

TOWARD THE BLACK UNIVERSITY:
Some Ideological Considerations

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(To be published in Negro Digest)

February, 1968

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Revolutionary change for the liberation of a people from oppressive social structures is not the special function of one course of action, but more likely the result of several. And while education is generally hoped to be a liberating force on men's minds and bodies, oft times it has been used as a debilitating tool in the interests of an oppressive society. Accordingly, Kwame Nkrumah compares the colonial student educated for "the art of forming not a concrete environmental view of social political problems, but an abstract 'liberal' outlook," with the revolutionary student "animated by a lively national consciousness, (who) sought knowledge as an instrument of national emancipation and integrity." So it is becoming rather clear that educational institutions are vital to a liberation movement, a fact of modern times in anti-colonial movements in the Third World.

In the United States there is no question about the persistence of segregation, racism, and more subtle forms of neo-racism. As the pernicious oppression of racism is an organic part of the institutions, symbols, and values of western industrial society, so is it firmly entrenched in the U. S. A. ("as American as apple pie"). An Afro-American liberation movement must subvert and/or supplant such a well-entrenched social system if it is to be a real source of radical change and not a false one.

My primary task in this discussion is an ideological consideration of the role of a university in the liberation of the Afro-American community. It must be clear that this role has to deal with today's world, as well as what ought to be. And certainly it must include the management of whatever social change is required to move effectively from the "is" to the "ought." The university is alive for people in the world (including all of the

socio-economic and political hang-ups involved), and so must meet the challenge of responding creatively to whatever needs exist now for those people. But at the same time it must project itself as a prophetic institution calling into question all that which is inconsistent with its highest ideals, and organizing its activities to bring about the realization of its ideals. The focus of this discussion is on what ought to be, the prophetic social role of the Black University, for therein lies the fountainhead of revolutionary liberation.

We must be reminded of this same theme as stated by Dr. DuBois over 50 years ago in the 1860 Niagra Movement resolutions:

And when we call for education, we mean real education . . . Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people. They have a right to know, to think, to aspire.

We do not believe in violence . . . but we do believe in . . . that willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right.

The Washington-DuBois dialectical opposition is relevant here as it is the important example of the "is" versus the "ought" concerning educational ideology for Afro-Americans. Training people to fit in where they can (think of MDTA, Job Corps, etc.) might be acceptable for short term solutions, though not as Washington thought it to be. But the educational ideology of DuBois is our prophecy, a rationale to build a Black university ---the crucible of definitive social change.

In order that the idea of the new university and the notions of how we are to achieve it as a goal will be more clearly understood, it is important to discuss briefly the current social situation. The current situation is one charged with a great deal of expectancy on the part of many Afro-Americans, an expectancy frequently expressed by the emotional connotations of a term or phrase but usually not delineated in structural or programatic terms. But this programatic shortcoming is not as much a shortcoming, as the exciting search for innovation and relevance is the first sign of progress. A major question, then, is what conditions give rise to this expectancy, this charged atmosphere chrystalized around the term Black University.

A major trend in todays world is that as oppressed people know that the world offers more than they have, and as they are able to get a little more of it, they also expect to get very much more. This has been called the revolution of rising expectations. A figurative example: An Afro-American family gets a television set and enters the world of affluent Euro-American society. It is not complicated to see that this would lead to wanting more than they have, much more. Just imagine how cruel it must be for poor oppressed Black people to watch the give away quiz programs on which white people win appliances, furniture, and cars in twenty minutes or so. Then think of a scene of ghetto destruction during which people brave armed police to steal appliances, furniture, and cars in twenty minutes or so. Oppressed people see what's going on, and want in the best way they can get in (yes, by any means necessary to do it right now !!).

Along with this developing desire to get more out of society is the increasing saliency of a nationalistic alternative to the system. The general components are militancy, self-determination, and a desire to identify with similar oppressed people throughout the world (who are not by accident mostly colored people). This alternative is grounded in communalism and finds its legitimacy from within Afro-America and not outside of it. Nationalism in this context means total concern for the community of common experience, so Afro-American Nationalism is grounded in the Black experience. Communalism, meaning self-help cooperative efforts, is the ethic supporting the new alternative.

