26.

Black Studies and the Problematic of Paradigm: The Philosophical Dimension

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In spite of its ideals and continuing promise, it was clear from its inception that Black Studies would encounter a series of internal and external challenges to its realization as a legitimate and effective discipline. And it was equally clear that how it responded to those challenges would determine its course, content, and ultimate future (Hare, 1972). At the heart of these challenges is the problematic of paradigm that, although it was posed and pursued at the inception of Black Studies, was never definitively resolved. This, in turn, has led to an ongoing and crisis-oriented struggle to define, develop, and defend the discipline and at the same time defend Black Studies scholars’ preeminent right to internal definition and development of the discipline. For given its academic and political vulnerability as a relatively young discipline, there is a continuing thrust—politically and philosophically—to define and/or disestablish it from external sources. Hare (1975:46), a founding father of the discipline, has recognized this vulnerability and its possible consequences. He observed that although “Black Studies remains relevant indeed...we are slowly letting the discipline slip from our political grip.” For “it is being increasingly shaped and defined for us rather than by us.”

Nowhere is this attempt to define the discipline from outside the discipline clearer than in the recent report to the Ford Foundation by Nathan Huggins (1985). Huggins’s (1985:1) claim that it is an “essay on the present state and future prospects of Afro-American Studies” is clearly unfounded. In fact, his piece, for all its pretensions and in spite of Ford Foundation’s prefatory assurance of his previous scholarship, is little more than European hagiography masquerading as history, and an unscholarly melange of personal preferences posing as meaningful analysis. The melange begins with and is pervaded by a paean to American universities and colleges and includes, among other items of varying merit and meaning, an undeclared and problematic “psychohistory” of Black students who continually suffer from and are motivated by “malaise,” an unsubstantiated attempt to rank Black Studies programs and departments, and ad hominem attacks on some Black Studies scholars. Given this and other equally deficient attempts to define Black Studies externally and Eurocentrically it becomes even clearer that one of the most critical challenges facing Black Studies today is the need to rescue and exercise its right to scholarship and vision and to reassess with rigor its original paradigm in both theory and practice.
Internal Dialogue

The problem of developing and establishing a paradigm, however, has confronted, perhaps even plagued, all disciplines in varying degrees and at various stages of their development. Moreover, as Gutting's (1980) collection of essays on the question demonstrates, the project poses not only intellectual problems, but practical and political ones also, and thus is not easily accomplished. This has certainly been the experience of Black Studies, whose historical and ongoing concern and struggle around the development and establishment of a paradigm are well documented (Hare, 1969; Turner, 1984b). Black Studies in one sense, then, follow paradigm process for Black Studies perceptibly different and more difficult. These are (1) the interdisciplinary nature of Black Studies, (2) its dual character and thrust of scholarship and praxis, and (3) the tendency to assume its origins as a discipline in the 1960s and deny its longer history as an intellectual enterprise, thus restricting "the data base from which exemplars can be drawn."

Stewart's observations and concerns are correctly focused and well founded. The problem of producing a paradigm for interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary studies has challenged academia for some time without effective resolution (Charlesworth, 1972; MacRae, 1976). Whether one talks about organic or theoretical integration of disciplines or of various subject areas into one discipline, fundamental problems are posed by the need for specialization of labor and the analytic decomposition of reality resorted to in the process of rigorous research. Experience tends to reveal that scholars seldom achieve sufficient grounding in more than one discipline or subject area and thus often reject the holistic approach for a more manageable specialized area of concentration. What one does, then, is work on discipline boundaries, crossing them tentatively and temporarily without ever intermeshing them.

However, Black Studies, since its inception, has sought to develop an interdisciplinary paradigm. In fact, by conception and definition, it was compelled to attempt a holistic approach to the study of Black life. As I have argued, "The scope of Black Studies is expressed in its definition and by the parameters it has set for itself as an interdisciplinary discipline" (Karenga, 1982:33), for Black Studies is essentially "the scientific (or systematic) study of the multidimensional aspects of Black thought and practice in their current and historical unfolding." The category of totality here is key to the self-conception and definition of Black Studies. It stresses not only the totality of social life—that is, the multidimensional aspects of Black thought and practice—but also the totality of time, that is, "their current and historical unfolding," which envisions and expresses an ongoing process.

