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**Restoring  
Traditional Values  
in Higher  
Education:  
More Than  
Afrocentrism**

*By Anne Wortham*



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# Restoring Traditional Values In Higher Education: More Than “Afrocentrism”

By Anne Wortham

I like to examine ideas, intellectual developments and social movements in terms of the basic premises that can be inferred from the statements and actions of their proponents and opponents. I am always interested in the ramifications they have for social life and intellectual history. This kind of examination is the approach I shall take today in my discussion of Afrocentrism.

## Multiculturalism and Afrocentrism as Anti-concepts

Since Afrocentrism is a part of the larger movement called multiculturalism, let me begin by identifying that movement's essential claims, as summarized by John Taylor in a recent article on political correctness in *New York* magazine. Taylor writes that multiculturalism claims 1) that Western society has for centuries been dominated by “the white male power structure,” or “patriarchal hegemony”; 2) that everybody but white heterosexual males have suffered some form of repression and been denied a cultural voice; and 3) that Western civilization is inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals.

As a species of multiculturalism, Afrocentrism claims that Western civilization is unfair to minorities, most particularly blacks, and that it is now time for emphasis to be given to black contributions to culture. Before I say more about the specific claims of Afrocentrism, let me take a moment to focus on what I view as the epistemological function and ideological significance of the concept of multiculturalism.

**Incapable of Clear Thinking.** Multiculturalism is what philosopher Ayn Rand calls an “anti-concept.” Rand defines the anti-concept as an “artificial, unnecessary, and (rationally) unusable term, designed to replace and obliterate some legitimate concept... without public discussion; and, as a means to that end, to make public discussion unintelligible, and to induce the same disintegration in the mind of any man who accepts it, rendering him incapable of clear thinking or rational judgment.” A legitimate concept is a term that distinguishes the essential characteristics of the thing it refers to from everything else. The anti-concept sounds like a legitimate concept, but the reason is it unusable is that it is really a term with a definition by nonessentials.

Multiculturalism is the belief that a cohesive and open society depends on cultural diversity and the enhancement and preservation of ethnic differences. It follows that the responsibility of the schools is to provide a multicultural education that mirrors the diversity within society and perpetuates values that support the rights of students as ethnic citizens. This in turn prepares them to function in their ethnic communities and the larger society. There are several nonessentials in this conception, but the primary source of its illegitimacy is in the

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definition of an open and cohesive society by the nonessential attribute of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is one of the consequences of an open society, but not its essential or defining attribute. An open society is distinguished by the guarantee of the right of the individual to choose the association he wishes to join, not the right of ethnic groups to survive.

Many people think multiculturalism is just another term for pluralism, so they are reluctant to question its validity or the policies and programs advanced in its name. They understand pluralism to be a pattern of ethnic relations in which cultural differences of citizens are mutually tolerated and preserved within the framework of a larger set of agreed-upon principles that legitimate social, political and economic institutions. The ideal is the form of voluntary pluralism suggested by the motto of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, which means "one out of many."

**Not Homogenous.** In its most fundamental sense, the "many" refers to individuals of diverse interests, backgrounds, affiliations, attributes, goals and achievements. This is the form of pluralism that multiculturalism means to delegitimize and replace. I call voluntary pluralism individualist pluralism. Such a pattern entails the restriction of equality to the political equality of individuals. It recognizes that individuals have a plurality of interests, attributes, and affiliations and ought to be equally free of interference as they peacefully bring those dimensions of their lives to bear on their aspirations. Like multiculturalism, individualist pluralism rejects the idea that people should be united by melting them into a homogenous superculture. Rather, it holds that people should be united, protecting their right to individuality; the well being of society depends on the fundamental principle of personal autonomy.

In a multi-ethnic society based on individualist pluralism, diversity exists within the context of a universal human nature, the expression of which requires the protection of individual differences. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, encourages the establishment and maintenance of boundaries between groups and a high degree of commitment to group solidarity. It is the belief in the desirability of proportionally dispersing economic and political power and diffusing cultural elements among a variety of groups so that no one group, language, set of beliefs, values or customs is dominant. In other words, multiculturalism aims to eliminate the very universalism that legitimates voluntary pluralism. It threatens the essence of a free and open social order by replacing pluralism with particularism. John Leo, of *U.S. News and World Report*, conveys an implicit understanding of these points when he asks: "What would America look like if each ethnic group won its own curriculum?"

**Haitian-Creole Curriculum.** One advocate of the Afrocentric curriculum has already proposed a separate Haitian-Creole curriculum. "Install one," says Leo, "and demands for Cambodiocentric or Italocentric curricula would most likely follow." The multiplication of curricula to meet the demands of any group that defines itself as distinct from the rest of society is the practical consequence of an ideology that defines American society by the non-essential of its multicultural composition instead by the ideals and the way of life that make such diversity possible. It defines American citizens by the nonessential of ethnic affiliation. Multiculturalism is the ideological corollary of the politically imposed plural-but-equal pattern of intergroup relations that is legitimated by the idea of group-based rights. It is a type of corporate or regulated pluralism in which the group has primacy over the individual in education and in social, economic and political life.

Corporate pluralism takes the position that group diversity should reflect the segmentation of world views, life-styles and cultural heritage of collectivities. By contrast, individualist pluralism sees group diversity as the reflection of the choices of individuals to pursue their opportunities through groups, which mediate between themselves and the wider society. In education multiculturalism takes the position that each ethnic group should benefit equally from school facilities and curricula. Individualist pluralism stresses not equality of output but the equal protection of the right of individuals to pursue opportunities. Individualist pluralism is based on the legal freedom of individuals to strive, in cooperation with others, for social, economic and political goals that do not require the violation of individual rights. Multiculturalism, however, is based on the competing interests of groups and the subjugation of the choices of individuals to the "collective will" of the group. Rather than encourage the tolerance of individual differences, it emphasizes differences among groups of people. It is used to substitute social and cultural determination for self-definition; it aims to legitimate the idea that cultural heritage unites individuals rather than ideas and values. It has been called "fascism of the left," and rightly so.

