
Transcending Boundaries: Toward an Ethical Philosophy for New Black Leadership in the American College

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Introduction

While the headlines read that the numbers of racial/ethnic minorities on college campuses are not keeping pace with the overall growth in the college student population, the new intellectual power that exists on America's college campuses is at an all time high. The background, knowledge, and experiences that African American scholars—as well as American Indian/Native Alaskan, Asian Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino scholars—bring to the American college in the 21st century is having a major impact on the institution of higher education in the United States. This impact will only grow and amend the culture of higher education if these new members (new with respect to traditional notions of the American college) continue to take advantage of the opportunities presented in academe and avoid the pitfalls that may impede their ability to survive, contribute, and flourish.

The increase in African American scholars on college campuses did not happen by accident, but by design. In the infancy of the 21st century, the Black intellectual forces that have arrived on America's campuses are the product of the groundwork laid by such early thinkers as, Alexander Crummell, W. E. B. Dubois, Phyllis Wheatley, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, Mary Bethune Cookman, and Martin Delaney. These early thinkers, who transcended the contemporary political labels of radical, liberal, and conservative, laid the groundwork for the leadership of Black America in the 21st Century. It is important that the thoughts,

dreams, and visions of these pioneering figures in the realm of Black thought—along with some of their more contemporary counterparts—be kept in the forefront of our thinking and debate regarding an ethical philosophy of Black intellectual leadership. The focus of such a dialogue should be spearheading change in the American college that goes beyond the traditional Eurocentric paradigm that currently exists in these institutions.

This new Black intellectualism has emerged on the American college campus at a crucial time in American history. It is a time when the American college is in need of fresh perspectives that can be provided by Black thinkers. A Black philosophy of ethical leadership has the opportunity to gain support and momentum due to the current void in ethical leadership in American society and a need to focus on issues of ethical treatment of marginalized groups.

The author of this article contends that the need for a new standard of ethical leadership at this time in American history is clear. Further, this article argues that the American college, one of the leading institutions in American society, has embraced a Machiavellian philosophy of ethics, leadership, and action. The Machiavellianism that exists within the structures of these colleges and universities has had a profound and far reaching impact on American society. Additionally, the Eurocentric ideologies that have shaped the contemporary social conditions in America have also moved the country to the brink of disaster. The events of September 11, 2001 and its after shocks are a mere fraction of the strife that this nation may face if the current mono-cultural approach to decision making in matters of international, public and social policy continues to be the *modus operandi*. The American college campus provides the optimal venue for discussion and debate on issues related to equality, fairness, ethics, and philosophy in this country, but many of the leaders of these colleges have succumbed to the egoistic philosophy of Machiavelli. This article argues that the new Black intellectual leader, who has the ability to transcend racial and social boundaries, must be prepared to assert a more ethical base of leadership than is already present on the American college campus and set a new standard for leadership. It is important that Black intellectuals take on this role because of their unique historical and societal position. Unlike the Black politician, businessperson, entrepreneur, activist, and/or clergy member, the Black intellectual on the American College campus is a social agent, with access to both those groups in the mainstream and those on the margins.

Based on their unique position in American society, this article offers five ethical principles of Black intellectual leadership for Black scholars in academe to begin to use for dialogue and debate. These five

principals begin to form an ethical framework and a set of values for new Black intellectual leaders to contemplate. The principles embrace the philosophies of towering Black intellectuals, past and present, in order to transcend the bounded philosophy of Machiavellianism that has been perpetuated in contemporary American higher education and fused into American society. The five principles of ethical leadership developed from Black intellectual thought offered here include: (1) the development of consciousness, (2) moving from the preoccupation with “what is” to a focus on “what ought to be,” (3) expanding Black politics and building multicultural coalitions, (4) realizing the power of Black art, and (5) maintenance of good personal character. Dialogue, critique, and debate on the five principals offered in this article can be the starting point for the development of a new philosophy of Black intellectual leadership that will spearhead the recreation of the culture of the American college. By building upon the five principals set forth in this article, the new Black intellectual leadership can ultimately improve upon the ethical, moral, and multicultural assets of these institutions and, subsequently, have a positive influence on the broader society. The battle ground for civil rights in the 20th century took place in the streets. The battle ground for the conscience in the 21st century will take place on the campus of the contemporary American college.