Again, then, the inclusive focus of Black Studies compels it to be interdisciplinary and integrate various subject areas into a coherent discipline rather than submit to the vitiating compartmentalization of knowledge established by white studies. After all, even if one decomposes reality at first to achieve a more intimate understanding of it, this does not preclude or obviate the need to include in that understanding the relations of each part to the other as well as to the whole. This is what Turner (1984a:x-xi) means when he states that "the intellectual task (for Black Studies scholars) is not then simply to pick or choose among the conceptual and methodological togs of traditional disciplines, but to reconceptualize the social fabric and rename the world in a way that obliterates the voids that have inevitably occurred as a result of artificial disciplinary demarcations."
The importance of theoretical construction to the development of a philosophy of Black Studies is well recognized in the discipline. In fact, Weber (1984:71) contends that “the first challenge of [the discipline] is to develop a sound philosophy of operation.” Recognizing the profound historical resistance to a definitive philosophy that sets basic guidelines and parameters of research and relevance, Weber asserts that while a philosophy “does restrict, it also gives direction and purpose to the program.” Stewart (1984:311), so clear and cogent on other issues, is correctly concerned that “one of the current barriers to paradigm development is the absence of a synthesis of Nationalist and Marxist approaches to Black Studies.” And LeMelle (1984:60) reasons that “success or failure of Black Studies programs and departments will depend to a large degree on the resolution of ideological struggles within Black Studies.”

It is important, however, to note here that although there is undeclared and declared sentiment in Black Studies for a grand theory or philosophy that would offer a framework for scholarship and the resolution of needless ideological struggles, there are serious problems that hinder its production and acceptance. The first of these problems is general academic and internal discipline distaste for and opposition to grand theories resulting from fashionable rejection of the value and groundedness of normative theories of human nature and conduct and the rise of the positivistic fetish for quantification, puzzle solving, and the search for lawful regularity. However, as Skinner (1985) demonstrates, the return to grand theory in the human sciences has already begun by such theorists as Gadamer, Foucault, Kuhn, Habermas, and Rawls et al. Such a return, as he in part suggests, had been occasioned by widespread reaction against the assumption that natural science offers a relevant or adequate paradigm for the human sciences; the moral objection to positivistic attempts to establish a nonethical science of society and the interest in returning to the question of the requirements of a just society and world order.

Second, there is the problem of priority in the competition for paradigmatic achievement. As King (1980:102-103) points out, the recognition of a paradigmatic achievement is not easily accorded given the fact that to accept a paradigmatic achievement is not merely to recognize owed esteem, but is also to concede that the achiever has earned “the right to be heard on questions concerning [the paradigms] future.” Third, in terms of production, the paradigm requires a developmental process that although emerging in Black Studies, has not proven as supportive as it could be in terms of collegial collaboration and creative challenge that are always essential, for it is in such a context of collegiality and creative challenge and collaboration that intellectual initiative and creativity is cultivated and achieved. A final problem in the production and acceptance of the grand theory is misconceptions concerning its theoretical and compositional requirements. Given the various definitions of paradigm, what one usually finds in the marketplace of propositions and offerings are simply theoretical elements of a possible paradigm rather than an inclusive cognitive framework that contains and imposes coherence on the essential elements. Williams’s (1986) contribution to the paradigm discourse is a case in point. He has produced a valuable piece and has cogently argued it, but it represents a contribution to the establishment of central elements in a paradigm, that is, its Afrocentric character and focus, rather than a grand theory or model itself.
Afrocentric Conceptualization