**"Neo-Racist" Cognomen.** Many multiculturalists believe that Afrocentrism is hostile to multicultural education, without appreciating that it is multiculturalism that makes Afrocentrism possible. I first encountered the term Afrocentrism in a 1982 review of my book, *The Other Side of Racism*, by Professor Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University. Professor Asante called my book "neo-racist." He wrote that it marked "one of the worst setbacks for academic publishing in contemporary history." In his view, the book demonstrated "a complete mastery" of what he called "Eurocentric individualistic ideologies." He is right on that charge. Although I do not have complete mastery of the principles of individualism, I am completely and unreservedly committed to mastering them. Of course, to call individualism Eurocentric is a contradiction in terms.

Asante also accuses me of being totally ignorant of "African concepts," and of failing to see the "antagonism between European individuality and African collectivity." He finds it abominable that someone who is both female and black defends the ideas of individualism as strongly as I do, and writes a book criticizing the civil rights movement from the perspective of individual liberty. He says that "Worham seems to know neither African history nor the American experience of Africans." Why? Because, he argues, the Americans I called "Negroes" are really Africans who are part of the "African diaspora" and "exist in hundreds of ethnic groups." My ignorance is also apparent, he says, in my rejection of the idea that blacks cannot be racists. He also condemns as Eurocentric my use of the term "American Indians" to refer to "Native Americans."

**Political Correctness.** So even in 1982 political correctness reared its head, but I had encountered it much earlier on. During the early 1960s, I discovered that to be a politically correct student I should embrace the anti-white collectivism of many civil rights activists as morally superior to the anti-black collectivism of bigoted whites. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Tanzania I learned that to be politically correct I should not defend American capitalism against the resentment-charged denunciations by my African co-workers; that I should see my fate as linked not to that of my fellow white countrymen but to that of those Africans who shared part of my racial ancestry. Later, as I pursued a career, I learned that to be a politically correct black person in predominantly white business and academic settings, I should take on the role of historical victim and confirm the identity of white colleagues who accepted the

indictment of themselves as historical oppressors and needed my condemnation to legitimate the self-imposed guilt on which they based their sense of worth.

Now, before I examine the content of Afrocentric education, let me take this opportunity to be politically incorrect once more and say that I am not an African; calling myself African would make no more sense than a white Australian calling himself English because his ancestors were English prisoners deported to the Australian continent. Neither am I part of any “African diaspora.” I am a native of this land – an indigenous American and thoroughly Western. This is my home; I desire no other, either symbolically or existentially.

### **Afrocentrism’s Promise of Self-Esteem**

What exactly is Afrocentrism anyway? My comments are drawn basically from Professor Asante’s 1987 book, *The Afrocentric Idea*. He writes that Afrocentricity means “placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior.” The Afrocentric idea is “a commitment to a historical project that places the African person back on center” in a cultural analysis; as such it becomes an “escape to sanity.” Asante argues that Afrocentrism is not just an artistic or literary movement; neither is it just an individual or collective quest for authenticity through the history of a people. Above all, he says it is “the total use of a method to effect psychological, political, social, cultural and economic change.” It involves overthrowing “Eurocentric icons” and exorcising them from the life and thought of African-Americans whose minds have been colonized by Europeans. The Afrocentric idea goes beyond the decolonizing of the mind that began with the black power movement to something else – the quest for an authentic mindset that one can speak of as Afrocentric.

**Improving Self-Image.** According to the Afrocentric perspective of education, the way to improve the educational achievement of black children is to improve their self-image by requiring that teachers include or emphasize the contribution of blacks in art, science, mathematics, language arts, social studies and music. This approach, known as the “Afrocentric curriculum” has gained in popularity and is being variously implemented around the country. In the District of Columbia, where enrollment is 90 percent black, a group of parents and businessmen founded an organization called, ironically, Operation Know Thyself, which lobbies school officials and pushes for the integration of an Afrocentric curriculum in all courses from kindergarten through high school.

The name Operation Know Thyself is paradoxical because the premise underlying the organization’s promotion of an Afrocentric curriculum is that self-esteem is dependent on cultural heritage, and that the self is a group phenomenon rather than personal identity expressed in personality and character. The tragic irony in this approach is that the attempt to derive self-esteem from the knowledge of black cultural contributions requires that one’s sense of personal identity be tied to the thinking and actions of people with whom one happens to share some racial ancestry and ethnic history; it is a recipe not for increasing self-esteem, but for perpetuating the kind of other-oriented dependency that is one of the primary obstacles to positive self-esteem.

**Center of Culture.** A very controversial Afrocentric approach in education is the teaching program known as African-American Baseline Essays, an outline used by several inner-city public schools around the country. The central claim of the Baseline Essays is that ancient Egypt was a black nation. One of the essays asserts that Europeans “invented the theory of ‘white’ Egyptians who were merely browned by the sun. According to Baseline: 1) Africa was

“the world center of culture and learning in antiquity.” Ancient Greece derived significant aspects of its culture largely from blacks. 2) Ramses II and King Tutankhamen were black. Aesop was probably black. Cleopatra was partly black. 3) “Since Africa is widely believed to be the birthplace of the human race, it follows that Africa was the birthplace of mathematics and science.”

