

INTELLECTUALS AND THE BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT

A Speech Delivered By

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Brothers and Sisters!

Let me extend my personal welcome and greetings to all of you who have come from far and near to this planning conference for the 1975 Year to Pull the Covers Off Imperialism project. As Black intellectuals we have come together to consider some substantive issues facing Black people and to explore ways of re-orienting our work to make a more solid and relevant contribution to the liberation struggle.

Our task is to help add some clarity and direction to the relationship of Black intellectuals and the Black liberation movement. So I will briefly speak to four questions:

1. Who are the new Black intellectuals?
2. What are the main theoretical questions?
3. How do Black intellectuals relate to Black people?
4. When and where can Black intellectuals serve the Black liberation movement?

The present identity of this new generation of Black intellectuals is best understood as part of its stages of historical development. The group I have in mind has the 30-35 year-old set as a corps that extends from 20 to 40. The clarion call at the birth of this generation was penned by Margaret Walker in her 1942 poem For My People:

"Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear! Let a race of men now rise and take control."

World War II was a period of great oppression and exploitation--and was also a period of social development, resistance to oppression, and struggle against exploitation. The war led to a great loss in life and limb suffered by the masses, but the war industries helped pull the Black masses into the cities and good paying factory jobs. Moreover, the masses of the world suffered this inter-imperialist clash against fascism, but also took the revolutionary road leading to the liberation of Vietnam in 1945, China in 1949, Ghana in 1957, Guinea in 1958, and Cuba in 1959. Indeed, Revolution became the main trend in the world!

While this generation was in public school the assault on educational segregation proceeded with the Sweatt case at the University of Texas Law School and McLaurin case in education at the University of Oklahoma--both decided for integration by the Supreme Court in 1950. The real spark occurred in 1954 when the Supreme Court decided that segregated public education had to end, then a year later coined the expression "end with all deliberate speed." Symbolically, the democratic rights struggle was at an all time high. Following this were the struggles of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Little Rock struggle to integrate Central High School. Many of us watched these events on television and saw our people engaged in struggle.

But this time was not all positive. The end of the Korean War in the first modern defeat of the US army, let to a turn toward a fascist type red scare--the McCarthy inquisition in which many people were intimidated, ostracized, and fired from their jobs because they had some type of progressive leaning--belief, association or participation in an activity. The other side of this political repression was the brutal murder of Emmet Till that became a major case in the Black media. Here a 14 year-old Black Chicagoan was murdered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. We watched the McCarthy hearings on television and read about Emmet Till in Jet magazine.

This generation sent some of its people to college, and this group picked up the banner of struggle with the sit-ins and freedom rides. The struggle for democratic rights was taken out of the legislative and judicial context and put in the street. We fired up the world with mass protest--we pulled the covers off the denial of rights by the country who pretended to represent democracy and really represented repression. Young intellectuals went to the masses of Black people and served them, sparked their desire for freedom, and led them in struggle. The whole generation followed the campaigns in the media--Albany, Georgia; Greenwood, Mississippi; Lowndes County, Alabama; Cario, Illinois--it spread everywhere and we

were being educated about the realities of the USA for Black people.

Our generation's lesson in the realities of political deception and the real interests behind governmental policy came through events such as:

1. The defeated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba when we saw John Kennedy on television first saying he had nothing to do with what happened, then later came back on T.V. and admitted he approved of the entire operation.
2. The Atlantic City Democratic Convention in which the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had an open and shut case against the racial discrimination of the regulars but were offered a compromise that violated all democratic principles.
3. The role of the US in the Vietnam War. This more than anything shot our generation into a first-hand understanding of the war-like character of imperialism. We opposed using class ranking systems for the draft, the selective service system in general, we defected from the armed services, we researched the Pentagon's use of the university as a brain trust for war, we investigated the interests of the corporations in other peoples countries, we marched in the street to mount a mass movement against the war, and we protest now to get the US to uphold the Paris agreement.

After the riots began and political assassinations became an expected aspect of the political grab bag of American life, nearly all establishment symbols became empty tokens of rhetoric. The masses were teaching us that they were prepared to fight for a better life, that in the end the masses were not afraid. Indeed, the assassination of people who were the symbolic leaders of various segments of society who spoke of change if not really fought for it brought the responsibility for change back to the masses. The great man theory of history becomes mere speculation or degenerates into ritual observances of birthdays when the great men are successively incarcerated and murdered.

