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Toward a Black Intellectual Agenda

By Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.

(The Seventh Annual Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Memorial Lecture)

Anyone privileged to deliver the Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Memorial Lecture is obliged to try to speak in the spirit of the man and his memory. No small task. As the first Black president of Howard University, he gave 30 years of his life to creating a center of intellectual excellence and moral authority that should stand on equal footing with the proudest colleges and universities in these United States. He believed that the liberation of the mind was as important for Black Americans as political and economic liberation. And his stewardship embodied that belief here in Howard University and carried the institution headlong toward the greatness that has become its modern heritage.

Before trying to sketch some of the elements of a Black intellectual agenda in the 1980s, it's worth asking just what is the role of the intellectual and, particularly, the Black intellectual in modern American culture. Is there a uniquely Black intellectual agenda? If so, what is it? And how does it differ from the agenda of American intellectuals generally?

In Europe, being an intellectual is almost like being a member of a particular class. A certain uniformity of outlook, values and experience is assumed. In fact, most Europeans talk about the intelligentsia in the same way they talk about the workers, the bourgeoisie and the military. At least until fairly recently, Europeans believed that the intellectual should speak for overarching, transcendental values: for such things as human dignity and against oppression; for enlightenment and against ignorance; for reason and against irrationalism; for progress and against reaction.

In the classic view, the intellectual is someone who must rise above the fray of contending interest and wrangling fashion, holding both individuals and society to ac-

count in the name of the common good. Michel Foucault, the late French philosopher, used to call such persons the universal intellectual.

The United States has seen, and from time to time still turns up candidates for this lofty peerage of the mind. But most American intellectuals have been content with a more modest role. We in America have not felt so compelled to speak with a single voice. We have been suspicious of any class distinctions, even those rooted in our own elitism of the mind. We have had less urge to identify and to articulate noble universals to which we could all subscribe. We've gotten by, not always painlessly, with our pluralism.

Interestingly, no group in our society more exemplifies our nation's pluralism than Black Americans, whose forebears landed here on these shores long before the Mayflower. Yet, as I will discuss shortly, it is with Black intellectuals that some class-differentiation has taken place, rooted in both internal and external forces.

Traditionally we in the United States have seen no incompatibility between being an intellectual and being an advocate. Social and political engagement has never been a problem for American thinkers as for their European counterparts.

Our intellectuals have been much more willing to speak from value-based positions and to take part directly in efforts to promote those values in the real world. And we in America have seen little reason for our intellectuals to refrain from reflecting the vast diversity that has been the heritage and hallmark of our nation.

I would like to share and outline with you a possible agenda in four broad areas where I think critical issues arise in the 1980s: first, the issue of scope; second, the issue of identity; third, the issue of research and scholarship; and fourth, the issue of leadership and education.

First, the issue of scope. From our earliest days in North America most of the Black writers, scholars and artists who have made their mark have focused their attention upon the needs and problems of the Black community. Whether from choice or from lack of choice, Black educators have traditionally had a special interest in the schooling of Black people. Black historians have chronicled the parts played by Black men and women in yesterday's civilizations and in the American past. Today's Black composers often draw upon traditional African and Afro-American material modes and musical types, while Black choreographers create patterns of movement that

celebrate or satirize the contemporary ethos of the Black metropolis.

All this is perfectly consistent with the broadest American intellectual traditions. But for the Black intellectual it presents special problems. Take the writer or sociologist who pursues empirical research on exclusively Black issues. In public, the larger academic community may accept or even applaud such work. But, in private, the work will be criticized as parochial or even separatist. Questions will be raised automatically as to the methodological rigor or the scholarly objectivity, and if the Black researcher is affiliated with a predominantly white college or university, those criticisms may well be influential when the time comes for academic promotions and tenure.

The fact that the locus of the problem lies with the majority not the minority can readily be seen in that such questions are rarely asked of other ethnic intellectuals. The Black intellectual whose work leads in more general directions faces yet another set of stereotypes. More often than not, the white campus takes it as a given that the Black academic agenda is racial/ethnic first and only secondarily a search for truth or even scholarship. If the field is history, the Black scholar will be seen as an historian of Blacks not an historian who simply happens to be Black. Any investigations he or she undertakes outside the approved domain will be viewed with raised eyebrows, if not active hostility. Again, almost any other group can write about itself without similar reactions.