**“Tolerant Racist.”** According to the New York State Board of Education’s 1989 Task Force on Minorities, the value of the Afrocentric approach is not only that it will cause children of minority groups to have “higher self-esteem and self-respect,” it will also cause children from European cultures to have “a less arrogant perspective.” This idea is an inversion of the argument made during the 1950s by social scientists, who took the position that segregated schools contributed to the low self-esteem of black school children. Together these propositions amount to saying that the self-image of black students is dependent on having white classmates who must disprove their own alleged racism by tolerating the ethnocentrism of blacks. When white students incorporate the notion that their self-esteem is tied to the approval of minorities, they come to think in the following way: “I want to be good (i.e., tolerant). Minorities tell me I am bad (a racist/Eurocentric). A tolerant person does not contradict the assertions of minorities. So the way to be tolerant is to be racist.” This is the self-fulfilling prophecy that teachers encourage when they blindly abdicate their responsibility as educators and subject their students to Afrocentrism.

Ayn Rand’s condemnation of the double standard that permeated victimization politics of the 1970s is equally applicable to the promoters of Afrocentrism during the 1990s. For such people, wrote Rand:

“Tolerance” and “understanding” are regarded as unilateral virtues. In relation to any given minority, we are told, it is the duty of all others, i.e., of the majority, to tolerate and understand the minority’s values and customs – while the minority proclaims that its soul is beyond the outsider’s comprehension, that no common ties or bridges exist, that it does not propose to grasp one syllable of the majority’s values, customs or culture, and will continue hurling racist epithets (or worse) at the majority’s faces. Nobody can pretend any longer that the goal of such policies is the elimination of racism – particularly when one observes that the real victims are the better members of these privileged minorities.

The Afrocentric curriculum requires not only the complicity of whites in the denigration of the cultural origins of their ethnic groups, but also requires the estrangement of both whites and blacks from the distinct culture they have created in the United States. By using the term “African” to refer to members of the American Negro subculture and the term “European” to refer to members of the many Caucasian American subcultures, Afrocentric education completely distorts the reality of intergroup relations in America. Moreover, it deliberately defines American Negroes as outsiders to the Western experience in defiance of the fact that we are bloody well in it up to our necks! As Earl E. Thorpe pointed out three decades ago:

Since 1865 practically all colored Americans... constantly have viewed this country as their home, and have not wished to be expatriated or colonized. Their political and social faith have been the traditional faith of America, and they speedily and unhesitatingly have risen to the

colors when the nation was imperilled by war. By and large, they have been basically American since the early days of slavery, and their so-called racial traits are simply American traits, accentuated here and there by historic circumstance. This does not deny the survival of certain African words, dances, and similar idioms, but these survivals have become a part of the total national culture.

The premise of the Afrocentric curriculum is absurd, and its promise of self-esteem is doomed to fail. There is no doubt that black children have a need for positive self-esteem. They are not unique in this; the need for self-esteem is inherent in man's nature. (For an exposition on why this is so, I refer you to a work by psychologist Nathaniel Branden entitled *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*.) Self-esteem is the reputation a person has with himself. Branden defines authentic self-esteem as the integrated sum of a sense of personal efficacy (self-confidence) and a sense of personal worth (self-respect). He says that it is "the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living." There is only one way that man can make himself competent to live, and that is by the proper exercise of his rational faculty. He needs to have confidence in the reliability of his tool of cognition, and he needs to feel that he is right in his characteristic manner of acting — that he is good and fit for happiness. "Man makes himself worthy of living by making himself competent to live," says Branden.

**Personal Autonomy.** Since, as Branden points out, "There is nothing a man is so likely to regard as irreducibly and unalterably 'himself' as his manner of thinking," one of the primary tasks of education must be teaching children the method of thinking. They must be taught to attain intellectual independence to free themselves from the dependence on the authority of significant others. They need to achieve the personal autonomy that results from independent thinking, independent judgment and self-responsibility. Afrocentric education assumes that personal worth is derived from group pride, and in so doing, promises what it cannot deliver.

Studies of the effects of minority status on self-esteem indicate that although it may seem logical that experiences of prejudice, discrimination and economic failure would cause a group to have a lower self-esteem than a group that does not, it is not necessarily the case. Indeed to insist that it is to generate another stereotype — that of self-hatred.

**Race not Base.** The assumption of a direct relationship between self-esteem and discrimination assumes that all blacks adjust to their ethnic status in the same way and that there is no variation in the effect that ethnicity has on their self-concept. To date, studies of the relation of ethnic identity and self-concept show that: 1) no assumptions about self-esteem can be based on race; 2) factors such as social class, school performance and reference groups appear to be more important than race in explaining self-image; and 3) that self-satisfaction, pride and self-respect are not a monopoly of those of dominant groups.

All students should learn about the contributions to history and culture made by people of different backgrounds. But it is a cruel hoax to suggest that there is any significant linkage between race or ethnicity and self-esteem. When I attended school in a segregated school system in the South, I learned about blacks who had contributed to American culture. However, I was not taught that there was anything special about them except that they were very smart, articulate, creative people who were worth knowing about because of their outstanding human qualities and achievements, because of the role they played in the making of America, and the contribution they made to the uplift of the Negro community.



No one told me that by having this knowledge something positive would happen to my view of myself. The reason was that my teachers, who were black, knew that properly educating me meant teaching me how to function as a human being, not as a black person. They did not tell me this in so many words, but what they taught was a clear indication of their intent. In the face of a society that viewed Negroes only in terms of racial stereotypes, my teachers focused not on teaching me counter-stereotypes, as Afrocentrists would, but on the things I needed to know to fulfill my human potential. In other words, I believe they understood that being a victim of racism did not entitle me to exemption from the standards of human achievement, and it would have been unthinkable for them to give me the impression that I could obtain a sense of worth by secondhand means.