So we turned to a defensive posture by rallying to the various shades of

nationalism, the emerging generation of intellectuals took up the call. The 1967 Black Power Conference in Newark was the watershed of nationalism for Black intellectuals. It was a vindication of Malcolm, and a new turn toward Africa. This led to the rise of struggle by Black intellectuals for legitimacy both within the organizations that existed--college campuses, professional associations, etc.--as well as to start our own. We combined the militancy of student protest with the bureaucratic struggle within organizations for some change.

The society was in turmoil and the ruling class moved to popularize the call for "law and order". No concern for the fascist action of police like in the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi (Chaney, Goodman, and Swerner) up to the gestapo-like raid to murder Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago. No concern for the real political criminals in the highest positions in government (like everyone knows Nixon, Halderman, Erlichman and Mitchell to be now). The emphasis was on subverting and or militarily destroying the struggles of the masses for peace and freedom.

Now this generation we've been talking about was followed by or perhaps joined by a younger set who took on roles as the shock troops--the youth were influenced by cultural nationalism on the one hand and revolutionary nationalism on the other. Cabral, Fanon, Malcolm, Che, Mao and Ho Chi Minh became the sources of intellectual inspiration. But this group has yet to make its own definitive moves, although I trust it would be helpful to trace the general political outlines of its development as well as all other generations.

Who are we? What is our identity? The new generation of Black intellectuals has been tempered by the struggles for democracy throughout our lives. While repression and war has been constant--revolution has been the main trend. Our experiences have paralleled Fanon's characterization of the changes experienced by the native intellectual: (1) fight for integration leading to assimilation to the extent that proof would be established that we as Black intellectuals are as competent as any

other intellectual, (2) return to the masses of people or simply to consolidate and organize the Black people who find themselves in the same context (e.g., the Black caucus movement).

Now the new generation is at a crossroads.

(A) Our personal lives place us on the threshold of our adult future-- marriage, children, our health, and our financial responsibilities set certain conditions.

(B) Our history has been characterized by great struggle. Fanon's third stage is "called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the peoples' lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature." Our action will define us, whether we do this or not.

Now this crossroads can be clarified if we can grasp the role intellectuals play in the society. Intellectuals do not play a direct role in the production and distribution of goods in a society, rather they produce and distribute knowledge. In this way they serve the interest of a particular class and a particular people. Intellectuals are a strata composed of many groups--occupational groups and students. The tendency is for he who pays the piper to call the tune. But that is only one aspect of the case of Black intellectuals. The knowledge we have gained over the last 30 years or so of our lives informs us with the second aspect, that of struggling to produce and distribute knowledge in the interests of the masses of people.

This is one helluva struggle. But we must never let funding become the dominant factor in our intellectual work--otherwise we will become prostitutes and repudiate the tradition of DuBois. So we have to choose the most important aspect to work on--money vs. knowledge, or more historically correct, to serve the institutions and thereby succumb to the corporate interests that provide funding (or

minimally bow to the prison of bureaucracy) or to serve the needs of the masses of people who fight for liberation and freedom from exploitation.

This crisis of identity--based on the concrete historical choices for the new Black intellectual to make--is reflected by the theoretical questions facing us.

A. What is the dominant character of the USA? Some would say the racial or national composition of the population dominated by white racism and white chauvinism is the basic set of forces that produce change in this society. In fact, our history during the fifties and sixties has produced a high tide of the Black liberation struggle aimed at defeating white chauvinist oppression. But it has always been more than this. Baldwin said "who wants to integrate into a burning house," and Malcolm said "You show me a capitalist and I'll show you a blood sucker." We've all said it if we've been in the struggle. Racism must end. And all forms of economic exploitation must end as well. In fact, racism has a purpose and benefits some people. The people who benefit are the ruling class.

This conference is called to focus on imperialism (monopoly capitalism) as the basic structure of this country and the major problem facing Black people. This is a fact that sums up the material realities of this country--its economic structure, and the basis for its social policies and governmental programs. Imperialism confronts people throughout the world, one of its major centers is the USA.

We have called this project the Year to Pull the Covers Off Imperialism. Concretely this points to reconceptualizing our theoretical framework, and focusing our intellectual tools on the interests that run this country. Our nationalist approach emphasizing the Black in Black studies was revolutionary in its implications for our theoretical work, but it fell short when some of us fell victim to the view that racial conflict was the motive force of history. After all, if our struggle was merely to use the same old approaches with a Black subject matter then we were simply helping the intellectuals of the ruling class do their job better. NO. Our theoretical approach must rediscover the revolutionary and focus on imperialism as the

material basis of all forms of oppression and exploitation including racism and national oppression, in the USA and around the world.

