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Toward a Black Intellectual Agenda For the Nineties



By Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.

The "Black intellectual agenda"—what exactly might that mean?

Over the years, I have tried from time to time to offer some opinions. A few years ago I did that at Howard University, in the Mordecai Wyatt Johnson Memorial Lecture in 1984. Some of what I said then I will touch upon again . . . for our agenda, like our society, does not necessarily change overnight. But I will also venture a few thoughts on what has changed—or perhaps should change, whether it has yet done so. As a framework, I would like to ask three very broad questions:

1. What does it mean to be a "Black intellectual" or a "Black scholar" today?
2. Where should we stand on the question of "multicultural" education?
3. What role should the Black scholar try to play in the society beyond the campus?

Black Thinkers

From our earliest days in North America, most Black thinkers have focused their attention on the Black community. Whether by choice or by lack of choice, Black educators have traditionally been committed to the schooling of Black youth. Black musicians and composers have played and written "Black music," although the vast popular appeal of blues and jazz has always rendered that label rather ironic. Black historians have chronicled Black deeds, personalities, contributions. Black writers have written about the Black experience.

All this seems logical enough; most people are inevitably drawn to their own heritage—that which they know

most intimately. But for the Black intellectual it poses some special problems.

Take the scholar who works on exclusively Black problems. Overtly, the larger academic community may accept or even applaud such work. But in private, the work may be called parochial or separatist. Questions may be raised as to whether it would meet the highest standards of methodological rigor or scholarly objectivity. And within many, if not most predominantly white institutions, such criticisms would almost certainly influence tenure and academic promotion.

Yet the Black scholar who moves in the opposite direction faces yet another set of constraints. More or less by reflex, the white academy takes it as given that the Black intellectual agenda is racial-political first, and only secondarily a search for truth. At best, this means that the Black historian will be seen as historian of Blacks, disqualified for any larger field of inquiry. At worst, it means that any work by a Black historian will automatically be suspect as self-serving—in effect, the facts cut to fit the cause.

Nor is this a problem entirely for Black scholars on white campuses. At the predominantly Black institution as well, the assumptions may be uncomfortably similar. There the issues will be authenticity, commitment, and ethnic solidarity. Cultural fidelity, not scholarly validity, often becomes the Black scholar's litmus test. And once again, failure to measure up can have serious personal and professional drawbacks.

Either way, the scholar's actual ideas are always at risk of being removed from serious consideration—if not in the white academy, in the Black one. . . if not in the Black academy, then in the white one. . . and much of the time, in both academies at once.

In both worlds, as a result, the Black scholar finds himself or herself held hostage to one kind of stereotyping or another. He or she is expected either to stay within boundaries imposed by others, or else to define certain ideas, values, or institutions as beyond dispute.

For those who accede to it, stereotyping of this kind usually entails a strange mutation of scholarship into theology. Ideas become dogmas, methods turn into rigid rules. Any challenge to the sacred writ takes on a color not simply of criticism, but of betrayal or blasphemy. As examples, I would cite the reaction in some quarters, white as well as Black, to William J. Wilson's socioeconomic critique of the so-called underclass, or more recently the opinions on affirmative action expressed by the essayist Shelby Steele. That these thinkers have been attacked on the validity of their positions is not troubling. What is troubling is that they have often been attacked for raising questions perceived as hostile to an established intellectual orthodoxy, regardless of the actual merit or empirical evidence for the positions involved.

In the larger sense, of course, the danger of such intolerance is hardly limited to Black scholars—especially when the ideas under discussion have significant political content. Whether in the form of yesterday's McCarthyism or today's "political correctness," imposed intellectual conformity threatens all those who prefer painful truths to comforting platitudes.