**History or Sales.** What is more important to the self-esteem of a Chinese-American: to know that tea, paper, paper money and printing originated in China or to acquire the skills necessary perhaps to sell tea and calculate his earnings? What is more important to the self-esteem of a Negro American: knowing that Negro spirituals and folk songs gave rise to what is recognized as American popular music, or learning how to defer immediate gratification when and if necessary and to tolerate unavoidable frustration in order to achieve his goals?

There is no necessary conflict between making students aware of the contributions of many peoples to the culture of their society and understanding that their self-concept has nothing to do with the achievements of people who happen to look like them, or talk like them or worship God as they do. Self-esteem is not a transferable commodity, or something conferred upon one by other people's character and actions. It has to be earned by the individual himself; there is no other way. What children need to learn is the distinction between culture and personality, and between biography and history.

This is not to deny the importance of teaching children about the history of American Negroes. But Afrocentrism does not simply claim that Negro American history has been distorted or excluded from school curricula; it wants to substitute any objective account of Negro history for its own selective and self-aggrandizing view. Moreover, in teaching students about the lives and achievements of people like Ralph Ellison, Duke Ellington or BeSSie Smith the Afrocentric curriculum intends that students view such persons not as individuals but as symbolic ancestors whose works are the cultural property of Negroes and whose lives were but extensions of all Negroes. Indeed, it demands that they be spoken of not even as Americans but as Africans.

**Unfortunate Washington.** Take another case, that of Booker T. Washington, founder of my alma mater, Tuskegee University. All school children need to know about the life and ideas of Washington, who was an inspiring figure in American history. However, since Washington was an ardent proponent of free enterprise and championed the other ideals of Western civilization, the consistent practice of Afrocentrism requires educators to present Washington as an unfortunate black leader who was a captive of Eurocentric consciousness. Surely, such a distortion of Washington's own worldview and his ideas cannot be seriously offered as education. No doubt he would be excluded from some Afrocentric curricula altogether.

### **Afrocentrism's Geographical Determinism**

An underlying assumption of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism is a crude kind of determinism that asserts a direct relationship between geography and culture. This determinism is

evident in Professor Asante's discussion of the relative merits of European and African rhetoric, which he defines as vocal interaction meant to stimulate cooperative action. Asante views works like Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as "a special Western perspective on discourse." On the assumption that the *Rhetoric* is a standard imposed on the rest of the world, he argues that not only has rhetoric existed in Africa much longer than in Europe or Asia, it also proceeds from different historical experiences than rhetoric in European society. In support of his argument Asante summarizes the deterministic assertions of a work by Michael Bradley entitled *The Iceman Inheritance*.

**Wurm Ice Age.** According to Asante, "[Bradley] contends that European attitudes and responses were shaped by the Wurm ice age." In the European landscape dominated by glaciers, a mentality (which Asante calls a "caveman mentality") emerged to draw boundaries, to establish patriarchy and to introduce individual and clan territoriality. In the regions where the sun dominated the environment, there emerged what Asante calls the "palm tree mentality." Asante says that this world view "is fundamentally community/society-oriented, relaxed and directed toward transcendence. Pressures of human survival, xenophobia and reliance on hunting combined to create the philosophical outlook of the European. On the other hand, interaction between humans in African society based on agriculture, burial of the dead, and ancestor respect, relates to another tradition." That tradition was based on a very strong collective mentality that gave greater importance to the group than to the individual.

Asante's use of Bradley's geographical determinism to support his argument against universal standards of discourse and to justify his denigration of the so-called "Western mentality" is not unique. Afrocentrist Leonard Jeffries at City College of New York (CCNY) divides the human race into the "ice people" and the "sun people." Europeans, who are descendants of the ice people are materialistic, selfish and violent, while Africans, who are descendants of the sun people, are nonviolent, communalistic and spiritual. These classifications assume a correlation between race and culture that does not exist, and a perfect correlation between natural environment and culture that does not exist. The assumption bypasses altogether the intervening variable of the meaning men give to the facts of their environment. As social demographer William Petersen points out, "Geography determines the limits of a group's development, but within these limits a considerable variation in culture is possible. In the often quoted words of Vidal de la Blache, 'Nature is never more than an advisor.'"

**Greater Control.** This is not to deny that there is some correlation between geography and culture, particularly among primitive peoples, but that relationship is made obsolete by more advanced peoples in the same area. "The greater the control over its natural environment a society has, the smaller this correlation will generally be and the less can one regard it as an inescapable cause-effect relation," says Petersen. "A reasonable stance can be based neither on geographic determinism nor on the denial that geographic factors are sometimes decisive, particularly in the past (and on occasion the quite recent past), in undeveloped countries, and in those regions of advanced economies subject to extremes of climate or topography."

Afrocentrists take no account of the fact that the correlation between geography and culture depends on technical skill. Indeed, their linkage of natural environment with culture and temperament amounts to no more than a folk belief advanced to justify the stereotyping of Europeans and the claim that Africans outrank Europeans in moral stature. Their categorization of groups according to environmentally-determined ideas, morality and behavior is no different than the "scientific racism" of such European writers as Count de Gobineau whose

racial theories were used to justify European imperialism. Indeed, according to Jeffries, in addition to being superior to whites in morality and temperament, blacks are also biologically superior because they have more melanin in their skin. He reportedly believes that melanin regulates health and intellect, which means that dark-skinned peoples live longer and are smarter than light-skinned peoples. These assertions are in the same class as those of Nazi leaders who preached that Germans belonged to the “superior Nordic race,” and that Jews and other non-Nordic peoples were inferior.