When we focus on imperialism the complex patterns of this society can be analyzed and documented in a systematic coherent manner. One example of this is in how we use a past historical period to help illuminate current patterns of life in the USA. Many of us looked at the 1960's as a second reconstruction. In the 1940's, DuBois had raised a slogan for the NAACP--"Free by 1963" and we saw motion similar to the reconstruction in the poverty program, the new populism of SNCC, and changes in Black peoples' access to political office holding. Indeed much of this was good, but one-sided. Most of us did not look at the most relevant aspects of the reconstruction which concerned how it was ended: the Compromise of 1877, the rise of the white terrorist organizations, and the disenfranchisement of Blacks. We were intoxicated with the hope and aspirations of the reconstruction but did not really understand it in the fullest sense.

Now we must change this historical reference. Imperialism is in crisis in the world and at home. The period we must all study and get our audiences--readers, students, etc.--to understand is the great depression. This is the historical proof that capitalism is a system plagued by crisis after crisis, that the masses of people--especially Black people--are the victims of these crises, and that the ruling class will use many devices to create an illusion to fool the masses. It is also proof of the great strength of the masses to struggle against this imperialist tyranny. Millions of unemployed workers of all nationalities struggled for a decent living, mass campaigns were mounted to save Black people from lynch mobs in the streets and in the courts, and several types of organizations that fought for the rights of Black people. By studying the depression (1929 to WWII) we can get a basic understanding of the fundamental flaws in imperialism, and learn basic lessons about how to struggle against its many points of attack on the well being and living standards of the people. After all, if the ruling class and their lackeys jumped out of win-

dows during the depression it must have been some powerful stuff--we need to know everything about it.

B. What is the purpose of our theoretical work? We have another contradiction here. Either we will continue to be apologists for the incredible facility of Black people to survive in spite of imperialism, or we will develop a fighting literature that illuminates the weak aspects of imperialism and points Black people to struggle against it. As apologists we often formulate long arguments to prove our vitality, creativity, cohesion, and will to survive. Again this is a good thing, but one-sided. Our thrust as a people is not merely to survive but to turn this society upside down, to eliminate poverty and exploitation, to build institutions that are designed for people and not against them. Its sort of like being in a cave, chained together. We can make do and celebrate the fact that we're still alive or we can study, analyse, plot and scheme--informing everyone of the sun-filled meadows and happiness outside of the cave, rise up, break the chains, and march out to freedom.

Science, after all, is a tool both to understand the world and to change it. Our science must be focused on imperialism and how to destroy it. Anything short of this implicitly condones imperialism and does not challenge the basic structure of how our people are oppressed and exploited.

Both of these two points on theory are spoken to in our draft Declaration Against Imperialism: "The exposure and defeat of the 'revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy' of US imperialism must be adopted today as the main objective of the historical task of Black intellectuals." This "exposure" is our scientific analysis, and the "defeat" speaks to the necessary purpose of our work.

C. How do Black intellectuals relate to Black people? As we indicated earlier, the intellegensia is a strata serving one or another class. Moreover, many intellectuals (especially in education) are located in institutions or connected to publications that tend to have defined audiences and a life of their own. Most organized contexts for Black intellectuals do not directly serve the interests of the masses

of Black people although they service them in someone else's interest. What this means concretely is that we as Black intellectuals come into contact with one or another segment of Black people but we do not necessarily serve their real interests. Certainly publications like Ebony, Black newspapers and Black journalists in the white media, etc., are examples of this. Although the situation is not completely that, but in the main it is. The relationship of most courses to the national standardized exams, requirements for graduate training, and vocational preparation do not encompass the objective struggle of our people against imperialism. Rather than pull the covers off imperialism we often end up encouraging our students to climb in bed and get under the same covers. But consider DuBois, with all the arrogance of a New England childhood, Fisk, Harvard, and Berlin higher education, he still had a burning desire to speak the truth to Black people--he is a model--not his elitism, not his intellectual, often abrupt style, but his undying love for his people and his life time commitment to do whatever he could to help in the fight for freedom. He was fired from universities, organizations and publications time and time again. But he was not on trial--they were.

The class and organizational constraints on our relationship with Black people must be understood and dealt with.

- A. Our language must be scientifically precise, but have a good mass style.
- B. Our knowledge must be put into a context relevant to the interests--objective and subjective--of the people.
- C. Our activity must be taken out of the classroom and be among the masses, and the masses must be brought into the classroom.
- D. Our allegiance must be to our people before all else, and only then to our campus, publication, or organization.

