

Leadership for Diversity: The Role of African American Studies in a Multicultural World

Delores P. Aldridge*
Emory University

It has been relatively easy for advocates of diversity to sidestep questions about the social and historical origins of policies they favor. The idea of diversity seems to have appeared out of nowhere. But the notion of changing institutions so that they better reflect the great range of peoples and experiences in American Culture is not new. In modern times, the most prominent movement for diversity has been the Civil Rights Movement. African American Studies, the intellectual and scholastic offshoot of that movement, initiated the first wide scale effort to broaden racial and social perspectives within the university.

Placing diversity in historical context is important because obscuring the roots of this issue negates the contributions and the importance of African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement and subsequent efforts to present African American life as a legitimate subject of academic study are defining moments in our nation's consciousness of its diverse makeup. This essay is an attempt to recover that neglected legacy and to define the future role of African American Studies in a global world order.

As developing nations like Brazil ponder racial and ethnic relations under democratic conditions, the African American experience stands as an instructive example. The same may be true of South Africa, where an expansive cultural perspective under democratic leadership is all but assured. In these and other situations, African Americans can provide the wisdom of experience gleaned from a

*This essay by Delores Aldridge explores the need for African American studies in a contemporary world. *Challenge* strives to publish empirical studies; however, when essays that are germane to African Americans are submitted, we try to accommodate the authors.

generation of pioneering diversity within the world's strongest democracy. The spread of democratic institutions and heightened consciousness among oppressed races are creating conditions for African Americans to provide leadership for the worldwide movement for cultural diversity and individual freedom. Without this acknowledgement of pioneering effort, significant work of African Americans will once again be expunged from the historical record—our role in the future course of social development and human relations unacknowledged. I hope this essay is the beginning of a dialogue to proclaim our commitment to a society with truly diverse institutions. And, I hope it will inspire a fresh examination of the possibilities for leadership African Americans can exert in the future world order.

Diversity is becoming a global reality. America's status as a world leader, and its ability to compete in the next century could well turn on its response to the challenge of diversity. Despite being predicated on lofty political and social ideals, American culture and institutions have not managed diversity very well. In part this is due to a powerful mythology of melting pot opportunity which trivializes legitimate claims of prejudice and inequality. Even more ironically, the very organizations that should be best prepared to meet this challenge—colleges and universities—seem least able to create truly multicultural environments. Today, a generation after struggle began for African American Studies in the university, racial tension and confrontation remain routine features of campus life, just as they continue to permeate society as a whole.

In America, racial tolerance and equality are benchmarks by which diversity must be measured. Without denying the legitimate protestations of other groups, race, not class, gender, or sexual orientation, remains the most unalterable factor in social oppression. Although increased advocacy for language groups, women, gays, and other interests has shifted the focus of diversity to a wider range of targets, race remains the seminal problem in American society.

Along with its mission of research and teaching, the university guards and perpetuates the formal values of our nation. As the main repository for formal knowledge and moral precepts, it has a special responsibility to style itself as a model for society at large. And because higher education serves the leadership class of society, its performance with regard to diversity and equity exerts a powerful influence upon those designated for roles of power, influence, and decision making. Not even life on campus, abstracted from the usual daily struggles and populated by the brightest, most impressionable citizens, has been able to embrace diversity in the academic curriculum as a deeply honored moral imperative.

What a generation of African American students and faculty have discovered is that the university is not so much a mold of society as a reflection of it. When black intellectuals first asserted the validity of academic inquiry focused on issues specific to African Americans, there was resistance. That resistance, in somewhat more subtle form, continues to this day. What should have been an oppor-

tunity to acknowledge real differences of experience and knowledge between black and white lives in a divided society was instead viewed as a power grab by entrenched academic interests. Established departments and their personnel perceived the movement for African American Studies, and the real academic diversity it implied, as an intrusion onto their turf by unwelcome competitors.

