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11

Black Studies Revisited

Martin Kilson

Some Context

Viewed in either its minimum curriculum format as represented by curriculum limited mainly to those black realities associated with North American blacks or viewed in its maximum curriculum format as represented by curriculum that embraces black African societies, the Afro-American community, Afro-Caribbean communities, and Afro-Latin communities, the academic field of black studies has experienced multisided transformations since those start-up years between 1968 and 1972. Those start-up years witnessed enormous political upheaval and intellectual upheaval, a situation that while sometimes pedagogically damaging should be viewed as nonetheless developmentally inevitable. In one of my earliest commentaries on the upheaval surrounding the birth of black studies, I offered both an affirmation of the student activism that drove this field, on the one hand, while chastising the violence or violence-posturing that surrounded this activism. Writing in a special black studies monograph produced by the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1969, I observed:

The activity of black students on campuses across the country in behalf of Afro-American studies is welcome. Much of this activity, however, has been associated unnecessarily with violence which has no place whatever on college campuses. Violence can do no other than destroy the delicate fabric of life and work in American colleges, and will certainly prevent the establishment of Afro-American studies along viable academic and intellectual lines.

In general, while the violence surrounding the birth of black studies was quite short-lived, a tendency toward ideological rigidity in regard to the academic organization and the pedagogical execution of the field of black studies proved rather tenacious and long-lived. This situation represented a special problem for progressive and leftist African American intellectuals like myself, for while we welcomed the activism that brought American colleges—white ones, especially, but black colleges too—to incorporate black studies into their educational regime, we felt a simultaneous responsibility to tame or pluralize this ideological rigidity.

Formative Phase of Black Studies

What were some basic elements of this ideological rigidity? First, militant advocates of black studies preferred that this field be organized mainly in terms of their strongly held ideological preferences. Among these preferences, for instance, was a tendency toward the glorification of the black American experience and of African history in a manner that would serve contemporary endeavors at political activism among black Americans. My own inclination, however, was to follow the lead of that first-generation cohort of black scholars (some white ones too) who pioneered the field of black studies when it was still called Negro studies. Scholars, that is, like W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Charles Spurgeon Johnson, Allison Davis, Horace Mann Bond, Ralph Bunche, Rayford Logan, Melville Herskovitz, E. Franklin Frazier, John Hope Franklin, Kelley Miller, Ira de Augustine Reid, to name just a few. What many militants among black studies advocates in the formative phase failed to recognize is that the first-generation cohort of black studies intellectuals balanced within their persona both a progressive ideological commitment to black realities—to freeing those realities from oppressive white supremacist patterns worldwide and advancing their modern development—on the one hand, and a nonethnocentric or pluralistic scholarly orientation toward black realities.

Thus what the first-generation cohort of black studies intellectuals taught us, with their balanced interface with progressive ideological commitment to black realities, on the one hand, and a nonethnocentric orientation, on the other hand, was this: that the serious study of the history and contemporary experiences of black peoples—worldwide or in the United States—will produce a bewildering mixture of things that can evoke pride, criticism, ambivalence, or even revulsion. They taught us that black students, taught about the great sculpture of West African peo-

ples, will more than likely be proud of the artistic achievement this sculpture represented, just as Anglo-American students would take pride in the works of William Shakespeare. But would these same black students consider as a source of pride the historical findings relating to the massive role of traditional ruling strata in African societies in forging the Atlantic Slave Trade? Most likely not, just as the white Anglo-American students would not likely be proud of the vicious oppression and violence perpetrated against the Irish by the English ruling class during their multicentury rule in Ireland. The history of all peoples is morally checkered!

The militant black studies advocates' belief that an academic regime in this field would produce and should produce activist cadres for black urban communities was rather shortsighted too. The academic organization of black studies was not, I believe, anything like the appropriate locale for forging political and neighborhood mobilizers. While the need for such mobilizers was genuine, their effective production should be undertaken elsewhere, I thought—in the context of black neighborhood voluntary associations, black churches, black civil rights organizations, etc. As it happened, this activist use of black studies programs proved a dead end. And this, moreover, was rather unfortunate in some respects, as the need for skilled neighborhood mobilizers was a real one and the failure of that militant segment that surrounded black studies programs in the formative phase to generate such mobilizers left a terrible vacuum in many black urban communities, among the weak working-class and lower-class sector especially. The high black homicide rate and the high rate of black-maiming-black can be attributed in part to this terrible vacuum. *One must wonder, in fact, whatever happened to all of that activist energy and excitement that surrounded the birth of black studies programs in regard to the goal of forging neighborhood activist cadres?* Currently, it seems the vast majority of middle-class black college students have lost all connection with this aspect of the formative era of black studies, as witnessed by their fervent participation in that all-black student good-time gathering annually during spring in Atlanta—the Black Freaknik Festival! This weird outcome could not, I suspect, have been envisaged or predicted some thirty years ago, at the birth of black studies. This weird use of black middle-class resources is seventeen years old.

Maturation of Black Studies

In terms of time frame, we might place the commencement of the maturation phase of black studies from the late 1970s onward (say, 1979 on-

ward). One measure of the maturation phase was, I think, the appointment of black scholars to head up black studies programs who were clearly scholars and intellectuals of the top rank. This occurred with the appointment of Professor Charles Davis at Yale's Afro-American Studies Department, Professor Nathan Huggins at Harvard's Afro-American Studies Department, Professor Joseph Washington and later Professor Houston Baker at the University of Pennsylvania's Afro-American Studies Department, Professor St. Clair Drake at Stanford University's Afro-American Studies Department, and Professor Claudia Mitchell-Kernan at the University of California's (L.A.) Afro-American Studies Program, to mention just a few.