In sum, rather than stress the unique, the obscure, of the "heavy" we should take × the major problems, do systematic and serious scientific investigation, and popularize our results among the masses, turn our research over to political activists, and

teach all who dare take the knowledge to fight against imperialism.

Now lets look more closely at five specific activities to take up some concrete courses of action.

A. Academic programs--Black studies programs. Some people are totally committed to these programs while others are totally against them. Both of these extremes are one-sided and don't take into consideration the dual character of Black studies. The negative aspect is that the tendency is for these programs--like all others in the university--to degenerate into non-essential activities--non-essential to the liberation of Black people. The positive aspect is that for those programs that have survived to this point there is still the possibility to breath the life of ^{the} liberation struggle into them. Consider the Declaration Against Imperialism as a position paper to provide (along with other material) the basis for organizing a program. Whether overtly or covertly a program not against imperialism will end up with it. Can we not oppose Gulf Oil in Angola--NO. We must oppose it! And if we fight against US corporations exploiting the African people what about the masses in this country.

A leading academic apologist for the ruling class, Robert K. Merton, writing sort of an obituary for Black studies, "Insiders and Outsiders" challenged the partisan character of its spokespersons. Now what oppressed people in their right minds would not use science for liberation. He makes a fool of himself really, its just that not all of us realize how and in what ways we can move against what he is saying and the interests he represents.

We are proposing that we initiate a campaign to place imperialism on all of our agendas and use this concept as an organizing tool for all programs. What a difference it would make if when we took students to Africa they were going not only to search out their ancestral past and celebrate the cultural survivals of traditional Africa, but to investigate the contemporary manifestations in Africa of the same imperialism they face at home. What a difference it would make if all sociology,

political science, art, drama, and damn near everything else (like the social development and use of the hard science like physics, chemistry and biology) was always put into its historical context and examined as part of our overall design to get a fix on imperialism and how to defeat it. I suggest that the design of university programs in countries like China, Tanzania, and Cuba could offer alot on this score.

Moreover, all of our programs must strive to sink deep roots in our respective communities. This means we must turn our focus to our immediate surroundings and pull the covers off the local manifestations of imperialism. Black studies in Detroit should have an auto concentration, in Greensboro a textile project, in New Orleans a petroleum, chemicals and shipping focus. After all, whatever are the dominant forces that shape the lives of Black people must be our concern. Moreover, once we have developed some knowledge from our research then we should take it to Black people involved in this area and check its validity, its relevancy, and its usefulness. The masses of people normally have more knowledge about what their lives are involved in than students do who study for four or more years about that same sector of society. What does that tell us? It tells us to open up the doors and let the wisdom of the masses of people come in. We have often been asked who teaches the teachers, or who grades the graders--well, for Black intellectuals the answer is clear. The masses of Black people do. We must believe this and implement programs designed to facilitate it or we will undoubtedly fall into the swamp of run-of-the-mill academia and end up grading ourselves never knowing whether it makes any difference at all.

B. Courses--now one major problem for us is the area of curriculum development. We have no model courses that reflect the basic theoretical concepts and concrete information all informed Black people should know about. We have popularized no list of classics of Black social analysis. We have no basic questions for which we as a rather cosmopolitan progressive group of Blacks can give substantially the same

answer.

This has got to stop. The textbook companies lure some of us to put out rather hum-drum readers and texts--or get their own staff to do it--and pretty much control what it is that people study. For a moment think about the innovation of "general education" in higher education built around courses called Humanities 101, Western Civilization and Fine Arts. These courses were developed at the University of Chicago and Columbia, then popularized throughout the country. We have to take this situation into our own hands and develop at least a two-semester course presenting a basic approach to the scientific study of Black people. What a difference it would make if 20 or 50 or 100 schools were using substantially the same course as an introduction to Afro-American Studies. Indeed, why should the students at Atlanta University, Cornell, Wayne State, and Stanford be emersed in creativity while the masses of students in the junior colleges and state schools generally struggle to make do. Are we saying that money controls it all, or can we unite around this task, this pressing need for a relevant Black education focused on imperialism with the goal of freedom and liberation.

C. Research--Since many of us have done or are doing college work, even graduate school work, we surely recall the mechanical and often irrelevant research topics that can take up one's time to get a BA, MA or PhD. Our research must be on such topics that help to pull the covers off imperialism. In the Declaration Against Imperialism we say:

"We Declare that the main task of Black intellectuals today is to study the character and historical development of US imperialism, especially its impact on Black people, and to promote this study throughout schools, publications, conferences, and organizations.

