

# THE HARD QUESTIONS

## Pride and prejudice

The impulse to use school curricula to give black youngsters a strong, positive sense of racial identity has gotten a bad rap. While guarding against the errors and excesses of some of its proponents, we should remember that Afrocentrism is a movement with deep roots in American history, for powerful and valid reasons. It arises from the existential condition of blacks in this nation of immigrants. And, for this reason, it should be, whenever possible, accommodated rather than denounced.

The intellectual historian Wilson Moses draws an interesting parallel between calls for an Afrocentric curriculum for inner-city black youngsters and demands by Christian fundamentalists for the teaching of "creation science." Both, he notes, are "evangelical utopian movements that couch their belief systems in pseudo-scientific terms, and they represent the frustration of their adherents as they attempt to cope with the stresses and anxieties of modern urban life." There is, about both movements, an aura of defensiveness and tragic folly—and yet, ultimately, a certain dignity. After all, both camps begin with a deep and abiding concern for the education of their children, and they both harbor justified suspicions of "secular" authority. Yes, there are racists among the black nationalists who trumpet a glorious African past, just as there are religious bigots among the fundamentalists. And, yes, many of their substantive claims (like the charge that the ancient Greeks stole their best ideas from black Egyptians) are just plain silly. But the Afrocentric impulse is neither rooted in nor necessarily fostering of racial antipathy. And, unlike "creation science," one can imagine an Afrocentric curriculum grounded in sound social research that nevertheless instills in black students both valid historical knowledge and a sense of racial pride. Certainly giving priority to the history of the underground railroad over that of the transcontinental railroad should not threaten a student's education.

Moreover, the existential condition confronting many blacks today, out of which the Afrocentric impulse arises, is not of their own making. It reflects the

fundamental role of race in the construction of chattel slavery, and the caste system which survived well into the present century. Given this history, and the extent of segregation by race in residences and schools that continues to exist today, it makes little sense to tell blacks in the Oakland ghetto that they should drop their racial fixation and get on with the job of integration. Afrocentrism is but an artifact of the West's long-standing romance with the idea of race. Nor are blacks the only ones to share this romantic, identity-preserving impulse. The philosopher Leo Strauss, in a famous 1963 lecture to the Hillel Foundation of the University of Chicago titled "Why We Remain Jews," argued that any other course would be dishonorable. It seems odd that many defend Strauss's impulse while repudiating blacks for believing essentially the same thing.

The Afrocentric impulse is especially understandable in the teaching of history. The descendants of slaves face a profound problem of authenticity in historical matters. Their ancestors were stripped of language and custom. They wrote few memoirs. As a result, we know little about how Americans of African origin saw their world prior to the 1830s, two decades after the importation of bondsmen into the United States had largely ceased. The Negroes of the early nineteenth century were forced to construct a moral universe virtually out of nothing. And they labored under the openly stated question of whether they were genetically *capable* of meeting the responsibilities of citizenship in a modern, civilized nation. In our time, with its own speculations about the genetic basis of black intellectual inferiority, this question still reverberates. Thus, it is wholly legitimate for inner-city educators to endeavor to project positive racial images to their students.

Of course, these hardships do not justify the propagation of false information in the interest of building "self-esteem." But there is a difference between the technical project of historiography and the normative project of constructing historical narratives. Unavoidable choices of emphasis and interpretation must be made, and these choices might as well be informed by the particular psycho-social needs of one's children. This should not be a controversial observation.

It will be objected, however, that the Afrocentric impulse leads to the politicizing of history. I agree. But teaching the young is necessarily and inevitably

political. It entails the authoritative promulgation of values as well as information. It is paternalistic. When we educate, we cannot escape the necessity of making judgments about the kind of citizens we want our children to become. Having immigrant children earlier in this century pledge allegiance to the American flag at the start of each school day was, most assuredly, a political move.

Critics of Afrocentrism question the legitimacy of efforts to convey to inner-city youngsters positive messages about "their history," as if any such effort must involve a loss of "objectivity." This is nonsense. While I doubt the wisdom of encouraging ghetto-dwelling youngsters to identify with a mythic African ancestral homeland, the question

of whether or not to do so is not simply a technical one. It involves matters of identity and meaning on which reasonable people may disagree, and about which blacks isolated in the backwaters of American society must have their say. We are talking about educating youngsters for roles within a social and political order that has a history in which race figures in paradoxical and morally profound ways. It cannot be that,

merely by defending "the honor of the race," black educators have somehow engaged, *ipso facto*, in a breach of scholarly standards.

Those acting on the Afrocentric impulse have made mistakes. In my view, they can be faulted not only for erroneous interpretations of the evidence, but for choosing vague, ancient and largely mythic history over history that is more recent and more relevant. The century after the end of slavery saw Negroes educating their children, acquiring land, founding communal institutions and struggling for equal rights. The crowning achievements of the civil rights movement projected into American politics a set of spiritual values that had been evolving among blacks for over a century. Forget about the influence of Africa on Egypt 2,500 years ago. It is the influence of Africa on America over the past 250 years that deserves our attention. But I know that my preference for an America-focused narrative over an Africa-focused one is an expression of my *values*. It is political; I cannot prove that it is right. Rather than dismissing those Afrocentric educators who disagree with me about this, I propose instead to argue with them respectfully. I urge others to do the same.

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