

RACE MATTERS

Cornel West

Beacon / 105 pages / \$15

BLACK STUDIES, RAP, AND THE ACADEMY

Houston A. Baker, Jr.

University of Chicago Press / 110 pages / \$16.95

CHALLENGING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ESTABLISHMENT: PROFILES OF A NEW BLACK VANGUARD

Edited by Joseph G. Conti and Brad Stetson

Praeger / 240 pages / \$22.95

reviewed by M. D. CARNEGIE

It is no coincidence that new books by two of our nation's leading black academics are very thin. That Princeton now boasts the preeminent Afro-American Studies department in the nation says little about the quality of research being done there—Cornel West, the department head, freely admits that he shunned Harvard because Boston radio stations don't play enough soul music—and rather more about the shoddy standards of contemporary academic life, which champions identity politics and continental jargon over real scholarship.

But the fraudulence promulgated by white meta-theorists under the thrall of Parisian *poseurs*, no longer taken seriously even in their native land, is a mostly harmless one. Except for the unfortunate few students who get suckered into believing the diacritical mumbo-jumbo amounts to anything, and then end up parroting it in graduate school and beyond, the white kids by and large have little to

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lose from the depredations and bizzareries of their professors. Like the Woodstock radicals who spent their finest years smoking hashish and copulating in the back of Volkswagen buses, only to end up as litigation attorneys anyway, the typical white Ivy Leaguer is off to a relatively cushy start. If he emerges after four years knowing more Derrida than Dante, it hardly leaves him at a significant disadvantage relative to his peers.

The mountebankery of black intellectuals is a separate and unequal matter altogether. The relative scarcity of blacks among the chattering classes has traditionally ensured that one or two public figures serve as spokesmen for the entire race. The absurdity of such an arrangement is readily understood by imagining who might possibly "speak for" all white people. And as black society has developed the striations of class that are proof positive of both economic gain and at least some degree of equal opportunity, race has become a less and less predictable measure of everything from income to education level to political affiliation.

Instead of celebrating this independence, however, by which upwardly mobile blacks are freed from being inevitably lumped with gangster hoodlums, an appalling number of black intellectuals continue to insist that the world be seen through the distorting lens of color. Jealously protective of their outdated role as race spokesmen, they encourage various stripes of radicalism and racial chauvinism, which are absolutely the last things a young black student presented with a college opportunity—be he at Harvard or Howard—needs or ought to care about. The white radicals often had Daddy's money to fall back on after their experimentation on the commune went sour. But until blacks have garnered sufficient capital with which to be utterly frivolous (and the radical intellectuals are the first to point out that blacks haven't), the temptation of the black middle class down the road of racial radicalism by their intellectuals represents a *trahison des clercs* of catastrophic dimensions.

Cornel West, one of the most charismatic and forceful black intellectuals of his generation, declares unabashedly: Race matters. Describing the Los Angeles riots that left fifty-four dead as "justified social rage," he harrumphs incessantly about "white racist society." When conservatives point hopefully to black success stories, he accuses them of "a vulgar rendition of Horatio Alger in blackface" and says that "after centuries of racist degradation, exploitation and oppression in America, being black means being minimally subject to white supremacist abuse."

But of course race matters when you deem society to be, as West does on almost every page, a tool of oppression by which white folks degrade and subordinate blacks. "The prevailing myths of black sexuality," he writes, for example, "are part of a wider network of white supremacist lies." No matter that these myths are publicly discredited (and privately affirmed) by members of both races; West insists that society was established to keep blacks down. And when he writes that "rap performer Ice-T is harshly condemned while former Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl F. Gates's anti-black comments are received in polite silence," he glosses over obvious evidence to the contrary. Ice-T generated

such controversy precisely because he had been *embraced* by the mainstream, not because of the color of his skin. And if West doubts that the shocking remarks of prominent blacks are not often met with deaf ear, he ought to read some Louis Farrakhan or Gus Savage transcripts.

It is not only the academic perversion of the age, of course, that causes a tenured black professor at Princeton to fritter away his energies blaming the white man. West knows the radical, racial boilerplate sells books, makes reputations, and cowers those afraid to call—West's phrase—a spade a spade. The bottom line, however, is a Princeton professor of religion defending his intellectual arguments with the seditious rantings of a street hood rapper. By rejecting distinctions of occupation, class, education, and social prominence, West underscores his belief that the rapper and the professor are but two sides of the same (devalued) black coin. Race not only matters; it is the *only* thing that matters. If you told white college students that they were just the same as the white kids in the ghetto, they could easily laugh it off. But as black middle-class identity is still at a rather new and fragile stage, the racist crowing of West and his fellow travelers serves only to harm the young blacks who have the most to lose by squandering their university education on identity politics and *passé* radicalisms.

