

Theorizing Black Studies: The Continuing Role of Community Service in the Study of Race and Class

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This essay proposes that “community service” and related efforts to develop programmatic linkages with neighborhood institutions and organizations represent a key component in the theory and pedagogy of black studies. Research paradigms that include community service and civic involvement reflect the description of black studies as a discipline that is “descriptive, critical, and prescriptive,” to use the words of Professor Manning Marable.¹ Attention to the pedagogy of community service on the part of scholars in black studies is important for the growth of this field of intellectual inquiry as well as for its growing impact on the analysis of political and economic issues facing black communities and U.S. urban society. Both theory and praxis are key to understanding how black life experiences have molded, and are reflected, in United States society.

Theory refers to the building of predictive and projective knowledge about the experiences of blacks in the African diaspora and how such experiences have influenced major national and global developments. The term *praxis* implies that theoretical understandings of black life experiences in this society should be informed by the experiences of blacks in ongoing political, economic, educational, and cultural struggles aimed at the expansion of racial and economic democracy. While this notion seems logical given the birth of black studies in the post-WWII period, it is resisted at some levels in higher education. Within the field of black studies,

however, community service focuses on changing system-based and dominant/subordinate social and economic relations and improving living conditions for blacks, and thereby, other communities. As a matter of fact, many black studies programs in U.S. higher education were established during the 1960s and 1970s not only because of the need to examine race and political economy in urban settings but also to enhance the effectiveness of black civic participation in the interests of social and racial justice. Indeed, this is still a distinguishing feature of many black studies programs, although it is resisted somewhat, as suggested by Joy James in her article, "The Future of Black Studies: Political Communities and the 'Talented Tenth'" (chapter 8, this volume).²

Revisiting this traditional role of community service in the field of black studies is a timely topic in that several doctoral programs offering courses of study in black studies have been established recently. There are now doctoral programs in black studies at Temple University, the Ohio State University, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of California at Berkeley. The call for the linkage of praxis with theory, and the pedagogy of community service, is an important component of these doctoral programs. The incorporation of community service within black studies, furthermore, has been endorsed by many scholars presenting papers at recent professional and academic conferences focusing on black studies.

The relationship between community involvement, or praxis, and the development of social and economic theory has been ignored or dismissed in other disciplines. But contrasted to this mainstream bias is the idea found in black intellectual thought that scholarship must be in service to social democracy in civic life. Indeed, several black studies departments and programs across the nation have designed curricula on the basis of building theory and knowledge linked to involvement with community-level experiences, preparing students to work in a variety of civic and professional settings. The recently established doctoral programs in this field suggest, through their faculty and curricula as well as their inaugural ceremonies, that scholarship about black experiences in the U.S. should be pursued within a framework of theory, praxis, *and* community service.

Community service represents a significant component in the field of black studies because it is actually an important research tool. Thus, the call for community service is viewed not solely as public service but as a key component for certain kinds of research. For instance, some focus on community service highlights the limitations in research concepts and par-

adigns utilized for the study of race and class within other disciplines such as political science, sociology, psychology, and economics. These limitations are associated, in part, with the separation of theory building from praxis and community service in the organization of these fields by traditional departments and universities. This is suggested in a publication by M. E. Hawkesworth, *Theoretical Issues in Public Policy Analysis*.³ The author notes that the field of public policy can be described as in a state of intellectual crisis because its methodology and purpose have become obfuscated with a false scientism serving no useful social purpose in advancing democracy. Mainstream scholarship focusing on the economics of poverty or race relations in the United States has not been able to help develop public policy and civic participation that can allow the United States to overcome certain kinds of racial problems. At times scholarship reflects its own industry, separated from dialogue and activism aimed at advancing social democracy. Because community service within the field of black studies is not disparaged or rejected as a component of research paradigms, it helps to inform and propel an intellectual understanding that may facilitate more effective civic responses to political and economic problems facing black communities.

In the contemporary period there are several political conditions and issues that are of particular significance in determining the social and economic status of the U.S. urban black community. The integration and utilization of community service in the field of black studies contribute to a greater understanding of the nature of these conditions and how the civic sector can respond to these issues. These major political and economic issues facing black communities include how its leadership should respond to national social policies—whether supported by Democrats or Republicans—that continue to weaken, institutionally and culturally, urban communities through the defunding of cities. Such policies include the adoption and implementation of *laissez-faire* or trickle-down approaches that usually focus on the development of downtown or benefits to corporate interests at the expense of neighborhoods.