"We Declare that the main objective of our study must be to expose the essence of imperialism and provide the intellectual tools necessary for combatting every imperialist assault on the people."

Check out all research being done and put it to the test of our Declaration, Check its validity and relevance with the masses of people. Check its scientific character with other scientists committed to the liberation of Black people.

D. Publications--The main problem here is our intellectual productivity. But with the previous comments that aspect has been covered. Specifically on the journals several simple and well known points need to be made:

1. The burning questions facing Black people must appear in our publications and special effort should be made to get this done. Today we face the Boston busing crisis, the changing racial composition of the armed forces, the soaring unemployment rates, the new style academic racists of the Jensen and Shockley type, the crisis of Black colleges, and many other issues.
2. On major questions there are different positions that need to be placed side by side in debate.
3. Older Black people need to be interviewed to recover personal histories not generally known--our recent losses include Oliver Cox, Cyril Briggs, Alexander Z. Loobey, and countless others who have taken with them many lessons we need to learn.

Special credit needs to be given to the African World and the Black Scholar for their consistent high quality and relevancy. The question becomes, how many of us read these publications regularly, write articles or critique those that we read, and how many of us use them in our classes and urge our students to read them.

Go back and examine Phylon under DuBois' editorship or the Journal of Negro History under Woodson and you'll find all the research and debate of the day. But now these journals are mere shadows of their former selves. Our generation has developed its own journals--the question is whether we have the commitment to do what is necessary to make them survive, and truly serve the people.

E. Organizations and Conferences--The key question here is that whenever Black people come together there are but two major questions--what is the past or present state of our exploitation and oppression? What moves have been, are, or can be made to fundamentally change that and lead to liberation and freedom. Moreover, each gathering should involve sharp debate over different points of view. Too long

have we been hampered and held back by our liberal attitudes and the line of all unity and no struggle. The symposium on imperialism at the last African Heritage Studies Association meeting in New York, and the May 1974 African Liberation Support Committee conference in Washington, D.C., are outstanding examples of conferences that have reflected a correct approach and moved many of us to do more serious study, and advance our theoretical work to a much higher level.

The second point here is the need to make great efforts to open our conferences to the masses of people. At this conference we have a few trade unionists, political activists, rank and file workers, and community activists--not nearly enough, but its a start. How can we have a session of Black labor without the participation of workers? On higher education without students? On community problems without the people who actually experience the problems on a day-to-day basis.

This leads us to our last question:

4. When and where can Black intellectuals serve the Black liberation movement?

Today the Black liberation movement is also in crisis, but the situation is excellent. The crisis reflects the degeneration of the cultural nationalist organizations, the floundering of the traditional organizations, and the growing fear of surveillance by intelligence agencies, and the brutal repression of the Attica murderer (grandson of the Rockefeller who order the slaughter of the miners in Ludlow, Colorado). Today the inflation, unemployment and general economic insecurity represent heightened attacks on the living standards of the masses of people.

But where there is repression there will be resistance. The spontaneous struggles of the masses go on everyday, throughout this country in plants, schools, and communities. Small organizations of a new type are emerging, a new movement is taking shape.

A. The first task is to work hand in hand with the movement where we are. Staff unions, students, etc., must be given full support, cooperation, use of facilities, and most of all encouragement and endorsement.

A second point is to take up questions that are raised by the struggle and conduct a scientific investigation that provides the data and analysis required to prove the case. The people are not afraid of the truth, but the barons of imperialism must be.

B. In general, Black intellectuals have the same general responsibility as everyone else--to get involved in the movement now, wherever you are. But as intellectuals we must:

1. be historians of the movement;
2. be alert and fight every ideological assault on the movement;
3. be students to the experience of the masses, and teachers of whatever theory, historical and political knowledge we have gained.

In sum, our Declaration Against Imperialism is clear on this point:

"We Declare that our goal is to establish a new unity between Black intellectuals and the Black liberation movement in which intellectuals function to serve the interests of the people with humility based on compassion, strength based on science and a revolutionary optimism that the people will triumph over all enemies and prosper."

I have tried to spell out in broad sweeping strokes my understanding of some of the basic issues facing Black intellectuals and make concrete suggestions on how to proceed from this point. Hopefully, now and in all the workshops we can continue this discussion.

FURTHER THE ANALYSIS THROUGH STUDY! HEIGHTEN THE CONTRADICTION THROUGH STRUGGLE!

TOWARDS VICTORY FOR OUR PEOPLE!