It was just this sort of racist thinking that was used to justify the oppression of blacks and other minorities. But *The Iceman Inheritance* was published in 1979 and, as I noted, Asante’s *The Afrocentric Idea* was published in 1987. I very much doubt that the publishers of those works would publish *The Other Side of Racism*, for it espouses a worldview and a set of values that, according to Bradley and Asante, are derived from the caveman mentality. And the last thing wanted these days is a work written from the perspective of the caveman mentality by a black person who is supposed to possess a palm tree mentality. “African-Americans who participate only in Eurocentric views can easily become anti-black, the logical extension of European cultural imperialism,” writes Asante. “They are victims of their own identity crisis, a crisis produced purely by their submission to the roles whites have forced them to play.”

**Open to Everyman.** One of the best arguments against the geographical determinism of the Eurocentrism critique that I have read is by George Reisman, professor of economics at Pepperdine University. Reisman quite rightly argues: “Western civilization is not a product of geography. It is a body of knowledge and values. Any individual, any society, is potentially capable of adopting it.” Some of the essential elements of Western civilization did not even originate in the West. But this is the least important thing about it. “The most vital thing to realize about it,” says Reisman, “is that it is open to everyone.” Indeed, I believe that it is precisely the accessibility of the intellectual and cultural content of Western civilization open to everyone that multiculturalists and Afrocentrists are attacking. They aim to discredit not only the content of Western civilization but also the universality of the rational faculty that produced it and is capable of comprehending it. The enemy is reason. This becomes evident when one considers just what Western civilization entails. As George Reisman points out:

Western civilization represents an understanding and acceptance of the following: the laws of logic; the concept of causality and, consequently, of a universe ruled by natural laws intelligible to man; on these foundations, the whole known corpus of the laws of mathematics and science; the individual’s self-responsibility based on his free will to choose between good and evil; the value of man above all other species on the basis of his unique possession of the power of reason; the value and the competence of the individual human being and his corollary possession of individual rights, among them, the right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness; the need for limited government and for the individual’s freedom from the state; on this entire preceding foundation the validity of capitalism, with its unprecedented and continuing economic development in terms of division of labor, technological progress, capital accumulation and rising living standards; in addition, the importance of visual arts and literature depicting man as capable of facing the world with confidence in his power to succeed, and music featuring harmony and melody.

**War of Words.** In the public debates over multiculturalism and their attending controversies in academia over political correctness the knowledge and values that constitute Western civilization are under attack, not because they have been proven invalid or harmful in their consequences but because they either originated in the West (and are thus deemed racist) or have been most fully developed and applied in the West (which critics say has occurred necessarily at the expense of the non-Western world) and because they represent a cultural achievement that is superior to that of other cultures (a judgment, say critics, that is impossible to make and that only ethnocentrists would insist on holding). On its face, the Eurocentrism critique appears to be just a war of words over the politicization of culture, freedom of speech in the academy, the merits of multicultural versus Western-oriented curricula, etc. To be sure these are real issues, but they are only proxies for more fundamental matters that become apparent when one focuses not on the fact of the debates and controversies, but on their conceptual content. It is to that chamber of horrors that I wish to turn next.

### **Discrediting Logic, Science and Objectivity**

Afrocentrism's educational program does not involve simply the discrediting of Western civilization. More fundamentally, its attack on European culture is but the latest manifestation of the two-centuries-old rejection of the principles that are required for a proper human life. This is not to suggest the equivalency of European culture and the proper life of mankind. On the contrary, the proper life for man is one lived in accordance with the universal natural requirements of human survival which communities may or may not discover and implement. The extent to which men of any community survive is the extent to which they guide their action and maintain their lives by means of their rational capacity. Explanations of the actions of individuals, groups and societies cannot be complete if they exclude the causal connection between human action and the commitment to conceptual awareness. Integrating the perceptual evidence of one's senses into conceptual knowledge enables one to project into the future and examine the past.

**Frozen in Now.** Human beings cannot survive, as the other higher animals do, by being frozen in the perceptual now where all that one can grasp cognitively are the concretes of his immediate experience. But this is the view of human consciousness that Afrocentrism's racial and geographical determinism assumes. It is necessarily in opposition to the effort by educators to push the child beyond the perceptual level of awareness at which he is born to the higher conceptual level of thinking that his survival requires. Its aim to decolonize the minds of American Negroes and purge the minds of whites is a program designed to arrest their rational capacity as human beings.

Indeed, as Asante presents it, Afrocentrism is a mixture of nationalism and mysticism that aims to liberate and protect students from the very requirements of human life, which Asante denigrates as "Eurocentric myths." These myths, says Asante, are objectivity, universalism, individualism, rationality, the scientific method and economic self-interest. These so-called Eurocentric myths are responsible for human progress wherever and to whatever extent it occurs, including the elimination of slavery in the United States. Yet, Afrocentrists argue that these are the ideas from which blacks need to be protected! As a proponent of black liberation theology has pointed out, the new forms of understanding that blacks need to achieve in order to bring about social change cannot be achieved until "the forms of communicating among blacks are no longer dominated by European cultural values and white pseudo-scientific and social science paradigms." This recipe for change is an explicit call for the rejection

of values and ideas that have been painted as distinctly European. But let me assure you that the change advocated will be regressive, not progressive.

**Plato versus Aristotle.** The opposition of Afrocentrists and other multiculturalists to what they call Eurocentrism is part of a larger intellectual debate between subjectivism and objectivism. It is a debate about the nature of reality and the power of human consciousness to understand reality and to validate the evidence of our senses. It is a debate as old as that between Aristotle, the objectivist and father of logic, and his teacher, Plato, the subjectivist. Indeed, it has been said that all of Western intellectual history is a debate between Plato and Aristotle.

