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THE STRUGGLE for BLACK STUDIES
at HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Presented to
James Ranchino

POLITICAL SCIENCE
HONORS PROGRAM

Submitted by
Johnnie L. Ware

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THE STRUGGLE for BLACK STUDIES
at HOWARD UNIVERSITY

In the beginning, white American education, particularly on the college level, was highly private, restricted to the few who were wealthy enough to afford it. In The Theory of the Leisure Class, by Thorstein Veblen, Those persons were characterized by a peculiar mentality in which, owing to the necessity for displaying one's wealth, it was prestigious to be free from productive endeavor. Any work done could not be remunerative and preferably should be of no significant use to anybody, let alone oneself; to waste time, and to have the time to waste time were symbolic of prestige. Their educational enterprise, accordingly, was characterized by a "liberal arts" approach where students learned a little about a lot of things and a lot about nothing. The leisure-class syndrome and its snobbish motivations encouraged a preoccupation with lofty ideals such as footnoting. Students might be compelled to labor in memorizing the idiomatic expressions and the verbal conjugations of dead languages; or, more currently, languages which invariably fade from the student's memory and, while remembered, are useless in post-graduate life.

As middle class aspirants began to emulate the leisure class, and education was largely socialized, the principle of exclusiveness was reinforced by the need to stem the flood

of recruits to professional occupations. Hence a student might make A's and B's in all required courses only to fail the comprehensive exam or the language test, or pass all academic requirements only to fail the bar exam because of political beliefs or color of skin. Education lost much of its capacity for vitalizing the mind and, since the end-products became more important than the process, eventually amounted to a routine assimilation of approved bodies of knowledge, a process which fails particularly to inspire a black child of working class origin.

With the growing urbanization of the 1950's and 1960's, colleges emerged increasingly as the factories for producing the technicians needed to run an urbanized society— computer types, lawyers, and the like. According to Nathan Hare, the forces of production which eventually led to over-urbanization and industrialization have produced a concomitant specialization of learning, and a rise of gadgeteering, but the leisure-class legacy has nevertheless remained. Neither leisure class education or specialized education is sufficient to transform black consciousness - or white consciousness of that matter - into a revolutionary, creative instrument for dynamic change. Leisure class education creates dilettantes; specialized education creates pragmatists and moral zombies devoid of imagination or compassion in the exercise of the skills.

Burdened by the duality of racial oppression, black American education likewise reflected white American education's dilemma, most strikingly exhibited in the educational philos-

ophies for which Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois are known. With his job-training approach, Booker T. endeavored to create a race of skilled workers and a consolidated economic bloc. DuBois' early talented-tenth theory was basically about creating a black vanguard of, essentially, radical black bourgeoisie who would become teachers/trainers and diffuse their skill and teach others through radicalized black colleges.

Booker T. provided for the masses and their economic plight in his thinking, but neglected the cultural-political theory, and the creation of a black intelligentsia. DuBois, on the other hand, directed attention to the intelligentsia, and cultural-political theories, but, in his early and most famous approach, failed to provide sufficiently for the masses. Possibly as a consequence of historical circumstances - the location of most blacks of that day in the South and the irreconcilable mores of segregation - neither developed theories for invading white colleges.

This was left to more recent years, when the early advocates of "black studies" sought both the collective elevation of a people, with education of, from, and for the masses, and the training of a mass-minded black conscious middle class. Black studies was to provide a working model and theories for both black and white colleges, correcting the "Negro" colleges' fallacies and seizing equitable power and control at white colleges. Instead of searching merely for equality of education, its premise was: (1) that there can be no equality of education in a racist society; (2) the type of education

conceived and perpetrated by the white oppressor is essentially an education for oppression; and (3) black education must be education for liberation, or at least for change. In this respect, it was to prepare black students to become the catalysts for a black cultural revolution. All courses - whether history, literature, or mathematics - would be taught from a revolutionary ideology or perspective. Black education would become the instrument for change.

Its initial vehicle, black studies, was at best a mass movement and a mass struggle based on the notion that education belongs to the people and the idea is to give it back to them. Hence, most crucial to black studies, black education, aside from its ideology of liberation, would be the community component of its methodology. This was designed to wed black communities, heretofore excluded, and the educational process, to transform the black community, making it more relevant to higher education, at the same time as education would bring both the college to the community and the community to the college. The community and its problems would comprise a laboratory, and there would be apprenticeships and field work components to every course.

Even a course such as history might have the requirement that students put on panel discussions on black history in church basements or wherever for younger children. A class project could be the formation of a black history club, over the years organizing the black community thereby and raising black consciousness, while helping to educate black youth

through course-related tutorial programs. The black college student's mere presence in the community could provide an otherwise unavailable role model for young black children and, as the student tests out his theories learned in the classroom via the abovementioned activities and apprenticeships where applicable (say, in black politics, black economics, black journalism, black theater, etc.) he would gain an intensive knowledge of and commitment to the community he was being taught to serve after graduation.