A Black Studies philosophy must begin self-consciously and self-definitionally as an Afrocentric enterprise. As Asante (1986:1-2) contends in his critique of Huggins's (1986) impoverished report on Black Studies discussed above, "Black Studies is not merely the study of Black people." It involves and necessitates the study of Blacks from a definite perspective. In fact, he contends, "an Afrocentric perspective constitutes the critical difference between African American Studies and other fields." Asante is referring here to a fundamental building block in the conceptual edifice of the Black Studies paradigm, that is, its Afrocentricity. Although Asante's treatment of Afrocentricity is more descriptive than definitional, more connotative than denotative, in both this piece and his book titled *AfroCentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980), his contribution to the appreciation of its essentiality in and to the discipline is recognized and respected. And it is clear from both works as well as from general Black Studies discourse that when Asante and other Black Studies scholars use the term, they are employing it to suggest a certain African quality that a given perspective or approach possesses.

Synthesizing the various yet similar ways in which the concept is used, *Afrocentricity is essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people.* To say an approach or perspective is in the African cultural image is to say it is rooted in an African value system and worldview, especially in the *historical* and *classical* sense. And to say that an approach or perspective is in the human interests of African people is to say it is supportive of the just claims African people have and share with other humans in terms of freedom from want, toil, and domination, and freedom to realize oneself in one's human fullness, that is, to know and produce oneself through meaningful work, uncoerced and non-manipulative leisure time, and effective and enjoyable encounters with other humans and nature without coercion or repressive limitation.

It is important that the specific *cultural* and general *human* character of Afrocentricity never be conceived of or employed as a reaction to or an African version of Eurocentricity with its racist and structured denial and deformation of the history and humanity of Third World peoples. Afrocentricity at its best is a quest for and an expression of *historical* and *cultural anchor*, a critical reconstruction that dares to restore missing and hidden parts of our historical self-formation and pose the African experience as a significant paradigm for human liberation and a higher level of human life. To be no more than "an obscene caricature of Europe"—to use Fanon's phrase—is to violate historical memory and vitiate historical possibilities inherent in the special truth Africans can and must speak to the world given their ancient, rich, and varied experience.

Having established the *essentiality*, even indispensability of the Afrocentric worldview and approach, one is still left with questions of grounding, further compositional elaboration, and application. Thus the Afrocentric approach and worldview produces a need to address several related and attendant problems or intellectual challenges that must be resolved in the successful construction of a paradigmatic philosophy.

A primary challenge, of course, is the need to specify clearly the priority and centrality of the African American experience in the discipline of Black Studies. As I have argued, the priority focus on the Afro-American experience is both necessary and correct for several reasons (Karenga, 1982:367-368).

First, such a priority focus is a due recognition and respect for the history of the discipline as an intellectual enterprise conceived and established by African Ameri-
cians, first and foremost, for their own intellectual and political emancipation. Obviously and unavoidably, this project was linked to the liberation project of all African people and even to the Third World, but the priority was given to African Americans. It was a project informed by the assumption that the rescue and reconstruction of one’s history and humanity was the prerequisite for one’s ability to assist, effectively exchange, and join with others in a similar and common project.

Second, the priority focus on African Americans in Black Studies gives a necessary rootedness and point of departure from which the systematic study of the Black world can proceed and expand. As Turner (1984a:viii) states, “The Black World is perceived as patterns within a trilateral relationship between Africa, the African Caribbean and the African Americans with, understandably, primary concentration on African America.” Moreover, Aldridge’s (1984:365) stress on the internationalization of the Black Studies curriculum fits within this model, for she is concerned that Black Studies is holistic in its approach to social and human reality.

It is at this point that Turner’s (1984a) and Clarke’s (1984) argument for the category “Africana Studies” instead of Black Studies is best understood. As Clarke (1984:31) states, Africana “relates . . . to land, history, culture” and thus gives greater grounding than color, for color simply “tells you how you look without telling you who you are.” Turner (1984a:viii), stressing the fact and function of linkage, observes that “the concept Africana is derived from the ‘African continuum and African consociation’ which posits fundamental interconnections in the global Black experience.” These are points well taken, but the duality of the African American experience, even synthesized and correctly delineated, must always be critically studied and understood. Given this need, it is not a violation of conceptual etiquette if one uses African American Studies—even Black Studies—interchangeably with Africana Studies.