Although the debate assumed a lofty tone, just below the surface of flowery rhetoric was the reality of vested economic interests and the management of power relations within the university itself. These interests had an epistemological basis. Acknowledging that the black experience in America has been qualitatively different from that of whites could negate or at least circumscribe the validity of assumptions about American social values. Central among issues raised would be questions about the character of American democracy itself. Delving into this sphere would put the academy at odds with its central political mission: to reinforce and validate social reality. Important though it might have been, this dilemma was actually of tangential importance in the overall scheme of things. The first priority in responding to African American Studies was to preserve the established structure of economic and administrative relations within the university, as well as cultural norms dominant in the society at large.

Thirty years ago neither African American Studies nor its adversaries within the academy could have predicted the radical transformations taking place in the world today. The end of the cold war and East/West political hegemony is ushering in a new era of global realignment. In the next century, most of the world's population growth will occur in countries with non-European cultures. National and ethnic consciousness is on the rise worldwide. Diversity is a global reality; it is driving the creation of a new economic and political order. America is buffeted by these same winds of change. Sometime early in the coming century, a large proportion of the American work force will be non-white. Even sooner, a majority of American schoolchildren are likely to be non-white. The gap in fertility rates between white and non-white populations ensures these trends will continue.

At the same time non-white populations are flexing their demographic strength around the world and at home, American race relations are characterized by increasing segregation, isolation, and enmity. In the future, corporations and the university itself will be drawing new recruits from communities with backgrounds and social attitudes different from the typical middle class white youth. The requirement to accommodate different perspectives and interpretations of social life will become increasingly imperative if American institutions are to make what appears to be an inevitable transition. The failure to embrace fresh, enriching perspectives will no doubt prove a costly error for American society.

Today African American Studies is uniquely positioned to address the diversity issue in America and, by extension, around the globe. The African

American experience from slavery, to emancipation, through Jim Crow oppression, civil rights, black nationalism, and all its other economic and political expressions, has clear application to national struggles waged by oppressed peoples elsewhere. That these experiences have occurred within the Western world's leading democracy can help focus specific economic and political theories likely to have an important impact upon global civilization in the 21st century. Emerging multicultural democracies such as South Africa and Brazil may find the African American experience an especially useful model.

A Leading Role For African American Studies.

Since its origins on the campus of San Francisco State University in the late 1960's, the African American Studies movement has struggled to establish an intellectual mission and epistemological identity. Although firmly rooted on many campuses, the discipline has a tangential relationship with other academic disciplines and departments. Its impact on scholarship has been significant but largely unacknowledged, and programs vary widely in scope, design, and size. But as global changes and demographic trends impose new perspectives on American culture and its educational system, African American Studies, the pioneer in diversity, has already demonstrated its ability to play a leading role in reshaping America's social and intellectual agenda. Not only is African American Studies positioned as the authority on racial issues in this society, its reach can be extended to burgeoning trends with other people of color in America and throughout the world.

In the 21st century, internationalism will be the focus of much economic and political effort. There is growing awareness among blacks in this country that they do not live in isolation from other people of color. African Americans are therefore becoming more conscious of their ties to other non-European peoples, and in the coming century, those linkages should be even more evident. At the same time, the unique perspective blacks have gained as an integral part of American society can provide a bridge between third world sensibilities and American institutions. The pace of global change, and the rapid integration of undeveloped nations into the international political economy provides an ideal opportunity to expand the content and mission of African American Studies.

Global consciousness is particularly urgent at this point in time. Industrial modes of production in advanced nations like the United States are rapidly being replaced by post-industrial service and information oriented industries. As American factories are shut down and manufacturing transferred to underdeveloped nations, the segment of domestic workers most severely impacted contains a high proportion of African Americans. Far more reliant upon blue collar manufacturing jobs for middle class stability, blacks are in de facto competition with other people of color for the work they are best able to perform. The exploitation of off-shore labor by global corporations, environmental degradation, and exacerbation

of class divisions in underdeveloped countries are obstacles to their evolution as just and democratic societies.

The so-called black underclass is not an isolated national problem. It is inextricably bound up with the international movement of capital and shifts in social priorities brought about by the changing contours of world economic development. Realities faced by African Americans go far beyond the limits of neighborhood, city, state, region, and nation. Likewise, the general set of concerns—lack of empowerment, disfranchisement—that preoccupy black Americans, are common to a broad set of peoples living under conditions of oppression. There is a pressing need for rigorous theoretical work. A critically focused African American Studies grounded in comparative history, behavioral sciences, and political economy, can generate analytical models that yield fresh, compelling insights into the nature of our oppression, and that of others as well.

