

WHITE FACES AND BLACK STUDIES

Is there a monopoly on interpreting the past?

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The furious hostility aroused in certain quarters by William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* should serve to warn others who also venture to write or teach about the Afro-American past of the reception that may await their efforts. But more immediately instructive is the implication the controversy has for the black studies programs that are now being established in universities from Massachusetts to California.

The opposition to Styron's novel revealed a state of mind that cannot help but influence the new Afro-American curriculums. Styron's unpardonable sin was not that he portrayed a Turner whose experience and psychology some black persons found offensive. It was simply that as a white liberal he ventured at this time to reconstruct a crucial incident in the Negro's American past. This is the arrogance, the persistent white chauvinism, that blacks of a particular persuasion find impossible to forgive. Having deferred so long to white domination, blacks now have no intention of relinquishing a claim on both present and future. As they well understand, control of the record of the past can be a device to direct events in the present and in that way help to shape the future. For that reason the historical Turner, a black revolutionary, cannot be allowed to become the object of white interpretation and thereby be deprived of his present political and ideological utility.

Those who seek evidence to support that view may read the charges a number of critics writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 7, 1968, brought against Styron and especially against his defender, Eugene Genovese. Genovese's flaw was not shown to be ideological or intellectual. Like Styron's, it is genetic. However deep Genovese's researches in black history may be, those who found *Confessions of Nat Turner* so objectionable seem unwilling to accord him the right to make statements related to his findings. Those who plan black studies programs will have to take account of the attitude revealed by the Styron-Genovese incident.

The awkward truth is that certain black scholars have declared a monopoly of the right and authority to interpret the past. Their history, they assert, is surrounded by a mystique which only blacks can penetrate, and no white scholar should try. A tenable intellectual justifica-

tion for such a view cannot easily be found, any more than earlier white advocates of segregation and the inherent inferiority of blacks found rational defense of their position easy, but we are dealing in both instances not so much with reason as with politics, the drive for power—in the one case for the attainment of power and in the other for its preservation.

Although the anger represented by the exclusionist attitude of blacks toward their history is understandable, its implications for the study and teaching of the subject are nonetheless disturbing. The claims to monopoly expressed by certain black historians and critics have been embraced by black university students who, like so many of their generation, possess both convictions and courage. Let a white teacher venture to instruct a class containing black militants in the facts of the Afro-American past, and he quickly learns the basis for this assertion. However well informed in his subject he may be and however sympathetic he imagines himself toward the grievances and aspirations of blacks, he probably still will encounter so much skepticism and thinly veiled hostility as to make his task unpleasant and difficult, if not impossible.

Such was my experience as I conducted History 260, a newly introduced course in black history at Ohio State University, a few semesters ago. Reports from other universities where similar attempts have been made suggest that my experience was not unique.

From a pedagogical standpoint the situation seems ideal. Rarely does a teacher encounter students so eager for engagement. Student motivation could hardly be greater. An air of high seriousness supercharges the classroom. There is little opportunity for humor or relaxation of pace. Both instructor and students understand that the mere offering of the course is a political act. No member of the class is likely to be unaware that at Ohio State as at many other institutions the introduction of Afro-American history into the curriculum was related to vociferous demands made earlier by a black student organization. On that account the rationale of the course is generally understood to be at least as much political as it is intellectual. As such it is not an enterprise that invites only nominal involvement. Everyone senses that merely by his presence in the class he is himself making history.

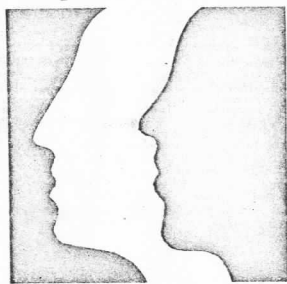
Yet despite the excitement generated by the aware-

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ness of being near the center of an important movement and despite the stimulation of association with intense and articulate young people, the general effect is depressing. It soon becomes obvious that the "usual past" many of these students seek is not one that recognizes and maximizes the achievements of black people and the creative part they have played in American development, as some of us in our innocence had supposed. Neither are they satisfied with a New Left interpretation that emphasizes the injustice and the exploitative aspects of white management of race relations and which admits the contradictions and hypocrisy that have marred so much of American history, although they certainly would not let the absence of those strictures go unprotested.