Finally, the priority focus on African Americans makes the praxis dimension of Africana Studies immediate, readily recognizable, and easier to implement. The original call by Hare to “bring the campus to the community and the community to the campus” finds its practical expression in the African American community. Both the campus and the community, then, become contested areas, centers of conflict and resolution in the ongoing project of intellectual and political emancipation.

**Rationale and Mission**

A second challenge for a paradigmatic Black Studies philosophy is to provide a definitive rationale and mission for Black Studies. As I (1982:371-372) have stated, the development of Black Studies has already contributed to the evolution in broad terms of a rationale that is at the same time a suggestion of mission. Moreover, as I have also contended, whatever its final form the rationale-mission should contain six basic contentions of relevance. Since I have explained these in detail in the first chapter of *Introduction to Black Studies*, I will simply state and treat them briefly. A seventh contribution Black Studies must also make, given the seriousness of the problem it seeks to solve, will be discussed below.

These first six contributions that Black Studies makes and that provide it with its fundamental rationale and mission are its contributions (1) to humanity’s understanding of itself, using the African experience as a paradigmatic human struggle and
achievement; (2) to the university's realizing its claim of universality, comprehensiveness, and objectivity by demanding and facilitating a holistic approach to the study of truth and the class, race, and sexual contradictions that constrain and distort it; (3) to U.S. society's understanding itself by critically measuring its claims against its performance and its variance with a paradigmatic just society; (4) to the rescue and reconstruction of Black history and humanity from alien hands, and the restoration of African classical culture on and through which we can build a new body of human sciences and humanities; (5) to the creation of a new social science, more critical, corrective, holistic, and ethical; and (6) to the creation of a body of conscious, capable, and committed Black intellectuals who self-consciously choose to use their knowledge and skills in the service of the Black community and, by consequence and extension, in the interest of a new and better society and world.

The seventh contribution that Black Studies can and must make to reinforce its relevance and expand the scope and content of its mission is the contribution to the critique, resistance, and reversal of the progressive Westernization of human consciousness, which is one of the major problems of our times. By the Westernization, or more precisely the Europeanization of human consciousness, I mean the systematic invasion and effective transformation of the cultural consciousness of the various peoples of the world by Europeans through technology, education, and the media so that at least three things occur: (1) the progressive loss of, historical memories of these people; (2) the progressive depreciation of themselves and their culture; and (3) the progressive adoption of a Eurocentric mode of assessment of self, society, and the world that induces cognitive distortion and deprivation, and the destruction of human richness in diversity. The need, then, is for Black Studies scholars to critique, resist, and attempt to reverse this by joining with other Third World scholars in exposing its antihuman character and consequences and by posing an alternative paradigm for discourse among those whose quest is the same or similar.

Even Stewart's concern with a creative synthesis of nationalism and Marxism is hampered by this problem of Eurocentricism and the intellectual imperialism this imposes. Without an honest recognition of this cultural and epistemological limitation by Black Marxists and an attempt to creatively deal with and diminish it, a synthesis is neither possible nor desirable for Black Studies. Certainly, Robinson (1983) is to be commended for his honest critical appraisal of this problem in a well-thought-out and impressive volume on Black Marxism. It is obviously a model for other Black Marxists in its ability to give credit to Marxism for its class perceptions, yet recognizes, as Robinson (1983:2) states, that is still fair to say that at its base... its epistemological substructure, Marxism is a Western construction” and that this produces as tendency for Marxists to perceive and pose their project as “identical with world historical development.” And, of course, there always the problem of their reductive translation of race and culture that must be resolved if any meaningful creative synthesis to take place.