These two major trends cannot be viewed outside of the total context of world events, especially those events of particular relevance to the Afro-American community. The military-industrial machine of the Western powers is equally offensive and outraging in Vietnam and South Africa, in Santo Domingo and Ghana. But it seems apparent that peoples can only unite across the world in aspiring for the same universals, peace, freedom, and justice, while focusing their working activities on the social ills as manifested at home. If we are to reap a harvest of world brotherhood then each man must first tend to his own garden. But for each garden to have its true meaning, the gardener must know his historical role and relationship with all others working for the same harvest.

The two trends are general social sources of the cry for a Black university. While everyone is more or less for such a thing as a university, for some the quality of Blackness imbues the concept with polemical emotional

intensity and conceptual ambiguity (or in extreme cases racism). This must be cleared up if the dialogue is to continue. In reference to a university Blackness must mean at least three things. First, Blackness refers to the Afro-American community as the basic focus for the university. This in no way compromises or limits its universalistic orientation and attempt to contribute to human progress, rather it frees it to be relevant in the face of an unmet need reflecting the woeful limit of human progress.

A second, and more controversial point considers the limits placed on participation in the university. Blackness does not categorically exclude all white people from the university, it redefines the standards for their participation and the possibility for their involvement. In much the same way that independent African countries have attempted to redefine the possible role of the European, so in the Black university the role of the white man must be redefined and carefully placed for the maximum good of all. Some white people will be necessary for the immediate future if for no other reason than our own shortage of resources. But unconditional participation will have to be over. The participation must be based on a commitment to the goals and aspirations of the Afro-American community, and the sacrificial humility necessary for one historically and socially identified with the beast of Afro-American history and the system of oppression.

Last, Blackness is an affirmation of an identity independent of the historical human evils of modern nation states, and closely tied to the emerging international identity of man is his struggle for a better life. Consider this revelation by Brother Malcolm X when on his pilgrimage to

Mecca:

That morning was when I first began to reappraise the the "white man." It was when I first began to perceive that "white man" as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, "white man" meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than anyone else had ever been.

The relations between men and peoples must be allowed to grow and progress without the limiting problem of the national state. Who are we? Afro-Americans, men of the world. Why are we here? We were sent here to love. Where are we going? Toward the community of love, and if stopped we will continue "by any means necessary," because we must continue.

So much for prologue. What is the Black university idea all about? What are its goals? And what might it look like? The University focusing on the particular needs of the Afro-American community will be a center of learning. But recognizing the alternatives noted above by Nkrumah it must be based on an educational ideology grounded in an uncompromising goal of psychological independence from the oppressor (and his oppressive system), and as much structural independence as is necessary not only to survive in the world, but to prosper. So education must be defined to specify these purposes as most important.

The American (U. S. A.) ethic of individualism is inclusive of both basic needs of man and the essence of a social style. All men are to some extent self-centered. But to build a social group process on self-centeredness, is to hope for a just order through "antagonistic

cooperation." The thrust of the Black University must be to overcome this subtle social war-like-state with the ethic of communalism. This means that instead of hoping for social progress through the individual merits of its students or faculty qua individuals, progress is to be viewed as a social process through which the community is uplifted with the aid of its contributing people. This then means that while students and faculty play a very vital role, they are co-workers alongside the equally important others, e.g., the community organizer, the artist, the union organizer.

Moreover, the goal of the university must be one of service to the community. The students, faculty, and administration of the Black university must consider themselves as servants to the broader Afro-American community. Being a member of the University must be considered an honor, but more important this honor must be one involving responsibility to the total community and not simply focusing on the "I made it because I'm smarter than" kind of thinking. Being servants, status is not based on the academic credentials university people create for themselves, rather it is on the extent to which the total community is able to reap benefits from the service provided.