Other than their opposition to incorporating an ideology of liberation (particularly in scientific and technical courses) to replace that of acquiescing to the status quo, administrators opposed the community component most. They soon succeeded in restricting black studies to culture and the humanities, to the study merely of blackness. But they did not do so without running into a battle with black students.

Let us now take up a case study of the struggle of a "Negro" campus, Howard University. I have chosen this one only because it was among the earliest.

Some years ago two Harvard University social scientists, David Riesman and Christopher Jencks, published a devastating article in the Harvard Educational Review on the failure of the American "Negro" college. It created a furor in Negro college circles. The anxious reaction of Negro college administrators and professors led to a number of lively, high-level faculty meetings and private threats - to my knowledge

never carried out - to debate Riesman and Jencks in public print.

The professors' hesitancy was simply a fact that most of them had never published anything before. Rather, it is that they knew that Riesman and Jencks were as accurate as outsiders could manage to be. This led some professors to develop a keen interest in helping to educate black students. It was their belief that they would become the leading black individuals of the future, if not black leaders, and that the entire race and the world would benefit from whatever they became.

This faith in the potential radicalization of the Negro college, before first radicalizing the white college as a model for them, soon appeared to be a bit naive. Part of the reason may be traced to the history of Negro colleges and the nature of their founding and motivation. A few grew out of abolitionist sentiment in the North but quickly became favorite places for guilt-ridden white slavemasters to send away their illegitimate offspring. Most early Negro colleges, however, were founded in the South by the missionary movement and religious preachers for missionary work in this country ("home missions") and Africa. They had the objective, writes Earl Conrad in The Invention of the Negro, "not only of teaching the freedmen how to read and write, but, by bringing the learning in the form of the Bible, to temper this teaching, perhaps to moderate the freedman as well as free him."

Missionary-run colleges, for the most part, eventually folded, or were taken over or duplicated by state governments - but Negro colleges, to this day, have never escaped the missionary influence. Most are teachers' colleges with an occasional school of theology attached, though many, predictably, are called universities. Many students insist that they are more properly "universities," and complain that A&M (Agriculture and Mechanical) are Athletics and Music colleges; A&I (Agriculture and Industrial), Athletics and Ignorance; and A&T (Agriculture and Technical), Athletics and Tomism.

As idealistic white teachers and administrators retreated, they were replaced by "colored" personnel who quickly instituted the mores of the plantation and sought to ape the academic trivia and adolescent fanfare of white colleges. These newcomers were mainly descendants of free blacks or "house nigger" slaves (those who worked in the house instead of the field and became domesticated emulators of upper-class Southern white manners). They longed to be accepted at all costs by white society and modeled their lives to approximate white thinking and behavior - even toward their own race - shunning association and identity with the lower class.

In Black Bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier says that instead of trying to promote a distinctive set of habits and values in their students, they were, by almost any standard, purveyors of super-American, ultra-bourgeois prejudices and

aspirations. Far from fighting to preserve a separate sub-culture, as other ethnic colleges did, the Negro colleges were militantly opposed to almost everything which made Negroes different from whites, on the grounds that it was "lower-class."

By the mid-1960's, the Negro bourgeoisie administering Negro colleges had come so much to resent their multiplying lower class students they fell victim to an effort to "raise the quality" of Negro colleges by making them predominantly white. It was mainly the resistance of black students which halted this travesty. A case in point was Howard University.

As Howard became "the Capstone of 'Negro' education," it also became an epitome of its political docility and academic nothingness, groveling at the feet of outside (mainly government) expectations, real or imagined, and fawning upon white Congressional appropriators. However, in an era of greater access to white colleges, just then emerging, and "rising Negro expectations," this footshuffling was proving inadequate, in the competition for top students and professors. Faced with this predicament, administrators merely intensified their Stepin' Fetchit tactics.

In early September 1966, then President James Narbrit announced in the Washington Post a plan to make Howard "sixty per cent white" by 1970, a plan opposed by virtually every student on campus. To accomplish this goal, the University had devised an ingenious program for excluding and/or removing black students while attracting white ones. Some professors

were warned by the dean's office, through departmental chairmen instructed to "counsel" them, that their grade distributions for each class should include a minimum of six per cent failing marks.

At the same time, it was decided to "raise standards" by raising the required score on entrance tests standardized on children of urban middle-class white exposure. Many "culturally deprived" black students would not of course, be expected to manage the new score. White students who flunked would not need to humiliate themselves enrolling in a pre-college sequence at Howard; hence, a proposed special division for students who failed the test would invariably be black. These "sub-normals" would have to spend a year preparing to enter the new white Howard. Having failed the test as individuals, their self-esteem would be further decimated, for they would be set apart as failures and subjected to an ego-mortifying curriculum.

