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Technological Revolution and the Black Studies Curriculum: A Course Proposal

by Abdul Alkalimat

A technological revolution is changing the world. The computer is fast becoming the universal tool in all aspects of work, production and communication, and innovations in bio-technology are fast transforming agriculture and health. The main impact of this technological revolution has been to restructure the economy, both the centers of accumulation as well as the labor process. It is also restructuring the methods by which people communicate, form and maintain communities. In general, the objective basis of social life is being fundamentally changed.

In this context, Black people are experiencing the most far reaching process of "last hired, first fired" since the end of World War II. Now this covers not only employment, but a rapid decrease in welfare programs as well as a corresponding increase in police and prisons. These far reaching changes are the content of the current congressional restructuring of public policy. Any plans being developed for Black liberation need to take this ominous motion toward a new society into consideration.

Historically, a paradigm for Black liberation has been developed and transformed in the successive contexts of slavery, rural tenancy, and urban industrial society. In the form of civil rights objectives to democratize industrial society, this paradigm united Black leadership from all walks of life, from the church to the classroom, from policy formulation to educational planning. In this way an industrial model has been the framework for curriculum development beginning in the 1890's with the second Morrill Act that established Black Land Grant Institutions.¹

A precondition for changing our paradigm for Black liberation is an intellectual program of study on the nature of this technological revolution and its impact on society, especially the Black community. In other words, Black Studies is being called upon to make a new contribution to the policy debate by preparing a new generation to continue the radical Black tradition into the 21st century. This is a transitional program toward the full articulation of a new paradigm for curriculum development.

Black Studies began in the 1960's with a focus on a critique of the present society and its racist exploitation of the Black community. A second phase has been driven by an Afrocentric perspective, utilizing ancient Africa as the source for a new foundation of intellectual, social and moral life. This new transitional program points us in the direction of the future, and seeks to fashion curriculum around the conditions in which Black people will be



living in the 21st century.² This is also a move from the particular to the universal, from the Black experience to a set of universal conditions facing everyone, including Black people.

This essay proposes a basic course that not only focuses on the technological revolution, but should be conducted in such a way that students become part of it. This means that the course will require the use of computers and be coordinated on the Internet utilizing listserv discussions and a course Web site.

Course Content

The general focus of this course is that we are going through a revolution, a fundamental change, not just a change in attitudes or opinions. In this sense, in the 1960's we wanted a revolution but did not get one. We got reforms and great attitudinal swings. In the 1990's we have a revolution and have yet to figure out what to do about it.

The changes we face today are objective. Our response today cannot merely be driven by the ideological positions of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.³ Today, to accept the challenge of the times we live in requires a revolutionary response to the same objective forces underlying the political direction linking Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan to Newt Gingrich. This is not merely a rhetorical revolution, but one actually taking place.

In March 1995 we organized a conference with the theme, "Technology, Employment, and Community," at the University of Illinois. In October 1995 we published the proceedings of that conference, which serves as the anchor for the course being proposed here. The basic idea is that social policy for Black liberation needs to be developed in the unfolding historical context and not based on the retention of a model of society that no longer exists.⁴ Therefore, the technological revolution and its

impact on society is the basis for our new course of study and the subsequent formulation of social policy relevant to the 21st century.

There are five revolutionary processes of change that we will focus on in this course. Each of these processes are related, but primary focus will be given to the technological and economic changes as they are the universal changes confronting everyone in the U.S. and, directly or indirectly, everyone in the world. Further, these are the changes that enable us to develop a coherent framework for the social, political and spiritual changes we are experiencing.

1. The technological revolution: Alvin and Heidi Toffler argue that there have been three basic revolutions in human society which they conceptualize as successive waves of change. The first wave is the agricultural revolution; the second wave is the industrial revolution; and, the current third wave is an information age revolution. Black people in the U.S. have been fully within the industrial sector since the end of sharecropping, while Black people in Africa and the Caribbean are still in the transition to industrial society.

2. The main economic impact of this transition into the third wave is a dramatic marginalization of Black labor. Jeremy Rifkin describes this process with great clarity. This began for Black people as early as the mid-1950's when automation began to restructure manufacturing. From 1953 to 1962 there were 1.6 million manufacturing jobs lost, and Black unemployment went from a previous high of 8.5% up to 12.4%. Since then, Black unemployment has been twice that of whites. Tom Khan correctly captured the basis of this trend: "It is as if racism, having put the Negro in his economic place, stepped aside to watch technology destroy that place."⁵

This is not merely a rhetorical revolution, but one actually taking place.