The service of the Black University must not be one transmitted through mass communication or ritualistic ceremony but through a concrete programmatic movement toward liberation. The time when the Afro-American community must be arms length from its institutions of higher education is over. The pimps, prostitutes, preachers, and Ph.D's must find a common

bond to change themselves and weave an organic unity as the basis for liberation and a better life for all.

These goals must redefine two dangerously pervasive patterns found among Afro-American faculty and students today. One of the patterns is for education to be simply a process of acclimation and adjustment to the white world. One goes to a white school to rub shoulders with them, "because son you got to make a livin' out in their world." Another is the play-culture of friendship cliques and fraternity life. Whether its mimicry of whites (think of Fort Lauderdale in the Spring), or defection based on hopelessness, we must find the recipe for a revolutionary discipline consistent with our desire for immediate radical change. A free man is also (and must be) a responsible man, and so must Afro-American students and faculty be responsible to themselves by being responsible to the Black community.

The values of the Black university must support the liberation movement of Afro-Americans, oppressed people around the world, and all that prevents man from leading the good life. We must find a synthesis of efficient reason and purposive compassion. The value placed on scientific methods must be joined by an equally important value placed on empathy, i.e., scientific detachment must be limited to method and technique, complemented with involvement and commitment. The students and faculty must be evangelical in their social roles and give new meaning to being a missionary for freedom. And finally, the Black university must impart to all who are associated with it the strength to be alone. The struggle

against ignorance, just as with the struggle of power, is one within which the forces of good are often small in number and sparsely placed. An Afro-American of the Black University must have inner strength, positive historical identity, and a vision of the good, for only having these traits will he be able to stand up in a world dominated by evil and be secure even in being alone.

Among its many functions, the University is most concerned with knowledge, both the accumulated information and insights of human history and the vision and process of new discovery. And it is knowledge about Afro-Americans that is most lacking, or biased and wrong in all these respects. The Black University is based on the fundamental assumption that the Afro-American community is in E. Franklin Frazier's words, "a little social world," a human universe heretofore misused or ignored by higher education. Consider these autobiographical comments by Dr. DuBois:

When I went South to Fisk, I became a member of a closed racial group with rites and loyalties, with a history and a corporate future, with an art and philosophy.

Into this world I leapt with provincial enthusiasm.
A new loyalty and allegiance replaced my Americanism:
henceforth I was a Negro.

The Black University must respond creatively to just these realities which were true for DuBois in 1880, and equally true for the author in the 1960's.

The knowledge of Afro-Americans, just as with Africa, is yet to be fully reclaimed. With the full scope of University activities (research, teaching, etc.) revision is needed to secure for colored peoples of the

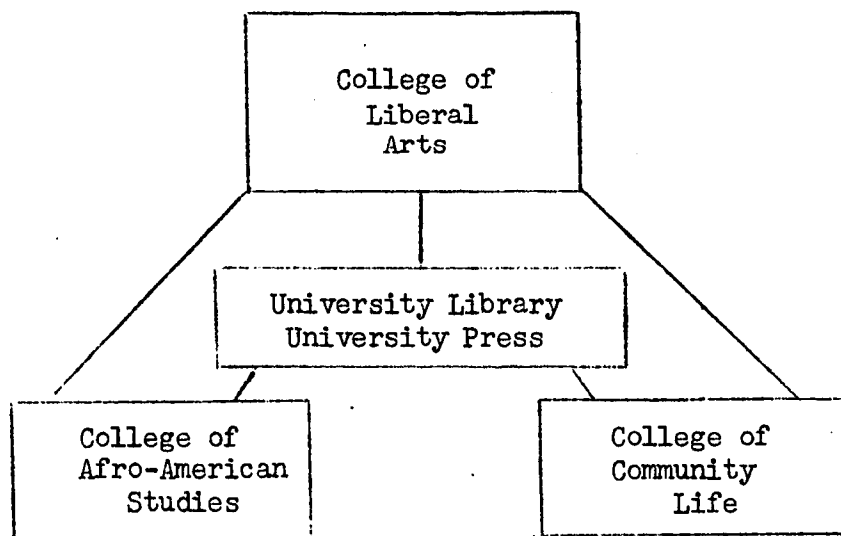
world their proper place in human history. This revision of educational materials is a process as much political as it is scholarly. With scholarly work a text of U.S.A. history can be written, but only with political influence will it be made available by getting it published, placed in a library, or adopted as recommended reading. However, in the present it would be foolish to think of throwing everything aside. Revision of what is must be a thorough job of systematic and rigorous scholarship backed by the concerted political efforts of Afro-American students, faculty, and the entire community.

