The Classroom is No Place
for a Social Bandit

God bless the children of the post-Civil Rights era! They are, collectively, an underdeveloped bunch with the weight and promise of an entire race on their shoulders. And, perhaps I am bias because I too am one of these souls. But I live a conflicted existence and one must find blame or cause for the disillusionment now being so thoroughly enjoyed. I live somewhere between the demands of the Black Panther Party, the unfulfilled promises of Operation Push and the exploitation of one's race and skills as exhibited by Justice Clarence Thomas. Am I an "American," African American, or a black man ignorant of his lineage trapped in America? Am I to add to the recipe of what makes this country what it is, for good or bad, or am I to figure out a way to rip it asunder and put it together again? Should one utilize one's skills and talents for personal and material gain or for the promotion of some "just cause" to the benefit of some larger group of brethren?

I was raised to believe in the "rewards" of the civil rights era, but I am a child of the late seventies whose adolescence was peppered and spiced with the influence and confluence of crack cocaine and all of its associated effects. With more than seventy-five years of black history month celebrations and a post-1960s proliferation of black studies programs, I was led to believe that attending university was the cure to all of life's social ills, but I was ill-prepared to recognize what life would look like without the antagonisms of society's ills – sexism, elitism, classism, racism. In the inner circles of the adults that I idolized, bad was good, right was wrong, and black did not equal being American necessarily. While many of my role models were unequivocally "squares" their heroes were social bandits, "bad" guys by traditional American standards. Those who were "bad" for a good reason. Fred Hampton, Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner, W. E. B. DuBois – these are but a few of the archetypes that helped to foster an identity and perspective for this black boy. I was taught to balance the good with the bad and learned to embrace the celebration of what could be considered race heroes. I was taught to always keep the promotion of the race foremost in my mind, while at the same time learning the ins and outs of the American system into which I was born. I was to encapsulize and internalize not only the efforts and determination of a Secretary Ron Brown, but also activist Jim Brown. Now, on the surface these two objectives do not sound contradictory; but eventually they collide and the chaos we call life implodes.

Now, I did not grow up with my mother; she, we, were casualties of the crack epidemic. I was mostly reared by my maternal and paternal grandmothers. Both of these women believed in the black American dream as epitomized in the Civil Rights movement. So this meant that I was to learn to "play the game" while "watchin' out for those white folks." That is, I was to be well aware of the fact that white folks had a long standing history of stereotyping blacks as crude, cursed, and criminal, while refusing to validate or accept these negative images. My goal was to be entrusted as an inheritor of the status quo while being a staunch opponent of the status quo at the same time. Have you ever tried to befriend someone who knew that, in a sense, you were trying to rob them? It is a precarious, schizophrenic existence to say the least. Walking both sides of the racial street in America will keep one constantly looking over one's shoulder. And there were programs that would teach "urban" youth how to play the game (never mind that many of them were suburbanites). I personally participated in INROADS and MYEP – both were programs designed to place college bound minorities in corporate work structures

throughout America. Under the guidance of such programs we were taught how to replace those traits of ourselves that made black youth so unattractive to corporate America with more palatable signs of acceptance of the status quo. Gone were the Afros and cornrows and any other signs of connectedness with some afro-centric dissident movement. As I understood it, my job was to infiltrate corporate America, and America in general, and fix the system from within. What a crock of shit!

At any rate, I attended _____ University where I had the privilege of coming into contact with the likes of _____, _____, and the always-explosive Angela Davis. You have to understand, these were giants in my estimation and I was in a position to gain wisdom from them and to my estimation I did. These were some of the "bad guys" who did good for the benefit of the race that I had grown up celebrating. The point is, I was constantly under the tutelage of social bandits, "Robin Hood" figures in the eyes of many in the black community. These figures of historical clout and influence only served to further the notion that it was my responsibility to do something about America from within the system of American society. If you are as frustrated as I am you understand what this means. You are to be a quiet revolutionary. You are to walk quietly and carry a big stick or else face the same end that Fred Hampton did. As I began to grow older I interpreted this to "selling out," because as I see it, you are either fighting the fight or you are not. But that is another topic for another time. So I bought the story: hook, line and sinker. I left _____ with a bachelor's degree in history and I was determined to reveal all of the lies of history, particularly American history, to the generations that followed me and to never let children experience history lessons that centered solely on a Euro-centric retelling of the savage colored people – be they black, yellow or brown- as I had. As a result I found myself teaching ninth and tenth grade World History at _____one of the best college preparatory schools in America. What a place to begin my efforts as a social bandit! I am no stranger to conflict with administration types. Could I be a "bad guy" serving the greater good?