But truth, painful truth, has always been our greatest ally in the Black struggle against oppression. The most uncomfortable and yet the most liberating truth our nation has ever had to face has been the truth of the gap between American ideals and the

American reality as Black people have lived it. Insofar as we have won any real freedom, that truth has been what has set us free. That is why, from the Black perspective, it is fundamentally contradictory to require that truth submit to the test of received wisdom, expediency, or entrenched values. No such doctrine of blind obedience can be seen merely as harmless fad or aberrant unpleasantness; it must be seen as poison to the very lifeblood of scholarship. And that is why, in answer to the question of what it might mean to be a Black intellectual in the nineties, I would answer: It means, among other things, to be someone who must insist upon the moral efficacy and the philosophical integrity of truth.

Multicultural Education

Over the last generation, higher education has seen the rise of a deeply confusing rhetoric of "multiculturalism." It is confusing because while practically everyone has at one time or another made use of the rhetoric—the familiar terms of "diversity" and "pluralism"—a huge gap has opened between the meanings we ascribe to them.

On one side, multiculturalism calls for greater inclusiveness, broadening the curriculum to accommodate the works and the viewpoints of Blacks, other minorities, women, non-Westerners, and others. In this case, multiculturalism is a term of inclusion. It stands for enlarging the university—socially, intellectually, philosophically. And it is hard to see how such a goal, pursued in good faith, could elicit serious objection.

But the rhetoric of multiculturalism has also evolved a second, diametrically opposed set of themes, whose collective effect is in fact *exclusiveness*. This is the multiculturalism that wants

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8 not to augment the traditional Western "canon," but rather to replace it entirely—presumably with some alternate canon collectively negotiated among a whole grab bag of intellectual interest groups.

In its most radical form, multiculturalism sometimes denies the intellectual value judgments upon which any canon is inevitably based. Some of its advocates have even called for doing away altogether with the canonical concept of a curriculum, which it scorns as a disguised "Eurocentric" political tool created by "Dead White Males," existing today only to preserve an oppressive establishment.

In this mode, multiculturalism is little more than a kind of frustrated, at times hysterical lashing out at the very idea of scholarship. Duke University's Henry Louis Gates has summarized it well:

"The '80's taught us a lesson about how the critical hair-shirt could become more of a fashion statement than a political one. . . . Academics made a pendular swing from the silly notion that scholarship existed wholly apart from politics to the equally silly position that everything we did had the very gravest political significance. We fell into what I call academic autism: close your eyes tight, recite the mantra of race-class-gender, and social problems will disappear. *New York Times*, Dec. 9, 1990.

Where, then, should we stand on the question of multicultural education?

I would argue for two points. First, the key axis is not that which runs between Blacks and other interest groups within the "multicultural" spectrum, whose main common ground seems to be a generalized state of grievance against an abstract majority culture. I question the efficacy of further collapsing specific Black concerns into the reflexive mantra of "race-class-gender." Our focus, rather, should be the actual experience and contribution of Blacks in relationship to a larger history and culture.

Second, we need continually to keep in mind—to remind ourselves no less than others—that even in the days of our most painful disenfranchisement, we have not been aliens or outsiders with respect to our nation's larger history and culture. Against all odds, we have played an integral part—starting even before the Mayflower landed. Even when our place has been most uncomfortable, our stake in and contributions to this society have been undeniable—though too often ignored or overlooked. The truth is that the larger American culture is our culture, too. Hence true multicultural education represents a broadening and enriching of our intellectual agenda.

The Scholar and Society

Traditionally, Black American leaders have been intellectuals: polemicists like Frederick Douglass, theologians like Martin Luther King, Jr., writer-editors like W.E.B. Du Bois, and academic leaders like Mordecai Johnson, Howard's first Black president. Historically, the Black community has revered

learning and viewed education as the royal road to progress. Hence the prominence of teachers, school administrators, professors, and college presidents in any chronicle of Black advancement from the 19th century onward.

In our own day, new avenues have slowly begun to open for Black leadership. There are more Black officeholders at all levels of government. There are more Black diplomats and career civil servants. The corporate world has begun to respond. We see more opportunity for Black professionals, managers, and executives. Even corporate boardrooms are losing their white-male exclusiveness.

