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THE BLACK SCHOLAR

"POLITICS OF THE ATTACK ON BLACK STUDIES", 1974
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POLITICS OF THE ATTACK ON BLACK STUDIES

Black Studies, ~~the~~ one of the newest additions to the academic curriculum, is in deep trouble. The Black Studies movement that began with such enthusiasm and optimism in the late 1960s is now fighting a rearguard battle; its very survival on campus is in doubt. ~~Wholesale~~ Wholesale cutbacks in ~~department~~ ^{operating} budgets and student financial aid, coupled with intellectual ambushes by academic critics, have ~~resulted in crippling and destroying~~ crippled or destroyed dozens of Black Studies departments and programs around the country. ~~Moreover, internal~~ ^{In 1971 some 500 schools} ~~offered~~ provided full-scale Black Studies programs; today that figure has ~~weak contradictions and uncertainties have weakened many of the remaining~~ dropped to 200. ~~(source, 54)~~

This gloomy picture is not helped by the fact that internal uncertainties and contradictions have weakened many of the remaining programs. Indeed, internecine feuding and opportunism have alienated many former Black Studies supporters. ^{black} Moreover, many serious ~~scholars~~ scholars have been dismayed by the confusion over exactly what constitutes the subject matter of Black Studies. The result: Optimism and enthusiasm are being replaced by cynicism and ~~apathy~~ apathy.

Of course, it must be said that exceptions abound; numerous Black Studies departments and program have not only survived but have established reputations for excellence, and have attracted outstanding faculty and administrators and enthusiastic students. Also, the internal problems of Black Studies are not exactly unique to it. Most academic departments are rife with conflict, ^{and} ~~disputes with other departments,~~ and ~~sharply~~ sharply contradictory schools of thought have been a ~~general~~ ^{and} ~~general~~ ^{unconditional} feature in the emergence of new academic disciplines.

Black Studies cannot be ~~blamed~~ ^{blamed} for a condition that is endemic ^{to university life} on campus. Yet, with these provisos noted, the general situation of Black Studies remains problematical. The battle for Black Studies is still far from finished, and certainly a post-mortem is not in order, but an examination of some of the factors and forces in this on-going struggle may clarify its nature and suggest ways in which the outcome can be affected.

X The demand for Black Studies cannot be separated from the rise of the militant black student movement in the 1960s. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the establishment of hundreds of Black Studies curricula in colleges and universities across the land was a major achievement of the black student movement. This is not to suggest that there was no black educational thrust before 1960. On the contrary, access to higher education has always been a central concern of black activism. ~~More than~~ ^{Almost} a century and a half ago the necessity for education was debated at a series of national black conventions. ^{Later,} The founding of black colleges, although made possible by white philanthropy, represented a continuation of black interest in education, as did the turn-of-the-century ~~debate~~ debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over whether ~~industrial~~ industrial training or academic education should be given priority in the black's struggle for equality. Thus, the demand for Black Studies was not so much a sudden departure as it was a variation in a traditional theme within the black movement.

What was new about the 1960s was that ⁽¹⁾ for the first time masses of black students became involved in the struggle for educational change, and (2) it was widely recognized that not only were black students and teachers largely excluded from American higher education but the totality of the black experience was not to be found in the curricula of ~~colleges~~ ^{the vast} majority of colleges and universities, ~~black as well as white~~. It was these two factors that led to the demand for Black Studies ~~departments~~ Departments as vehicles for incorporating black ^{people} ~~faces~~ and the black experience into American higher education, ~~all in one fell swoop~~. (Black colleges did not escape the scrutiny of militant students. These schools were accused of being white colleges in blackface, and courses in black history, literature and art were demanded, along with a demand that the black colleges must "relate" to the local black community.)

The demand for Black Studies was therefore in essence democratic and even integrationist, although it took a form that was superficially separatist.

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It was a response to educational racism -- the virtual exclusion of black people and the black experience from higher education in the United States. By demanding open admission of black students and the establishment of separate Black Studies ~~programs~~ departments the student activists and their adult supporters were in effect calling for group or collective integration into higher ^{education} ~~integration~~ rather than token integration of a few selected black individuals. This was certainly a militant demand but not revolutionary, since at its core it simply called for a widening of American democracy not the institution of a totally new educational or social order. However, ^{By} widening educational democracy Black Studies could pave the way for the introduction of new and revolutionary ideas into the curriculum, and this was correctly perceived as a threat by conservative administrators and faculty.