Such a mission requires that African American Studies be specific in its research subject, but universal in the scope and application of knowledge. It will be necessary to challenge much of the current curriculum design, which serves an increasingly irrelevant academic status quo. To the extent that it will assume a transformative role African American Studies will be tendentious. It must be an intellectual and pedagogic advocate. This can be accomplished without sacrificing rigor, discipline, and accountability.

Creating A Web Of Communication

Constructing a dynamic discipline such as that described above will require uniform standards for research, exposition, and meaning within African American Studies. A web of exchange, linking black scholars, students and their communities as well as other important critical scholarship, can provide a vast body of experiential data and theoretical perspectives. This store of information will have draw from different disciplines to discover useful commonalities and instructive contrasts.

Asymptomatic hypertension, for example, affects black people in the United States disproportionately compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Among the various causes postulated to explain this discrepancy is "environmental stress." The medical establishment and the government have made a concerted effort to investigate and control hypertension with medications. The results have not been effective. There seems to be a conscious effort to avoid serious investigation of the impact environmental stress may have on this condition. To do so could raise troubling political issues. Possible linkages between physical illness and environmental factors such as racism, poverty, and oppression challenge existing designs of knowledge. For the status quo it is better for hypertension to be viewed as an individual medical problem than a mark of oppression—a social problem with individual medical manifestations.

A grounding in critical theory augmented by global consciousness would

present a number of possibilities for addressing this problem. Scholars could ponder, for example, the comparative statistics for blacks living in other countries insofar as rates of hypertension are concerned. Such comparisons, properly controlled, could have measurable impact on the quality of life and health for blacks in American society. Linking African American studies and broader frames of reference will allow the leap toward high level research of the sort suggested above. Bringing to bear specialized knowledge of history and economics, social and behavioral sciences, policy analysis, linguistics, and other disciplines, problems endemic to the black American population can be illuminated within a network of relations that place African Americans in a clearer relationship with the rest of the world.

There is a particular need to attack social myths that exert a pernicious hold over both the academic community and American society. It is a powerful fact that even under conditions of bondage, Africans in America managed to maintain a strong attachment to family structure. Newly freed slaves embraced the institution of marriage with such enthusiasm that by the end of the nineteenth century, upwards of black children were born to married couples. In subsequent decades, through countless acts of deliberate economic and political disfranchisement, black family stability was steadily eroded. Today, black families and gender relations in black communities are in crisis, but so are family relations and gender relations in the larger society. The question is, what marginalizing changes have occurred in recent history causing mainstream families to demonstrate characteristics similar to those in oppressed and disfranchised black communities? As the doors of economic opportunity slam for white Americans due to international competition, their family bonds are transformed. As economic conditions force white mothers out of the home and into the work force, mainstream families are undergoing fundamental structural changes. The extreme marginalization and improvisations forced on blacks in contemporary American society may prove an accurate predictor of changes awaiting an even larger segment of American society as we face the economic dislocations in the 21st century. It is the task of African American Studies to seize on such insights, conduct required research, invalidate existing models, produce visionary policy proposals, and postulate new models of social organization. A unique grounding in the experiences of America's historically oppressed minority can, at this moment in history, produce the keen insight required to dissect ongoing social and economic transformation—an insight that should prove instructive for maximizing the options of other oppressed groups.

To reach its potential as an academic discipline and intellectual pursuit, African American Studies cannot define "blackness" in fixed terms. We live in a dynamic universe, and the experiences of black folk are being transformed along with the rest of the world. African American Studies is not and should not be dominated by a fixed precept of racial identity. Its mission is to develop a set of

cognitive values which distinguish the black experience as a unique intellectual subject, yet is open to participation and inquiry by all interested parties. This is a significant challenge. Internal criteria defining the discipline's intellectual mission are not enough. Our scholars must put forth original concepts for historical interpretation and social change that establish our linkages to other segments of America's increasingly multi-cultural order. The focus must be simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic. A dynamic, reflexive methodology will produce a compelling vision of society, and position African American ideals at the forefront of progressive thinking in the next century.