Another challenge facing blacks as a group is how the nation's intelligentsia, including media, educators, scholars, and cultural leaders, continue to approach black urban communities as pathology, rather than recognize the significant cultural and intellectual contributions to U.S. society reflected in the nation's black community. A relatively new political issue for the U.S. urban black community is the status and future relations with other communities of color that are growing in number and po-

tential social influence. Perhaps this particular issue can only be understood and responded to in the interest of advancing democracy within a context of praxis? Yet another challenge facing black communities is how to respond to the renaissance of “color blindness” as a powerful and dominant ideology protecting the social and economic status quo. This ideology is becoming increasingly popular and influential in justifying a racial order born of segregation and slavery. And certainly the growing numbers and concentration of alienated youth without linkages to cultural or socially supportive institutions in their communities are another important challenge facing black communities. While not an exhaustive listing, these are some of the basic social issues that community service pedagogy can target in the field of black studies. I propose that community service, as an integral component of black studies, is a fundamental tool for building effective theoretical frameworks and public policies.

Black Studies and the Role of Community Service

The history of black studies as a field illustrates that theory must be strongly linked to praxis, or community service. Planning and institutionalizing opportunities to pursue scholarship, praxis, and community service within an integrated framework was a major demand of students during the 1960s black cultural renaissance and black studies movement in U.S. higher education. In predominantly white universities the call for opportunities to pursue “community-based” research within programs of Afro-American studies can be summarized by the famous demands of black students at San Francisco State University in 1968. These black students, and other students as well, argued that the scholarship they were exposed to should be both informed by the everyday struggles of black people for justice and economic survival as well as useful in preparing students to make contributions to society.

The suggestion that black studies should reflect research concepts and paradigms based on community experiences is one of the strongest intellectual traditions within the black struggle for educational equality and opportunity in the United States and abroad. This is the first theme explained by Charles V. Hamilton in his classic taxonomy of black intellectual and philosophical traditions and values, *The Black Experience in American Politics*.⁴ Historical and contemporary examples of how this theme is reflected in the work of a wide range of scholars can be found in William M. Banks’s more recent book, *Black Intellectuals*.⁵ In fact, the first

editorial of the nation's first black newspaper in 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, called for black leaders to use education and scholarship as a civic and political resource aimed at the abolition of slavery and uplifting the black masses. This was an important theme of Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, published in 1895.⁶ Washington explained that he decided to pursue education in order to return to his community with skills that would help uplift blacks in the South. He argued further that this was a widely held belief in the black community; that is, those blacks fortunate enough to acquire an education were expected to return benefits to less fortunate blacks by being involved with their community and receiving training that would advance this involvement.

This theme was reflected in the activism of black journalist and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who went much further than Booker T. Washington regarding the professional responsibility for community service on the part of the black scholar and activist. While Washington generally felt that black scholarship could be utilized to uplift the race, such uplifting could be carried out under the social and economic order of American society. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, however, believed that the *moral* responsibility of black intellectuals meant not only trying, socially and economically, to uplift the community but also challenging a racist social order. According to Wells-Barnett, black intellectuals even had moral license to consider those social situations that might require military action in order to redress wrongs committed against blacks in America. Despite this important difference, however, in both instances scholarship and the pursuit thereof was tied to working with one's community.

The proposal that black scholarship must be put at the service of solving the social, economic, and political problems of the community was certainly a strong theme in the life of W. E. B. Du Bois. His life reflects the belief that knowledge and intellect should be informed by praxis at the service of the black community. Indeed, Du Bois's often misunderstood idea of the "talented tenth" was based on this very proposition. Du Bois certainly did not advocate that a black elite be established as in a neo-colonial bourgeoisie that would serve as a bridge or channel between powerful colonial powers and "the natives." He acknowledged that because of racism in American society it would be unlikely that the masses of blacks would be educated and thereby equipped to challenge the racial, economic, and political order. What he proposed was that those few blacks fortunate enough to break through the racial barriers of advanced education had a professional—and moral—obligation to help other

blacks break down the barriers of racial exclusion in ways that would change society for the better in terms of social and economic equality.

One of Du Bois's major intellectual works, and a critical study in defining the field of urban sociology today, is *The Philadelphia Negro*.⁷ This work reflected a commitment to the pursuit of scholarship within a framework of praxis and community service. Decades later, Malcolm X argued eloquently that the purpose of education was to liberate the black mind from mental slavery, but such education had to be grounded in the political and economic struggles to strengthen black communities.

Between the turn of the twentieth century and the period of Malcolm X there were many educators, activists, and scholars who insisted that scholarship that would be useful to the advancement of blacks in the United States must be grounded in praxis and community service. This is reflected in the works of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Oliver Cox, the late John Henrik Clarke, as well as the artistic contributions of individuals like Lorraine Hansberry and Paul Robeson.