On the predominantly and/or historically Black campus, the assumptions may be uncomfortably similar if for a different reason. Here the issues will be the scholar's Black authenticity, commitment, faithfulness to personal roots and racial solidarity. The cultural credentials of the Black scholar or artist become the litmus test rather than the intellectual ones. Whether the institution is predominantly Black or white, this kind of stereotypical straitjacket is sometimes astonishing.

I remember well, during my years as president of Michigan State University, when we were putting together a research project on sickle cell anemia in our medical school, we had more than 280 Black faculty and staff doing research as well as teaching. And you would not have believed the amount of consternation in Blacks and whites alike over the one Black faculty member who declined to participate in this research that is especially related to Blacks.

There is an even more ironic aspect of the whole dilemma. The minute a Black writer



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or artist or scholar produces a distinguished work, everybody agrees that its real strength lies in its universality. The racial background of its creator will then be flatly ignored or patronizingly dismissed as incidental.

A wonderfully constructive example is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "Primitivism in the Twentieth Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." The works of Picasso, Braque, Matisse and many other modernists are on display alongside much older artifacts. If you see it, the aesthetic debts of the later works to the earlier ones are stunningly obvious. Yet the exhibit catalog and most of the reviews have insisted on referring to the older work in disembodied euphemisms like "primitive" or "tribal" rather than "Black" or "African" or "oceanic." It is almost as if acknowledging the Black origins of the models would dim the radiance of the great moderns they inspired.

Altogether, it seems to me that today's Black intellectual faces a quandary as regards the relationship between race and work. Damned if you do, and damned if you don't. It is bad enough when the double bind is imposed from the outside nonminority peers in the white academy. What makes it worse is when Blacks for different purposes unconsciously take over the stereotypes and make them our own.

In the 1980s Black intellectuals have to break out of the historic bind between parochialism and universalism. I believe

that the first step is confronting the issue, and confronting it is to reject the either/or duality, and then to insist on greater acceptance and recognition of the universal.

Second, the issue of identity. The Black intellectual agenda for the 1980s is inevitably shaped by the dilemma of Black intellectuals themselves. Closely related to the first issue of scope is this one of identity which I have subtitled "Separatism vs. Integration." Are we Black intellectuals or intellectuals who are Black?

In the academic community, the Black perspective now has both student and faculty representatives, largely absent a generation ago. But they tend to cluster together in programmatic cul-de-sacs and disciplinary cliques that lend themselves all readily to isolation. This problem is especially acute among students. There is a real and recurrent impulse towards circling the wagons to the point where a Black youth who sits at a mostly white table in a dining room may encounter more friction from other Blacks than from whites.

On many predominantly white campuses Black faculty are concentrated disproportionately in Black studies departments. This concentration has its own special problems of enrollment and funding for priorities which have plagued their stability. Now despite these problems, the scholarly achievements and contributions of Black and Afro-American studies programs over the last decade and a half have been very important indeed. But the blessings have not been unmixed. The Black studies departments have proven to be an effective vehicle for teaching Black students about Black contributions to history, literature, arts and society, and for instilling a sense of pride in their heritage. But they seldom manage to extend such awareness into courses offered by other departments to the student body at large. Perhaps the most conspicuous challenge yet to be faced by most Black studies departments is how to infuse the Black perspective into the general curriculum of the predominantly white campus.

Many Black studies programs provide the broader historical context within which to understand the Black culture and experience. The converse is rarely true, that is, where the Black dimension is included as an important element in the larger cultural socioeconomic setting. It's worth pointing out that novels grounded in such rich ethnicity as "Good-bye, Columbus" are taught in every English department in modern literature but not as Jewish Studies. But Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" or Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" usually

get into the general curriculum, if at all, as specimens, case studies in the psychology of what it's like to be Black. Meanwhile, this year as for countless years past, the majority of white college students will get their most sustained exposure to Black accomplishment, not in the classroom, but during varsity football or basketball games! And ironically, none of these contests will be advertised or promoted in the community as Black athletics.

The issue of identity is not new on the Black intellectual agenda. Awareness of one's ethnic heritage and pride in one's origins are critical in a society where being Black means automatically being labeled as poor, nonachieving, educationally disadvantaged and culturally deprived. Part of the problem is certainly the persistence of racist attitudes in the larger society. But I am increasingly convinced that our Black intellectuals must become more forceful and outspoken in advancing the positive and the broader dimensions of the Black contribution and role.