Now, while I idolize Huey Newton and Malcolm X and Che Guevara, my goal was not to follow them into martyrdom. This was this most valuable lesson that I learned from Ms. Davis: to follow and benefit from their struggle, but to not repeat their errors. If I was going to be a social bandit, it would have to be on an intellectual level. On an ideological level. Any level but the physical. So my job would be to attack the educational system, as a social bandit, and provide my two cents to the collective pot of the "black freedom movement in America." And this was no easy task.

The classroom is no place for a social bandit. Please allow me to qualify the statement. Unless one is independently wealthy, a classroom located within one of the wealthiest, most influential, whitest college preparatory schools in America is not the place for a social bandit. Or, at least not for this self proclaimed social bandit. As I found myself teaching predominantly white students - there was the occasional black and Asian and Latino student sprinkled here and there, and I did this for six years - I began to realize that while my revisionist take of history was accepted within its proper context in the classroom, it was taken as a personal affront or indictment on greater America at home. To a certain extent I can only blame myself for being surprised at the situation. Was I to truly be shocked at the fact that the very people who benefit from the interpretation of history as it stands were threatened by my take on history? That they were not that impressed with my attempt at fixing the system from within? Hell, one would speculate that from their perspective, the system needed no fixing. It could accommodate some diversity among those that help to perpetuate

it, but no fixing. And so, this is where I found myself. Languishing in a game that had no end, and in mine eyes no real point. The students that would really benefit from what I had to say were not impressed enough with the material accoutrements that I had acquired to be willing to follow the path of a social bandit and those who had no use for undermining the system used my insight as a precautionary tale for what could happen if knowledge of his-story fell into the wrong hands. And so in essence, I really found myself with no audience at all. I was viewed as a "sell-out" by the minority students because I was not "hard" enough or violent enough to garner respect as a social bandit, never mind the thought that in my eyes one had to be very hard to operate as the only black male teacher in a predominantly white history department dominated by particularly white, middle-class points of view. Never mind that I had taken on some of the most vehement conservative sympathizers in the Hoover Institute, that I challenged a whole auditorium of California types to rethink their views on the black freedom movement, that one petitioned and picketed Governor Wilson and Vice-Provost Condolezza Rice and the board that controlled affirmative action within the UC university system. Never mind that I spent my career making advocates of the status quo elucidate their positions and also explain why it would be of relevance to my generation. With all of this under my belt, I was still viewed as the token black instructor of history at a predominantly white institution. I suffered from the stereotyping of my historical views as crude or underdeveloped or even criminal and incompetent in some circles. And not all of those circles were white. And while we who teach are all entertainers on some level, lest we risk losing our audience, most were fixated on my ability to shock and/or entertain, but ignored or underestimated my contribution to the development of American children's historical perspective and a more complete understanding of the humanity of a segment of society with whom they rarely come into contact. And it is understood that the social bandit rarely gains mainstream acknowledgment or municipal parades to highlight contributions made. But they are usually celebrated, if close to the vest, by some in society. This was not the case at _____.