There are numerous works on black life in America in the 1960s that reflect the synthesis of scholarship, praxis, and community service. Although many examples could be cited, I have found two classics particularly useful for examining the role of community service within black studies. One is Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, published in 1965.⁸ This important study, actually a sort of case study of a specific antipoverty program, HARYOU, laid the intellectual and conceptual foundation for numerous studies and books focusing on race relations and the nation's political economy today. The methodology used by Clark to produce *Dark Ghetto* reflects how community service can advance intellectual understandings of social and economic situations. Clearly, Professor Clark would not have been able to produce this insightful work about social and racial relations within and without a black urban community without his community work and experiences in the HARYOU program.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent arguments for the pursuit of community-based research within black studies is presented by Harold Cruse in his work *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, also published in the mid-sixties.⁹ Professor Cruse pointed to what Alexis de Tocqueville, David Truman, Robert Dahl, and many other white scholars had also concluded, namely, that the "group" is a fundamental social and cultural reality in American society. Cruse simply reminded blacks that struggles for racial and economic justice should reflect this fundamental fact of U.S. society. Black intellectuals, or the professional sector, could only be effective

in the long run if they were grounded in the theories and activism necessary to advance the group or the community. Blacks who were alienated, or disconnected, from their own community were, in fact, “ahistorical” beings. Individuals, as such, have very little opportunity to do anything that will move the community forward economically and politically. The black community would not move forward, according to Professor Cruse, if they acted as a conglomeration of individuals rather than a cultural group, as have others who realized economic and political progress in the United States.

The importance of community service, and praxis, as a research tool within this field was echoed by black studies professor Abdul Alkalimat in his introduction to *Paradigms in Black Studies: Intellectual History, Cultural Meaning and Political Ideology*: “There is one profound consistency in all fundamental modes of Black social thought: a focus on change. The key issue is changing the conditions that cause Black people’s historical suffering.”¹⁰ This implies that individuals educated under the umbrella of black studies must have opportunities to become involved in the challenges facing black communities, a key aspect of their education.

This fundamental role of black studies, which involves training for civic action on the part of intellectuals and students, was also captured by another black studies professor, Maulana Karenga, when he wrote in his classic work, *Introduction to Black Studies*,

Black Studies advocates stressed the need for Black intellectuals who were conscious, capable and committed to Black liberation and a higher level of human life. They argued like Du Bois that the race would be elevated by its best minds, a “Talented Tenth” which did not sell itself for money and machines, but recognized and responded creatively to the fact of the indivisibility of Black freedom and their indispensable role in achieving it.¹¹

Discussing the pedagogy of black studies, Karenga explains that a major and “early objective” of the advocates of black studies was “the cultivation, maintenance and continuous expansion of a mutually beneficial relationship between the campus and the community. . . . The intent here was to serve and elevate the life-conditions and the consciousness of the community and reinforce the student’s relationship with the community through service and interaction.”¹² Again, Alkalimat, in his previously cited work: “Afro-American Studies, as a field, is a partisan activity, an

enterprise in which the objective is not merely to understand the world but also to help make it better."¹³

These statements are verified by many scholars examining the thoughts and writings of many black intellectuals involved with advancing education. Historians Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed substantively illustrate this point in their collection of case studies in the struggles of black women, *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible*.¹⁴ This anthology shows that for many black women educators the idea that scholarship should be, and is, strongly associated with activism is a dominant one. Other examples of black women educators who based their intellectualism on community involvement are provided in the reference book by Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*.¹⁵

The importance of continuing to link black studies and a community-based research agenda was reiterated at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the National Congress of Black Faculty. The keynote speaker for the annual meeting, renowned sociologist James Blackwell, emphasized this theme in his discussion on the mentoring of black students in higher education, arguing that students needed to be trained and educated for activism. According to the minutes and resolutions of the November 2, 1990, meeting of the Council of Community Relations, this topic is important for two reasons: 1) the presence of black educators in American higher education is intricately and historically tied to black community activism; and 2) the synthesis of the community's political, social, and educational agendas with the research agendas of black scholars and teachers in academia can produce creative, significant, distinctive research projects beneficial to American society. This call does not mean that politics or political opinions take the place of scholarship. It simply means that theory is most effective, logical, and useful when it is informed by the real-life experiences of people. In fact, theory that is not informed by such experiences may not be useful in moving the black community forward socially, economically, and culturally.

Notes

1. Manning Marable, "Black Studies and the Black Intellectual Tradition," *Race and Reason*, vol. 4 (1997-1998), pp. 3-4.

2. Joy James, "The Future of Black Studies: Political Communities and the 'Talented Tenth,'" *Race and Reason*, vol. 4 (1997-1998), pp. 36-38.

3. M. E. Hawkesworth, *Theoretical Issues in Public Policy Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

4. Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Experience in American Politics* (New York: Capricorn, 1973).
5. William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: Norton, 1996).
6. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).
7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Schocken, 1967 [1897]).
8. Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
9. Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967).
10. Abdul Alkalimat, *Paradigms in Black Studies: Intellectual History, Cultural Meaning, and Political Ideology* (Chicago: Twenty-first Century, 1990).
11. Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: Kawai-da, 1982), p. 27.
12. Ibid.
13. Alkalimat, *Paradigms in Black Studies*.
14. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible* (New York: Carlson, 1995).
15. Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).