

Journal of Black Studies

<http://jbs.sagepub.com>

Introduction: Incorporating Black Political Economy Into Black Studies

Jessica Gordon Nembhard and Mathew Forstater

Journal of Black Studies 2008; 38; 687

DOI: 10.1177/0021934707310291

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jbs.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Black Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jbs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jbs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Introduction

Incorporating Black Political Economy Into Black Studies

We have been here before. Black scholars have been struggling over the past two centuries about how to incorporate economic analysis and economic strategies—and what kind of analysis and strategies—into studies about the color line and the Negro condition. In an early issue of the *Journal of Black Studies*, Martin O. Ijere (1972) posed the question of how to incorporate economics into the Black Studies curriculum and suggested some economic content. The 1970s were nascent days in the development of Black Studies programs and departments. Many Africana Studies curricula minimized economic analysis, choosing to focus more on the history, politics, literature, music, art, anthropology, and sociology of peoples of African descent on the continent and throughout the Diaspora. This occurred perhaps because there were fewer Black economists in general, or because the economic questions were considered to be the most difficult and controversial to address. This remains problematic for similar reasons. At the beginning of the 21st century, the question of “whither economics in a Black Studies program” has not been adequately answered and continues to be not only relevant but also provocative. Research, for example, shows that a paucity of faculty members and course content in economics in Black Studies departments persists, while poor economic conditions prevail for a majority of the population, and at the same time, intragroup economic inequality has increased among African Americans.

We recently sponsored two lively discussions on this topic: at a National Economic Association session at the annual meeting of the Allied Social Sciences Association in Philadelphia in January 2005 and in a session at the Eastern Economic Conference in Philadelphia in April 2006. The presentations and subsequent discussions during those sessions inspired this special issue. In these pages, the authors challenge us to address these issues comprehensively and to think in new ways about both the form and the substance of incorporating Black political economy into Black Studies.

Editors' Note: The editors/authors of this special issue would like to acknowledge the expert editorial and formatting assistance provided by W. J. Moussa Foster.

African American Studies, Black Studies, Africana Studies—whatever the name preferred for the study of Africans in the Diaspora and in Africa—is an interdisciplinary enterprise. As such, departments typically consist of many different combinations and configurations of scholars and course content from a variety of disciplines. Africana departments thus offer a diversity of programs and have a range of academic strengths. One therefore might find it surprising that economics is probably the least represented of the disciplines, outside of the hard sciences. Nonetheless, this is the case. Some departments focus much more on the humanities, political science, and sociology. A few departments have tracks in both social and cultural development and public policy or social science. However, there is no standard curriculum and neither an agreed-upon canon nor a body of knowledge, though there are some classic texts.

In this issue, Black economists and economists who teach in Black Studies departments address the problem from a variety of perspectives. Three main issues arise in the dialogue about better incorporating economics and Black political economy into Africana Studies:

- Where is the discipline of economics in Black Studies curricula, and why is it important to Africana Studies?
- Where are the scholars in this area, and why are so few of them in Black Studies departments as well as economics departments?
- What kinds of economics should be taught in Black Studies departments?

We include five articles that engage one or more of these major questions.

Although there has always been an interface between economics and Black Studies, Patrick Mason and Mwangi wa Githinji's article points out just how wide a gap exists even as the number of Black economists continues to increase. Linwood Tauheed articulates the mandate for including economics in Africana Studies curricula, the importance of developing a methodological framework for theorizing about how to better address economic problems, and challenges the discipline to develop "community economists." Jessica Gordon Nembhard continues the discussion about content and the importance of training students in Black Studies departments to use economics as a transformative discipline—to design and practice alternative economics that will address Black economic marginalization and increase African American economic participation and prosperity. Julianne Malveaux highlights the variety of subject matter and analysis that is missing when Black Studies does not include economic content. James B. Stewart challenges Africana Studies specialists and progressive economists to collaborate in ways that will lift the

“ideological and theoretical blinders created by their disciplines” to combat all forms of racism.