West's ranting also helps to gloss over the rather poor quality of his writing and thought. He writes "of a [sic] inchoate xenophobia" and claims, "If there is a hidden taboo among liberals, it is to resist talking too much about values" (his emphasis) when, of course, he means to say the very opposite—that the liberals' taboo is to talk about them, not resist doing so. Of course, the era in which we might expect an Ivy League professor to write clearly and accurately is long past, but we shouldn't laud the decline. Just as when Houston Baker refers to Allan Bloom as "Alan" and journalist-screenwriter Nelson George as a "scholar," we are given just cause to wonder if the "intellectuals" in question really have the goods.

Houston Baker, professor of English and "Human Relations" at the University of Pennsylvania, bolsters his bona fides by

submerging himself in the impenetrable blather of post-modernist theory. Like West he saddles up the rap hobby-horse; he believes it is fully impossible to engage young minds in literature without recourse to rap. Rather like saying you can't teach a person to read music without a boom box, of course, but not a surprising argument from an intellectual who seems incapable of comprehending either word or world without the aid of a technological apparatus—in this case, the jargon machine of post-modernism.

For Baker, a cigar is never only a cigar. He describes a street festival as a "collaged multiplicity of sound and image" and the university as "a metonym for social chaos." Every sentence is stuffed to the gills with hybridities and axiologies, renominalizations and reverse cyborgisms. Chess is "the Western board game of war" and "the notion of preserving infinite historical value and unquestioned excellence in the referential files of the English department is at best a quixotic extension of Arnoldian cultural economics."

Filling the minds of black college students with this blarney serves only to divert their energies into a semantic *cul de sac*. Everybody knows that language-gaming has destroyed much of intellectual life in recent decades; but as almost all black public figures are quick to point out, blacks remain in sore need of intellectual leadership. For black intellectuals to feed our young a diet of Frenchified jargon—and pretend it is a way of studying the plight of American blacks!—is especially perverse and irresponsible.

Then again, responsibility is evidently a quality not dear to Baker. About the brutal Central Park wilding incident, he can muster up only more linguistic folderol, spending several pages on how the police who handled the incident must have misheard "wild thing" for "wilding," and all the while having a laugh at whitey's misunderstanding of black street culture. He quotes with approval a *Village Voice* article in which a young man says, "I ain't never heard of [wilding]. Sounds like a white-boy rock type of thing." Again, one feels that for Baker, the only true things that exist are artifacts of language, and if nobody actually uses the term *wilding*, then the horrible assault might as well never have happened. Concerning the rape itself, he writes:

The reason the Central Park jogger incident yielded no credible "whys" was precisely because the incident itself was *the answer*. It was the answer to the question that could have been formulated anytime during the past decade by almost anyone over the age of thirteen and breathing—the answer to the question: "What will happen next in the great contestation marking northeastern American urban, public spaces?"

Fortunately for all of us, there are a number of black intellectuals with the courage and wisdom not to hew the racist line. Joseph Conti and Brad Stetson remind us that a cadre of thinkers and public policy advocates have attempted to steer the mainstream of black thought away from the shopworn formulations of identity politics and the civil rights establishment. That they are finally the subject of study can only be seen as a good sign; but that Thomas Sowell, now in his sixties, could be considered part of a "new vanguard" is testimony to how strong and strident the opposition to black conservatives has been.

Conti and Stetson offer analyses of four major contrarians—Sowell, Shelby Steele, Robert Woodson, and Glenn Loury. Scholars all (except for Woodson, who founded the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise), these men have refused to cast the struggle of black Americans within the too-narrow framework of race. Steele's writings, for example, offer a sophisticated analysis of affirmative-action, which causes blacks to feel "the stab of racial doubt" and tends to overuse the political capital of accumulated white guilt. Affirmative-action programs are discharged to expunge white guilt, he argues, but as such programs have helped a relative few, their overall social cost is rather a steep one. They are more successful at assuaging white guilt than at advancing non-middle-class blacks. Meanwhile, Glenn Loury, professor of economics at Boston University, takes issue with the rhetoric of impossibility and pessimism of complainers like Baker, West, and the white liberals who echo them. Responding to a *New Republic* editorial by Hendrik Hertzberg (now the Comment editor at the *New Yorker*), Loury writes:

Quit trying to imagine what it's like for a black person "to experience contemporary American political culture." . . . I,

having risen from a Chicago ghetto to a tenured post at Harvard, most emphatically, *do not feel excluded* from the "land of opportunity" tenet of America's civil religion. Got it?