Ethical Discourse

Another fundamental compositional element of the Black Studies paradigmatic philosophy is ethical discourse. The historical rootedness of the Black Studies concern for ethical discourse goes back to the ancient African interest in the just society. This interest is expressed in the ancient Egyptian text, The Book Khun-Impu
(Karenga, 1984:31ff.; Lichtheim, 1975:169ff.), which is the oldest text on social justice, appearing in the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BCE). In addition, African Americans' greatest contribution to social change in this country has been its ethical criticism—both theoretical and practical—of the anti-human constraints and contradictions of U.S. society. Whether one talks of Henry M. Turner, Anna J. Cooper, Malcolm X, Mary M. Bethune, Frederick Douglass, or Martin Luther King, one talking about an Afro-American tradition and legacy of setting the moral and progressive agenda for U.S. society. And Black Studies is obligated to raise up, honor, and critically elucidate that tradition and legacy.

Moreover, from its inception—in both its prediscipline and discipline stages—Black Studies has stressed the ethical dimension of its mission. It was begun, as W.E.B. DuBois (1971:64) note as "primarily scientific—a careful search for truth conducted as thoroughly, broadly and honestly" as possible. However, its more expansive dimension was "not only to make the truth clear, but to present it in such shape as will encourage and help social reform." In a word, the Black Studies paradigm, even in its prediscipline stage, posed the possibility of an intellectual paradigm that combined valutative discourse with factual discourse without doing damage to either.

Furthermore, we live at a critical juncture in U.S. and world history in which ethical discourse has become one of the major critiques of the social and human condition. In fact, it could be argued that even the Marxist critique demonstrates its greatest strength, especially among Third World peoples, not in its scientific claims, but its ethical discourse concerning the social and human condition. This seems clearly to be the case of liberation theology that has absorbed the Marxist stress on praxis and translates it as reflective ethical action (West, 1982; Cone, 1975).

Moreover, one need only survey the literature in the field to see ethics as a central discipline and discourse in the fundamental areas of human and social concern, that is, nuclear ethics, biomedical ethics, judicial and legal ethics, feminist ethics, and, of course, liberation ethics. Given this centrality of ethics in our tradition and the current world, a Black Studies philosophy must exhibit and stress an effective grounding in ethical discourse that provides indispensable tools for grasping the place and value of ethics in society and critical competence in identifying and analyzing the ethical issues of our times as they relate not only to social policy questions, but to the enduring questions of the nature, function, and dimensions of a just society and world order.

**Critique and Corrective**

The paradigmatic grand theory of Black Studies must also be self-consciously a holistic enterprise of critique and corrective. It must be a fundamental contribution to the development of an analytic, empirical, and ethical framework in which every aspect and element of African American life can be investigated, understood, and explained. It must begin as critique and culminate corrective on both the theoretical and practical level. For as I (1982:32) have argued elsewhere, Black Studies is both an investigative and applied discipline and requires this dual thrust contemplation and intervention, and observation that inspires informs social action.

By critique, I mean the systematic unrelenting battle against both ignorance and illusion, the struggle against the poverty knowledge as well as the perversion of truth. In being holistic, will be of necessity cultural in the broadest most inclusive sense of
the word. By *culture*, I mean the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, defines and celebrates itself, and introduces itself to history and humanity. Culture becomes a key concept then not only for the critique of society, but for the critique and corrective for the Black Studies paradigm that must erect its conceptual, curricular, and practical project out of its understanding of its culture—historically and currently.

It is in its critique of domination as well as the underdevelopment that it has produced in the African world culture that the Black Studies critique-corrective becomes a central contribution to human consciousness and liberation. The interpretative task to break through the wall of social distortions and obstacles that damage vision, corrupt human values, and justify the social order at the expense of social justice. Such a critical theory will place even scientific “facts” in a given context and show that they already propose and project a theory in which they are grounded. It will at its best demonstrate that history without interpretation is empty and self-deceptive, that facts without context is illusory, and that empirical observation without analysis is useless and, at one stage impossible.

