

AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES: ELEMENTS OF
A TRADITION IN SEARCH OF THEORY (1984)

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1. For over two centuries, a Black intellectual tradition germinated in the Black community. Institutionalized segregation set the parameters for Black intellectual productivity, although academic training and credentialing was provided by prestigious white universities. There were definite elements to this tradition: (1) ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: affirming the primacy of reason; (2) SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: advocacy for social change; (3) BLACK EXPERIENTIALISM: observing and listening to Black people themselves; and (4) CRITIQUE: defending Black people from intellectual racism and bad public policy. The central crisis faced by Afro-American Studies is how to maintain this tradition while surviving through successful adaptation in a white academic context. The old institutions are not as dominant today, and the new creation of Afro-American Studies has yet to establish an institutional base to consolidate itself and prepare the conditions to reproduce itself.

2. There is a crisis of theory in Afro-American Studies, but this can be resolved. All relevant theoretical questions can be located in the analytical space of a paradigm of theoretical unity (see Figures). There are four categories that define our material terrain: (1) RACE: (biology); (2) CLASS: (political economy); (3) NATIONALITY: (culture and social structure); and (4) IDEOLOGY: (psychology, individual and social). Each aspect of experience is guided by its own logic of development and change, but in general, all of these levels of reality have experienced periods of social cohesion and social disruption. Assuming the African experience as the historical background, the Afro-American has experienced three periods of

social cohesion (slavery, tenant farming, and city life) and three experiences of social disruption (European slave trade, Civil War and Reconstruction, and migration/resettlement from the rural south to the urban north.)

This analytical space allows a standard system of conceptual coordinates to clarify ideological questions, to identify silences in theoretical statements, to merge disciplinary specialization in a federated unity, and facilitate a new intellectual synthesis of theories that cover all the space in the paradigm.

This analytical space not only enables us to codify quite diverse bodies of material into one comprehensible whole, but directs us to questions in a systematic manner. The theoretical unity that we require must be developed over time as a process of building an intellectual framework in which unity can be won.

3. The social requirements for institutional, intellectual productivity can be met by a new form of collective action, THE COOPERATIVE RESEARCH NETWORK. The basic orientation is the establishment of new data bases for the empirical, grounding of the theoretical synthesis. Further, all curriculum development should include the codification of published literature and these new data bases.

In the main, Black intellectuals must codify the Black experience as lived by Blacks, for in this way new knowledge can be developed and a new meaningful affirmation for Afro-American Studies might be possible.

Unfortunately, Archimedes was not interested in the practical application of things, but in the rational aesthetic of scientific beauty. Perhaps, we should consider Marx: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."