Third issue. What about scholarship and research? Are there problems of concern uniquely for Blacks or in whose study the Black viewpoint is especially useful? When stated this bluntly, the question immediately seems to embody some of the same stereotyping that I described a few minutes ago. To the degree that the Black intellectual chooses to concentrate upon an agenda of Black topics, there are several issues that Black scholars have a special responsibility to address in the 1980s. Let me just select two.

One issue is the growing controversy over race vs. social class. With the crudest forms of overt bigotry wearing now new makeup, it has become increasingly hard to know when disenfranchisement results from actual if subtle racial discrimination, and when it is simply a function of low income, poor education or any of the other variables associated with lower socioeconomic standing. To what extent do many of today's Black problems converge with those of the non-Black poor? Do many Blacks still lack opportunity because they are Black, or is it now more because they are poor, unemployed or unschooled? Or is it both? Finally, is it true, as many have argued, that the dimension of race and blackness still dominates?

Research should tell us whether these are distinctions without a difference. There would almost certainly be important implications for public policy. However, in undertaking such research I would urge that the focus be more with an examination of the

22 white majority than with the Black and the other minorities.

A second related topic is the progressive polarization of Blacks in our society. In a recent keynote speech to the Education Commission of the States, I thought aloud about a growing polarization in American society generally. There seems to be a widening gap between an affluent, well-educated and professionally and technically employed elite and an ever-growing, larger mass of low-income, low-educated people who work at economically marginal jobs or are chronically unemployed. My point, at the time in that speech, was that all these trends tend to be mutually reinforcing, and that the lines of income, educational and career division just happened, they just happened, to correlate quite closely with racial/ethnic divisions as well. Interestingly enough, the presidential elections just past suggest that partisan politics are beginning to reflect and to reinforce precisely this polarization. The social and economic implications of these trends are, in my view, quite ominous for the well-being of our nation. I believe that this is an area all intellectuals, including Blacks, must begin to address more vigorously.

Despite the continuing need for Black intellectuals to address special Black issues, I believe that the 1980s should see a continuation and an expansion of the current mainstreaming trend. More and more Black intellectuals will be advancing scholarship in non-Black areas. And this is to be applauded and encouraged in promoting the broader goal of full integration. Before leaving this topic I would mention that there is one research area where I believe the Black scholar can make a unique contribution. The Black experience, which the intellectuals share, has given them a unique perspective and affinity towards Third World issues. The greater sensitivity and understanding of the U.S. Black intellectuals offer the potential for significant bridging of perspectives between the United States and the Third World. Needless to say, the Third World looms larger

each day on the world stage and particularly in its strategic, political, economic and cultural ties to the United States. Many of the Third World countries are clearly the nations of promise for the next century. The ties of U.S. Blacks to the Third World, which is predominantly nonwhite, are much more than race or skin color. It is the commonality of experience between colonialism and post-colonialism of the Third World nations and the historic socioeconomic discrimination of Blacks in the U.S. Black intellectuals in the U.S. can indeed have and play a unique role in a two-way interpretation which would enhance international understanding.

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Now lastly, what about leadership and the Black intellectual? Traditionally American Black leaders have been intellectuals—polemicists like Frederick Douglass, theologians like Martin Luther King, Jr., writer-educators like [Booker T.] Washington, [W. E. B.] Du Bois and Mordecai Johnson. Historically, the Black community has revered learning and viewed education as the royal road to progress. Hence, the unusually prominent place of teachers, school administrators, professors and college presidents in any chronicle of Black advancement from the 19th century forward.

Relatively recently, however, new avenues have slowly begun to open for Black leadership. There are more Black officeholders at all levels of government, especially state and municipal. There are more Black career civil servants. In addition, the corpo-

rate world has begun to respond. New opportunities are appearing for Black managers, executives and officers. With the addition of outside directorships, corporate boardrooms are also losing their white male exclusiveness. Nevertheless, Black board members are still the exception, rather than the rule, even among the largest corporations.

There is a great potential for Black intellectual leadership in the corporate hierarchy. The Black executive with a Ph.D. in management or chemistry, or the Black board member who is also a successful lawyer or foundation official can be effective even in relatively conservative organizations. Yet many Black intellectuals continue to view with suspicion not only the corporate world itself but also those other Blacks who have chosen to try to work within and through it. All too often, Black executives or board members within predominantly white private enterprises are dismissed as sellouts or tokens. Again and again, there is an almost automatic presumption that the system demands compromises, that entering one world presupposes abandoning the other.