First, they were to receive a speech course (then already incorporated at Howard) frankly calculated to force black students to "lose their in-group dialects," despite the fact that President Nabrit himself had been successful in Supreme Court presentations in a classical "Negro dialect." Such students also were to be given a course in reading skills and, simultaneously, one in masterpieces of world literature. It goes without saying that "masterpiece" authors would be invariably, if not exclusively, Caucasian. Still another course was

history of Western civilization (not world civilization, as in the case of the masterpieces). This curriculum would say to black students, who already were failures as individuals, that they had no ennobling ancestral roots: their kin had produced no civilization worthy of attention, no literary achievements, and indeed are guilty now of the wrong mode of speech.

Meanwhile, as integration at the college level increased (an overwhelming majority of all black college students now attend predominantly white colleges) the Negro bourgeoisie increasingly began to send their children to white colleges. The late sociologist E. Franklin Frazier complained that for forty years he for one had been unable to teach the Negro bourgeoisie or their children anything. Frazier once wrote in his book, *Black Bourgeoisie*: "As the children of the Negro masses have flooded the colleges, it was inevitable that the traditional standards of morals and manners would have to give way."

Thus although the protest at Negro colleges in the 1960's sometimes took the form of black power cries (often exaggerated or concocted by administrators and public relations officials playing to public sentiment), the fight on Negro college campuses - in contrast to more nationalistic black tendencies on white campuses - more accurately reflected a desire to escape the dullness of Negro bourgeois trifling and administrative tyranny and mismanagement.

Even where black students at Negro colleges chanted "black power," it seems to be mainly a rallying cry. Closer inspection of their demands revealed divergent provocations. Howard students, who launched the fad in 1968 of briefly taking over administration buildings finally wrangled some concessions out of their administrators. These concessions revolved around the following: the freedom to bring liquor into the dormitories, and the opportunity, in the case of girls, to take as many as three "unexplained" weekends. However, a cutback in the stiff prerequisites for the then existing course in "Negro history" was also being "considered." By contrast, black students at San Francisco State College already had sixteen courses in black studies. When students at Pennsylvania's Cheyney State College chased the existing administration out of its building, they demanded a state investigation of school policies. The students thrown out of Louisiana's Grambling College merely wanted less emphasis on athletics and more on academics.

Black students on Negro campuses were merely rejecting the paternalism (some say "maternalism") of their administrations and, like the black race generally, seeking a new direction. They resented the fact that their colleges are fundamentally grotesque caricatures of white colleges, and that they are denied any place ⁱⁿ ~~in~~ helping to determine their own destinies.

Because administrators extend only puppet power even to official student government, most students disdained to take an active part in routine campus elections. Thus the students

elected to office seldom represent genuine choices of the student bodies they purport to serve, and, except for occasional sham attempts to be relevant to student interests, serve largely antical goals. Students seeking self-determination accordingly feel impelled to take matters into their own hands and force the administration to serve them.

Most Negro college students want to know how to "break this administrative grip." The Dean of Students at UAPB (AM&N) indicated that, despite a high flunkout rate, UAPB lost more students each year who earn a "C" average and above than students with less than a "C" average. This could lead to speculation that most major leaders of black revolutionary groups such as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), RAM (Revolutionary Action Movement) and the Black Panthers, were above-average, frequently honor students, in predominantly black colleges or junior colleges, before dropping out in disgust. Instead of teaching white colleges, by example, the methods of a new genuine freedom, Negro colleges merely compounded the most deplorable errors of white college ways.

Consequently, there is an ever-widening gulf between black students and Negro professors. The Negro professor's gleeful submission to a "melting pot" uniformity necessarily produces in a college involuntarily black an institutional schizophrenia. "Under such circumstances," wrote Riesman and Jencks in the Harvard Educational Review, "the Negro colleges could have maintained their self-respect only if they had

viewed themselves as a pre-revolutionary holding operation, designed to salvage the victims of injustice." This they have never done. Part of the blame rests as much on the professors as on the administrators.

Negro professors are generally characterized by acquiescence to the administration and a resignation to academic nothingness. They disidentify with their work - for promotions are largely social or political in nature - and do enough to just get by. To compensate for this condition, professors ceremonialize the most minute achievements into regal grandiosity. More than half a dozen "academic processions" are pompously strutted through each term - Founders Day, Charters Day, Parents Day, May Day, baccalaureate ceremonies and commencement exercises - at which white and Negro dignitaries speak or receive "honorary" degrees. There is a very high turnover of personnel, dampened by the addiction to the ownership of fine homes and the difficulty some of them experience in getting other jobs. "They are marginal," although some of them will pad their "bibliographies" with "letters to the editor" and the like. Those who dare to rebel are either dismissed on some pretext or labeled crazy or "confused." Elaborate codes of conduct, vaguely defined, are set up to keep both faculty and students in lockstep and submission.