What did these scholars do to initiate what I call the maturation phase in black studies? Essentially, they *disciplinized black studies*, so to speak. They slowly interlocked the structuring of the academic regime of black studies with the established academic disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Thus they filtered the curriculum dimension of black studies—the courses—through modes of curriculum packaging akin to those usually found in, say, regular political science courses, producing thereby such courses as "Black Electoral Politics," "Blacks in National Politics," "Black Legislators," "Politics and Society of Afro-Americans," "Black Urban Regimes," etc., etc. But an innovative thrust, curriculum-wise, evolved as well in the maturation phase, especially in the area of literary studies. This was so particularly where the field of literary studies overlapped psychological and societal areas of inquiry, producing what has amounted to a new academic discipline, that of black cultural studies. Moreover, the traditional field of literary studies was itself broadened by the penetration of this field with the works (and thus styles, aesthetics, etc.) of black American writers, African writers, Afro-Latin writers, and Afro-Caribbean writers. And, of course, the field of women's studies (gender studies), which evolved almost simultaneously with the field of black studies, has contributed in many enriching ways to the spin-off field of black cultural studies and also the established field of black studies. Women's studies has exercised this influence through its subfield of black women's studies, of course.

Interestingly enough, this penetration by established academic disciplines of black studies since the late 1970s, as well as the emergence of a major spin-off subfield of black cultural studies, has not displaced variants of black ethnocentric delineation in the black studies field. This black ethnocentric delineation of black studies goes today under the name of

Afrocentrist studies. It has also acquired a kind of parallel status with the field of black studies.

In terms of its curriculum manifestation, Afrocentrist studies is rather ideologically rigid and informed by a hyperglorification of a black realities outlook. The most prominent gathering of black scholars who function within the Afrocentrist paradigm is at Temple University, though there are smaller clusters located rather broadly at some black colleges. It should be noted, however, that given the Afrocentrist paradigms' highly emotive and hyperideological thrust, it appears to have forged a rather broad appeal at the popular level of African American society, among stable working-class and middle-class sectors no less. The appeal is of an ethnic-group-solidarity-affirming character, mainly, I believe; it is not an appeal that is translated into institution forging or systemic forging outcomes. So, over time, the Afrocentrist appeal can be expected to dissipate, assuming of course that a steady expansion of black Americans' incorporation into American social and power patterns obtains, and assuming also that this expansion is not rendered problematic by neo-racist forces associated with the neoconservatism that has wide influence today among white Americans.

Concluding Note

No one, of course, can predict future trends in black studies generally with any high degree of accuracy. But one can suggest trends that might be initiated.

One trend I would like to see emerge is, in fact, a rather old trend. It relates to the early Negro studies series that W. E. B. Du Bois pioneered while he was at Atlanta University and that other scholars among the first-generation cohort of black scholars (between early 1900s and 1940s) contributed their own variants of. The Du Bois Negro studies series focused on both Negro social categories (professions, business, workers, agrarians, etc.) and on Negro institutions and their modern metamorphoses (churches, voluntary associations, professional associations, colleges, black elementary, middle, and secondary schools, etc.).

That what I view as the mature phase in black studies has not yet fashioned either broad curriculum regimes or research regimes with what I call the Du Boisean Negro studies focus baffles me somewhat—baffles me especially in light of the social mobility and overall modernization crises

that have confronted the weak working class and the poor strata among African Americans. Those households that make up perhaps 40 percent of all African American households have received, of course, lots of research attention from social science scholars among blacks, but mainly with a focus toward fashioning public policy responses to intervening in the crises of joblessness, family dislocation, intrablack violence and maiming, etc., faced by these black households.

But most progressive black intellectuals have also recognized that what I call the "mobile sector" among black Americans—as contrasted with the "static sector" of weak working-class and poor households—have an obligation to fashion ways and means for intervening in the crises facing the black static sector. It is here, then, where a revival of the Du Boisean Negro studies focus in the context of our mature phase of black studies could, I think, produce important outcomes: outcomes both academic in import and operational relative to the crises facing the black static sector. The range of institutional capability associated with the black mobile sector—with its class categories and with the agencies available to these categories—is, I suggest, greater by exponential degree compared to what this institutional capability was several generations ago during Du Bois's era. Black studies programs can, in our mature phase, play a significant role in uncovering the ingredients and dimensions of this institutional capability. This is a must agenda for the years ahead.

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Theorizing Black Studies: The Continuing Role of Community Service in the Study of Race and Class

James Jennings

This essay proposes that "community service" and related efforts to develop programmatic linkages with neighborhood institutions and organizations represent a key component in the theory and pedagogy of black studies. Research paradigms that include community service and civic involvement reflect the description of black studies as a discipline that is "descriptive, critical, and prescriptive," to use the words of Professor Manning Marable.¹ Attention to the pedagogy of community service on the part of scholars in black studies is important for the growth of this field of intellectual inquiry as well as for its growing impact on the analysis of political and economic issues facing black communities and U.S. urban society. Both theory and praxis are key to understanding how black life experiences have molded, and are reflected, in United States society.

Theory refers to the building of predictive and projective knowledge about the experiences of blacks in the African diaspora and how such experiences have influenced major national and global developments. The term *praxis* implies that theoretical understandings of black life experiences in this society should be informed by the experiences of blacks in ongoing political, economic, educational, and cultural struggles aimed at the expansion of racial and economic democracy. While this notion seems logical given the birth of black studies in the post-WWII period, it is resisted at some levels in higher education. Within the field of black studies,