

The W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington Debate: Effects upon African American Roles in Engineering and Engineering Technology

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The messages of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois could not have been more diverse. The philosophical rivalry between Washington and DuBois has deep historical roots. To be on the same side fighting for the same purpose, progress, and uplifting of the Black race, these two Black intellectuals harbored radically divergent views on how to assist African Americans to free themselves from their often subhuman conditions. Both men were aware that technological advancement was of foremost importance to the advancement of African Americans. Washington's (1901) *Up From Slavery* and DuBois' (1903) *The Souls of Black Folks* were immediately hailed as classic commentary due to their efforts to address the then "Negro" problem in America. There were a number of Black Americans who made a valiant effort to mitigate poverty, illiteracy, racial discrimination, high mortality rates, and other des-

olate conditions that plagued many African Americans, particularly at the turn of the century. However, due to their influential appeal among certain constituencies, both Washington and DuBois garnered ample attention from many segments of the American intelligence, many of which were European in ethnic origin. Thus, acknowledgment from the White power structure (this was particularly true in the case of Washington) provided both men a platform to promote their message.

Washington was a student at Hampton Institute and became convinced that vocational education was the only means by which Blacks would become successful in America. In 1881 Washington went to Alabama and founded Tuskegee Institute, where he put into practice his belief that the ultimate solution to the race problem was for Blacks to prove themselves

worthy by becoming reliable and superior laborers, eventually making themselves indispensable to the economic well-being of the country. In order to accomplish this, Blacks needed the right form of education: an education that would be beneficial in an economic sense. Given his experience at Hampton, Washington felt that industrial education was superior to academic education for achieving his goal of Black social improvement (Spivey, 1978). As quoted in Franklin (1973), Washington believed that Black education “should be so directed that the greatest proportion of the mental strength of the masses will be brought to bear upon the everyday practical things of life, upon something that is needed to be done, and something which *they will be permitted to do* (emphasis added) in the community in which they reside” (p. 285). The basic philosophy of industrial education as practiced at Hampton and Tuskegee was quite simple. The training in various domestic and trade skills within an authoritarian and religiously based environment would produce a Black who would fit into the lower end of the occupational structure and, more important, know his or her place among Whites and come to accept that place as proper.

Such a form of education was just what White society sought. For Southerners, it would keep Blacks subservient and exploitable. For Northerners, it would serve as a way of calming racial tensions and providing a well-trained laboring underclass that could be used in the effort to industrialize the South. For these reasons, wealthy philanthropists in both the North and the South were willing to give large grants to institutions that adopted this vocational model while ignoring those institutions that remained academically oriented (Franklin, 1973; Quarles, 1969; Winston, 1971).

The results were as dramatic as they were devastating. The ideology of vocational education became the panacea for the race problem in America. Except for a few institutions of higher learning (Fisk, Atlanta, and Howard), Black colleges took the financial windfalls and adopted the vocational curriculum. Educationally, vocational training was a failure: It not only failed to prepare Blacks to move up in society, but it also guaranteed that they would move down. The emphasis on manual training and the trades served to destroy the educational aspirations that had been aroused during Reconstruction and wiped out the hope that education could

provide a way out of poverty. By 1930 industrial education was seen as a “cynical political strategy, not a sound educational policy” and proved to be the “great detour” for Blacks from which they are just beginning to return (Winston, 1971, p. 683).

Booker T. Washington was born a slave on the plantation of James Burroughs near Hale’s Ford, Virginia (Harlan, 1970). During the period of Washington’s prominence, from the 1890s until his death in 1915, probably the leading ideological orientation of American Negroes centered on the development of Negro business enterprise through a combination of thrift, industry, and racial solidarity, or Negro support of Negro business (Kusmer, 1991). Although the philosophy of “self-help” has largely been credited to Washington, this was a message that was very much in vogue as far back as the 1850s. It experienced a renaissance during Reconstruction, particularly among educated African Americans. The advocates of this progressive form of African American empowerment argued that African Americans, despite facing rampant discrimination, disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and other forms of oppression, must turn from being defensive toward the capitalist system and adopt proactive methods of combating such a system. Once African Americans had proven their ability to help themselves and to acquire wealth and respectability, it was believed that prejudice and discrimination would disappear. During the mid 20th century, there were Black academics such as the late E. Franklin Frazier who argued that there were African American businessmen who were not above exploiting the masses of Blacks to augment their own economic welfare (Frazier, 1957).

