



**"W.E.B. DuBois & Booker T. Washington: Approaches to developing citizenship Post-Reconstruction in the America"**

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The Negro problem was the exclusion of the segregated Negro masses from the group life of American society. There were two causes to this problem: racial prejudice and the cultural, social, economic, and educational backwardness of the Negro. It was only by addressing these issues that they could gain their rights and move towards integration. While African-American leaders agreed that these issues needed to be addressed, there were disagreements as to the best course of action in attaining these goals. Some African-American leaders preached submission and acquiescence to Southern whites; while others had a more direct approach that argued that equality and rights must be fought for constantly. It is by analyzing Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois that we can understand the reasoning behind the different ways that these two men saw and handled the Negro problem.<sup>1</sup>

In Washington's most famous speech, presented at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition Speech, he addressed the future of relations between Whites and Blacks. In this address Washington stated that Blacks post-Emancipation were ignorant, inexperienced, and started from the bottom rungs of society; at a time when they were at the bottom, however, there were still some striving for political position in Congress or the Senate. Instead, Washington proposed that Blacks should forgive the South of any transgressions, relinquish any attempts at political power and instead fight for positions in agriculture, domestic service, and industry, because it is through industry and accumulation of wealth that Blacks can gain the rights suffrage and equality. Blacks needed to gain the trust of Southern whites and stand by them in civic, religious and economic life so that both races could prosper; yet they remained separate in social spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Washington spoke of social equality as though it was a agitation and an extremist folly, and that progress and enjoyment of

all privileges would only come with acquiescence, instead of through protest.<sup>1</sup> In return African Americans would receive opportunities for ownership, vocational skill, and business development. Washington urged Blacks to create their own institutions, businesses, services and goods that cater to Blacks, while using racial segregation to separate the both economies.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, his program wanted Blacks to help themselves by disciplining their bodies, as well as cultivating entrepreneurial virtues and knowledge of trade. With these tools they would have the necessary skills and aptitudes to thrive in a capitalist economy and achieve equality.<sup>3</sup> Washington believed that this form of self-help through business success would persuade whites to extend Blacks their civic and voting rights, which are cornerstones of American citizenship. It was through this program that Blacks would remain faithful to whites and show them that Blacks were a people that could be trusted and were law-abiding citizens that held no resentment toward whites.

Today any of these remarks remain perplexing and paradoxical given how things turned out. When we try to understand Washington's short and long-term goals for the Atlanta speech, we must first understand the historical context and the mind-set of the majority of whites in the country at the time.

In 1885, politicians and intellectuals were becoming more hostile toward Blacks and white supremacists were becoming more and more represented in political life. It was a time when racist ideologies were plentiful and it was even encouraged to be openly racist against Blacks. The slightest breach of racial etiquette could lead to the lynching and persecution of Blacks. Newspapers had openly racist articles proclaiming white superiority, spreading propaganda that stated that Blacks were unfit for freedom, degenerating to a bestial state, linked to increasing levels of criminal activity, and had an intense hatred of the white race. In

public, advertisements and plays were presented that overtly made fun of Blacks and portrayed them in stereotypical ways with actors taking the roles of Blacks using Black-face.<sup>4</sup>

There was also an escalation of intellectual racism that claimed that Blacks were a different species from whites and that if they were not kept separate, then they must be eradicated. This was all the justification needed by some whites to lynch Blacks, to proclaim the futility of education and to begin a backlash against Black schools and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

What was especially infuriating to many whites was the idea of educated Blacks. They saw them as a danger to white society, because education was power and it allowed for Blacks to compete with whites in both labour and business. However, what was truly inflammatory was how they even asserted that Washington was not teaching Blacks “their place” in the industrial system in the South or to be at the beck and call of white men; on the contrary, he was teaching them to become independent, operate their own businesses, plant their own crops, buy and sell their own goods and destroy the last vestiges of dependence on the white man. It was believed that a nation was being created within America and that Black independence would lead to the destruction of white America.<sup>6</sup>

Schools were threatened and violence ensued against Blacks in many cases. In one instance an African-American principal was chased out of town for a perceived breach of racial etiquette and in another case, one was lynched weeks prior to Washington’s visit. In this environment something needed to be done to defuse the situation and ease the tension. Washington knew that without the support and tolerance of whites, the education of Blacks would be impossible and could only lead to further violence and extreme acts against his people; which would see his life’s

work and all of their achievements destroyed, as well as any hope of rising out of the hole they were in.

The only thing that could be done to change the course of action was to change how the public saw the education of Blacks. This was the goal of his speech, to show whites that Blacks could make progress and offer a new point of view to Americans, as well as to challenge white-supremacist ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Washington's main goal of the Atlanta speech was to show whites that Blacks were making incremental progress and to ease the tension that was building all throughout the country.

Publicly it appeared that Washington supported segregation and the disenfranchisement of Blacks, but behind the scenes he was very involved in politics and the prevention of disenfranchisement and other forms of discrimination.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Washington spoke at many rallies and gave speeches advocating for Blacks' voting and civil rights. Washington was even invited to the White House and gave Theodore Roosevelt advice concerning Blacks and had some influence in appointing Blacks to office.

