

THE DILEMMA OF BLACK STUDIES

THE trauma that Cornell University went through last week (*see EDUCATION*) exemplifies a problem that is shared in varying degree by almost every college and university in the U.S. It is how to satisfy the aspirations of an aroused minority of black students who reject academic programs designed for a majority of students who happen to be white. As blacks see it, the result is "whitewashed" education that robs Negroes of the pride and skills they need to fulfill the black destiny in America. The blacks want something dramatically different—now.

Grating as it seems, the black demand cannot be ignored by a nation that views education as salvation—indeed, as the key to bringing Negroes into the mainstream of U.S. life. Ironically, colleges have helped to bring the problem on themselves. For years, select colleges accepted a token handful of bright Negro students from relatively privileged homes. In effect, they blackballed ghetto youths for alleged failure to meet white academic standards. Now the colleges have broken their own rules (often stringently) by seeking "disadvantaged" Negroes, many of them straight out of the ghetto. The eight Ivy League colleges, for example, have just accepted a record 1,135 black applicants for next year's combined freshman class of 8,080, a rise of 89% over the number of blacks admitted by the Ivies last year.

Negroes, though, are still a tiny minority on most campuses. Only 4% of U.S. colleges are black; they number 300,000 (half at Negro colleges) in a total enrollment of 6,700,000. The result makes Negroes both defensive and militant. At the same time, colleges are getting many blacks who resist the notion that they were ever failures, and who think, in fact, that the colleges are the failures. The reaction is natural; white administrators simply failed to foresee it. For lower-class Negroes, whose whole lives have been spent in black ghettos, the sudden move to white campuses often produces cultural shock. Everything is so white. How can a slum Negro cherish the glories of Greek culture, for example, while his sister supports him by ironing The Man's shirt? Even middle-class Negroes are often upset. Says Byron Merritt, a political science major at Syracuse University: "If white education is increasingly 'irrelevant' for whites, what is it for us?" Merritt's concern is that college will sweep him into the white world and alienate him from his less fortunate black brothers in the ghetto. "I know I can get my \$20,000 a year, but then what? Where do I fit into the black community?"

Erasing White Culture

The answer demanded by Negroes is "black studies"—a concept that baffles white teachers, who have not yet caught up with a profound change in black attitudes toward education. Until recently, most Negro leaders preached racial integration; Negro colleges felt a special responsibility to set an example by using their education to build successful careers in the white middle-class world. Today, new leaders preach black "nationhood," not integration per se. Negro students now feel an even heavier responsibility than their predecessors—not to escape the ghetto, but to return to it and improve the lot of the black community at large.

All too often, such hopes dim soon after matriculation. Militant black students complain that colleges teach nothing to prepare them for coping with everyday ghetto problems like rat control, police hostility and price gouging by white merchants. Worse for black identity, white-oriented courses more or less ignore Negro contributions to American history and culture. While standard history courses extol the white abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, for instance, they seldom mention David Walker, a black abolitionist and one of the first U.S. Negroes to press for equality. If there is a black record in American poetry, politics or science—and

there is—U.S. education has rarely studied or taught it.

Out of such frustration comes the clamor for black studies—courses aimed at defining and demonstrating the black role in America. In a recent survey of 185 colleges and universities, Educational Consultant Joseph Colmen found that 23 campuses will offer full-fledged "black" majors by next fall. San Diego State and Stanford already offer bachelor's degrees in Afro-American Studies.

What the students want out of black studies is basically identity—an explanation of blackness, a pride in it, relief and rebirth. Some yearn for knowledge of their African ancestors; others place a greater emphasis on the cultural achievements of the American Negro; almost all are determined that black studies should stress courses directly related to the pressing needs of the black community. Common to many black militants, though, is a pessimism that white faculties will understand what they have in mind. Says Bill Osby, a Cornell graduate student: "Having a black studies program on a white liberal campus may turn out to be almost impossible because the administration and the faculty are just not going to let the program get at the essentials. They will simply let it study black history and wear dashikis while we get ready to work for Xerox or IBM. I'm for a black studies program that helps to destroy white culture in the mind of black people. And going through an intellectual environment is not enough; black studies has got to be an action-oriented program."

Salvaging Stupidity

How militant blacks expect to ignore realities like Xerox and still survive in a technological society is a question to which they obviously have not given much deep thought. As they see it, the priority is self-development through black studies, and toward that end, new courses are now emerging. Among them:

► A sociology course on "The Black Family" taught at Oakland's Merritt College by Melvin Newton, 31, brother of imprisoned Black Panther Co-Founder Huey P. Newton. Newton discusses and then discounts the white concept of the black family as a weak social unit, a notion that is partly based on the relative frequency with which Negro fathers abandon their homes. "The important thing is not to view the stability factor," argues Newton. "The secret of the black family is its ability to survive, its flexibility." In his lectures, Newton attempts to build black pride by accentuating this affirmative view.

► A language course at Indiana University taught by Orlando Taylor, an assistant professor of speech. "Blacks are traditionally taught that phrases like 'I busy' and 'I be busy' are grammatically wrong," says Taylor. He refines the effect when he tells students that such speech forms come directly from the language of their West African forefathers and are not a corruption of European usage: "Suddenly this causes the black students to feel that their language isn't so inferior after all. This is psychologically important—the black doesn't have to feel he is stupid."

► A history course at U.C.L.A. called "Racial Attitudes in America," taught by Gary B. Nash. The course examines American racial thinking from the first English contacts with Africans and Indians in the 16th century. It also includes an inquiry into the Kerner commission report and a reading list that includes Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, Gordon W. Allport's *Nature of Prejudice* and John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*.