**The Paradigmatic Classical Civilization**

The final compositional element of a paradigmatic Black Studies philosophy is the identification and restoration of a paradigmatic classical African civilization. This would give grounding to the claims of Afrocentricity by producing a paradigm for a truly African social thought and practice. It would also then give a cultural basis on which to build a new body of human sciences and humanities, and enable Black Studies to stand on the firmest of grounds in its cultural, historical, and epistemological claims. The delineation and development of an African worldview, then, presupposes and necessitates a definitive historical paradigm that involves both models of historical practice and historical possibility, and the restoration and effective utilization of a classical African civilization yields the framework for this.

Carruthers (1984:16) has made a cogent call for an African worldview, focusing on the relevance of Egypt as a classical source of the African worldview. He states that “the formulation of an African worldview is the essential beginning point for all research which is based upon the interests of African people.” In fact, he goes on to say, “there can be no African history, no African social science without an African worldview.” Carruthers (1984), Diop (1981), this author, and others (Karenga and Carruthers, 1986) argue that this worldview must evolve from the rescue and reconstruction of the classical African legacy of Egypt. Diop (1981:12) writes that “for us, the return to Egypt in all fields is the necessary condition to build a body of modern human sciences, and renew African culture.” That is why it is necessary to state that “far from being a diversion in the past, a look toward ancient Egypt is the best way of conceiving and building our cultural future.” In fact, “Egypt will play, in a rethought and renewed African culture, the same role that the ancient Greco-Latin civilizations play in Western culture” (translation mine).

The importance of Egypt to constructing an African worldview and indeed to the building of an authentic and effective Black paradigm rests on several factors: (1) its antiquity, (2) authenticity, (3) level of achievement, (4) document availability, (5) relevance to other Africans including us, and (6) its relevance to world history and culture (Glanville, 1957; Karenga and Carruthers, 1986; James, 1976).
The production of the "Negro," as Robinson (1983:4) argued effectively savaged our history and created historical amnesia in Europe and among Africans concerning the contribution of Africans to the forward flow of human history. It "substantially eradicated in Western historical consciousness the necessity of remembering the significance of Nubia for Egypt's formation of Egypt in the development of Greek civilization, of Africa for Imperial Rome, and more pointedly of Islam's influence on Europe's economic, political and intellectual history" to which Africans also contributed significantly. Having produced this artificiality, "from such a creature not even a suspicion of tradition needed to be entertained... In its stead, there was the Black slave a consequence masqueraded as an anthropology and a history."

It is the obligation, then, of Black Studies to rescue and reconstruct this rich, complex, and varied legacy that introduced the basic disciplines of human knowledge, produced the oldest sacred texts on which a significant part of Judeo-Christian ethics an theology are based, contributed the calendar among other critic things, and was a school for the Greeks to whom other European pay so much homage (James, 1976).

**Conclusion**

The needed thrust, then, for Black Studies in its solving the problematic of paradigm is what Gouldner (1985:204) has called "creative rupture" as opposed to "routine competence." Such creativity comes, he tells us, from "paradigm-distancing, i.e., the ability to adopt a position apart from, outside or in critique of the established paradigms of normal science or scholarship." Strickland (1975:7), reminding Black scholars of their continuing historical project, has reaffirmed the Black Studies mission and the philosophical paradigm that frames and fosters it. The demands of history and social conditions pose "a most precise challenge to Black intellectuals in America," he states. And "that is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the challenge to create a new intellectual tradition — and practice — in these United States." It is in the context and practice of Black Studies, as a self-conscious interdisciplinary discipline, that this new intellectual tradition and practice will be both posed and realized. For in this framework, Black Studies scholars will rescue and restore the lost and hidden experimental dimension of African history and find in it a paradigm of human emancipation and possibility. The essential need, then, is that we do our work so well that even when other scholars are emotionally or culturally unable to accept our conclusions, they are still compelled to concede the rigor of our research and the groundedness of our theory. It is upon such critical work that both the continuing legitimacy and academic life of Black Studies depend.

**References**