The American College: A Prototypical Social Institution

The key role that the American college plays in American society and culture is difficult to dispute. Colleges provide a means for inter-generational transmission of culture. Phenix (1975) argues that the American college has the power to contribute even more. Contrary to the popular belief that college is not the “real world,” Phenix suggests that college campuses are prototypical social institutions. He wrote: “Ideally, the life of school or college should be a foretaste of what would be enjoyed by the ‘beloved community’ of shared thought and action on the purest and highest levels” (Phenix, 1975, p. 23). The view of the college campus envisioned by Phenix is one that embraces a positive focus on building the “beloved community.” Phenix also believes that the American college provides an ideal community that should be mirrored in the broader community.

The Machiavellian philosophy of self interest that seems to prevail on many college and university campuses threatens the further development of Phenix’s ideal notion of the beloved campus community. College campuses, in essence, are vessels for the development of contemporary society. In fact, there is scarcely another venue that has as widespread

an affect on American culture as the college campus. To that end, the American College campus has become a battle ground of values. The civil rights battles of the 20th century have changed context in the 21st century. In the modern context, the battle centers on the establishment of new norms and values in the American college that go beyond out-moded Eurocentric paradigms that currently dominate the institution. Black intellectuals have an opportunity to influence the development of the American college through principled ethical leadership that seeks to broaden existing social and cultural values.

Black Intellectual Thought and Leadership

The following principles of Black Intellectual leadership have been drawn from the writings of past and present intellectual leaders in the Black community. These principles have been developed as a starting point for the construction of a framework for an ethical model of Black intellectual leadership that will be initiated in the American college. This framework, while not exhaustive in terms of its scope, is meant to serve as a touchstone for Black scholars as they consider their role and work in higher education.

Focus on the Development of Consciousness

“Are you conscious?” Is this question important enough to be asked of individuals within the college context? Does such a question have the power to move individuals to critical reflection on personal ethics and issues related to inequality and human suffering? The primary elements of consciousness—thought, reflection, and liberty—are unique to the human being (Rebore, 2002), but do we exercise them? hooks (1994) argues that critical consciousness can have a lasting affect on human perception and change our outlook on life as well as our actions.

The author of this article believes that the issue of consciousness is one that Black intellectuals must use to push the envelope on college campuses and focus on the societal problems that have persisted as a result of the ideology of domination that is the Eurocentric paradigm (Karenga, 1995). Wilson (1996) contends that in order for Black intellectuals to raise the level of consciousness surrounding issues of importance to marginalized groups in society, we must take an even stronger intellectual focus on the problems that exist in our society to force policy makers, the media, and the business community to turn their attention to these issues. According to Cruse (1967) this can only be done if the Black intellectual is able to appeal to both middle class groups and marginalized groups to help them understand their common interests

and how those interests are and are not being served. While many young academics have been steered away from dealing with such important social issues that in some way impact the whole of society, I argue here that this position must be rethought given the current national social crisis and international strife that we find ourselves in as Americans.

Make the Transition from “Is” to “Ought”

The era of the 1960s was a time when existentialist philosophy was of extreme importance. The prevalence of existentialism at that time, especially in the Black community, was important because there was a need to focus on the state that Black Americans found themselves in as individuals. More recently, Gates and West (1996) analyzed Dubois’ work and asked the question “Does his work contain the necessary intellectual and existential resources enabling us to confront the indescribable agony and unnamable anguish likely to be unleashed in the 21st century...?” (pp. 56-57). While the description of the existentialist work of the past century presented by Gates and West was aimed at defining the shortcomings of W. E. B. Dubois’ work, it also provides a context for understanding the focus on existential philosophy in the Black community during the civil rights era and toward the end of the 20th century.

