

“In Defense of Cornel West: The Role of Black Intellectuals”

America’s most prominent black public intellectual, Dr. Cornel West, appears to be a target white conservatives and reactionaries can’t help but to attack.

In the past year, my colleague and brother Cornel has experienced the kind of smear tactics and professional character assassination reminiscent of the anti-Communist McCarthyism of the 1950s. One of America’s best known scholars, West has previously taught at Yale and Princeton, and had served as a distinguished member of Harvard University’s African American Studies Department from 1994 until this year. Harvard’s program chaired by Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., since 1991, has some of the most outstanding and productive black scholars in the country, including William Julius Wilson, Lawrence Bobo, and Anthony Appiah. West has been a familiar and highly respected scholar in the black community for many years. His numerous books such as Race Matters are widely read, and he has generously donated much of his time to give benefits and fundraising lectures at various institutions. Despite a recent, difficult battle with cancer, Dr. West continues to exhibit considerable courage and grace.

Last fall, the quality of West’s scholarship and his teaching performance was challenged by Harvard’s recently appointed president Lawrence Summers, who had served previously as the Secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton administration. He was accused of “grade inflation,” giving excessively high grades to students enrolled in his courses. West was criticized for

making a spoken word CD using the cultural medium of hip hop, which was judged to be “beneath” the role of an accomplished academic. When news about the conflict with Summers became public, West was roundly criticized in the national media as an “intellectual lightweight.” Conservatives accused him of being a radical ideologue without substance or content. Unhappy with his problematic status at Harvard, West accepted an offer to join Princeton University’s faculty in the fall 2002.

Now, in the latest controversy, West’s invitation to speak at a City University of New York Graduate School conference examining the work of pragmatist philosopher Sidney Hook, sparked the public withdrawal of several white conservatives from attending the event. Historians John Patrick Diggins and Gertrude Himmelfarb, conservative ideologue Irving Kristol and art critic Hilton Kramer, refused to participate in a conference with West due to his lack of “scholarship.” Kramer informed the press, “When I saw that Cornel West was a participant, I decided that it wouldn’t be appropriate” to attend. Several weeks later Diggins reversed himself, agreeing to come after all. Still, the conservative historian could not resist attacking West. “My view and that of others is that Cornel West turned away from philosophy years ago, and turned toward the study of popular culture,” Diggins argued. “He can perform as a public speaker and he kind of preaches. . . .”

What’s amazingly hypocritical about this academic controversy is that Himmelfarb, Kristol, and Diggins have no serious grounding in philosophy, and Kramer has no scholarly credentials at all. West, on the other hand, published [The American Evasion of Philosophy](#) in 1989, which contains a detailed critique of Sidney Hook’s work and ideas. One of the City

University of New York conference organizers, Robert B. Talisse, described West's work as "one of the best philosophical pieces on Hook in the past twenty years."

In the Spring 2002 issue of The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education published a detailed analysis of Cornel West's record of scholarship, and how it compares to the records of other prominent scholars in terms of the number of scholarly citations of the number of scholarly citations of their work, according to the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia. The Institute's Social and Behavioral Sciences Index, for calendar year 2000, listed 205 separate citations of West's works in scholarly publications, placing him second only to sociologist William Julius Wilson among black American scholars throughout the United States. In the Institute's Arts and Humanities 2000 Index, West ranked sixth behind only Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Toni Morrison, Paul Gilroy, Alice Walker, and August Wilson.

It is interesting to compare the number of citations between West and those neoconservative African-American intellectuals that the Wall Street Journal and other mainstream publications insist are actually producing "real scholarship." Condoleezza Rice, former Stanford University Provost and currently the Bush Administration's National Security Adviser, had only one fifth of the total references in scholarly publications in the social sciences than Cornel West did in 2000. Shelby Steele, whom in 2001 I had the pleasure of debating in Newsweek over the issue of black reparations, was cited in only one seventh the number of social science publications as West. What's truly extraordinary about these rankings is that West is not a social scientist. That his scholarship lends itself to research across a variety of fields is the best standard for excellence to which one could aspire.

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education also used the databases of the Institute for Scientific Information to evaluate the seventeen "university professors" of Harvard University, the most prestigious elite group at that institution. Among all citations from the natural sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences, West ranked fourth at Harvard with more than six times the number of citations for Harvard's former president Derek Bok. Based on any number of objective standards for scholarly accomplishment, West ranks among the most influential scholars in the country. So what explains the viciousness of the attacks on West as a scholar and teacher?

Be clear about this: the attack on Cornel West should not be understood as an assault on the integrity of one black scholar. It is an attack on the idea of an African-American scholarship that seeks to empower black people and to democratically transform our society. West personifies a politically and morally engaged scholarship, which stands squarely in the rich intellectual tradition of Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, C.L.R. James, and Angela Davis. It is frankly a blunt and unambiguous warning to all African Americans in higher education, that there are boundaries and limits to our freedom of inquiry and political expression; that we risk being silenced for attempting to make education a tool for the enrichment and advancement of society's most marginalized and truly disadvantaged groups. The attack on West, is an attempt to push us back into silence about the continuing problem of academic apartheid. But we dare not go back.

Because the fight is about the integrity and renewal of the black intellectual tradition, and its legacy in attempting to reconstruct the cultural and scholarly imagination of America as a whole. We should not seek to rebuild a new “Talented Tenth,” but rather, to spark a renewal of a socially engaged scholarship that lends itself to the practical tasks of black community reconstruction and capacity building. That is the standard that West more than anyone else in our generation has set, and that is the standard we must uphold for ourselves and history.

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