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ABSTRACT

The roots of the current movement for ethnic studies in American education can be traced to the early colonial period of American history. The Dutch appear to be the earliest settlers with an interest in ethnic studies. The efforts to resist the dominant English culture began in New York in about 1660. Education became one of the ways non-English settlers could restrain the force of British history and customs and of the English language. In order to combat the nativism of the times, minority immigrants organized "ethic schools" and activities that would help to preserve their particular cultures and religious outlooks. Minority groups' use of historical societies for the purpose of providing cultural instruction increased during the early decades of this century. The current movement to resurrect the sentiment for ethnic education is strongly influenced by the writings of W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson, who kept the issue before the public for so long. (RB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SENTIMENT FOR ETHNIC STUDIES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Contrary to general belief, the concept of ethnic studies is not a recent concern in American education, formal and informal. In fact, the roots of the current movement may easily be traced back to the early colonial period of our history. And from that early interest there has slowly evolved the movement that now exists on the American scene.

Precisely when the sentiment began, or who was its originator, is not entirely clear. The probability is that it just grew. If we can read a broad meaning into one recent observer's discussion of the current black studies movement, the ethnic studies idea "was a fact in American education before it could be defined."[1]

To set the context, it is extremely important to notice that the history of American education is filled with instances of special-interest groups pushing for their favorite schemes of educational change and recognition. To be sure, advocates of ethnic studies have acted no differently. In this brief account it will be seen that minorities from the start have charged the formal schools with having filled the larger

society with negative depictions of minority cultures. Hence the high point of this investigation is the view that the modern movement got its impulse and direction from the early proponents; and that the continuation of the sentiment mirrors minorities' cultural tenacity and their unrelenting desire to be themselves in the American environment.

To begin with, it is possible Dutch settlers manifested the earliest interest, of record, in ethnic "studies" in New York, circa 1660, and later in Pennsylvania. In the Dutch view, the English settlers--the dominant group--were deliberately attempting to re-create English civilization as they had known it back in England, and were trying to establish a unitary national culture in the colonies based upon Anglo-Saxon heritage and values. In addition, they felt the English, thinking the American colonies belonged to them alone, were manipulating the formal schools to retain the civilization they knew. To remedy this, the Dutch turned to their own parochial schools (located in their communities), where they established standards of curriculum supporting their culture and traditions, their mother tongue, and, at the same time, perpetuating the creed of their religion, the Dutch Reformed Church.[2] Here, perhaps, is the seed of the ethnic studies idea in American education. And from the point of view of

origination of the idea, the Dutch might perhaps deserve the label of "pioneers" more than any other group.

Although this particular movement lost its strength as the free school idea began to spread, it left an indelible impression upon American education that was to continue to the present time. (See, for example, the curricula of the Jewish Day and Sabbath schools, the Chinese Day and Evening schools, the early Polish Supplementary schools, the Amish schools, the many minority and white ethnic studies programs now being offered at particular public and private schools and colleges.)

During the first years of settlement, the ethnic studies impulse was felt by other minorities (i.e., Jewish, German, Scotch, and non-Protestants--Catholics and Quakers), since the English-American colonists directed their attitudes against them as they did against the Dutch settlers. And, like the Dutch, they too felt the need to preserve their cultures, their native languages, and their particular religious beliefs. In order to meet this condition, they, too, established private schools and lived separately in ethnic communities. And by so going, they were able to transmit more easily their heritages to the young. To non-English settlers this was the only way by which they could restrain the force of British history and customs, and the English language that was then being taught in the formal schools.

In the early years of the 1700s, strange as it may seem, German Lutheran settlers in southern Pennsylvania took up the cry against the charity school movement. Since the instruction in this type of school was to be given in the English language, the Germans contended this would result in the displacement of their German culture and language.[3] At the time, they were particularly aware of Benjamin Franklin's open attempts to force the formal schools to emphasize the teaching of English in order to make the colonies English preserves, and because he "feared the German culture would replace the English one."

Even at this early stage, white "minority" settlers were not alone in seeking a special curriculum to transmit their culture. As early as the mid-1700s, particular free and enslaved African-Americans were coming into touch with their African history and culture through the missionary efforts of particular Quakers. These Quakers, being colonizationists, aimed to cause those blacks learning about their African heritage to see more clearly their detasement under the slavery system. More importantly, perhaps, the missionaries had hopes this knowledge would make them so discontented that they would welcome immigration to Africa.[4]

But this period had to be preceded by a period in which the African-Americans made themselves familiar with their heritage. There is every reason to assume they orally

transmitted their history and culture through unwritten songs, and that they carried them in the memory of folk tales and legend from generation to generation. In comparison with the white minorities, these African-Americans' situation was accentuated by the fact they not only differed in color, culture, language, and race, they were generally excluded from the Anglican Church.