^{pm} ^{In the early 1960s,} ^{culmination} With the ~~success~~ of the student sit-in movement in the South, ~~in the early black~~ 1960s, ~~that~~ black students began turning their attention to the college campuses which had served -- reluctantly -- as their bases of operations. The ~~students'~~ political experience in confronting the white power structure led them to question the political function of black colleges in particular, and higher education in general. They began to understand ^{that} ~~the~~ despite all the talk about developing a critical intellect, higher education in practice served ^{also} ~~initially~~ to inculcate bourgeois cultural values and behavior ~~patterns~~ and to channel young people into professional slots in the economy. In short, higher education served to strengthen and conserve the prevailing ~~social~~ social order. To the young black students, having just done battle with the racism of the downtown businessmen ^{and themselves} - guardians of the prevailing social order ^{and} this realization came as an affront to ~~their~~ their newly awakened black consciousness. On Black campuses, students and militant teachers began demanding not only curriculum changes but a restructuring and reorientation of the colleges themselves. The student activists moved to turn black college campuses into political bases for organizing the surrounding black communities. To

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this end they wanted classrooms and other school facilities made available for community use.

In the spring and fall of 1968, the black student rebellion spread to predominantly white campuses in the North and West. At Columbia, Cornell, San Francisco State and countless other schools a familiar scenario was ~~repeated~~ repeated. Students would go on strike (sometimes occupy buildings) and present the administration with a list of demands (sometimes "non-negotiable") that usually included a demand for admission of more black students, hiring of more black faculty, and initiation of a Black Studies Curriculum. The fad word of the period was "relevant" (sometimes "revelant"), and it was believed that these demands would make the university relevant to the struggle for liberation, ^(or at least) and prevent it from remaining an accomplice in racial oppression.

Almost overnight ^{these} ~~this demand~~ demands ^{were} ~~was~~ taken up by other black students, Third World students and sympathetic white students on campus after campus. The outcome (after hundreds of arrests and much head-busting) was a virtual tidal wave of new courses, programs and departments. No school wanted to be the target of demonstrations and disruptive strikes, especially in the face of demands that were generally just, ^{usually} (although many administrators were offended by the expletives that were not deleted). But the hastiness with which many of the new programs were patched together suggested that ~~these~~ they were being offered as palliatives, or pacification programs to cool ~~ex~~ out the students, rather than as serious innovations in the educational process. Some schools simply took all their courses touching upon race relations and minority groups, lumped them together and called this potpourri Black Studies. Others hired one or two consultants to come in and design a few courses dealing with black history and art.

The serious question of what constitutes Black Studies was all but lost in this mad scramble to come up with something -- anything -- that could be called Black Studies. Black students and scholars were themselves far from

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With A Functioning Relationship
TO the black community, to break
down the "ebony tower" ^{some} ~~structure~~ of + ~~isolation~~

agreed on what ~~constitutes~~ is Black Studies. One school of thought viewed Black Studies as a purely academic field concerned with researching black history and illuminating the contributions of blacks to American society. Others, such as Harold Cruse, considered Black Studies to be an instrument of cultural nationalism specifically concerned with critiquing the "integrationist ethic" and providing a counter-balance to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. Still a third viewpoint, best expressed by Nathan Hare, saw Black Studies ~~as a~~ as a vehicle for ^{social} ~~revolutionary political~~ change. According to Hare, Black Studies must transform the black community. "A Black Studies curriculum," he wrote, "must include race analysis, class analysis, and the study of the oppressor as well as his black victims. There must be a study of the march toward freedom of other peoples in other eras and other lands -- why they succeeded, their failures, an ~~only~~ analysis of their goals and strategy, their tactics." Not surprisingly, the advocates of this overtly revolutionary viewpoint came under severe attack. Dr. Hare found his efforts at San Francisco State College obstructed by the school's administration and finally he resigned to establish The Black Scholar. ^{insert A}

While the purpose of Black Studies was being debated by black 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~~ thrust in Eastern Europe, it soon became apparent that Asian Studies, African Studies and Black Studies were to become new ~~new~~ 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 Black Studies was thereby shifted away from black scholars and students, and instead given over to the funding agencies -- college administrations, government and foundations.

