COMMENTS ON "ANOTHER SIDE OF THE BLACK STUDIES DEBACLE"

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In his paper "Another Side of the Black Studies Debacle" which appeared in the Spring 1975 issue of the RBPE, William N. Ikemma of Oberlin College made a number of statements about black studies which merit closer examination.

Ikemma’s use of the word "debacle" in the title of his article provides immediate concern, given one dictionary definition of the word as "a complete failure."

While it is true that in the first years of the "new" black studies (circa 1968-72) there were a number of hasty, ill-conceived efforts popping up for a variety of reasons, it cannot be generalized that all such efforts were a complete failure. To do so lumps them all into a common level of mediocrity that is not supported by evidence selected from individual case histories at colleges and universities across the country.

If we accept the connotation of black studies as a fiasco, what does this imply regarding its long-term survival as a viable academic discipline, given the politics of semantics with which all social scientists must be familiar if they are to perform coherent analyses of society? Language is the primary vehicle of communication, irrespective of the form in which it manifests itself. We have to be careful lest we transmit the wrong message, trapping ourselves into a cul-de-sac.

That "sporadic white concessions... to appease ‘black rage’ seem to be losing momentum just as fast as they began" is not all that spectacular a revelation if one understands some basic facts about American society. America is a very superficial society in the sense of "faddishness." Its very essence as a quasi cultural vacuum mandates a kind of lightness that spurs it on vicariously from one new experience to another, ever searching for satiation because of its emptiness. This is evident from the rapidity with which it changed its focus from black studies to women’s studies to native
American studies, etc. As Nick Aaron Ford has pointed out, at no time did more than 10 percent of the nation’s black students opt for a major in black studies. Most averaged one or two courses as electives to fill out a regular course of study in one of the more traditional academic disciplines. This suggests that in some respects black students are little different from their white counterparts whose interests are noted for their changeability in a four-year course of study.

Ikemma concludes that “the so-called civil rights activities were nothing more than an exercise in mockery and self-pity,” provided that we accept his contention—which does have an element of truth—“that the liberal whites who actually spearheaded the moves have subsequently satisfied their conscience, and they do not have as much sense of guilt and urge to restitute for the unscrupulous acts of their race against the black man during the colonial and neocolonial years of slavery.” One problem with that notion prevails in a search for the meaning of “civil rights,” while another is prevalent in a review of the historical record.

If we accept Vincent Harding’s belief that black studies must place its emphasis “on [the] exposure, disclosure, [and] reinterpretation of the entire American past,” would it not be more appropriate to speak of social/democratic rights than civil rights, provided that we accept the traditional definition of civil rights as those rights of personal liberty spelled out in the U.S. Constitution.

The notion of civil rights as rights of personal liberty speaks much more forcibly to the concept of an individualistic America which most Blacks have not enjoyed since their arrival in English America in the early years of the seventeenth century as indentured servants. Beginning with the passage of the *durante vita* laws in the 1660s, Blacks had been demoted to the status of an object class, proscribing all future relations with whites as occurring within a system of asymmetrical power balances—whites, because of their control of political and economic institutions were in a position to define the conditions of citizenship. Given the perception of Blacks as a monolithic commodity to be exchanged in a market context, any alteration in their status necessarily had implications for the whole, irrespective of singular manumissions.

The idea of social/democratic rights as contrasted with civil rights addresses more accurately the outgroup status of Blacks and their search for freedom, dignity, and manhood in an oppressive society.

Turning to the historical record, if we accept Ikemma’s contention that whites spearheaded the push for black social/democratic rights, how are we to explain seventeenth- and eighteenth-century slave petitions to Congress