The core of their expectation is something few academically oriented historians are likely to give—exhortations to "liberation." Or, as one of my students bluntly put it, "Black history must be taught by a black revolutionary," presumably for the same reason that novels portraying black revolutionaries must not be written by white liberals such as Styron. The educational goal of courses in Afro-American history then is seen as strictly utilitarian, a highly selective sifting of the past to yield information and to produce attitudes that together will



support programs of radical action. This is the "racial and cultural identity" such courses are expected to help achieve.

A white instructor is not likely to be qualified to promote such a cause, nor would black militants welcome his efforts if he tried. After hearing a classroom presentation of some of the uglier aspects of the American past, a black co-ed addressed this plaintive appeal to me: "Then don't you think we are justified in what we are doing?" It was a rare effort to secure approval, a lapse in militant role playing, as she immediately sensed, and she never repeated her error; yet in that question were revealed the meaning and purpose of the course for her, and perhaps even the meaning of the blacks' American experience itself. It could only be impertinent for a white instructor to address himself to such a question posed in such a setting. A black man would have to do so, for he would be inescapably encompassed within that plaintively expressed "we."

Persisting as an undercurrent through all the weeks the course lasted was resentment that a white person had ventured to instruct blacks in history which was pecu-

liarily their own. Race had unfitted him for the task. A black man was needed, it was argued (even by some white students), because some mysterious power would enable him to see the black past as it actually was, a vision forever veiled from the eyes of whites. A racial bias common enough in its application to blacks but rarely felt by whites was pinching at me. It was beyond the reach of argument, and it hurt.

Militant students expected the course to be shaped to satisfy their particular political goals and pronounced disapproval when they found it deficient in that respect. They were impatient with discussion of historical figures who did not fit their model of appropriate "liberative" behavior. Mere mention of the early black New England poet Phyllis Wheatley, who was anything but a revolutionary leader, aroused protest. The abolitionists—"white liberals who felt sorry for blacks," as one student described them in the ultimate condemnatory phrase—were scorned immoderately. Analysis of Booker T. Washington, in spite of his unquestioned magisterial qualities, was judged irrelevant. They were quick to denounce all conciliatory black figures as having attained position through treason to their race, scarcely even venturing sympathy for them as victims of an overpowering white hegemony. Many of the students brought to the classroom a dogma and a doctrinaire approach to the subject that within my experience are rare among undergraduates.

Although the obstacles to free discussion and to the wide-ranging examination of history in such a situation clearly constitute a hazard in the black studies programs, skillful teachers, black and white, can go far toward overcoming them if they are intent on making the effort. It is nonetheless obvious that to make that effort is in some degree to destroy the very intent of the programs. The intellectual objections that legitimately may be raised to the movement for black studies seem on balance less pertinent than the more immediate social and political problems it presents.

One of these grows out of the character of the educational system itself. It may be that much education in America has been simply an enterprise in indoctrination supportive of majority views and elitist control, and that what we now are witnessing should be regarded as an attempt to alter the direction of the indoctrinating process. While such efforts on the part of black students may be objected to, objections coming from white persons must be recognized for what they are—the protest of a threatened elite. Since the aim of many advocates of black studies clashes with entrenched interests, it would be unrealistic not to expect such protests. The political import of the black studies movement is not likely to be ignored for long. Louder calls for militancy and separatism will emanate from the universities and echo throughout the cities. These calls will be responded to—both favorably and unfavorably—in many quarters,

with who knows what threats to the integrity of the universities. We must ask whether, under those conditions, university administrations and the men who support them will long tolerate the institutionalized advocacy of "liberation." If they fail to be patient and forbearing, and out of apprehension attempt to control or even check the movement now underway, then the resiliency and malleability of American society, already severely tried, will be tested still further, this time specifically in its educational sector. Instead of diminishing tensions, as its white advocates appear to hope, the black studies movement eventually may intensify them and itself become a focus of new conflict.