Perhaps it is the boldness of a social bandit that is the key to his or her downfall or misinterpretation. Social bandits are pieces of iconography. They are rallying points. They are not leaders. Are they? Because, if so, then the boldness of action, which a social bandit must have, will always be in conflict with the role of a leader. Boldness is a quality that is good for a soldier, one who has to execute plans. A soldier cannot be concerned with the ramifications of actions taken; a soldier simply follows orders. And to a certain degree, the social bandit is following orders of a higher calling. A social bandit is fighting for the greater good, to help enforce the natural laws of order, equality and justice. While his bold actions may require him to go against the status quo and incline him to a position that can be interpreted as being at the mercy of history and "bad," the social bandit cannot concern himself with errant evaluation and devaluation by the mainstream public. Leaders do. Leaders must take every precaution to understand the consequences of every decision made, for the leader has more than himself to consider. Those that are ill equipped with the skills of a successful social bandit – to survive and even thrive despite the overwhelming odds against them and their designs – do not necessarily outwardly express support for the social bandit, while they may secretly admire them. Leaders may praise the substance of social bandits, but never fully embrace them. So to be a leader and a social bandit at the same time would cause one to have a split personality with competing agendas. From one perspective one would have to be cautious and organized and show great foresight when considering action taken; and from another perspective, the bolder the

actions undertaken, the greater the potential reward. Had Malcolm X been Harvard educated and espoused the status quo of the time, would he have reached legendary status amongst the disenfranchised and those frustrated with the efforts of the civil rights movement? Had Harriet Tubman stopped at securing the freedom of one, would she have reached mythic proportion among those that continue to search for freedom in all of its elusive forms? No! She had to be bold! A breaker of man's laws but an enforcer of God's greater laws, social bandits have to be prepared to face a life of "crude, criminal, and cursed" interpretation from the very establishment that they are seeking to undermine. But why are the inheritors of the momentous gains added from the suffering of the civil rights era burdened with this weight? Or, perhaps it is just me.

If you escape the manufactured slums of America's ghettos, particularly as a result of the struggles suffered by those such as Medgar Evers and Emmit Till, and you do not help to further the efforts of the struggle, then conceivably you will be labeled a bad black, a race traitor, which is not to be confused with a social bandit. While a social bandit may be privately admired, a race traitor is publicly ostracized and humiliated. Those that "forget where they come from" are detested and grouped in with those who support the very system that the struggle is dealing with on a daily basis. This is a hell of a burden to place on a generation that also has to deal with navigating through this new world that has been opened as a result of the rewards of the civil rights and freedom movements. Playing the game and being a social bandit and not forgetting where you come from is very difficult for those that have an ever-changing game plan because the system against which they are fighting is ever changing. There is no finish line; but I digress.

As many of us come from places where thugs and ruffians originate and from which the working class emanates, when we are plucked from our environs and dropped into places like Stanford and Yale and Cornell, we face the sharp eye of scrutiny when we step on campus. We face a crude, cursed, criminal evaluation. After all, if you put a suit on a thug and cut his hair and give him some glasses, is not he just a dressed up thug? Yes and no. But to even pose the question one has to begin from the perspective that thugs are bad. Thugs, are in essence, amongst the earliest of social bandits. The word thug descends from an Indian, east Indian, not Native American, word that described a band or group of native Indians that preyed upon unsuspecting Englishmen in the Indian countryside. To put it bluntly: Thugs were groups of Indian thieves that robbed and murdered innocent Brits and shared the spoils with their extended family members and clansmen. Now on the surface, this sounds detestable to the western, civilized mind. But if one places the actions of the thugs within their proper context of British colonization in the subcontinent of India, then one, particularly if one stems from the point of view of the down-trodden and the underclass, can begin to appreciate the actions of the Thugs as actions of necessity and rebellion against an invading force and culture. Does that make the actions of the Thugs justified? Does that justify the traits of the Thugs and those with whom we find similarities? In the tradition of many black households where we can find a way to balance the good and the bad in individuals who are "bad" for good's sake, the answer is a resounding yes.

Is there a place for social banditry in 21st century America? I'm quite sure there is. That place does not exist within _____. With its old boy networks and traditions and ivy-laden buildings, it exists as a bulwark against social bandits and their designs. The social bandit needs to operate in an atmosphere where his bold actions will not conflict with the powers that be. Where that place exists, one has yet

to deduce, but: the classroom is no place for a social bandit.