

December 15, 1988 (Vol. 4, no. 8)

Dear Colleague:

The Asian American Alliance asked me to write a letter in support of the establishment of an Asian American Studies Program on campus. I said no with regret, explaining my action with the argument that rather than start another ill-funded program we should put limited University resources into the establishment of a Center for the Study of Cultural Pluralism. Or, possibly, a radically transformed American Studies Program in which the word "America" will in the course of time acquire a significantly different meaning from the one it still has.

Let me admit to an irrational element in my rejection. As an Asian American, I am humbled by the thought that our group wants to jump on somebody else's bandwagon. Black and Chicano students got the wagon rolling. We Asian Americans see that it is a good thing and now we too want a piece of the action. Programs in Black and Chicano Studies serve, however, an urgent political as well as a long-range academic purpose. Black and Chicano scholars are greatly underrepresented on campus. Something has to be done--quickly. Now, I don't see that urgency for Asian Americans. We are not underrepresented in America's academic institutions. Asian American students have plenty of role models on campus, especially in the high-prestige technical fields. Another somewhat irrational reason for my objection is my awareness of the irony of calling the Alliance Asian American. Asia is not a beautiful word for me because it was, after all, invented by Europeans and ignorantly imposed on heterogeneous peoples and cultures elsewhere. Arabs, Bengalis, and Chinese all had their own separate and proud identities until their imperial overlords fused them into a convenient blob for their own convenience. I don't want to be reminded of that historical humiliation by putting the word "Asia" in the title of an academic program designed to give greater dignity to non-White Americans.

Finally, I don't much like the multiplication of semi-independent ethnic programs because I am deeply suspicious of apartheid in any form. In a nightmarish scenario, I see a powerful white University with enclaves of ethnic studies in which nonwhite students can feel at home and exercise their rites of self-rule recognized by the parent University but by no other economic or political power. Such enclaves evoke, however faintly, the disturbing image of the "homelands" of South Africa.

Best wishes,