At the close of the 19th century, the entrepreneurial class in the Black community depended in considerable part upon the support of White customers. Though the range of occupations varied from city to city, this group was composed primarily of blacksmiths, tailors, barbers, and other skilled artisans, hackmen and draymen, grocers, and less frequently meat dealers, hotel owners, caterers, real estate dealers, and contractors (Kusmer, 1991). Along with civil servants, teachers, pullman porters of upper class status, domestic servants in the most elite White families, the more eminent and better educated ministers, a few doctors, and an occasional lawyer, the more successful among

these entrepreneurs composed the upper echelon of the African American community in the late 19th century (DuBois, 1899).

By about 1900, however, significant economic and social changes were well under way. A growing antipathy on the part of Whites toward trading with Black businessmen coupled with rapid changes in technology and business organization forced many of these small entrepreneurs out of business. At the same time, the increasing urbanization of African Americans provided an economic base for professional and business men who were dependent on the services of African Americans (Meier, 1963). These services included banks, cemetery and realty associations, insurance enterprises, and numerous retail and service establishments (Meier, 1963). Previously established businesses such as newspapers, morticians, and retail merchants had depended upon the money that the upper middle class African American community had spent for their goods. By this juncture this economic class had increased in size. It was during the first two decades of the 20th century that two of the largest Black fortunes—that of R. R. Church, real estate magnet in Memphis, Tennessee, and Madame C. J. Walker, creator of the straightening comb and the first Black female millionaire—were created (Pierce, 1947). Walker was a profound example of early 20th century Black technological genius. It was the combination of the aforementioned factors of Black entrepreneurship that both Booker T. Washington and, to a lesser degree, W. E. B. DuBois attempted to espouse to the African American bourgeoisie (Meier, 1963).

Throughout American history, the Black upper class had an easier time obtaining an economic and technological based education than their brethren in the lower class. Because of this fact, they tended to be more acquainted with current scientific technology. Depending upon the city, the members of this socioeconomic class varied. In New Orleans the Black upper class consisted of free people of color. In Charleston, South Carolina, artisans, contractors, barbers, and postal employees represented the African American upper middle class. In cities such as Atlanta and Durham, there was a substantial entrepreneurial class that DuBois called the group economy. In Washington, DC, the situation was unique due to the large number of government workers and politicians. For many years (this was the case in many African

American communities, both urban and rural), ministers, teachers, and a few small businessmen (particularly after the Civil War) were the African Americans who were more inclined to gravitate toward technological pursuits (Meier, 1963).

Because of their diverse views on how to reduce the reductive circumstances of African Americans, both Washington and DuBois had viewed technology from different perspectives. Washington was a Southerner who harbored deep suspicion about the Black intellectuals who dwelt in the northern cities or attended the southern colleges that he never attended. He dismissed their arcane knowledge as too much from books and too little from life.

Washington was different than most Southerners in the fact that he was astute to the fact that in a capitalist society that it was pertinent for African Americans to become skillfully adept to the ever-changing economy. He knew that becoming technologically efficient was one such way to do so. This Black man who was the offspring of former Virginia slaves founded Tuskegee Institute in 1881. This was only four years after the Hayes/Tilden Compromise that officially ended Reconstruction in the South in 1877. Beginning with a few ramshackle buildings and a small sum from the state of Alabama, he built Tuskegee Institute into the best-known African American school in the nation. While not totally negating academic training, the school's curriculum stressed industrial education, training in specific skills and crafts that would prepare students for jobs. Washington built both his school and influence by tapping the generosity of Northern philanthropists, receiving donations from wealthy New Englanders and some of the leading industrialists and businessmen of his time, such as Andrew Carnegie, William H. Baldwin, Jr., Julius Rosenwald, and Robert C. Ogden.

Thus his establishment of Tuskegee Institute was the cornerstone for future goals that he harbored for African Americans. Washington's reputation as the principal of Tuskegee Institute grew through the late 1880s and 1890s; his school was considered the best exemplar of industrial education, viewed as the best method of training generations of African Americans who were either born into slavery or were the sons and daughters of freed slaves. His control of the purse strings of many of the

Northern donors to his school increased his influence with other African American schools in the South.

It was his legendary Atlanta Compromise speech that firmly defined Washington as a man who was deeply immersed with economic and technological advancement. It was during this speech that Washington urged African Americans to refrain from adamantly attempting to integrate with White America. Rather, he advocated a gradual emancipation of African Americans through hard work, economic improvement, and self-help (Washington, 1901). Technological advancement was an integral part of his message. His rhetoric gained universal acceptance among many Whites and a large number of Blacks.

What distinguished Washington from DuBois and many other African American leaders of the early 20th century was his philosophy that Black Americans had to keep ever faithful to the virtues of sacrifice, discipline, delayed gratification, and most important, economic salvation for their own communities.

