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## The Failure of Afrocentricity

by Samuel F. Reynolds

Although you can ask 15 different people what "Afrocentric" means and get 15 different answers, for the most part you can expect an answer like this: to be Afrocentric (and its derivative, -icity) is to place an African world view (which includes African knowledge, values, aesthetics, and cosmology) at the center of any study or modality of existence concerning African people, either on the continent or abroad (the Diaspora).

Galvanized by both a mission and a vague sense of definition, Afrocentric scholars and activists fight to answer the question of who controls how our children are educated by developing various

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"curriculum of inclusion" programs.

Many "curriculum of inclusion" programs include an Afrocentric component that traces Black history all the way back to the Nile Valley and discusses the sundry contributions that Black people, throughout time, have made to modern progress. However, these programs are hotly contested by many educators who feel Afrocentrists fracture the American mosaic of history with their self-interests and "therapeutic" history. Afrocentrists, of course, refute the charge of therapeutic history as not only being needed, since lessons of inferiority are embedded in the education Black children receive; but also make the claim that Afrocentric history is correct history—a history redeemed by errant Eurocentrism (an ideological cousin to White Supremacy). But the real question is, can

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Afrocentricity be the vessel of "redemption" for our children that it claims to be?

I doubt it. Ultimately, Afrocentricity, despite its vast gains, can provide no redemption for Black children or Black people in general because it is too mired in the issues and language of redemption. Put differently, Afrocentricity is playing White's game on the chessboard of Race. Afrocentricity vs. Eurocentricity (as it is usually listed on the Marketplace of Ideas' marquee) is a two dimensional game in a three-dimensional world. Afrocentrists are to be applauded for challenging Western notions of Black people and culture; however, our children must see a body of work and intellectual vigor that challenges the conception of the West itself, including the man-made notions of race, African, European, Asian, etc.

Before "European" expansionism in the middle of this

millennium, there was no Europe. The diverse group of people we now call Whites, Europeans, made up the totalizing term called Europe as to give its inhabitants some means of distinction from other peoples of the world. In essence, the conception of Europe and its eventual claims of ancient Greece and Rome as classical European civilizations (despite the ancients' disdain for most of what is called Europe) made Europe feel special. As James Baldwin alluded, if this fact wasn't so tragic, it would be funny.

Along comes Afrocentricity to assist in the exposure of all of this, without explicitly realizing a few basic problems.

Firstly, the framework by which Whiteness is conceived is the framework by which Afrocentrists pattern Blackness. Instead of questioning the linearity of the West's timeline, Afrocentricity merely blackens and lengthens it. If

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the collective of ideologies that challenge Western "progress" (post-modernism, Marxism (to some degree), existentialism, and other ethno-centered theories, like Afrocentrism) reveal anything about our world, it shows how arbitrary and tenuous our conception of it is. Apparently, history is more like a CD player than a cassette player: it's all about random access and not going from side A to B. We order ourselves (and our civilizations) according to our desires and abilities. The truth of history is not in who came first—Greece or Egypt.

Secondly, Afrocentricity has no language by which it can describe itself, Europeans, and the assortment of billions of people (who largely go unnoticed by both Afrocentrists and their counterparts) independent of European descriptions. It shows a remarkable paucity of vocabulary to describe "atomistic, rational, and

anti-natural" behavior as simply Eurocentric. Similarly, it shows an equally remarkable lack of intellectual depth to make pronouncements about Black and White people based on their being "Sun" people and "Ice" people. Six-year-old children can do better.

Disregarding the fact that all "Europeans," at all times in human history, have not acted this way, it becomes clear that many Afrocentrists do not have the ability to talk about various ways of life other than being mired in the ideology that creates their own world-view—Race! Likewise, can we be certain that these traits of selfishness and reckless endangerment to the environment and people were not evident in pre-colonial Africa? Nonetheless, the presence of such traits in post-colonial Africa and throughout the Diaspora renders that very question irrelevant.

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Additionally, Afrocentrists frequently collapse varied examples of Black life to a struggle almost solely resting on being Black. For instance, how does Afrocentricity address identity-construction in that of a Black gay man, or as is in my case, a physically challenged Black man? One must wonder if Afrocentricity has even the power to describe Black life. To be sure, we must ask Afrocentrists the question that Ralph Ellison asked in an essay written over thirty years ago: "Why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is?"

Finally, Afrocentricity has been woeful in addressing the subject of advancing technology and its impact on mass communication and media. Although there are a plethora of "Afrocentric" publications and a host of computer on-line services, what is being done to address the rampant computer illiteracy in

predominantly Black public schools? If something isn't done to address such illiteracy (and even standard illiteracy), then many of our children may fast become members of an underclass—thrice

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over. They won't have any capital, there won't be any need for their labor, and they won't have the technological skill to cope in the techno-driven world of the future.

Likewise, as Harold Cruse put the matter so deftly in The Crisis of The Negro Intellectual, what measures and structures (not just institutes and institutions) are Afrocentrists putting in place to counter America's prodigious ability to sweep, by its own inner dynamic, "everything before it by its power of rapid development and ability to recover, adjust, and absorb and institutionalize *even anti-capitalistic*

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*features* [italics in original]?" To add to that thought, America's cultural and mass media apparatuses can even absorb putative radical cultural nationalist imperatives, like Afrocentrism, and make it completely innocuous. After all, what can the mass dissemination of positive Black images mean when, for instance, a Korean vendor can sell a T-shirt proclaiming the Black man as the original man right next to a shirt that reads "I can't stand no beggin-a-- B--ch!"

Obviously, it means that as Afrocentrists gain more ground our children will be able to list a great number of Black people throughout history, say the Nguzo Saba (the seven principles of Kwanzaa), and possibly do a few other neat tricks; but for the most part, despite putative boosts to their self-esteem, our children's condition, impaired by racism and racialist thinking, will be much the same. If there is a change at all, what we may create

are children whose racialized thinking will pick out a racialized scapegoat for the calamities of their time. It might not even be White people.

But to be clear, for those who misread me, I am not arguing for a de-racialized, utopian society. I am arguing for the evocation of a spirit of vision and creativity in all of us that re-describes our society and culture other than how it is known. When Marx re-described the industrial revolution in terms of class struggle and its subsequent dimensions, the world could never look at capitalism the same. Likewise, when early racialist thinkers began to describe world by race, the world had a language by which to gaze upon itself and discriminate accordingly.

So the failure of Afrocentricity is rooted in its inability to refashion the world in a way other than how it is already known. Put simply, despite its protest to the contrary,

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Afrocentricity's impassioned imperative is only to vindicate Black life and culture. However, our children, those who will have profited from Afrocentricity's gains and losses, must liberate themselves from the drive to vindicate (and be vindictive). This must happen, because, at bottom, there was never any true reason for us to have to do so. The concept of original sin as Blackness (and virtue as Whiteness) is embroiled in the language of its creators. For one alien or liberated from such notions, there can be no blame and no need for redemption. Afrocentricity has exposed these not-so-veiled intentions of Black blame as false, but at great cost: it's left with the choice of either being an attendant vindicator for Eurocentrism or becoming something other than what is, something that lifts it above what it was. As to how and when this will happen, is up to us and our children.