One writer of this period informs us that a number of aborted efforts (John Eliot's Indian "praying towns") were made during this same time to teach Indian children a knowledge of Christianity and Latin grammar. (Later, Latin grammar was to be replaced by English grammar.) This, he thinks, was probably done to divorce them from their own culture and to convert them to "English ways and Christianity," which could, in effect, lessen their resistance to encroachments on their ancestral lands.[5]

An important implication of the English-American colonists' efforts, during these formative years, to acculturate <u>all</u> settlers into an Anglo-Saxon, Anglican nation was the fragmentation of the colonists into self-conscious racial and religious groups. So that by the late colonial period the ethnic studies notion was both potent and entirely acceptable to the various ethnic communities.

Immediately after the termination of the American Revolution, the nation was in a period of flux, which aided

the rise of a movement not only for national--political and economic--independence, but also for cultural homogeneity and the establishment of an "American" national identity. During the beginning of the national period, some of the former colonists began to reject everything British, and to show a general preference for things "American." However, it would be a mistake to assume that all colonists were caught up in this Anglophobic fervor. On the contrary, some began to take on the "airs of Englishmen" with more emphasis than during the British reign.

The particular advocacy of Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster during this same era reflected the nationalist sentiment spreading among this post-revolutionary generation of Americans. Spurred on by patriotism, Rush proposed the establishment of a college that would teach the former colonists "the art of forgetting" their British heritage.[6] He also proposed the establishment of a "national" university and a uniform system of education for bringing about "the homogeneity of the population and a national culture."[7] On the other hand, Webster called for the abandonment of the "King's English" and the establishment of a national language--"a language of the people." Moreover, he had hoped to impose unilingualism (American English as the vernacular language) through the wide use of his Elementary Spelling-Book.[8]

During the score of years from 1820 to 1840 (the Jacksonian Era), newly arrived non-English immigrants--Irish, German, Dutch, Russian, Southern European Catholics, Scandinavian, and Jews--were confronted with a strong national program of political and social consolidation that sought to blend the various "white" cultures into an Anglicized one. Along with this drive came the movement for a national system of public education. In order to combat the resulting bigoted nativism of the time, these minority immigrants, with few exceptions, organized--through private subscription--"ethnic schools" and activities that would help to preserve their particular cultures and religious outlooks.

Contemporaneous with this push were the brave efforts of knowledgeable Afro-Americans to teach about the heroic exploits of black revolutionaries--such as Nat Turner and Toussaint L'Ouverture--to their fellow blacks. Those blacks who could not read at this particular time (owing to the Slave Code which prohibited the teaching of reading and writing to them) learned of their history and culture from others in "Sabbath Schools," "true bands," and "literary societies," by the spoken word, and in black-organized "library societies." These library societies often supplemented their lending facilities and reading rooms with forensic groups where Afro-American history and culture were popular topics.[9]

The extent of the impact of this nativistic mood against non-English-speaking immigrants is most strikingly illustrated in the particular social conditions of Irish and Catholic immigrants in the 1830s, who were forced to petition the federal government for lands in the South and West, where they hoped to establish separate territorial ethnic enclaves.[10]

In the succeeding decade (the 1840s) the Irish and Catholic immigrants, particularly, were forced to organize a special curriculum in their parochial schools to serve as an antidote to the prevailing Protestant nativism that welcomed them to America. At the same time, in Pennsylvania, German-speaking Lutheran settlers resisted "free" public schooling for their children on the grounds that it "hindered a proper appreciation of their language and customs" and served as a barrier to religious solidarity.[11]

It may be well to point out that in the years between 1830 and 1840 the most striking feature of the ethnic studies sentiment was the founding of more than thirty-five historical societies. These societies rose in response to the peculiar social and political conditions of minorities, rather than to intellectual inquiry. Although their membership was probably limited in most cases, they confined themselves strictly to telling of the heritages of minorities and serving as the instrument by which these groups could fight against assimilation.[12] Of course, these societies were not the only

sources of information on the conditions of minorities--there were the Abolition societies.