Now that we have embarked on a new century, the author of this article contends that it is time to expand the existentialistic philosophical perspective to include a new philosophical approach that encompasses a normative moralistic perspective. In making the transition to embracing normative ethics, the Black community can begin to build a vision for the future by focusing on what “ought.” Normative ethics provide the community the ability to develop an ethical standard and a moral code of their own by defining how life for Blacks in America ought to be (Taylor, 1975). Individuals are then able to develop a reflective morality that enables them to seek objective and reasoned explanations for their positions and actions based on established principles of morals and ethics. This is not to say that such normative ethical principals do not exist in Black America, but that they should be brought to the forefront and utilized for the development of ethical Black leadership.

Beyond moving from the focus on what is to a focus on what ought to be, normative ethics provide a vision and a set of ideals and standards that do not change based on the individual’s ability or inability to live up to them (Taylor, 1975). Normative ethics provide a standard for individual evaluation based on agreed upon values and those things held in esteem by a community or society.

While many of the problems and concerns of Blacks in America have been well documented and there is some need to continue to discuss

the problems we face, much of our attention and focus must be aimed at establishing a direction and a preferred future. This article does not argue that Black intellectuals have not ventured into the zone of establishing the notion of “what ought to be.” The point here is that we are at a juncture where continuing to describe the problem becomes counter-productive. One of the earliest Black intellectuals to move toward the establishment of a normative moralistic plan for the development of Black people was W. E. B. Dubois. Dubois’ notion of the Talented Tenth set forth a plan for developing the Black masses with a highly trained force of talented and well educated Black people. However, Dubois’ plan met with a great deal of criticism at the time it was devised, primarily because of its elitist overtones. Even recently, Dubois’ ideas for the Black race have received criticism. In Gates and West (1996), West asserts that Dubois’ approach to the uplift of Black people was due to his “Puritan New England origins and Enlightenment values” (p. 59). While the point West makes here is well noted, the fact still remains that Dubois went beyond his role as a social scientist and studying the problem. Dubois advocated a plan for changing the condition of Black America.

Dubois’ focus on developing a plan for the advancement of Black people is an important one. This is something that Black intellectuals in the 21st century must take care to focus on. We must begin to develop a vision of the way life ought to be in the United States and develop plans that will move Black people and the country in that direction.

Black Power and Multicultural Coalitions

The potential power of Black America is made evident by Paul Robeson (1971), who argued that the numbers of Black people in the United States are far larger than many countries that are a part of the United Nations. Robeson argues that the existing power in the numbers that Black America has is underutilized. Part of the problem here is that Black people have been unsuccessful in developing the sense of tribal unity that is necessary to take advantage of the opportunity that exists in having such large numbers.

We must begin to subscribe to the Zulu philosophy of the oneness of people of African descent. We must begin to see the whole picture, move away from the minority mentality, and understand that as Black people in America, our destinies are inextricably connected.

My neighbor and I have the same origins;
We have the same life experiences and a common destiny;
We are the obverse and reverse sides of one entity;
We are unchanging equals;

We are faces that see which see themselves in each other;
We are mutually fulfilling complements;
We are simultaneously legitimate values;
My neighbors sorrow is my sorrow;
His joy is my joy;
I am sovereign of my life;
My neighbor's is sovereign of his life;
Society is a collective sovereignty;
I exist to ensure that my neighbor and I [realize] the promise
of being human;
I have no right to anything I deny my neighbor;
I am all; all are me.
I can commit no greater crime than to frustrate the life's
purpose of my neighbor.
I define myself in what I do for my neighbor.
I am All-in-One; I am One-in-All.

(Zulu Personal Declaration; 1825)

A common destiny and an inter-connectedness give Black America a reason to believe in more than news bites and results of pollsters. Black America does have reason to believe in the Black family. In spite of census figures and special reports on single parent families, department of justice figures on incarceration—and all the other neatly packaged numbers that point to the fact that the Black family is dismembered—members of the Black family are inextricably connected.

