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REPORT ON THE CONDITION OF BLACK STUDIES

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The thrust of what I have to say can be summed up in four questions. The first question is simply: Is there a crisis in Black Studies? And if there is a crisis, the second question is, why does this crisis exist? (I hope we all agree that there is.) Thirdly, what is the nature of this crisis? And finally, what is the future of Black Studies? That will constitute the body of my report on the present conditions of the Black Studies programs.

The first question, then: Is there a crisis in Black Studies? I think that very few would argue that there isn't. Too many program directors who are facing the kinds of hassles -- budgetary problems, and administrative hang-ups - that the white people are throwing at them - are not aware that these problems are general. They are. Everyone whom I have seen who runs a program is confronted with the age-old problems of money, staff, office space, secretaries, phones, stamps, etc. There are a series of little bitty, nagging, petty problems that people trying to implement Black Studies programs have to face.

However, that is not the crisis! Those things are inevitable with any new movement. The crisis, I think, arises much less from these petty budgetary and administrative hassles than from the simple lack of knowledge of what we are doing. So, I think that the gist of the crisis is that we have not spent enough time talking about what Black Studies is, to know what we ought to be doing. When the partially blind accept responsibility to lead the totally blind out of the darkness, there is bound to be some stumbling over feet. In fact, I think that is what we are doing at the moment.

So we come down to what, I have to confess, may be a brutal but I think, personally, an honest assessment, that at the moment, Black Studies does not exist. In too many instances the enthusiasm for Black Studies has in fact generated what I would call a new category of academic, pimps and hustlers, both black and white. Brothers are trucking Black Studies. They've discovered the amounts of money available for Black Studies represent a rapid scaling up of personal status, academic rank and professional income. Lots of people who confess that they know nothing about what they are doing proceed to go ahead and try to do it anyway. That is not intrinsically bad in the sense that few of us actually know what we are doing, but when in fact one definitely conceals his lack of information to make sure that nobody finds out that he doesn't know what he is doing, then he is faking

it. Well, the faking of programs will be exposed and eliminated. I hope that not many fakers have managed to sneak into our deliberations here. It matters very little if you have. Those who are faking it know, and everybody else will find out soon enough. What is going to have to happen, frankly, is that we must confess that we really don't know what is going on. Then we must attempt to go back to the basis of our blackness, and find out what we have to do. That's going to mean that many people are going to have to get over a lot of old hang-ups about their traditional roles as teachers.

Now the second question: Why does the crisis exist? I think the reason that this crisis exists is the same reason that the society is in a crisis. I don't think you can separate American education from American society. You can do it analytically, but in practice it is almost impossible.

Basically, there are a set of assumptions which underlie this society. Most of them not articulated. And since they have never been made very explicit, most Americans don't even think about them. I call this set of assumptions "Western Cultural Imperialism". They consist of ingrained notions about an evolutionary process, about man's movement from one civilization to another civilization: a belief that western man (that is, white people) represents the highest state of evolution in terms of culture that man has ever achieved; and a belief in the United States as the epitome, the highest plateau

of human civilization. Because it is an evolutionary assumption, whitey believes it inevitable that other people farther behind must follow him. Thus non-whites are less civilized, primitive, underdeveloped, underprivileged, etc. You have heard the whole set of value judgments that people apply to people they feel beneath them.

What I have done is to try to point out that the prevailing definitions in America of intellectual validity and worth are derived from that tradition, that if you go down to the heart of what it is that is defined as being intellectually valid in American schools and Western universities, it comes down to anything that is a part of the Western cultural tradition. In one sense, scholarship has been the history of Western cultural endeavors and their impact upon lesser cultures. That is, how have we succeeded in elevating these lesser people to something which approximates what they ought to be. You can begin to understand how people who call themselves historians argue that the whole of African history was a footnote to something the English were doing in Asia. African history has been for too long simply a study of what white people were doing in Africa.

What I am trying to argue is that because of an unarticulated set of values, there is a conceptual blind spot in American education. The conceptual blind spot is the inability to conceptualize alternate and equally valid sets of cultural values that did and do exist. Western education had to believe that there