The pattern is clear when we examine the main industries in which Black workers have been marginalized. The auto industry has been transformed, going from the assembly line production technology of Henry Ford to the lean production technology started by Toyota. The Ford River Rouge Plant in Detroit had 85,000 workers in 1945, and by the 1990's this was down to less than 15,000 workers even though the company was making more cars! U.S. Steel had 120,000 workers in 1980. Ten years later computer-based engineering allowed U.S. Steel to make more product than ever with a workforce of only 20,000.⁶

The workers being excluded from these jobs who remain active in the workforce have had to take jobs making less money, sometimes part-time or temporary, and frequently at minimum wage. For others, less success has meant unemployment, welfare, homelessness and hunger. It is estimated that nearly 20% of full time employees are making incomes of less than

the poverty line. For Black workers the situation is even worse.⁷

Five Revolutionary Processes That Will Define the 21st Century

- a. Technological Revolution: The transformation of tools and techniques based on the computer and biotechnology;
- b. Economic Revolution: The transformation of the workplace, and the resultant economic polarization toward the extremes of wealth and poverty, from the wealthy to the homeless;
- c. Social Revolution: The destruction of public institutions connected to industrial society, the privatization of social life, and the polarization of social environments from gilded high-tech suburbs to inner-city forbidden zones;
- d. Political Revolution: The destruction of the welfare state and an emerging struggle between conservatism and the creation of a police state versus revolution and the expansion of economic security and democratic rights; and,
- e. Spiritual Revolution: The end of the old American dream and the emerging battle between the spirit of reaction and conservatism versus the spirit of revolution.

3. The social revolution emerges out of this economic transformation, and begins with the destruction of society. This is a very different interpretation than what usually confronts most Black people. Usually this destruction is viewed as someone's fault: "Why are you people tearing up your community?" However, it is not the aberrant behavior of "uncivilized" people causing this first stage of the social revolution. This destruction of society is an inevitable result of an economic revolution. The schools do not work because they were built on the school-to-work model that does not function anymore. The hospitals do not work because they were established to keep employed workers healthy who are now being increasingly marginalized. This same pattern is found for virtually every public institution.

4. The political revolution is on the front pages of the daily newspapers, at least the part of it being driven by the right wing forces who have taken over Congress. These forces are rewriting the social contract so that the capitalists do not have to pay to maintain people they no longer need as labor. While Black people have consistently given the Democrat party their electoral loyalty, the main impulse has been to elect Black officials, expanding Black Congressional representation to 40, recent successes for the Senate, state-wide offices, and a couple of serious bids for the presidency.

5. The spiritual revolution is one of emotional well being, and general social belonging in society, as well as one's psychological comfort level with the future. The Million Man March (October 16, 1995) was a declaration that a spiritual revolution was necessary in order for the Black community to rediscover a positive self-image and sense of worth. More importantly, the Black church remains a viable institution that speaks to the spiritual needs of the community and serves them in a culturally effective manner. The Civil Rights Movement captured the spirit of the people because it was morally righteous and the leadership, willing to sacrifice, had been educated, organized and canonized. This is what must be done all over again.⁸

These five points of discussion serve as the content for the new course. The driving theme is how the technological revolution serves as the context for the other processes of change (though not in a simplistic model of technological determinism). The argument is quite simple and straightforward: the world is changing and everything in it. Black people's lives, as with everyone else, will have to change in this world. Only by fully understanding the logic and contours of these changes can a new paradigm for Black liberation and human freedom be designed and implemented. This new course is a proposal to get this project underway.

Notes

¹Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*. (New York: The New Press, 1994).

²Paul Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*. (New York: Random House, 1993). See also Alvin Toffler, *Power Shift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

³Nelson Peery, *Entering An Epoch of Social Revolution*. (Chicago: Workers Press, 1993).

⁴Abdul Alkalimat, Doug Gills, and Kate Williams (Eds.), *JOB?TECH: The Technological Revolution and Its Impact on Society*. (Chicago: Twenty-first Century Books, 1995). See also Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁵Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. (New York: Putnam, 1995).

⁶Richard Barnet and John Cavanaugh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

⁷James Jennings, *Understanding the Nature of Poverty in Urban America*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994).

⁸James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1984).

Abdul Alkalimat, an owner-editor of Twenty-first Century Books and Publications in Chicago, is also the author of *Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A People's College Primer*. He will be coordinating the aforementioned course at Northeastern University for the academic year 1996-97.