Those planning the new programs share the students' concern for learning that has practical application. Robert Singleton, 33, a black associate professor of economics, hopes to have U.C.L.A.'s planned Afro-American Studies Center in operation next fall as a complement to the university's in-

Intellectually distinguished ten-year-old Center for African Studies, Singleten sees the new center as "an evolutionary laboratory in which to design alternatives to current social institutions, a base from which to test these alternatives in nearby communities and a classroom in which to convert field findings into new courses back on campus." An obvious possibility: teaching white teachers how to teach Negro children.

Not every school is eager for such a pragmatic approach. Says Assistant History Professor John Willis, a member of the faculty-student committee now making final plans for an Afro-American studies department at the University of Wisconsin: "Students have asked for an action-oriented program while serious academicians want a department oriented toward scholarship." Though Willis himself is black, he goes along with the professors because "I'm an academic Tom—I can see the quality angle."

Jim Crow Revisited

The push for black studies is without geographical bounds: even the University of Alabama has started a course in Afro-American history (attended mainly by whites). Stanford offers an inter-disciplinary major in African and Afro-American studies. Harvard, Yale and Columbia, among other

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DISCUSSING AFRO-AMERICAN COURSES AT SYRACUSE

Eastern schools, are readying major departments of black studies for the coming year. Eventually, Harvard hopes to help create a Boston-area consortium of university Afro-American resources.

Among the most comprehensive programs of black studies is the degree-granting department planned by Dr. Nathan Hare for San Francisco State College. It will open next fall, though Hare, an adversary of acting President S. I. Hayakawa, has been dropped from the faculty. (The students are demanding his reinstatement.) To earn a black B.A., San Francisco students will take four basic courses in Negro history, psychology, science, arts and humanities; after that, two areas of concentration are possible. One consists of 14 courses in behavioral and social sciences, such as "Black Politics" and "Black Nationalism and the International Community." Hare describes the purpose of the department bluntly: "It's to teach black students to deal with a society that is self-defined as racist."

Many blacks, if they had their way, would like to see autonomous black studies programs—administered, taught and attended by blacks only. White professors, they believe, are incapable of really understanding the black experience. White students are a potential embarrassment. Says Indiana's Orlando Taylor: "There is a psychological feeling among blacks against exposing some of the hang-ups they may have as a result of racism in front of a white audience."

One black who opposes such total separation is Nathan Hare. "We're not racist," he says. "We think that separation

is often a ploy to evade acting in a revolutionary fashion now." He wants to include as many white students as possible (white students, in fact, could greatly benefit from black studies). The shortage of qualified black teachers will keep most faculties of Afro-American studies integrated for some time to come. There are, moreover, legal obstacles to full autonomy. Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, warned last winter: "If some white Americans should accede officially to the call for separate dormitories and autonomous racial schools, there will be court action to determine anyone's right to use public tax funds to set up what are, patently, Jim Crow schools." Sure enough, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare last month threatened to withhold federal funds from Ohio's Antioch College unless the school desegregates its blacks-only Afro-American Studies Institute, which opened last fall.

The strongest opposition to autonomous departments of black studies comes from faculty members who see the idea as a threat to academic integrity, their own prerogatives or both. When the Harvard faculty last week voted to include six students on the committee working out plans for the future department of Afro-American studies, Economist Henry Rosovsky indignantly resigned from the committee.

During the debate, Rosovsky and some of his colleagues argued that the action would set a dangerous precedent for student participation in the appointment of teachers in other departments, that students were not sufficiently well-trained to judge academic qualifications and that distinguished academics might not come to a department half-controlled by students. Nonetheless, the faculty voted 258 to 151 to include the students on the committee. "The country has to make the utmost effort to find constructive solutions to the race problem," said Economist Richard Musgrave. "One has to be prepared to do things which one would not do in other circumstances."

W. H. Perry, a fellow of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, has gone so far as to suggest that the University of California set up an all-black undergraduate college, the ultimate in autonomy. "A good deal of the problem," wrote Perry in his proposal to the Regents, "revolves in the clash between what we whites think blacks should want, and what blacks do want. I believe we must pay strict attention to what the blacks say they want—even though contradiction and mutinies may sometimes be discerned—and go the long mile to helping them achieve it."

Prudence and Justice

Many critics remain unconvinced. Some argue that full-scale black studies will produce second-class education, a dual standard for degrees that will only unfit black graduates for the real white world. In addition, critics fear that black revolutionaries may use the classroom for propaganda. Nathan Hare gladly concedes the point: "Education is not objective. It propagandizes students to conform to the society." Black students, he argues, must be trained to reject racism—black as well as white—and in that sense he is preaching revolutionary education.

Even so, it is necessary to define precisely what kind of revolution black studies should accomplish. If the courses teach blind separation or violence, tragedy will result. If the goal is problem solving, the teaching of personal and political skills or real black power, then nothing could be more legitimate. Conversely, the most worrisome revolution, perhaps, is the one that may afflict campuses that block or hedge on black studies. Going along is not only prudent; it is also just. In the long run, moreover, the present "action" phase of black studies is likely to be self-liquidating. As soon as it succeeds, it will not be necessary. Black studies could then grow into a more intellectual discipline like Asian or African area studies. The risk in black studies is that it may create academic apartheid. But the risk in "white studies" is greater: the loss of black equality and achievement. If those key American ideals mean anything, the choice is obvious.