This crucial intellectual contest has been chronicled by philosopher Leonard Peikoff in his book *The Ominous Parallels* in which he identifies the parallels between the ideas that led to Nazism in Germany and those that underlie the increasing pervasiveness of collectivism in America. Peikoff defines subjectivism as “the view that reality (‘the object’) is dependent on human consciousness (‘the subject’).” Therefore, subjectivists hold that instead of deriving knowledge or truth from the facts of reality, a person needs only to turn inward and consult those contents of consciousness that have the power to make reality conform to his dictates. The elements of consciousness that have this power are feelings. Peikoff writes that subjectivism is essentially “the doctrine that feelings are the creators of facts, and therefore men’s primary tool of cognition.” For the subjectivist, reality is whatever one says it is; what is true is whatever one feels or wishes.

**Human Mandate.** Objectivism, writes Peikoff, is “the view that reality exists independent of human consciousness; that the role of the subject is not to create the object, but to perceive it; and that knowledge of reality can be acquired only by directing one’s attention outward to the facts.” One asks questions and bases his judgments and conclusions only on their correspondence to the facts of reality. All of this requires the value of independent thinking that is the mandate before all human beings, wherever they are; for while man is a social animal, the thinking he must do is not a social activity.

Of course, we humans are neither omniscient nor infallible; we cannot know everything, and we can reach erroneous interpretations and evaluations. But the supreme fact of our existence is that we must apply our rational faculty to the problem of our survival. As someone has said, in the business of living no one has the right to be a conscientious objector. We may object to our nature, but we cannot escape it. This fact may be denied, evaded or denounced as “racist ideology,” and people are free to do so, but they are not free to escape the consequences of such a betrayal of their nature.

**Misery and Destruction.** We cannot survive as a species sitting around dreaming and making up things in our heads and as spoiled brats demanding that our ideas and beliefs are valid simply because they are ours or our ancestors’. Such thinking has nothing to show for itself but the wreckage of misery, death and destruction strewn across human history. Yet this is precisely the kind of thinking that pervades our culture and that Afrocentrists and other multiculturalists wish to sustain. They speak of “liberating” students from the necessity of making value-judgments (the rejection of “hierarchy”). But their insistence on the primacy of consciousness over reality necessarily sabotages consciousness itself. By severing the tie between reality and consciousness, these subjectivists hold man’s reason hostage to uncertainty. For once the tie between consciousness and reality is severed, there is no rational way to establish the validity of truth claims.

**Political Dominance.** Having done just this, Afrocentrists conclude that there are no objective interpretations, only situational explanations that reflect the interests of competing groups. When there is a conflict between interpretations, the correct view is established not on the basis of whether it corresponds to the facts, but as the outcome of the struggle of competing groups for political dominance. Knowledge is hostage to a continually contested political struggle between groups with opposing goals and worldviews. Truth is decided not by reason but by force. Make no mistake about it: the attempt to discredit objectivity is an unvarnished effort to destroy the legitimacy of our basic tool of knowledge: reason — the faculty that makes it possible for us to survive, the only thing that we have going for us.

In his indictment of objectivity, Asante claims that it has “protected social and literary theory from the scrutiny that would reveal how theory has often served the interest of the ruling classes.” So the last thing any American Negro should endorse is objectivity, for it is no more than a cloak to hide the oppressiveness of Western civilization. The problem with Eurocentrism, says Asante, is not that it expounds in Western categories, but in:

the absolute manner in which they are assumed to constitute the whole of human thought. Even in its reach for diversity, a Western philosophy or science creates, *inter alia*, limitations. In the West one may tolerate diversity of viewpoint and then establish a single set of criteria for what constitutes validity. In this formulation, neither African nor Southern Hemisphere thought amounts to much. This is not merely ignorance in the sense of ignoring the ways in which people in the cradle of civilization have dealt with communication or transcendence; it is, more seriously, the continuation of Western imposition of a view of the world, and the assumption that it is real.

The idea that objectivity is impossible to man was systematically argued by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose ideas continue to have significant influence throughout the intellectual world. Kant wrote that the external world that men perceive is unknowable in and of itself. The objects and events that men experience (the world we claim to know) are only chaotic sense impressions that are organized and given meaning by fundamental “categories” in the structure of the mind. According to Kant “understanding can never go beyond the limits of sensibility.” In this view knowledge of the external world is impossible. The essence of human consciousness is not to perceive reality, but to create reality.

**Private Universe.** These days almost everyone accepts Kant’s view. But, as Peikoff points out, there is disagreement over the answer to the question: whose consciousness creates reality? Psychological subjectivism, the view taken by the romanticists, the existentialists and assorted “vitalists,” says that each person creates a private universe in his own mind, a universe called into being by moods, feelings, irrational passion and the like.

(It is because many people equate individualism with psychological subjectivism that they often mistakenly believe there is a connection between individualism and existentialism. However, while existentialism attempts to reaffirm the importance of the individual in mass society, it is thoroughly subjectivist and condemns the idea that reality is objective and knowable by reason alone. It views knowledge as predominantly subjective, arrived at by means of feelings and moods rather than by detached, analytical understanding, which alienates the individual from his species nature. Together the romanticist movement and existentialism succeeded in corrupting the meaning of individualism by divorcing it from the context of reason.

All that is left is a collection of stereotypic images of pseudo-individualists: the rebel without a cause; the alienated loner; the self-centered, amoral and manipulative dog-eat-dog, power-seeking predator of the corporate and political worlds; the New Age narcissist who claims that he is the universe, and more – that he is in fact divine. These are the images that collectivists use in their ongoing campaign to discredit individualism.)

