

# The Case for Black Studies

CHARLES E. WILSON \*

CURRICULUM developers, educators, and school officials are not too different from Americans in other walks of life. School officials prefer to take the easy way out. They take this easy way whenever confronted with alternatives to the nation's long-term mistreatment of black people in the study of history.

At this stage in American history it is easier, for instance, to discredit as "separatist" the emergence of a black community than to deal with the demands of the ethnic group for an end to a regime of cultural domination. It is easier to confuse tokenism (the perfunctory acknowledgment of nonwhites) with genuine racial integration. It is easier to denigrate the ideas of those outsiders with whom the educators disagree, by calling the outsiders "dirty names"—like "militant"—than to try to understand the ideas themselves.

From this frame of reference, too, it is far easier to challenge the dissatisfied to present constructive, affirmative proposals than to recognize the destructive nature of current offerings. And, finally, it is far, far easier to talk and write about some mystical curriculum approach to democratic values than to face the strain of fantasy and the narcissistic predisposition to European cultural values which underlie much of today's school curricular offerings.

Captured by the philosophy of the easy way, it is not a great step to perceive that

the minds of many Americans are therefore easily the prisoners of myths and popular misconceptions. The social myths concerning blacks, for example, range from notions of the "happy docile slave" of yesterday to the wistful yearning for the "black urban primitive" of today. The appeal of these stereotypes is buttressed by the broad conviction that nonwhites simply have no history, no accomplishment worth mentioning, no past, and no future. After all, isn't everyone alike? America's racial myths transform ethnic differences into *minor* inconveniences.

Victimized by such distortions, the American collective spirit is just as unable to consider the need for a curriculum geared to blacks or other ethnic groups, as its educational establishment is *unwilling* to develop such a course of study.

For what Americans of almost all strata cannot face is that, if America is to be, she will have to become a multiracial society—

—that schools must be involved in the preparation of people for life in that kind of society.

—that neither white nor black Americans can proceed into the challenging era of multiracial society with a legacy of misinformation, half truths, and white propaganda

\* Charles E. Wilson, Unit Administrator, I.S. 201 Complex, New York, New York

fantasies, which has impeded their progress in the past.

It is important here to recognize that the largely local thrusts for black studies are no longer aimed at saving or educating white America at the expense of black America. The local demands call first for ridding blacks of the consequences of the racist oppression. This approach will just have to be different from the approach adopted for those whites who willingly or unwittingly are numbered among the oppressors.

Black curriculum-black studies then speak to a basic humane notion that rejects European cultural superiority, accepts human difference without implying inferiority, and accepts each group's unique character, viz., cultural pluralism. Over and above that, black curriculum speaks out harshly against the homogenized American melting pot fiction which seeks to dissolve the diverse American communities into an undifferentiated mass all for the sake of "educational uniformity." The young people of America have grasped this profound danger and they speak out against homogenization in their own words.

"There are indeed different strokes for different folks."

"Different ways on different days."

"No strokes for some folks."

## Fears of Change

The basis for the demands for black studies has often been obscured by those who reject the notion as well as by the very ones who claim to "support" the idea. The resistance of the educational establishment to black studies is rooted in its own collective fears of change, its conviction that the self-same educational establishment really knows what the power order will permit, and finally the educational establishment's wish not to have to examine its own assumptions and beliefs about the value of the current offerings (an example of the easy way out). The arguments of this segment are rooted in a cliché-filled rhetoric about the existence of some special American racial ethic to be

established in the by and by. More important, this rhetoric calls into play a group of sacrosanct rules and practices which just do not seem to exist in the real world.

The costumes, gyrations, antics, and phrases of some of those who "favor" the adoption of this ethnic kind of curriculum approach often call much attention to themselves as individuals and divert the attention of many from the basic issue. While picturing America as a racist society whose educational system reflects and shares its deeply rooted racism, some of the loudest sponsors of black curriculum offer little more for consideration than white droppings colored over to hide the fundamental deficiencies.

Flamboyant spokesmen have tried to suggest that black studies may be the easy answer to the racial tension or to the problems of black education. This misguided reasoning has been echoed by the pragmatic conservatives in the white majority who wish to limit the sectors of change in urban education to the least costly and least threatening areas. As one reactionary expressed it to this writer—"We'll give you all black studies but no arithmetic, science, or reading."

As viewed by the pragmatic conservatives and the super salesmen for black studies, the demands for widespread educational restructuring offer an easy alternative to real change. This approach shows just how important it is to avoid the lure of status without substance. The flamboyant spokesmen for change and the pragmatic conservatives who wish to limit the changes are both vulnerable to the charge that they are advocates of the unwise, the unsound, and the poorly conceived. Martin Kilson, a black professor at Harvard, dismissed these kinds of efforts when he wrote:

Efforts by many advocates of the Black studies movement to portray Afro-American studies as the educational salvation of Black men display a deficiency of thought and common sense.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Lewis. "The Road to the Top Is Through Higher Education—Not Black Studies." *New York Times*, May 11, 1969. © 1969 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

Other opponents of the current system of things suggest that the present offerings are largely irrelevant. Those who maintain that position point to the traditional Dick and Jane stories as classic examples of the fact that the stories and approaches are foreign to the experiences of urban lower class children. But these allegations are only the most apparent and the most obvious conclusions to be drawn from the material given to students from which to learn.