Tauheed begins this dialogue with a thoughtful, thought-provoking, theoretical, and historical analysis of Harold Cruse’s argument for the development of new theoretical models whose application can guide economic development. Cruse criticized Black economic theorists for “not taking seriously the possibility of developing alternatives to the standard economic models” and exploring the interrelatedness of political economic and cultural forces. Tauheed also leads readers to perceive the limitations of the traditional liberal and conservative labels as he delineates several of the major economic ideologies and projects pursued by Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, the Niagara Movement, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Gunnar Myrdal. In particular, he traces the evolution of Du Bois’s thought from liberal to nationalist to radical, and suggests a new path. He demonstrates that “Black political economy calls for a Methodology able to integrate knowledge and insight from the other Black Studies disciplines . . . as well, and to do so from the unique standpoint of Black cultural life” (p. 725). Tauheed provides a rationale for why we need Black political economy and why we need it taught in Black Studies departments. He also provides a methodological process to delineate a specific kind of Black political economy.

Mason and wa Githinji document the paucity of faculty members and course content in economics in Africana Studies and discuss the barriers to entry for economists who wish to participate in such departments. They provide a statistical analysis of the number of Black economists, the number teaching in Africana Studies, and the economic content of introductory and other texts in Black Studies and in peer-reviewed Africana Studies journals. They explain the absence of economics as a result of the hierarchical and conservative nature of the economics discipline and the statistical and mathematical gap between the two disciplines. Among their recommendations are that African American students be encouraged to take economics and mathematics courses, that accessible economics texts be incorporated into Africana Studies reading lists, and that Africana Studies journals make an effort to focus more on economic issues and theory.

Gordon Nembhard continues where Tauheed leaves off, suggesting that African American Studies curricula should be concerned with training African American Studies students not just in economics generally but to be deliberate about the content so that students can use economics as a tool to focus on economic problem solving (finding solutions to economic problems) and strategies for creating economic democracy. Black political economy provides a methodology for exploring alternative economic

strategies that help students think out of the box about economic development strategies that will address structural racism and economic inequality. Gordon Nembhard delineates concepts and ways to teach such content. She also provides examples of ways in which public policy and economic development courses in Black Studies curricula attract students to the discipline and address issues in the Black community.

Malveaux explores the kinds of economic content that will strengthen the Black Studies curriculum. She notes that the real questions are, What does economics bring to the African American Studies table? and What are the opportunity costs of marginalizing economic content in the curriculum? She advocates strengthening Black Studies with the addition of courses in Black economic history, Black economic thought, Black entrepreneurship, and income and wealth inequality. Malveaux reminds readers that the economic issues confronting African Americans urgently require that Black Studies more fully incorporate economic analysis and training.

Stewart contrasts the rich history of African American contributions to economic analysis and Black political economy with the unrealized opportunities to use economic research in Africana Studies. He points out that in the latter, much of the economic discourse is produced by those with little formal economics training. Stewart also chronicles collective economic development strategies and highlights the potential of collaborations around environmental justice, living wages, and Black farm retention for Africana Studies content. He suggests that Africana Studies specialists collaborate with economists in the field of stratification economics to better address racism and caste distinctions. He argues that no less than the relevance and rigor of Africana Studies is at stake.

Such a focus on what Africana Studies could or should do presents a compelling challenge for the field of economics. Unless economists are willing to engage Africana Studies—especially its methodologies—cooperation between the disciplines will be limited. In particular, economists would need to advance a critique of Eurocentrism explicitly and forcefully. Whether using an Afrocentric (or African-centered) perspective or a social change or Black liberation paradigm, questions concerning the implications of a Eurocentric framework for economics and political economy arise. Black political economy cannot be defined solely by its subject matter any more than Africana Studies can. If such were the case and Africana research or curricula only needed to be *about* peoples of African descent, then even racist articles, books, and courses on Black topics would meet the criteria. The latter, however, would not address the great questions in the discipline.

Likewise, neither teachers nor scholars of African descent meet the criteria of the discipline on the basis of race alone. The issues and analysis are deeper and more complex than just pertaining to and being addressed by people of African descent.

The authors in this special issue of the *Journal of Black Studies* provide insight into these complexities. They help us revisit the questions, What are the distinctive features of Africana Studies? and What distinguishes Black political economy from economics? This symposium does not address every aspect related to these questions. Nevertheless, it does constitute a beginning. Considered together, these articles represent a spectrum of views, a wealth of history about Black political economy and Africana Studies, and an array of examples of the kind of content available for inclusion in Black Studies curricula.

Let the dialogue continue.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard
University of Maryland

Mathew Forstater
University of Missouri

Reference

- Ijere, M. O. (1972). Whither economics in a Black studies program? *Journal of Black Studies*, 3, 149-165.