It is important that the connection that exists in the Black community be nurtured and cultivated. Black intellectuals must insure that Black America is able to see beyond the sloganeering in the popular media and the touting of individualism and “boot strap” success theories to focus and nurture more concrete group centered development within the Black community. The myth of the American pioneer that moves from poverty to wealth—the proverbial rags to riches story—is a good story but it is not the rule in the United States, it is the exception. The wealth that exists in this country did not appear over night. The true power structure in the United States is based in Judeo/Christian organizations (Cruse, 1967). This insight provided by Cruse nearly three decades ago could not be more evident in 2007. In outlining the dilemma that existed among Black intellectuals in the mid 20th century—choosing whether Black people should focus on a nationalist movement or an integrationist strategy—Cruse (1967) points out that dominant groups really had no vested interest in “leaving a door open for an outsider” (p. 9). It is important to mention, however, Cruse notes the exceptions to this ethnic group separation are artists and intellectuals. Cruse does not argue that Black artists and intellectuals are exceptionally powerful individuals in American society,

but he does contend that they have been able to transcend the traditional racial and class boundaries in American society through their work.

Art and intellectualism are two important vocational spheres in American society that must be leveraged to develop plans that extend far beyond our past focus on integration and begin to construct a new power base with an eye toward building a multicultural America that is influenced by ethically sound Black ideology. In order to build this new power base, Black intellectuals must work to develop multicultural coalitions (Wilson, 1999). That development can be aided by more manuscripts, conference presentations, and motivational speeches of public intellectuals, but true development calls for the birth of new political coalitions and plans of action that can be put into motion. Delaney summed up this position up in 1852 when he wrote “Experience has taught us that speculations are not enough; that the practical application of principles adduced, the thing carried out, is the only true and proper course to pursue” (Delaney, 1993).

The Virtue and Politics of Jazz

While true success and politics have been an elusive blend for Blacks in America, the contributions of Black people to American culture have been astounding. In fact, the Black artist has met with more success than the Black politician, to date, in the sense that they have been able to garner mass appeal and acceptance. The struggles that Barack Obama has faced in his bid for the Presidency lends evidence to this position. The mass appeal that Black artists enjoy may be attributable to the contribution that Black art has made to culture. West (1994) defines culture as a structure similar to the economy and/or politics. The structure of culture includes families, schools, religious institutions, the arts, and mass communications (West, 1994). In narrowing this definition of culture and viewing the notion of culture from the perspective of the appreciation of human expression and creation (Locke, 1996), we can gain a better sense of how Black art has been able to have an impact on American society. Gates and West (1996) point out that in the cultural sphere of creativity there is no need for remedial approaches to providing equality or moralistic programs of assistance because Black artists and intellectuals are making an impact on American culture with their talents.

The point isn't that there are [B]lack artists and intellectuals who matter; it's that so many of the artists and intellectuals that matter are [B]lack. It's not that the cultural cutting edge has been influenced by [B]lack creativity: it's that black creativity, it so often seems today, *is* the cultural cutting edge. (Gates & West, 1996, p. 39)

The ability of Black artist and the Black intellectual to be on the cutting edge of culture provides both an opportunity for growth and expansion of the consciousness of mainstream America and an opportunity to build unity and solidarity within the Black community. So, in essence, Black artists and intellectuals can make a difference on two important levels. First, it is very important to the progress of Black people that those individuals who are able to transcend the barriers of race and class continue to chip away at the divisions that exist among Americans across racial and class lines through their crafts in order to build a strong political base. Politics is a major institution in the United States, and though Blacks have had marginal success in the political arena, it is an area that must be cultivated (Woodson, 1993). By transcending racial and economic barriers, the Black artist and the Black intellectual provide Black America an opportunity to build stronger multicultural political coalitions. Wilson (1999) contends that a multicultural political coalition of ordinary people is a key to reversing the political trends that have plagued the middle and lower social classes and provided further economic and political advantage to the elite class. Second, talented Blacks in the art and intellectual spheres have the ability to reach and influence the masses of Black people in America, as well as people of other races and ethnicities. Their far reaching influence must be leveraged to improve the connectivity of Black America and further the debate on issues related to ethical leadership, other critical issues of importance and the implementation of ideas and plans. The college campus is the place to cradle and nurture such initiatives, which can eventually transcend the boarders of the campus and blend with the broader society.