The likelihood of this happening appears greater when one examines the issue of who is to staff the new programs. Not many whites will be judged adequate for the posts, we may be sure of that; indeed, for reasons already suggested, the black studies vogue at present offers few opportunities for white scholars. Will they be

staffed by traditionally qualified blacks? Ideally, yes. But on account of past inequities and miscalculations there are not nearly enough to go around, and the movement will not wait while more scholars are being trained. Who then? The question remains to be answered, but probably in some instances by persons who are very close to the "liberation" movement and who are perhaps selected by students themselves—instructors who will both sway and be swayed by their classroom constituencies. This at least is the expectation of some student-movers of black studies programs, and at this advanced stage of the movement it seems unlikely that their expectation will in every instance be unrealized.

A moral question also must be raised respecting the establishment of these academic programs, even though to raise it is no doubt to be both old-fashioned and irrelevant. Should the university endorse programs that advocate and are accompanied by self-imposed segregation as the black studies movement is? The movement

Black Studies: More Than 'Soul Courses'

The turmoil that rocked the nation's campuses this last year grows partly out of the character of the young black students reaching college for the first time. The situation is likely to be more acute before this year is out. The Ivy League, for instance, accepted 86 percent more blacks this year than last. And such schools as the City College of New York are playing with special admissions procedures to accept blacks and Puerto Ricans who could not qualify under traditional academic standards.

Even the best-meaning college administrators have been, and continue to be, grossly unprepared for the impact of these young blacks on their campuses. Many of these students come straight from urban ghettos, and thus possess their own special attitudes and mores few white academics can understand. As one faculty member at Valley State College in suburban Los Angeles told me: "We expected 200 Roy Wilkinses and wound up with 200 Eldridge Cleavers."

It does no one—neither the college nor the kids—any good to ignore the fact that many of the new black students are unprepared academically, socially and culturally for the environment of a big college campus. Many whites are not much better prepared. Freshman year is a wrenching and frustrating experience for almost anyone, even a well-adjusted kid from Scarsdale. Imagine what it must be like for a kid from Harlem. One Harvard professor put it this way: "Many of these 'high risk' people from core areas are incapable of plugging in here right away. They get obsessed with the idea that what

they're learning is not relevant, they get frustrated, their grades drop, and they feel the whole place is against them."

The result is that some of these students tend to take out their hostility in the way they always have—through physical violence, or at least the threat of it. Hence the guns at Cornell, and at several other schools as well. It is well-known at Harvard that several freshmen kept guns around and threatened to use them on the moderate leadership of the Afro-American Association if the leadership compromised with the administration in a fight over a black studies program. Students are demanding black studies for many reasons, but one is that they are seeking a refuge in an alien and threatening environment.

What can be done? In terms of academic preparation, special courses could be provided that would improve students' basic skills—reading, writing, etc. Many schools give them now. The problem is that blacks tend to see such courses as second-rate, or even segregationist; students in the SEEK program at Queens College, for example, rebelled against courses designed to prepare kids with poor backgrounds for college work. In other words, the whole subject must be approached with great tact and sensitivity—qualities that seem conspicuously absent on many campuses.