Curriculum offerings at their present level are irrelevant, not because they are white or because they are middle class, as many charge, but because they do not present readings and situations which deal with life, life's real options, its dreams, its problems, its realities, its beauties, and its uglinesses as life exists here in America. These current offerings are irrelevant because they make the black man seem like a kind of "white man incomplete"—incomplete not only in his own eyes, but incomplete in the eyes of his fellow men as well.

The case for black studies is obscured then by this kind of verbiage, sentiments, postures, self-indulgent pursuits, myths, and folk tales. But there is a genuine case for black or ethnic studies, a case found within the very needs of people black and white. And where else should the basis for curriculum be found but in the needs of the people?

### **Studies of Other Groups**

While the racial romantics, on the one hand, the cynics in the middle, and the professional education skeptics on the other end of the continuum discuss their notions of black studies, a firm case can be constructed for black studies and multi-ethnic group studies. The case is rooted in the dual reality of this nation—a nation which at one and the same time is the world's foremost "democracy" yet which from its birth possessed a consistent virulent strain of racism imbedded deep within her vitals. A nation with a verbalized creed of freedom but a history of domination, suppression, compression, and repression of black and other nonwhite people.

What educators must face is that this demand for ethnic studies is a product of long years of maltreatment. The maltreatment is a measure of a "racism of contempt that is anti-human, dangerous, that minimizes what it hates and devalues what it would exploit." In education this racism hides behind a group of mindless, ritualistic practices; behind an assumption-mask that induces continued victimization, that suggests that somehow the victims are either less intelligent, less capable, or less motivated, and that the institution somehow has nothing to do with the condition.

Many of the members of the education establishment, themselves, function toward the nonwhites and the low income victims of the system much like the British civil servants of yesteryear, doing time in one of the far-flung colonies. To these assumptions the demand for black studies is a threat, but the course of study is a logical response to the racism and to the handmaiden of racism, "educational colonialism."

It is for this very reason that a black curriculum is essential for the black student. No amount of pious rhetoric about the values of integration, or talk of the dignity of man, can equip black people to face the challenges, realities, and contradictions of America as it is. To attempt to limit such studies programs to the college level because, on that level, black studies somehow seem easier to provide, is both unrealistic and shortsighted. Black studies are required by black people on each and every level—for the educational colonialism is itself found on all levels.

If the goal of education is to truly liberate people and to equip them as individuals and as members of society, with the capacity to be able to function within this society as well as to possess the capacity to change the undesirable and the unfair elements of their environment, then black studies do present some valuable tools. Black studies are not a substitute for training in the arts and sciences nor a substitute for orientation in the skills that will equip a person, child or adult, to function in this complex, technologically advanced, but morally bankrupt society. Black studies are a complement or a supple-

ment and, for many black students, may be a point of contact with an educational process that has tried up to now to give them facts without helping them to gain a sense of self.

Black studies can attempt to redress the injustice perpetrated by the centuries-long record of cultural domination and systematic exclusion of black people from the pages of American history. As a part of a broad and effective course of study, black studies may go a long way toward putting substance into the shadowy talk about the dignity of "all men." As a reflection of the society-deep concern for defining *man* and citizen in broader terms than those of 18th-century European nationalism, black studies may begin to focus their attention on the need for a new model of man, a model unbound by the need to make, label, and exploit those whom we may classify as non-men.

For the opulent descendants of Europe, a familiarity with the contents of a black studies course on terms established by black people might be useful and extremely beneficial to their own understanding of who we are and what we are as a nation, and what we must be about, if we are to achieve a truly humane destiny.

If this nation is to take its place in a world increasingly aware of and sensitive to the reality that whites are in fact a numerical minority in the world, then Americans might be more willing to give up their racial hybris. The slogan "Black is beautiful" does not mean that "white is ugly." For man is beautiful—black studies, Chinese studies, Hispanic studies, ethnic studies are all legitimate sources of studies so that each child may in fact never have to trade a part of his heritage for a chance to join the rest of the American community in the enjoyment of the bounty and beauty of this land.

### Forging a New Partnership

Unfortunately, disputes of race and social class are seldom solved by dispassionate discourse or reason. The current controversy over the demand for black studies

is not a discussion of separatism as it has been portrayed but a demand for *cultural pluralism*; not a romantic notion but a *cultural necessity*; not a threat to the status quo but a threat to the *assertion of cultural superiority*; not a threat to peace and order but a thrust toward *justice and dignity*.

The case for black studies on the various levels of education, not just on the university level, speaks effectively to the needs of black children and adults who so desperately need to know alternatives to the cultural dominance that has been a part of the American past. For America must come to face herself as she really is—increasingly two hostile camps, one black and one white—and then do something to heal the breach.

The hostile camps are the product of the centuries of domination and exploitation. To seek to perpetuate the domination only increases the polarization. To understand the growing world demand for the development of a truly multiracial society is to recognize that the current "status quo white studies"—or do we call them colorless studies—cannot continue without change. Education must begin to prepare our citizens for a truly brave and a wide new world. That preparation will have to be designed to meet the needs of the different groups who must comprise this new multiracial society.

If those who read this article and those who make key curriculum decisions can become convinced that black studies are an opportunity rather than a threat; that black studies are a *hope* rather than a sign of hopelessness; that black studies can inject life into what is now the sterile recapitulation of tired old white middle class racial fantasies—*then* a new healthy human partnership between the black and the white of America may be forged. And Americans at all levels must come to understand that the thrust for black studies and the thrust of other ethnic groups demanding studies programs reflect the fact that a new partnership will have to be forged in this society. For blacks and other groups will no longer settle for a junior partnership. □

Copyright © 1969 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.