

3-23-1989

[Letter from Charles DeCarlo to Alice Stone Ilchman, March 23, 1989]

Charles DeCarlo

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Recommended Citation

DeCarlo, Charles, "[Letter from Charles DeCarlo to Alice Stone Ilchman, March 23, 1989]" (1989). *Complete protest and activism collection online*, Sarah Lawrence College Archives. 43.
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March 23, 1989

President Alice Ilchman
Sarah Lawrence College
One Meadway
Bronxville, New York 10708

Dear Alice,

The recent troubles at the college prompt me to write some recollections of a similar time twenty years ago.

It is beyond my ability to understand all the causes, griefs and other background factors that made the late sixties such unsettled times. Certainly the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement and the rejection of traditional authorities were major factors in creating attitudes and environments of much anger and of demand for change.

In retrospect, much of this energy did induce positive change, though perhaps not as fast as most would like. For my part, I admire the resiliency of this varied society, which in the span of one generation shook deep cultural patterns and brought to public awareness the necessity for their reformation. The feminist movement, the concept of affirmative action, the increase in scholarship aid attest to the fact that change has taken place. Admittedly, the swing to conservatism in the last eight years has hindered the full flowering of these changes; nonetheless they endure. I think we have to view these years as a natural counter-spasm, as the body politic moves forward to better health.

With respect to what I understand are the basic issues involved in the current situation, since they are practically identical to those of twenty years ago, it would be well to consider the subsequent history of that time:

- o A Black Studies program was instituted. However, a check of registrations will show that individual students, black or white, elected courses in their own educational or career self-interest, rather than upon the basis of political or racial ideology. What happened is that the program failed because it did not address the real needs of students. This situation was aggravated by virtue of the college's three course system, which heightened the importance of the student's choice.

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Now, of course, the issue of curriculum and the place of non-Western studies within it is receiving much national attention. I believe we must look to the great universities to resolve this matter. Certainly, for financial and scholarly reasons this is beyond the capabilities of the nation's liberal arts colleges.

- o An earnest effort was made to recruit black faculty. The fundamental reality was that the universities, who themselves were changing in response to the times, were not producing scholar/teachers at anywhere near the rate to satisfy the national demand. I regret to say that under pressure I made some faculty appointments of people not fully qualified to teach in the college. Ironically, in the case where fine scholar/teachers were appointed they were quickly lured away to institutions which could pay them much more, and perhaps more importantly, provide reduced teaching loads and the opportunity for research.
- o We did establish a Black House and encouraged the programming of black cultural activities. However, the students' passion for change, and the necessary commitment to it, soon became spent. I remember the embarrassment Dorothy and I felt when no audience showed up at the President's House when a fine black poet and musician was invited to speak.
- o We appointed, in succession, individuals to serve as dean and counsellor to black students. Unfortunately well trained, experienced people were not available and those who served had their own agendas, often I believed, at odds with the interests of the students and the college.

Must it be true that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it? I hope not and that your current students will think through what they really want and what they can help change towards that end.

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There are two matters I believe urgently more important than the admittedly emotional and deeply felt issues of the moment. The first concerns the earned role and integrity of the academic community, consisting of both students and faculty.

I wonder if your students know of Kent State and that horrifying moment when outside force intruded upon the sanctuary accorded the academic province, implicitly and explicitly, by the outside world. They should know the precious intellectual freedom of that venture rests upon fragile, unspoken agreements between it and society at large. All in the community, students, faculty and administrators have a serious responsibility to protect and be warranted that freedom. Civility and rational discourse are expected behaviors and so the disturbance of public order is an act that helps put that freedom at risk and diminishes regard for the institution. I realize this may be difficult for students to comprehend, particularly when inchoate angers dominate, for they but pass through their college days toward their goals, perhaps unaware of the history and struggle to attain academic freedom. It would be a good thing if the faculty were to educate the students to this history.

The second matter is one that should concern us all, particularly the young black student. This is the adequate and proper supply of young people needed to keep our country in economic and competitive health. Between now and the year 2000, twenty million people will enter the work force. 83 % of these will be women, members of minorities and immigrants, groups traditionally outside the technology mainstream. In addition, by the year 2000 nearly 40 % of Americans 18 years old, or younger will be black or Hispanic. In little more than one decade these facts will present us with changes, and accompanying demands for response, of profound significance. For young people, and particularly black students, this represents opportunity as well as an awesome challenge. It certainly should bring home the importance of their educational pursuits and encourage them to work at full throttle.

Only they can evaluate their anger and dissatisfaction in the light of balancing these with their own longer term self interest. It's tough, but then no one has ever been guaranteed a rose garden and the realization of this is the beginning of wisdom.

Good luck to you, the students and faculty as you all work towards the solutions of your problems.

Charles DeCarlo