But more important (and more difficult), there is a need to find new styles of scholarship, new forms of knowledge, new ways of knowing. These new developments must be consistent with what is to be known, and have utility for the liberation movement. There must be research on all aspects of the Black experience, research necessarily not limited to traditional scholarly disciplines, but open to the demands of the subject. For example, the "Blues" component of Afro-American culture demands a historian, musicologist, literary historian, sociologist, etc. The soul of a people must be reflected in the results of the research as well as the life style of the Black University. We must be in search of the "funky" sociologist, the "soulful" political scientist, and the University president who can "get down."

These are some of the necessary ingredients of a Black University. And while we can at best look to a future tomorrow for its full realization, it is quite possible to suggest a structural outline that reflects these

fundamental assumptions about its social and intellectual role. The diagram suggests three related colleges concerned with distinct areas, though bound together in the idea of the University. Each would be organized around research, teaching, and practice. For every part of the University community there would be an advisory board of community representatives from all walks of life with the task of giving policy suggestions and guidelines. This would insure the community ties to the specific parts of the University.

The Black University: An Unfinished Design



1. Centers for International Study
(Asia, Africa, Latin America)
2. International Conference Center

As one enters the University he will be faced with a variety of degree programs and alternative courses of study. It is quite clear that the standard four-year college degree meets only a partial need for the Afro-American Community. But even for the person entering the College of Liberal Arts, in order to meet the requirements for graduation he would have to work at least a year in one or more of the other two colleges. The general principle might well be that to meet the need of today the new programs will have to take less time, but those set up to meet the needs of tomorrow will have to take more time.

As a national institution engaged in activities found nowhere else, the component colleges of the Black University will be of great service to a wide variety of groups. Service professionals working with Afro-Americans face a challenge supported by sparse research and little experience. The College of Afro-American Studies, being a center of innovation and discovery concerning these problems, will conduct special courses and training programs so that people can supplement their training and experience with a concentrated program. There is a desperate need for social workers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, etc. And the same kind of function is planned for the entire University.

Also connected with such a University must be a set of centers of International study. They will be small centers specializing in specific areas in order that together they might constitute an international program without superficially missing the peculiar character of each part of the world. In addition, no such University could hope to function without

an international conference center available to the University community, and other activities consistent with the aims and purpose of the University community and liberation movement. Afro-Americans are moving onto the international scene and so must have at their disposal a center where such meetings can be held.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion, there is no panacea for the Afro-American liberation movement, just as there can and will be no monolithic organizational structure. But there can be operational unity around such concepts as the Black University. The first step in moving toward this operational unity, moving toward the Black University, is to begin a creative and honest dialogue among the Afro-Americans. But more than that, we need small bands of people in positions to act to make steps, be daring enough to risk failure (or worse, irrelevance). It will only be when these ideas can be referred to in concrete terms that definitive statements can be made, and the concrete reality of the Black University must begin today.

One last thought. The Afro-American community has not got unlimited resources with which to carry on experiment after experiment. Each one of us that can contribute to the Black University must ask himself what he is doing for it, what he is doing for this kind of operational unity. I am calling for all of the brothers and sisters in "other" colleges and university settings to come on home. And to those at home, lets get this thing together!!