Soon after the Civil War had ended (which had given the ethnic studies movement a pause), there came a rising tide of foreign immigrants, which brought on the rejection of the alien and the strange, and the hatred of unaccustomed people and things. Within such a context, minorities found themselves once more confronted with a nationalistic spirit which manifested itself in the demand that all Americans be of the same mold, speaking the same language, and revering the same culture.[13] One result of this new influx was that popular indignation rose against all resident groups of non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic background and against those immigrants who remained unassimilated. The desperate need to counter the overt ethnocentric sentiment then penetrating into public school education took on a sense of urgency to ethnic education programs, particularly among immigrant minorities.

As might be expected, during the last quarter of the century publicly-supported education was given the mission of assimilating and molding immigrant minorities and other Americans into an Anglo-culture nation. In the public schools significant stress was laid upon the inculcation of all students with Anglo heritage and values, and the English language. To undergird this, more than twenty state legislatures passed

compulsory public school attendance laws. Indeed, the overall social and political atmosphere added intensity to the need for ethnic education among immigrant and resident minorities if they were to preserve their cultures.

Of profound significance, it would be noted, was the fact that the melting-pot goal was not universally accepted among educators during this period. For example, a few (e.g., John Dewey), sensed the need for an antidote by advancing the notion of "cultural pluralism," which could help migrant groups "sustain respect for their old-world cultures."[14] At the same time, Afro-American educational leadership took steps on its own to see that black children were taught something about "their African past and the role black people had played in the development of this country." The latter group's effort can hardly be overestimated since it was taken up at a time when anti-black sentiment was rampant in America. The group's persistence gave a strong impetus to the sentiment for black studies in all-black public schools during that time.

Equally significant about the post-Civil War decades is that the voice of sentiment for ethnic studies raised by minorities was evidence enough that they were backing away from assimilative influences in formal education. (Contrary to historical legend, minorities have always and consistently warded off the melting-pot tendencies of formal education.)

The deep concern of minorities in their own history and culture at this time is evident from their renewed attempts to form ethnic historical societies. During this era, there was a mushroom growth of these societies among many ethnic groups.

The first society came in 1868, when a group of German-American citizens organized the German-American Historical Society. Their effort was followed by the Jewish Historical Society, the Negro Historical Society, the Huguenot Society of America, the Holland Society of New York, the integrated Scotch-Irish Society of America, and the American-Irish Historical Society.[15] (A few have survived even to the present day.)

A couple of decades later (the 1880s) ethnic studies found a receptive ear among Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Greek Orthodox church leaders in introducing bilingual and bicultural parochial schools for their non-English-speaking coreligionists. These schools were staffed by teachers who were themselves foreign-born and members of the faith. While these schools began as church and temple appendages, they became in time appendages of the public schools.

Minority America's use of historical societies for the purpose of providing cultural instruction is best understood in the course of the political events during the early decades of the twentieth century. This was a time when Americans were

probably more historically minded than in any other period in history. In organizing their historical societies, minorities did not differ from white Southerners of that time, who were telling of the peculiar social features and traditions of Southern life.

In the years following World War I, the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey brought America's attention to the educational plight of black minority students attending public schools. Presumably Garvey's preachments on the need for a balanced curriculum was the important factor in the development of the movement of the 1920s. This movement was kept alive and made more intense by the writings and exhortations of leaders of the "Harlem Renaissance."

With the tragedy of the war and the optimism of victory over the Germans fresh in mind, "100 percentism" became the battle cry of those campaigning to eliminate German and other "foreign" languages from the public school curricula. Not surprisingly, private and parochial schools came under heavy attack for having purposes of alienating their students from the "American way of life." Particular federal officials with super-nationalistic tendencies were helping lead the anti-German and anti-Red hysteria; yet despite this, Afro-Americans, faced with racism endemic to America, were showing a renewed zeal for ethnic studies. It was largely through

their militant efforts that the public schools of New York, Philadelphia, and some Southern cities set aside free time for the teaching of black history and literature. A specific outcome of their efforts was the first celebration of "Negro History Week," which was held in the early 1920s.

Following the twenties, the ethnic studies sentiment--as a national expression--marked time, mainly because of the Great Depression which extended throughout the thirties. It did not re-emerge as a national movement until the mid-1960s.

Turning now to the current movement, probably no one influence served to resurrect the sentiment for ethnic education at this time more than the early agitations of two prominent black educators, W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson, who kept the issue before the public during the first twenty years of this century. For there can be no doubt the convictions of these two men more than any others have whetted the perception of many of today's advocates. In addition, there is no doubt that each, in his own way, holds a particular niche in the present movement.