Many students increasingly came to realize the interdependence of faculty and student conditions. More and more of them are growing aware of the fact that freedom for them is

freedom for the faculty which in turn will benefit them. While such sentiments are on the rise in Negro colleges across the country, they are currently held by only a minority of students. However, the very apathy and inactivity of the student majority, bent mainly on hucklebucking through fraternity bazaars on the way to a bachelor's degree and a big-time job, will permit the militant minority to wield a disproportionate impact.

This was the case during the struggle at Howard in 1966-67. The students wanted not only to prevent the proposed transformation of Howard into a white university but also contrarily to further "blacken" Howard, to "overthrow the Negro college with white innards and to raise in its place a black university relevant to the black community and its needs." That was not then a popular orientation of black students at Negro colleges. Thus, though they were able generally to excite mass protest on particular issues, the struggle mainly took the form of guerilla propaganda and activity by a small vanguard whose goals frequently conflicted with moderate and liberal black student activists who then thought the vanguard too "extreme."

It was difficult to escalate to mass action, the most successful effort culminating in a boycott of merely one day. Part of this was due to the absence of provocation by visible (uninformed) police action on the campus, all violence being executed by the rebels. Containment took the form of police infiltration and student spies in the employ of the administration.

At the same time, there was not a single arrest, even after a police infiltrator was quietly shot near the campus. This, like many other provocative events such as scattered fires and other terrorism, was totally kept out of the press, though the press, like the police, knew about the incidents. Also, there was almost no involvement by the faculty members. This lessened the spread of support by students though many leaned toward change. In any case, the participation of a faculty member was a lonely one, leaving him subject to the most trivial forms of harassment.

School closed, and in the dead of early summer about twenty students and six professors (all but one of them white) received letters of dismissal for their "black power" activities. The courts readmitted the students, but, though pointing out that ~~■~~^{they} were illegally dismissed (without a hearing) have not acted on ~~■~~^{their} case to this day. Meanwhile, the student members of the Black Power Committee were imprisoned in another town in a summer "riot-prevention" roundup of Black militants, in this case for allegedly "conspiring to incite a riot." No bail was set until October, leaving the student forces of the year before gravely decimated. The liberal-moderate students dillydallied but did little else. There also was no help, as promised the year before, from the community's black militants, including the Washington Committee for Black Power, an umbrella group of the activists in the area of which Dr. Nathan Hare was chairman. This is one of the most crucial failures in the

black college student struggle, the lack of enduring community support.

At Howard, as in the case of the previous year's boycott, student militants exaggerated the united front approach to the point of fallacy. Excessive in their search for "wide participation," they turned the leadership over to establishment students. It was clear by then that the major reason for the Black Power Committee's relative strength in 1966-67 resulted ~~from~~ its exclusiveness, although this angered many students who regarded themselves as "black militants" and had reputations for constant espousals of the glories of blackness and revolutionary rhetoric. These students, years later, could still be found at that game, beating their chests and reading and parroting Frantz Fanon and Mao Tse-Tung; and it eventually became apparent that they could not be expected to do much else.

Then there were the grand organizers who held a unifying meeting of the representatives of nineteen different groups, each proposing to have the cure for Howard's ills. They agreed on a collective name whose acrostics formed an African word meaning "unity" but they never did do anything else. Which is what they agreed in the first place that no member-group should do anything. There ^{WAS} a united front, apparently, and a united front.

There were many other conclusions at Howard which have implications for students everywhere, but they are difficult to draw. For one thing, the ancient Toms at Howard are being

replaced now, at least in token degree, by a liberal black bourgeoisie. This new black bourgeoisie is not to be confused with the Negro bourgeoisie which E. Franklin Frazier described in his Black Bourgeoisie. The group of which we speak is a radicalized sector of the new black middle class, leaning neither toward the left-wing Black Panthers nor the radical separatists such as the Republic of New Africa.

Its ideology revolves around black occupancy of crucial niches affecting black people. In the college situation; it is spurred more recently by a dream of converting the old negro colleges into black colleges. They stress cultural reversion, while almost totally diddaining the politics of confrontation; few have ever participated in any form of activist struggle. Thus, despite their puffy tooting of "blackness," and the concomitant cover of black unity, they continue to receive strong criticism from their more revolutionary students. It is clear, then, that the Howard story has not ended yet. The developments there, in any case, are almost certain to be reflected more or less in other Negro colleges. Take a look at Southern University.

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