In the essays that introduce *Challenging the Civil Rights Establishment*, the editors delineate the parameters within which the struggle for control of black public policy must be fought. While the rhetoric of oppression is carelessly bandied about by professional activists with their own axes to grind, Conti and Stetson note that the evidence often supports the assertion that even inner-city blacks have more opportunity than is customarily believed. In South Central Los Angeles, at ground zero of the 1992 riots, stands Los Angeles Southwest Junior College, which offers associate degrees and general education. Los Angeles Southwest admits anybody in the community, with or without a high school diploma, for an astonishing \$5 per credit. (Even so, student loans are available.) In an effort to help more urban youth, however, students who maintain a C+ average there are offered four-year scholarships at USC covering 100 percent of tuition. If a student's financial standing is bad enough, USC will increase the stipend beyond tuition costs, which alone are currently \$63,000 for four years.

Five dollars per credit and a C+ average at community college will get you a \$63,000 scholarship at USC? It's a hell of a deal by any measure. But instead of pushing this program, Conti and Stetson note, community leaders keep haranguing everybody with a "rhetoric of hopelessness." The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the largest black-owned newspaper in the West, featured a column after the riots in which the writer claimed that

the United States is on the verge of becoming a police state, if it is not there already. I have carefully described the many similarities between present day USA and early stages of the Nazi Third Reich in pre-war Germany.

This is the strident ignorance that sells newspapers. Only an absolute know-nothing could believe such bogus polemics. Unfortunately, if the Wests and Bakers of the world continue to distort the intellectual life of the academy, the blacks who end up there will emerge

as uninformed and unprepared for reality as the uneducated poor in South-Central. Intellectually underdeveloped, they will be stuck in the tragic mode of self-pity, and instead of having the world as their

oyster, will discover themselves ill-equipped to do anything but beat incessantly upon the race drum. And then race will sadly have mattered very much indeed. □

THE FIFTIES

David Halberstam

Villard Books/816 pages/\$27.50

reviewed by RITA KRAMER

The *Fifties* begins, as did the fifties, with America ambivalently assuming leadership of the free world, and ends with a gathering momentum for radical social change. Best-selling journalist David Halberstam puts on display all the tumult of the decade: It saw Eastern liberal internationalists and Midwestern conservative isolationists battle over the direction of the Republican Party, and Senator McCarthy's exploitation of the growing fear of Communist subversion; the beginnings of the Cold War and the debate over the development of the hydrogen bomb; the Korean War, the last conflict not shown in America's living rooms; and the MacArthur-Truman showdown; the policy of containment segueing into the arms race; the growth of the national security apparatus and the expansion of the role of the CIA in covert operations; the beginnings of our involvement in French Indochina and the articulation of the domino theory; the race for outer space; the U-2 photo reconnaissance flights and the Soviet propaganda victory in launching *Sputnik*. A large-scale transformation, but Halberstam is content to sum up the decade as "a mean time. The nation was ready for witch hunts."

At the outset of the decade America's wealth and productivity, her industrial might and seemingly endless possibilities for growth created a consumer market of

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unprecedented abundance, all the more shocking for its contrast with the Depression and the War years. Highways crisscrossed what had been farmlands and opened up the new suburbs, where entrepreneurs like William Levitt took advantage of new technologies to develop low-cost mass housing for veterans' families. Blacks from the rural South began to migrate to northern inner cities. Women left the workforce to raise families, "isolated," as Halberstam ominously puts it, "in a world of other mothers, children, and station wagons." The consumer economy was turning out an abundance of home appliances, and the new medium of television was beginning to market and sell them.

Everything television touched would be turned into entertainment, not excluding politics. Even what Halberstam considers the watershed event of the decade—*Brown v. Board of Education*, and the beginning of the end of segregation in the South—could not have had the influence it did without television. The segregationist mobs hadn't expected that their ugly confrontation with the federalized National Guard troops escorting the black children to class would be captured by camera crews and broadcast all over the country. Halberstam sees Nixon's Checkers speech as a triumph for "the new electronic man in the new electronic age." Ironically, the decade would end with a coolly poised John F. Kennedy debating a tired, sweating Richard Nixon in a contest whose significance would not be lost on advisers to future candidates. →