The wisest among my race understand that agitation of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera house. (Franklin & Starr, 1967, pp. 85-87)

Washington argued that business and technological acumen were paramount. This was the means by which the African American masses would prosper. He believed that cultured-based education was secondary and could be pursued at a later date.

DuBois concurred with Washington that progress among the Black race had to occur, but he believed that it would be more aptly served through a trickled down means. DuBois was born to a white French father, Alfred DuBois,

and Mary Burghart DuBois, a Black woman, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1869. He was what many people referred to in those days as “mulatto” or in contemporary terms, biracial. Unlike many Americans (Black or White) of the time period, his stellar educational opportunities afforded him a national platform for him to espouse his message. He earned his BA at Fisk University in 1888, another BA at Harvard in 1890, and later his doctorate in 1895. He was the first African American to earn a PhD at the institution (Aptheker, 1951). Ever determined to uplift Black Americans from poverty, he focused on how the skills of the Black professional class could be utilized to achieve this goal.

It was during this time period that the North was experiencing a large number of immigrants from Europe as well as a large number of African Americans migrating from the South. This fact provided for potentially volatile relationships between the newly arrived immigrants and the native born Black population. White Northern businessmen, primarily due to more familiarity and comfort with Europeans who shared their ancestral lineage, mores, and customs, began to align themselves with Jews, Greeks, Italians, and other White ethnics which, in turn, either marginalized or prohibited Black Americans from being able to provide services to their communities (Butler, 1991).

With regard to this problem, DuBois engaged in a major study of the city of Philadelphia. His work focused on four social classes within the city. The top 10% he called an upper class or aristocracy. These people included entrepreneurs and professional people. These people had decent jobs and their children attended the best schools. Group two was the respectable working class. These individuals were primarily made up of servants, waiters, porters, and laborers. This was a class that was eager to engage in upward mobility. The third group of African Americans was referred to as the poor. It was made up of recent immigrants who could not find work, unreliable persons, widows, and wives of broken families. The lowest class (about 6% of the Black population) was labeled as criminals (DuBois, 1899).

Because of the great discrepancies that existed between the two groups, upwardly mobile African Americans were able to successfully distinguish themselves among other

classes in the city. Class has often been used as a distinguishing feature of American society, especially among White Americans. However, it is also true that similar situations were commonplace among Black Americans as well. Upon his conclusion of studying African Americans in Philadelphia, DuBois decided that the only way that African Americans could advance was through the leadership of the upper classes. Thus the term talented tenth was adopted. DuBois was adamant in his belief that intellectual guidance from the best and brightest among the Black race was the means by which to advance African Americans. A number of years after Washington's death, DuBois (1940) reiterated his belief:

Since the controversy between myself and Mr. Washington has become historic, it deserves more careful statement than it has had hitherto, both as to the matters and the motives involved. There was first of all the ideological controversy. I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and such leadership could not always be trusted to guide this group into self-realization and to its highest cultural possibilities. Mr. Washington, on the other hand, believed that the Negro as an efficient worker could gain wealth and that eventually through his ownership of capital he would be able to achieve a recognized place in American culture and could then educate his children as he might wish and develop his possibilities. For this reason he proposed to put the emphasis at present upon training in the skilled trades and encouragement in industry and common labor. (p. 70)

There was no doubt that by the early years of the 1900s that Washington's influence among the White elite was considerably stronger than DuBois'. There was no gainsaying his influence in the highest places, his manifold services to his people, and, above all, the radiating influ-

ence of Tuskegee's good works (Lewis, 1993).

Washington's leadership ultimately gave way to new forces in the 20th century, which placed less emphasis on individual leadership and more on organizational power. The founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 with W. E. B. DuBois as its first president and the National Urban League in 1911 challenged Washington's power as a dispenser of political patronage as well as his technological and economic message. Nevertheless, he remained active as a speaker until his death in 1915 at Tuskegee.

DuBois had a phenomenally prolific career as a writer and scholar. Over time, he became more disillusioned with America, particularly the Black elite—the group that he dubbed as the Black upper class—believing that they had failed on their obligation to lead the masses of African Americans out of retrograde circumstances. In October 1961 he moved to Ghana. In 1963 he renounced his American citizenship and officially became a citizen of Ghana. He died there on August 27, 1963, at the age of 95 and was buried there (Rampersad, 1976).

Both men were aware that the need for African Americans to become technologically literate was paramount. However, whereas Washington advocated a hands-on external approach, DuBois promoted a paternalistic form of advancement of the Black race. Both men's philosophies are still being argued and applied in the technological arena today.

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