**Everyman's Structure.** The second group of subjectivists is the group Peikoff calls “social subjectivists.” These people take the view that reality is created not by the consciousness of individuals, but of groups. In Kant's perspective, writes Peikoff, “mankind as a whole is the decisive group; what creates the...world is not the idiosyncracies of particular individuals, but the mental structure common to all men.” Kant's social subjectivism is distinguished by its universalism. Later philosophers and social scientists adopted a pluralistic social subjectivism; in this view, men do not have the same mental structure. As Peikoff points out, pluralistic social subjectivists divide mankind into competing groups, “each defined by its own distinctive kind of consciousness, each vying with the others to capture and control reality.”

According to pluralistic social subjectivism each group creates its own truth and, in effect, its own universe, “There is no such thing as ‘the truth’ in any issue, the truth which corresponds to the facts,” writes Peikoff. “There is only truth relative to a group – truth ‘for us’ versus truth’ for them.”

**Racial Determination.** In Karl Marx's theory, history consists of the struggle between the consciousness of the oppressed class and the consciousness of the oppressors for the control of economic reality. The Nazis substituted race for class and divided mankind into competing groups whose minds were determined by their racial composition. “Racial subjectivism,” say Peikoff, “holds that a man's inborn racial constitution determines his mental processes, his intellectual outlook, his thought patterns, his feelings, his conclusions – and that these conclusions, however well established, are valid only for members of a given race, who share the same underlying constitution.”

One Nazi political scientist, Karl Schmitt, wrote in support of this view that “an alien may be as critical as he wants to be, he may be intelligent in his endeavor, he may read books and write them, but he thinks and understands things differently because he belongs to a different kind, and he remains within the existential conditions of his own kind in every decisive thought.”

**Suspect Theories.** The assumptions underlying Schmitt's racial subjectivism are exactly the same as Afrocentrism's Eurocentrism critique. “How can the oppressed use the same theories of the oppressors?” asks Molefi Asante. The assumption of Asante's question is that theories produced by the oppressors are suspect because they must necessarily serve the interests of the oppressors at the expense of the oppressed. “When Europeans colonized the world,” writes Asante, “they imposed European languages on the people they ruled and thereby made their chances for mental liberation all the more remote.” But Afrocentrism is not Marxist; it is racist. Asante writes that “while Afrocentric thinkers must confront presumptions of inequality, Marxism is not helpful in developing Afrocentric concepts and methods because it, too, is a product of a European consciousness that excludes the historical and cultural perspectives of Africa.”

An example of racial subjectivism at work in the motion picture industry is the idea that white people cannot direct black films. “A white director has to find an emotional center that

he can identify with and is therefore going to give the white characters a disproportionate amount of importance,” says Warrington Hudlin, president of the Black Film Makers Foundation and the producer of the 1990 film “House Party.” This was certainly true in the case of Richard Attenborough’s direction of “Cry Freedom” he said. “When a white director does black material, you don’t get the real story.”

“**Big Problem.**” Spike Lee, producer and director of “Do the Right Thing,” told *The New York Times* last year that he had “a big problem” with the idea of Norman Jewison directing “The Autobiography of Malcolm X.” Said Lee: “That disturbs me deeply, gravely. It’s wrong with a capital ‘W.’ Blacks have to control these films.”

One has only to substitute cultural heritage for racial makeup to see that multiculturalism and its Afrocentric perspective (and their respective dimensions of the Eurocentrism critique) are expressions of the same assumptions about human consciousness that underlie the Marxist and Nazi versions of subjectivism. Then it becomes clear that underlying such issues as the self-esteem needs of minority school children, the merits of gender-specific and ethnic-specific curricula, etc., is the debate over the nature of reality, of man’s consciousness, and how he acquires knowledge. That is why this debate is very serious. For if young people are taught that they cannot rely on their tool of knowledge because it is determined by the “dominant ideology” of capitalist society, their belief in this myth leaves them open to being influenced by the first group that promises them the cognitive efficacy they seek. And as things stand, that group is the one that shouts the loudest denunciations of other groups, the group in to which one was born.

**Different Logic.** Peikoff writes that the Nazis believed that since each race had a different truth as well as a different logic, it was useless for men of a “different kind” to turn to logic to resolve their disagreements. “There is not one correct method of reasoning binding on all men, but many opposite methods, many logics — Aryan, British, Jewish, etc. — each deriving from the mental structure of a particular group, each valid for its own group and invalid for the others.” The idea that logic and truth vary with racial groups is the doctrine of “polylogism,” a key feature of Nazism, that is not a theory of logic but a denial of logic. Writes Peikoff: “The polylogist invests ‘logic’ with the character of mystic revelation and turns logic into its antithesis: instead of being the means of validating objectively men’s claims to knowledge, logic becomes a subjective device to be used to ‘justify’ anything anyone wishes.” One of the consequences of substituting “justification” for “validation” is that the Western tradition of reality is now seen by Western philosophers as “structurally flawed.” Logic is seen as a disguised technique of domination associated with the European way of life that must be unmasked and denounced.

Since their arguments cannot be defended by reason, the polylogists proceed to turn the fallacy of *ad hominem* into a formal philosophic doctrine by claiming that objections to their claims may be dismissed as expressions of “bourgeois logic,” or “logocentrism” as deconstructionists would say, or as what multiculturalists call the “hierarchical discourse” of Eurocentrism. Thus, vilification of an opponent replaces analysis of his argument.