The corporate hierarchy holds great promise for Black leadership. The Black executive with a Ph.D. in management or chemistry, or the university-based scholar who consults in computer design or molecular biochemistry, can be a force to be reckoned with even in relatively conservative organizations.

All too often, however, Black executives or board members are regarded by other Blacks as somehow having "gone over to the enemy." Again and again, there is an almost automatic presumption that the "system" demands compromises of a sort that cuts off those who enter it from their people.

Such attitudes certainly shape student behavior. It happens in the early grades, where Black youngsters who study hard and earn good grades are often scorned for "acting white." And it happens in colleges and universities, where Black students continue to steer clear of the curricula in highest demand in the job market—fields like business, computer science, and engineering.

Today, our strongest and most vocal leadership is political. But Black political leadership has in too many instances become a victim of the pragmatism and ills of traditional politics. Now that so many important battles have been won, today in too many cases election and reelection have become goals in and of themselves. Success at the polls has come to depend upon a formula that appeals to the narrowest image of the Black electorate—poverty, disenfranchisement, unemployment, and entitlements. And the Black leader who attempts to move beyond these narrow images may well find that he or she, too, is challenged for “acting white.”

As a result, few if any Black politicians can really devote themselves to converting the leadership of Blacks into Black leadership in the larger society. Yet our ultimate goal must be Black leaders whose contribution is not only to the Black community, but is recognized and accepted as leadership for the *entire* society and nation.

Parenthetically, I can't help mentioning a striking contrast from the recent war in the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, we have heard expressions of concern about the high concentration of Blacks in the armed services, who are being called upon to fight and perhaps die for their country. On the other hand, day after day we have seen General Colin Powell standing at the very apex of the military chain of command. He is not there, needless to say, to “represent the Black perspective.” He is there to embody our national will and to direct our national effort in an hour of global crisis. He is the leader of the entire effort—not just of some limited segment.

Yes, we will continue to need leaders of the Black community like Howard's

distinguished board chairman, John Jacob, and Howard's 1991 alumni honorees—Gwendolyn King, Ruby Martin, Gerald Prothro and Mayor Dinkins—each of whom exemplifies that broader leadership role.

The question I have found myself asking again and again is simply this: How can the style of leadership which has been so vital in achieving the gains we enjoy today be augmented, complemented and broadened by a new, broader, and more encompassing kind of leadership. Better still, what can we do to define, develop, and nurture those kinds of leaders? And how will it affect our future if we do create them—or if we fail?

In my view, we as Black Americans urgently need to reemphasize the integration of Black leadership into the mainstream of American policy—public policy, civic policy, and business policy. Increasingly, like it or not, the reality is that the main jumping-off point to leadership and power in our society is sophisticated knowledge—often scientific or technical knowledge. As we increase our presence and contributions in technical, professional, and managerial fields, our intellectual, economic, and political fortunes will follow apace. And I am strongly of the opinion that colleges and universities are where this has to start, and that Black scholars and intellectuals are responsible for making it happen.

Conclusion

In trying to construct a Black intellectual agenda for the '90s, I have tried to answer three questions: What does it

mean to be a “Black intellectual” or a “Black scholar”? Where should we stand on the question of “multicultural” education? And what role should the Black scholar try to play in the society beyond the campus?

I do not suggest that there is a single answer to any of these. In America, scholars and intellectuals are under no compulsion to speak with a single voice—Black scholars and intellectuals certainly included.

At Howard University, students and faculty have helped set the Black intellectual agenda for many, many generations. Under the leadership of President Franklyn Jenifer, and a brilliant faculty, Howard is still on the cutting edge of defining what is most important on our agenda.

As the years go by, to be sure, the agenda changes—though for our people the overall agenda will be the same until we have achieved the full justice, full opportunity, and full power that we have long been denied.

The challenge for Black intellectuals today, it seems to me, is to extend ourselves across the full range of disciplines, professions, and roles. To discharge our responsibilities, to ourselves, we need not merely to accept, but to reach eagerly for the mantle of a larger responsibility. □

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