Alienated
black
intellectuals

Activist

with Robert Chrisman, another black faculty ~~member~~ at San Francisco

State College at that time.

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Departments which were thought ~~xxx~~ 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 black communities.

These dangers did not become immediately apparent. Instead the Black Studies movement enjoyed victory after victory as intimidated college administrators scurried to piece together programs (or acquiesce to ~~xxx~~ hastily drafted proposals) that they hoped would keep the black students at bay. Black Studies supporters were jubilant. Certainly there were clashes and debates over direction, but the growing opportunities and exuberance of the moment overshadowed and minimized contradictions.

9 Between 1968 and 1971 the number of Black Studies courses, programs, and departments featured by white colleges increased sharply. One investigator¹ reports that at one time "close to 1,300 schools offered at least one Black Studies Course." A 1970 survey² found that larger, public colleges and universities were the most likely to have offered Black Studies curricula. (This study also confirmed that student pressure was a major factor sparking the initiation of such programs.)

However, the illusion of quick success was soon to be shattered. In 1972 the counter-attack against Black 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. In 1973, for the

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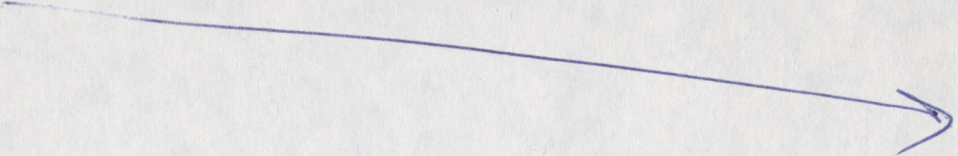
Martin Weston, "Black Studies: Dead or Alive?", Essence, August 1974, p. 57.

2

Rhoda Lois Goldstein and June True Albert, "The Status of Black Studies Programs on American Campuses, 1969-1971," Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Winter 1974, pp. 1-16.

first time in a decade, the percentage of black youth entering college ~~declined~~ decreased. (This decrease, along with repression, signalled the decline of the black student movement, which had been a chief supporter of Black Studies.)

Cutbacks were the means used to attack Black Studies but they do not



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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 Black Studies coincided with the ^{consolidation of} ~~rise of reaction~~ 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, and the United States had been beaten in Vietnam, 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 ~~take working people in general pay the cost~~ shift the burden of economic instability onto the working population in general while singling out blacks and other potential dissidents, ^{as scapegoats} for intensified ~~repression~~ repression (code name: law and order). Great efforts were made to convince any doubtful whites that (black) ^{militants, (black)} ~~revolutionaries, welfare chiselers, AFDC mothers, "criminals," (black) AFDC mothers, "criminals"~~ student radicals, etc., were the ~~cause~~ cause of the whites' present economic and political distress. This ideological assault served to cover the malicious ~~From this it was a direct step to the~~ attack (code name: benign neglect) being made against the black 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 grounds of the "inherent inferiority" of the black race. ^{observe} and served to ~~cover~~ the racism in the cutback process.

On campus a similar ^{kind of} ~~process~~ of scapegoating took place. It was "militant Negro students, often academically marginal," in the words of Martin Kilson, who were accused of making trouble. Moreover, according to ^{the} ~~Kilson and other~~ critics, ~~it was~~ these "ill-suited Negro students" were often aided and abetted by Black Studies departments of "questionable" academic validity. From this it was an easy step for college administrations to ^{rationalize shifting} ~~justify~~ cutbacks in Black Studies programs and black student enrollment in the secure knowledge that the enemies of Black Studies would provide ample justification for the attack.

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The intellectual arguments against Black Studies centered on several points:

1 -- Black Studies as political, not academic. Black Studies Departments have been accused of "politicizing" black students and encouraging militancy and confrontations with the administration, while ignoring the need for "academic achievement." ^{The university, of course, is a political institution.} In this way the responsibility for racial tensions on campus is shifted from the racism of the university and instead blamed on the militancy of black students and Black Studies. Such a charge also serves to obscure the political function of the university as servant of the bourgeois order, preparing an academic and professional elite that can "manage" America ⁱⁿ behalf of the white power-holding classes. The university ^{therefore} is not apolitical, and to call for the "de-politicization" of Black Studies only obscures and confuses the issue.