**Opposition to Reason.** As polylogism was the epistemological underpinning of Nazism’s racist ideology, so is it the root of Afrocentrism and multiculturalism. These doctrines are opposed not just to what they refer to as “Eurocentric consciousness,” but to reason itself. The enemy is not dead white European men, but man’s rational faculty, which is at once the source of his individuality and his linkage to all other human beings.



However, if there is one single dead white European male whom Afrocentrists and other multiculturalists view as their enemy, it is Aristotle, the father of logic, the art and method of correct thinking. Professor Asante attacks Aristotle's argument that reason can discover the laws of the universe and validate his observations by rational proof. His rejection of what he calls "the Western formulation of science" entails the accusation that the scientific method is Eurocentric because it rejects the idea that knowledge can be obtained by nonrational means. Truth, the Afrocentrists declare, is not attained by testing the observations of cold rationality but by intuition and mystical insight.

### **The Particularism of Collectivism**

To teach children these things is of course to cripple them. The imposition of this very primitive level of thought will leave them incapable of thinking in principle, and thereby without the intellectual tools they need to be able to think critically and arrive at independent judgments. What remains is a generation incapacitated by confusion and abject conformity.

Let me end by sharing an experience I had during fall 1989 at Smith College. While I was there the Student Organization Against Racism (SOAR) was composing a list of terms that refer to what they called "specific manifestations of oppression that goes on in society." In addition to racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism were ableism, "oppression of the differently able by the temporarily able;" and ageism, "oppression of the young and old by young adults and the middle-aged." They also listed "lookism" and "classism." This list, they said, was to facilitate an awareness of types of discrimination and prejudice. However, its unspoken purpose was to discredit the legitimate discriminating function of consciousness. It is an application of multiculturalism's zero-sum vision of value judgment, in which to make judgments about people or other ways of life is to engage in "oppression."

**Black Individualists.** I gave two talks at Smith. The first was on individualism in the black community. My basic argument was that whites do not have a monopoly on individualism, that blacks can be individualists, too. To illustrate my point I spoke of my own upbringing, how individualism had been a key element of my father's teaching, and how much of his teaching I could now find in many philosophical works that he himself was unaware of. I told the audience of my father's constant reminder to my siblings and me that he was raising us to be "independent, self-supporting and law-abiding citizens." Later I learned from my studies that he was teaching us a key principle of individualism and the very basis of a free society: that the corollary of political freedom is self-responsibility.

**Leaving in Tears.** In the middle of this, a black student — a young lady who, I later learned, was to be my hostess the next day — ran out of the room in tears. Why was she crying? Well, I was speaking in a language that was offensive to her. Students told me of the offensiveness of my views during the question period after the talk I gave the next night. They told me, in effect, that I spoke in a language that should not come from someone who is black and female. For they had been taught that my ideas were the same as those used by racists to justify their exploitation of the disadvantaged. One young lady, a white student, condemned me and said I should not have been permitted to speak there.

I could understand why the students were offended by what I said and by my presence. After all, when I was a college student, young people from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Tuskegee, and they spoke a language of collectivism I had

not heard before, which frightened me. However there was a significant difference between my apprehension in the hearing of the collectivistic advocacy of anti-white racial solidarity and the reaction of the Smith students to my advocacy of individualism. My reaction to SNCC's collectivism was not shared by most students, but the hostility that the Smith students have toward individualism is by no means a minority reaction. The collectivism that bothered me as a student is now taken for granted and taught to students under the guise of "diversity." But what is most troubling is that when today's students hear the principles of individualism articulated, they think they are hearing an opposing brand of collectivism that they call Eurocentrism.

We owe it to our students to teach them the difference between individualism and collectivism, and between objectivism and subjectivism, and to inform them of what is at stake in the conflict between those opposing worldviews. They may resent being so enlightened, they may flee from us in tears; but at least they will be aware of what the debate is really about.

**No One Exempt.** But we must teach them something else: that however the debate goes, there are certain biological, psychological and cognitive requirements of human survival that transcend the debate and that must be met. No human being is exempt from the imperative to exercise his consciousness by extending the range of his awareness beyond the perceptual concretes immediately confronting him to the conceptual level of consciousness that enables him to identify the numerous particulars in the world and integrate them by means of concepts into knowledge. No human being is exempt from the responsibility to acquire the knowledge man needs to survive. No human being is exempt from the requirement to choose to think — to regulate the action of his own consciousness — to generate and direct mental action. No human being is exempt from the requirement to maintain proper cognitive contact with reality. No human being is exempt from the requirement of judging what in his environment is beneficial or harmful to his well-being; what can further his life and what can endanger it; what is desirable and what is undesirable. No human being is exempt from the emotional response to the value judgments he makes. No human being is exempt from the basic need for self-esteem, for a positive view of himself.

**Universal Conditions.** These conditions of human survival are universal, but man has no automatic means of knowing them. They must be discovered and taught and passed on from one generation to the next. The first men had to discover these conditions or we would have become extinct as a species long ago. The fact that we continue to exist is the achievement of those who have across the ages learned these truths and acted accordingly. The issue of man's survival has not been settled once and for all by some ancient ancestor. It is the ruling issue of each person's life. Thus the imperative before young people in 1991 is no different than the imperative before the first cave man; the imperative for the Chinese is no different than the imperative for the Americans; the imperative for George Bush is no different than for Saddam Hussein. The rules for our existence are dictated by our nature, by the kind of being that we are, and we have but one choice in the matter: to heed those rules or sink to the level of a subhuman existence. For we must either live according to the requirements of our nature, or perish by them.

Now that is universalism. And it will not change simply because men denounce it as Eurocentrism and turn their backs on it in the name of Afrocentrism. These are things the young people need to know. And educators must have the courage to tell them.