Protect the Iwa Pele

In the African Yoruba language, Iwa Pele means good character (Abimbola, 1938). The Iwa Pele is among the most important forces of the Yoruba existence. The importance of maintaining good character for the Yoruba people is of the same importance to the new Black intellectual leadership. But the allure of the Machiavellian philosophy of self interest that has been embraced by the American college is ever present. It is important that the new Black intellectual adopt the Yoruba principle of good character and contemplate an ethical standard that raises the bar on personal ethics in leadership.

In his revision of *The Talented Tenth*, Dubois provided the basis for intellectual contemplation of the individual character and personal ethics (Gates & West, 1996). He wrote:

In this reorientation of my ideas, my pointing out the new knowledge necessary for leadership, and new ideas of race and culture, there

still remains that fundamental and basic requirement of character for any successful leadership toward great ideals. Even if the ideals are clearly perceived, honesty of character and purity of motive is needed without which no effort succeeds or deserves to succeed....We cannot have perfection. We have few saints. But we must have honest men or we die. We must have unselfish, far-seeing leadership or we fail. (Dubois, 1996, p. 173)

Conclusion

The new Black intellectualism that has emerged on the American College campus is poised to bring about a new focus on ethical leadership. Black intellectuals have the opportunity to gain broad based support and momentum at a time when the American college, one of the leading institutions in American society, has fallen into a Machiavellian philosophy of ethics, which has had an impact on America as a culture and a society.

Even with the problems the American college faces in the 21st century because of its outdated *modus operandi*, it is a prototypical institution with the potential to exert long term positive change in the mainstream of American society. Through the American college, Black intellectual leaders have the ability to transcend artificially contrived racial and class borders to have a profound affect on the mainstream of American society. Unlike the politician, businessman, activist, and/or clergy member, the Black intellectual is a social/cultural agent with far reaching influence. As social/cultural agents Black intellectuals have access to individuals in the mainstream of American society as well as those in groups that have traditionally been marginalized.

The role of the new Black intellectual is important to the direction of the American college and, ultimately, the nation. It is important that these new intellectuals understand this role and begin to contextualize the importance of their contribution to debate, intellectual development, and ethical leadership on the American college campus. While many young Black academics have been steered away from dealing with important social issues, I argue here that this position must be rethought given current national and international strife. Black intellectuals must utilize their position as social/cultural agents to inform racial and ethnic minorities, the White middle-class, and Black America of current and emerging realities (Cruse, 1967). At the same time, these scholars must begin to turn the focus of articles, books, lectures, and art from what "is" the current state of Black America—and America in general—to begin a new focus on what it "ought" to be. In moving toward this visionary form of leadership, Black intellectuals will need to leverage their posi-

tion in society to form coalitions that embrace all aspects of the Black community. This form of outreach must also go beyond the Black community to build an inclusive, multicultural constituency.

Black intellectuals must also look to build creative intersections with the Black artist. These creative intersections can be a powerful means to transcending racial, class, and subsequently, political barriers. But, in order to be successful in the pursuit of these lofty principles, Black intellectuals must first establish an ethical standard that rises above the current standard of the American college and strive to maintain good character and honesty of intention.

The Black intellectual is not a new phenomenon on the American College campus. What is new is the intergenerational power base of the Black intelligentsia. According to Cruse (1967), there has never been societal pressure put upon the Black intellectual to take on the charge of leading the nation and setting the tone for leadership in America through the social and cultural outlets provided by the American College. This article seeks to challenge Black intellectuals to begin a conversation utilizing the five principles of ethical leadership drawn from Black ideology and to begin to develop a set of values and an ethical philosophy for an new Black Leadership that begins on the American College campus. The five principles offered here do not provide a map for change in Black America nor the American College. It only provides a grid for the development of a map through discussion and debate on what an ethical philosophy of new Black intellectual leadership truly means and what the role of the new Black intellectual leadership ought to be in light of their ability to transcend racial and class boundaries. These are important questions to explore given the current void in ethical leadership on the American college campus, whose primary beneficiary is American society.

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