2 -- Black Studies as intellectually bankrupt. Black Studies has often been accused of having no proper subject matter and of being merely an attempt to boost the collective black psyche by glorifying black history. 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, Black Studies advocates are expected to come up with an instant discipline. [This is a new twist in racist logic: If blacks can't do it better and faster than whites then the black effort is deemed inferior. Actually, the current debates over subject matter in Black Studies are a sign of its health and vitality, not an indication that it is moribund. 9

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3 -- Black Studies as reverse racism. This is a particularly insidious charge since it confuses voluntary self-organization with externally imposed segregation. Because of racism blacks have generally had to organize collectively to break through the barriers of discrimination in American life. The individual black person is ^{helpless} ~~powerless~~ before a confused ~~xxxxxx~~ powerful and racist institution. Only a ~~xxxxxxxx~~ mind could equate ^{Mass Action?} a group attempt to break down discrimination with ^{The use of Power} state-imposed efforts to maintain segregation. Certainly some black students may prefer ^{An} all-black ^{experience} ~~classes (or dormitories)~~ ~~but~~ the fact of the matter is that the overwhelming majority of Black Studies courses are open to any and all students. ~~In any case it would be~~ ^{IT IS} a travesty of history and logic to equate the preferences of a few black students with the oppression of the southern Jim Crow system. The two are entirely incommensurate. Nevertheless, this charge has received wide currency among the opponents of Black Studies.

Many other minor charges have been brought against Black Studies but most of them stem from or are related to those already mentioned.

The charges against Black Studies cannot ~~be~~ 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 Black Studies to bear a disproportionate share of the cuts. ^{must} The cutbacks ~~can~~ be opposed by a ^{coordinated,} ~~organized,~~ nationwide ^{isolated} campaign ^{to save Black Studies,} since individual ~~xxxx~~ departments are relatively powerless. Such an organized ^{campaign} ~~campaign~~ could bring

where's the rest of this sentence?? Mary Beth

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

• The need to ~~Problem of~~ defining the field, ^{clarify} and its relationship to Ethnic Studies and other disciplines. (This ^{latter point is} ~~is especially~~ important since Black and Ethnic Studies are often counter-posed and forced into an antagonistic relationship!)

~~Problem of curriculum~~

- The need for curriculum development and standardization.
- The need for extensive faculty recruitment and staffing, ^{including} the use of quota systems to ~~achieve~~ achieve proportionate representation. (Here a thorough critique of ~~Affirmative~~ Affirmative Action hiring programs is in order since these programs often pit members of different racial minorities against each other, or pit the racial minorities against white women, to the detriment of all.)
- 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~~ various disciplines) to compel full and general recognition of Black Studies ^{and active support of the black presence in higher education.}
- The need for watchdog committees in Washington and state capitals to review legislative proposals and assess their impact ~~on~~ on Black Studies. Black elected officials could play an important part in aiding such committees.
- The need ~~for~~ to analyze career prospects for Black Studies graduates, and to find ways by which these prospects could be enhanced.

Bullets

Many ~~other~~ ^{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 violent debates, agitation, and conflict. The academic world likes its veneer of gentility, but this ~~only conceals~~ ^{only conceals} furious struggles in which academics and politics are usually mixed.

In this regard the critics ~~are~~ ^{are} right when they note that politics is a fundamental problem for ~~the~~ the development of Black Studies. But the question is not politics or no politics; rather it is ~~which~~ ^{which} politics? Whom will Black 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 attack on Black Studies.

No footnotes

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ROBERT L. ALLEN, is Managing Editor of THE BLACK SCHOLAR. Formerly he taught in the Black Studies Department of San Jose State College in California. He is author of Black Awakening in Capitalist America (Doubleday, 1969), which is widely used in college ~~and university~~ courses. His most recent book (written with the collaboration of Pamela Allen) is Reluctant Reformers: The Impact of Racism on American Social Reform Movements (Howard University Press, 1974).

Black Scholar