Undoubtedly, such views influence career choices among college students. Unfortunately, Black students continue to avoid many of the curricula in highest demand in the job market, especially at the graduate level. Black representation continues to be low in graduate schools of business and in fields like engineering, computer science, physics and chemistry. In 1981-82, for example, 606 Blacks nationwide received doctorates in education, but only 20 took Ph.D.s in engineering, 29 in physical sciences, six in mathematics and one in computer science.

Recently, I published a guest editorial in *Science Magazine*, and I called into question the widespread tendency among guidance counselors to guide Black high school students into vocational education. I also recommended remediation and incentives to overcome the poor elementary and secondary preparation that hinders so

many Black youngsters in mathematics and science. Most of the mail I got in response was overwhelmingly positive. But there were also a few earnest letters telling me that my suggestions were naive or unrealistic. Almost all the letters in this vein shared the same logic. These persons argue that Black youngsters have only themselves to blame for their poor preparation in certain subjects since they willfully avoided classes where the subjects are taught. And why is it that Black youth do avoid these classes? Why obviously, because they're too poorly prepared.

Current projections are that most new jobs in the next 10 years will not require sophisticated technical skills or even baccalaureate degrees. Openings for janitors, secretaries, orderlies and nurse's aides, retail clerks, cashiers and fast-food workers will in fact far outnumber those for scientists, technicians, experts and managers. But that observation assumes that the only important problem for Black workers is getting any job, however limited its rewards and prospects. This assumption ignores the basic point that some positions offer much more potential than others for bringing about change, not only in one's own life but also in the lives of others. Like it or not, the reality is that scientific and technical knowledge is increasingly the main jumping-off point to power and influence in our society. So long as Blacks are underrepresented in the scientific, technical, professional and managerial disciplines, our intellectual, economic and political fortunes will continue to lag.

More importantly, I believe we need to realize that there is a serious gap in Black leadership. Our strongest, most visible and most vocal leadership today is political. But Black political leadership has, in many ways, become drastically limited both philosophically and practically. In most cases, election and reelection have come to depend upon a formula which appeals to the narrowest images of Black concerns — poverty, disenfranchisement, unemployment and entitlements.

The repeated chanting of this litany of concerns, real as they are and needed as they are for successful election, has had the effect of unduly narrowing the range of true concerns of the Black community. As one Black intellectual said to me the other day, "We have painted poverty in the United States Black, even though the majority of the poor in our nation are white." Little wonder that any TV news broadcast dealing with welfare or poverty or unemployment chooses almost exclusively Black examples.

Few, if any, Black politicians can be very preoccupied with the increasingly critical question of how leadership among Blacks

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can be broadened and transformed into general leadership positions, that is, participation by Blacks in the leadership of all of our social institutions across the board. In my view, more attention to and concentration upon the integration of Black leadership into the mainstream of American leadership are long overdue. And I am strongly of the opinion that Black intellectuals, scholars in colleges and universities as well as specialists and experts in corporations and government, must take the initiative in making this broader concept of Black leadership a reality.

Today, as in the past, most issues on the Black intellectual agenda revolve around a paradox. As a philosophical ideal, as a goal, most of us uphold the idea that society should be race neutral, that racial background should confer neither penalties nor favors in social, economic, political and cultural life. Yet, reality and experience have shown that a legacy of stereotypes and disadvantages does not evaporate

overnight. We are still in the process of building a critical mass of Black intellectual power. We are still adding to that reservoir of Black human capital.

As an economist, an historian and academician, I believe that the power of the mind and the practical and moral force of the intellectual institutions do exist. At Howard University, many proud generations of scholarly leaders have pursued a Black intellectual agenda. The items on tomorrow's agenda may differ in some respect from yesterday's, but the dedication, sincerity and unflagging will we need are the same qualities that so epitomized President Mordecai Wyatt Johnson.

Black leadership has an obligation to find the method and the procedures which will extend its reach across the full range of professions and occupations to the full range of economic, political and cultural issues of our times. However we define the Black intellectual agenda for the 1980s, the challenge of diversity lies at the top. It is no longer enough to restrict our efforts to arenas we have circumscribed for ourselves or have been condescendingly delegated by others. Above all, we must recognize and reflect the new, the broader dimensions of our great march towards true full equality.

Clifton R. Wharton, Ph.D., is chancellor of the State University of New York and chairman of the board of the Rockefeller Foundation. He spoke at Howard University on November 6, 1984.