Insofar as the Dutch colonists, already noted, provided the initial impetus for the overall movement, it was DuBois' unceasing efforts to formulate a rationale for black studies that gave educators one for ethnic studies. Taking note of

the fact that American educators in the 1890s appeared not to be concerned with issues relating the school curriculum to minorities, DuBois admonished them for ignoring the cultural and historical contributions of American minorities. At the same time, he chided minority (particularly Afro-American) leaders for failing to adequately equip minority students to realize their full potential, despite the temper of their times.[16] Parenthetically, it might be mentioned that the latter group did modify their actions (or inaction) somewhat.

DuBois' substantial contributions were supplemented later on by Woodson, who, as head of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, lobbied for the teaching of minority history and culture at all educational levels.[17]

It seems a fair inference that the leaders of the present movement--which came dramatically upon the scene some ten years ago--were stimulated by the social turmoil and radical tempo of the early sixties. Their zeal may have come down to them from the black African nationalistic spirit which was demanding the "Africanization" of staff and curriculum in African universities during the fifties.

Be that as it may, there is every indication that the initial impetus in the present movement was born amid the Black Liberation movement of the mid-sixties. Clearly, it

began when a group of student activists at Merritt Junior College (in California) first publicly expressed a sense of outrage at the long-lived Anglo-biased courses of instruction. They made specific demands that the college curriculum be reordered to include courses in minority history and cultures. Shortly thereafter, the mood spread like wildfire to practically every college and high school campus in the nation.[18] From then until recently, the ethnic studies question has overshadowed all else in the minds of campus minority group activists, especially in the Northern urban centers, where minority nationalism has maintained its greatest strength.

Contrasting the earlier movements to the present one, without evidence to the contrary, one must assume that the early advocates' interest in ethnic studies was mainly practical. Unlike their counterparts of today, they differed in their notions about the function of ethnic education. With them, first and foremost, it had to meet a desperate need: to preserve and sustain their heritages. It is apparently assumed that they did not recognize the broad use of the concept. This may help to explain why they preferred to fight the assimilative process in formal schooling by organizing their own private schools. It is also probably the reason why their efforts were able to exist without any appreciable opposition.

Most significant of all about the present-day advocacy is the strong desire to <u>reform</u> public education through

minority ethnic studies programs. Little wonder that this movement has met so much resistance among tradition-bound educators, who seem--by all reports--convinced that ethnic education is a political nostrum that has no place in the public aspect of education. It may well be that for this reason they have opposed the idea. Yet, whatever the reason, this climate of thought has served to help dissipate the energies of many campus advocates.

In conclusion, it remains only to point out that those with a perspective of the past fully understand the present ebb in sentiment, for since the first move for nonsectarian education, the sentiment for minority ethnic studies has periodically recurred. And in each instance of its appearance there has been a sincere and over-zealous opposition, which has shown the inclination to stifle the impulse wherever it took root.

Footnotes

[1]Laura Bornholdt, "Black Studies: Perspective 1970," Danforth News and Notes (Danforth Foundation), 5(2):1, March, 1970.

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[3]J. P. Wickersham, History of Education in Pennsylvania (Lancaster, Pa., 1886), pp. 318-19.

[4]Carter G. Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1918), p. 40.

[5]Edward Winslow, The Glorious Progress of the Gospel, Amongst the Indians in New England (London: 1649), p. 88.

[6]Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Amusements and Punishments Which Are Proper for Schools" (1798), pp. 71-72.

[7]Benjamin Rush, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" (1786), p. 13.

[8]Noah Webster, "On Education of the Youth in America," in Preface to The American Spelling-Book (1784).

[9]Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-1846," Journal of Negro Education, 4(4):555-570, October, 1936.

[10]Nathan Glazer, "Ethnic Groups in America: From Culture to Ideology," in Freedom and Control in Modern Society, ed. by Monroe Berger et al. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1954), p. 161.

[11]Lawrence A. Cremin, The Genius of American Education (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 67.

[12]R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, A History of Education in American Culture (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1953), p. 158.

[13]Gladys A. Wiggin, Nationalism and Education (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962), p. 60.

[14]Lawrence A. Cremin, The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 71.

[15]Charles Wesley, "Racial Historical Societies and the American Heritage," Journal of Negro History, 37(1), January, 1952.

[16]W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1961; repr. of 1903 edition), pp. 87-89.

[17]Carter G. Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro (Washington, D. C.: The Associated Publishers, 1933), p. 14.

[18]Lawrence P. Crouchett, "The Relationship of Ethnic Studies Programs to the Potential Renewal of Interest in General Education in Community Colleges" (unpublished doctoral dissertaion, University of California, 1973), Chapter III.