ethnic Studies advocates are expected to come up with an instant discipline. This is a new twist in racist logic: if racial minorities can't do it better and faster than whites then their effort is deemed inferior. Actually, the current debates over subject matter in Ethnic Studies are a sign of its health and vitality, not an indication that it is moribund.

3-- Ethnic Studies as reverse racism. This is a particularly insidious charge since it confuses voluntary self-organization with externally imposed segregation. Because of racism ethnic groups have generally had to organize collectively to break through the barriers of discrimination in American life. The individual minority person is helpless before a powerful and racist institution. Only a confused mind could equate mass action to break down discrimination with the use of state power to maintain it. While some minority students may prefer an all-minority experience the fact of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of Ethnic Studies courses are open to any and all students. It is a travesty of history and logic to equate the preferences of a few minority students with the oppression of state-sanctioned segregation. The two are entirely incommensurate. Nevertheless, this charge has received wide currency among the opponents of Ethnic Studies. .

THE CHARGES AGAINST Ethnic Studies cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant since they have helped rationalize devastating financial cutbacks. True, the cutbacks were on the agenda in any case for reasons already cited, but without this process of intellectual scapegoating it would not have been so easy to force Ethnic Studies

to bear a disproportionate share of the cuts. The cutbacks must be opposed by a coordinated, nationwide campaign to save and expand Black and Ethnic Studies, since isolated individual departments are relatively powerless. Such an organized campaign could bring pressure to bear on state legislatures, federal agencies, foundations, and educational organizations.

Beyond this it is necessary to recognize that although the criticisms of Ethnic Studies may be self-serving, still they are not entirely without merit. Moreover, a host of other problems is also confronting Ethnic Studies. Thus, in addition to the problem of cutbacks, any program or campaign to save Ethnic Studies must be cognizant of the following:

The need to define the field, and clarify its relationship to and other disciplines. (This latter point is important since Black and Ethnic Studies are often counter-posed and forced into an antagonistic relationship.)

The need for curriculum development and standardization.

The need for extensive faculty recruitment and staffing, including the use of affirmative action to achieve more equitable representation.

The need to bring pressure to bear on professional organizations (e. g., National Education Association, American Association of University Professors, American Federation of Teachers, organizations in the various disciplines) to compel full and recognition of Ethnic Studies and active support of the minority presence in higher education.

The need for watchdog committees in Washington and state capitals to review legislative proposals and assess their impact on Ethnic Studies. Minority elected officials could play an important part in aiding such committees.

The need to analyze career prospects for Ethnic Studies graduates, and to find ways by which these prospects could be enhanced.

Many other needs and problems could be listed, but this should give the reader some idea of the dimensions of the problem. There is no crash program that can resolve these problems; they are inherent

in the process of establishing a new discipline and will require patient practice and development for their resolution. And no one should be deceived into thinking that this process of development will be gentle; it will be marked by vigorous debates, agitation, and conflict. The academic world likes its veneer of gentility, but this only conceals furious struggles in which academics and politics are usually mixed.

In this regard the critics are right when they note that politics is a fundamental problem for the development of Ethnic Studies. But the question is not politics or no politics; rather it is *which* politics? Whom will Ethnic Studies serve? Will it be truly democratic in its intellectual and political vision, or will it become "apolitical" and acquiesce to a narrow, elitist and bourgeois view of education? This question lies at the heart of the present struggle for Ethnic Studies.

Adapted from "Politics of the Attack on Black Studies," TBS 1972