African American Studies has been treated with disdain, even contempt by the American academic community. Pioneers in the field have been refused the acknowledgement and professional regard they are due. Higher learning in America is the poorer for that. The university has failed to enthusiastically embrace a new and potentially enriching perspective. It has failed to demonstrate the flexibility, openness, and grounding in reality evident in the revised strategies of this country's global corporations. Most disturbingly, the university, in contrast to the business community, continues to exhibit a reluctance to hasty change and innovation.

A renewed emphasis on race is in order. Racial divisions in American society are as tense today as any time in modern history. American universities and the society itself face a burgeoning racial dilemma. The high level of racial polarization on campus and in the streets is just one sign of unabating trouble. Yet, for the most part, African American Studies has been overshadowed by better funded programs focusing on women, gays, and other groups. Even granting they are valid areas of inquiry in their own rights, one reason for the attraction of these curricula may be that they divert attention and resources from African American Studies. However, none of these fields addresses the seminal social problem still faced by American society: the problem of the color line.

The potential of African American Studies as a rich trove of transformative knowledge is undiminished. That potential, like many aspects of African American life, is simply underdeveloped. In the 21st Century, issues of race and social equity will confront American society like a Hydra. In African American Studies, higher education has a neglected, but powerful tool for expanding intellectual boundaries.

Toward A Way Out.

It is time for higher education to embrace African American Studies as an aggressive, focused, transformative academic discipline which pioneered the diversity movement. Specifically, African American Studies needs to be accepted as a solution, a course of study which addresses one of the nation's most enduring and tenacious problems. Campuses are being compelled to reevaluate race relations in a context of accelerating diversity. African American Studies

can assume a leading role in that process, providing the grounding in racial realities everyone needs to be considered a truly educated American .

With an appropriate level of resource support and status confirmation, African American Studies can address issues of racial and cultural diversity in ways that can serve as a model for other disciplines. It has the platform to address issues of racism and oppression directly, from the perspective of its historical victims, within the belly of the beast. It alone can transcend the celebratory emphasis of "Black History Month" and other well-meaning, but superficial concepts. They address symptoms, but do not grasp the depth of America's racial dilemma. African American Studies exemplifies a clear, practical, emphatic course of action: infusing all curricula from K-12 to the university with diverse knowledge representing the different perspectives, experiences, and issues facing black and oppressed people in the world. Such an approach can preserve scholastic rigor and intellectual discipline, while accessing important knowledge ignored by traditional courses. For example, traditional social stratification courses too often focus on culturally different behavior and social class without forthrightly dealing with the socially determined role of race in structures of inequality. The role race plays in complicating concepts of culture and class appears less powerful in study than it does in the world of lived experience. African American Studies has the potential to correct this discrepancy between what is formally taught and what is intuitively known to be true.

As racial tension, hostility, and conflict experience a resurgence on campus and throughout the larger society, an opportunity exists for African American Studies to recapture its pioneer role in diversity leadership. Seminars and workshops on prejudice reduction cannot address the underlying, structural causes of persistent racism. In fact, such exercises, by focusing on individual attitudes and preferences, mask core problems. Intermittent courses on race relations modified from traditional course offerings have the same effect. In their case, gatekeepers and ideological paradigms grounded in the status quo are charged with changing that very status quo. Mere courses on contributions made by blacks and other minorities do not address the central issue.

Of critical import is the issue of color; its role in power relations, allocation of resources, and impact on the resulting configuration of society. This realm of inquiry must be elevated from a "discipline of disciplines" to an autonomous, respected intellectual endeavor. What is our past, present, and future "fit" in American society and the world? That is the seminal question for African American Studies. Its pioneering history, enriched by continuing innovation, makes African American Studies a model for all the "new studies." At the same time, its human focus probes broader questions of what kind of world is to exist in the future. A transformed academic discipline can point the way toward a more transformed university. That would be good for our people, good for the nation, and good for the emerging world culture of the next century.