As for social and cultural adaptation, only a limited amount can, and probably should, be done. Harvard talked about assigning each freshman his own personal advisor and confidant, a person who can help guide the young man (or woman) through the bewildering adjustments that have to be made in college. At the same time, blacks are demanding their own institutions—dormitories, eating places, social centers—and do not want to blend into existing establishments. This runs against the

constitutes a significant step toward a new separation of the races and marks a further departure from the dream that motivated the abolitionists of the last century and their successors in this one—the creation of a multi-racial society in which men of all colors can live together amicably and on terms of equality. And this retrogressive step is taken at the very moment when a different, more humane course seemed possible even though still far from realization. It will not do to blame black militants alone for a development in which all Americans through many generations must share responsibility. It may be that white Americans deserve this reaction and that whatever fates preside over the course of history smile at their discomfiture now that the shoe is on the other foot and mock their embarrassment that blacks who once found all doors closed now themselves slam them. But to be aware of such ironies makes the growth of black separatism, especially within the universities, no less to be regretted.

integrationist ethic and undoubtedly has some unhealthy ramifications; it is strange to see blacks doing to themselves what the segregationists did to them for so long. But it is probably useful and necessary. Blacks feel they have to “get themselves together” before they can deal with the white world on an equal basis, and that seems fair enough. Do the same people who object to a black social center or dormitory object to a Newman Club or the desire of Jewish students to live together?

The controversy over black studies has illuminated another interesting issue: what these black students are being trained for and what they want out of life. Men like Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin have argued that without solid academic training, young blacks will not be equipped to take over the jobs in industry and finance that are rightfully theirs. Black studies, they say, is self-defeating.

The argument fails to understand several things. First, it does not recognize the almost desperate desire of young blacks to foster racial pride, and that pride can be nurtured, and asserted, through a black studies program. Second, it fails to realize that a growing number of young blacks just do not want those jobs at IBM and Chase Manhattan many older Negroes view as the epitome of success. What they want are jobs that will have social utility, that will enable them to serve their people and improve their lives. This feeling is part of a broad desire, among young whites as well as blacks, for professions in which success is measured by social change, not cold cash. This was clearly evident, for example, during the Columbia uprising. As much as anything else, the students were rebelling against the fact that the university seemed to be training them for jobs in the great corporate establishment, symbolized by the school's Board of Trustees.

Despite all our reservations about these developments, we can hardly urge universities to be merely defenders of existing arrangements, racial or otherwise, nor can we demand that they avoid innovation simply in the interest of tranquility. It is unrealistic, nevertheless, to suppose that the black studies movement will be uncomplicated by turmoil and resistance or to suppose that it will not create new problems as grievous as the ones it purports to solve.

University officials justify the new programs as legitimate academic enterprises similar to the earlier established Latin American and Asian programs, as of course theoretically they are, and some apprehensive administrators no doubt see in them the means to defuse explosive campus racial situations. Their student advocates more realistically regard them as important political opportunities. We shall not need to wait long to discover whether administrators or students are more shrewd in their expectations.

This is where the whole issue of “relevant” education comes in. It is unfair and unknowing for critics of black studies to say the students are wasting their time with “soul courses.” Most of the students now know that; few of them want to bother with Chitlins 101 or Militant Basketweaving. What they want are courses that will really analyze the society, that will show them how and why decisions are made, that will give them the understanding, and the skills, to try to alter those decisions.

Some of this is rhetoric. Most colleges are just not tools of the corporate elite the students envision, and there is little stopping the imaginative student from studying almost anything he wants. Moreover, black students often feel guilty about being in college in the first place, and they want to show that they remain militant and uncorrupted. Some of them will take jobs in the establishment. But many of the brightest ones will not—or if they do, will utilize the resources of the establishment for their own ends. A young black guy at Chase Manhattan can do a lot of good by urging the bank to make low-interest loans to ghetto businessmen. A lawyer in a Wall Street firm can scare a lot of merchants who are defrauding their customers.

This is the full meaning of the revolt against affluence. We now have a student generation that can afford to worry about things other than money; even a black youngster from the slums knows that once he gets into a good college, his economic future is pretty secure. This was not true a generation ago; but it is now, and reverberations from this basic fact are just beginning to be felt.

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