Washington is seen as the face of acquiescence to Jim Crow in the South, as an accommodationist and segregationist, but he did what he thought was best to stand up for Blacks and tried to change the way that they were perceived. In so doing, he gave the impression that he warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Double-consciousness serves three purposes. First, it refers to the power that the white stereotype holds over Blacks and how they are positioned to be aware of it. This stereotype pervades the consciousness of both the individual and the group; where they see themselves not as they are, but through the eyes of those who have a prejudice towards them. It is the consciousness of alienation and exclusion, a false-consciousness, which is obtained when Blacks

view and judge themselves based on white American ideals; he is judging himself based on a mistaken picture of himself.

Second, being an American citizen and knowing no other place as home, but considered to be a non-citizen due to skin color and prejudice. In this case, Blacks are technically American as they were born and raised in America, but not American as they are excluded from all the rights, privileges and social life inherent to American life.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, it is a reference to both African and American consciousness that is a product of being in the midst of American society and retaining the last vestiges of their African heritage, which results in embracing both cultural patterns. It is the merging of the two souls present and he wishes to make it possible to be both American and a Negro, without being persecuted, spit upon, or the doors of opportunity being closed in his face.

Du Bois's goal is to integrate the African-American people into the modern affairs of America and allow for them to forge lives and gain inclusion into American society. For this to be achieved, Blacks must be released from their imprisonment as serfs to the land and not become a servile caste in America. This is necessary, as most Blacks at the lower socioeconomic level were more pre-occupied with economic survival and achieving some measure of economic equality; than thinking of abstract ideas and concepts like equality and voting.<sup>7</sup>

For this to happen opportunity needs to be secured and the only way to achieve this is for Blacks to be granted full protection and the benefits of citizenship. Full citizenship is essential in this, but more will be needed to uplift Blacks to the standard of living in the rest of the nation. In addition to citizenship, what is needed is for Blacks to gain education in order to fully realize their potential. Industrial education would be more than enough for most, but those with the ability to go into liberal arts education and should be

allowed to do so; for it is these men and women that would attack the greatest obstacles undermining the advancement of Blacks.

For Du Bois, the two greatest obstacles to achieving these goals were racial prejudice of whites and the cultural backwardness of the Blacks. The underlying cause of these two obstacles is white supremacist ideologies that misrepresent Blacks and spread the idea that those of African descent do not deserve to be citizens of the American social body. This leads to economic, educational, social problems and cultural backwardness. It is this prejudice that must be addressed as it keeps Blacks segregated from the rest of America and reinforces and entrenches the cultural backwardness that is slowing down their progress; this sustains the gap between Blacks' standard of living and the rest of the nation. With these barriers still in place it makes it ever more difficult for Blacks to achieve inclusion into American polity. Both obstacles must be addressed, for backwardness reinforces prejudice and vice versa; in combating both issues, white supremacy is also combated and allows for self-assertion and the integration of Blacks into all aspects of American life.

Further, Du Bois believed that it is the job of Black leaders to combat these two obstacles by directing the masses to protest the prejudices keeping them out of national life, in order to change the social environment of the nation by staging a two-pronged attack on prejudice and backwardness. These goals can be achieved through the politics of self-assertion, which are necessary to undermine both prejudice and backwardness, and through continually striving for their right to vote and insisting for their rights as constituted by citizenship.

For it is Blacks responsibility to not only themselves, but to other dark-skinned people of the world, and the masses to judge the South and bring attention to the evils of Jim Crow. This is essential, in order for evil not to be perpetuated; it must be

challenged by the victim because to do otherwise would be to acknowledge and encourage the behaviour to continue. It would only escalate to a point where Blacks would once again become a slave caste.

In conclusion, both Washington and Du Bois wanted to uplift Blacks and overcome the prejudices and inequalities inflicted upon them. Although, both men had the same goals and objectives, they differed in how to deal with the situation in the short term. Du Bois believed that insisting constantly for right and dispelling the misconception of Blacks face. Whereas, Washington sought to ease the tension at the time by relinquishing the pursuit of voting and equality and hope to that the South would give their right willingly given enough time. However, behind closed doors Washington went to rallies to support equality and helped to appoint many Blacks into political office. Ultimately, it was Du Bois views that would become more prevalent and lead to the formation of the NAACP and the civil rights movement that we know today.

#### Notes

1. PBS Online, "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" Booker T. Washingtons Atlanta Compromise Speech, [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/historical\\_docs/hist\\_doc\\_altantacomp1.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/historical_docs/hist_doc_altantacomp1.html), (Accessed 10/26/2013)
2. Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 9, 38, 42 & 44.
3. Gooding-Williams, Robert. "In The Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought." Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (September, 2009), 82 - 94.



4. Marable, Manning. "Celebrating Souls: Deconstructing the DuBoisian Legacy." cited in Zamir, Shamoan, *The Cambridge companion to W.E.B. Du Bois*. (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17
5. Norrel, Robert . "Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Vol. 42 (Winter, 2003-2004), 97-104.
6. Meier, August. "Toward a Reinterpretation of Booker T. Washington." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 23, No. 2. (1957), 221.
7. Young, Alford. "The Souls of the Philadelphia Negro and The Souls of Black Folk." cited in *The Souls of W.E.B. Du Bois*. (Boulder : Paradigm Publishers. February, 2006), 64.