

Hunter College High School

Black Socioeconomic Advancement: The Early 20th Century Debate

Stephen Jones

U.S. History I&II

Mr. Seoparsan

Spring 2023

Following the emancipation of enslaved African Americans and the ultimate failure of Reconstruction, the African American community was left to fend for itself, shunned by white society. Millions of African Americans—who encompassed crucial aspects of the American workforce and society at large—often found themselves forcefully segregated and subjected to vicious discrimination. Amidst the sociopolitical upheaval that rocked America in the post-Reconstruction era, leading Black scholars debated the complex and controversial question of African American socioeconomic advancement and integration into American society at large. As the African American community attempted to solve its socio-political dilemma, two rivaling schools of thought emerged: prominent Black scholar Booker Taliaferro Washington held accommodationist views—he argued that Blacks should abandon their immediate pursuit for civil rights, accepting segregation whilst developing vocational labor skills and building economic independence. In contrast, fellow scholar W.E.B. DuBois argued that the brightest path forward involved the attainment of civil rights. W.E.B. DuBois’ pursuit of full African American assimilation and socioeconomic progression through civil rights provided a more definitive and maintainable solution than did Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist plan—Washington’s plan for Black integration, entirely hinging on the white perception of Black people, was inherently contradictory and vulnerable to exploitation.

Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist stance on Black integration and socioeconomic advancement relied heavily on white support, rendering his plan manipulable. Insight into Washington’s life is fundamental to understanding the core principles of his argument: Washington was born a slave on a Virginia plantation in 1856, where he worked until emancipation in 1865. After having been emancipated, Washington and his family migrated to West Virginia, where he worked in a mine whilst attending school. After having enrolled himself

into Hampton Institute, a trade school for African Americans, Washington's passion for education remained with him—in 1881, Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute, which similarly taught vocational labor skills with an emphasis on discipline and self-reliance.¹ Once the vitality of Black economic contributions was proven, he theorized, African Americans would gain recognition from white society and racial inequality would gradually disappear.²

Washington rose to national prominence as an educator and leader in the African American community following his speech at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, where he highlighted his accommodationist perspective on the socioeconomic position of African Americans.³ In his speech, Washington asserted: “You shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race; only let this be constantly in mind, that, while from representations in these buildings of the product of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters, and art, much good will come, yet far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions...”⁴ Washington's speech, dubbed the “Atlanta Compromise” by opponents of his viewpoint (who believed he was relinquishing key ground in terms of rights), degraded African Americans, painting them as subservient and eager to appease white Southerners. By depicting African Americans as dedicated servants to white people, Washington's speech only acted to perpetuate the white belief of African American inferiority. The argument against Washington's self-perpetuated subservience has historical merit—in the United States' early history, enslaved Africans were viewed as indentured servants. However,

¹ “Virginia: Booker T. Washington,” National Parks Service, August 23, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/btwash.htm>.

² “Booker T. Washington and the ‘Atlanta Compromise,’” National Museum of African American History and Culture, February 8, 2018, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/booker-t-washington-and-atlanta-compromise>.

³ Ralph McGill, “W.E.B. Du Bois,” *The Atlantic*, November 1965, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/black/mcgillbh.htm>.

⁴ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, New York: Doubleday, 1901, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2376/pg2376-images.html>

with the rise of chattel slavery, White Americans increasingly viewed African Americans as subservient people who were destined to be enslaved. By catering to and abetting White Americans' views of African Americans, Washington was working against his own goals of social advancement. Washington's willful subservience is highlighted in a 1965 interview with W.E.B. DuBois by *The Atlantic*: "'Booker T. Washington helped them rationalize it. I do not think that he meant to do so. But he did,' ... There was no doubt in DuBois's mind. He was sure, he said, that without Washington's position there would have been no Plessy-Ferguson decision in 1896.'" ⁵ DuBois, among many other historians, attributed Washington's doctrine of submission to the Supreme Court's decision on *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld discriminatory practices under the premise of "separate but equal" treatment. ⁶ By perpetuating discrimination and accepting the "separate but equal" pretense for a discriminatory status quo, Washington's work ultimately worked against the interests of the African American community. In his speech, Washington did not tackle racism, the key factor behind the segregation of African Americans—instead, he denounced African Americans who fought for civil rights, labeling equality movements as "[the] extremest folly." ⁷ Washington accepted racism towards African Americans and spoke of how vocational work and economic independence would lead to an eventual "blotting out" of racial differences. These ideas on Black integration were demonstrative of Washington's underestimation of the deep-rooted nature of racism in America: African Americans had little power in society—the ultimate decision to "blot out" sectional differences would have belonged to white people, who held extreme animosity at the idea of racial integration. Thus, Washington's accommodationist ideals were incredibly vulnerable to

⁵ Ralph McGill, "W.E.B. Du Bois," *The Atlantic*, November 1965, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/black/mcgillbh.htm>.

⁶ "Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.

⁷ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, New York: Doubleday, 1901, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2376/pg2376-images.html>

exploitation—racist whites would have been able to exploit African Americans’ willful submission and perpetuate the discriminatory status quo within America.

Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist approach to assimilation was not representative of actual Black experiences—many African Americans occupied vocational positions but received no compensation or recognition for their work. In his “Atlanta Compromise” speech, Washington asserted: “Cast [your bucket] down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions... No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.”⁸ Washington asked African Americans to seize the opportunity to establish themselves in vocational work in order to gain recognition—and thus subsequently gain equal standing in society. By asking African Americans to “cast [their] buckets down,” Washington was also asking African Americans to cast themselves down literally and to accept their inferior status within American society. Washington’s plans for advancement through industrial education and labor presented a contrast to reality—in much of the South, African Americans had already occupied and were presently occupying vocational labor positions. Prior to the Civil War, an 1860 population census estimated the enslaved population of the United States to be approximately 3,952,838 people—these almost 4 million people, forcefully enslaved and forced to toil under the oppression of slavery, composed the South’s agricultural backbone.⁹ In fact, cotton, which was mostly cultivated by enslaved people, became America’s most valuable export.¹⁰ The treatment of enslaved African Americans represented a fundamental contradiction to Washington’s claims of advancement through vocational labor: despite playing a

⁸ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, New York: Doubleday, 1901, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2376/pg2376-images.html>

⁹ Mitchell, S. Augustus, Map of the United States, and territories, Philadelphia, Pa., Together with Canada &c. Mitchell's map publication office, 1861, Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/99447041/>

¹⁰ Matthew Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>.

fundamental role in the American economy, enslaved people were not rewarded nor recognized, instead being further oppressed and exploited. Following the end of the Civil War and military-enforced Reconstruction, a large number of formerly enslaved African Americans worked as unskilled laborers in plantations and in cities; these laborers, who constituted a vital part of the South's labor force, faced long working hours and extremely low wages with marginal improvements (if any) to prior working conditions.

Famous Black intellectual W.E.B. DuBois' argument for immediate, unconditional civil rights provided a more definitive solution to the question of African American integration in America than did Washington. DuBois opposed Washington's views on African American socioeconomic advancement. His different origins and experiences were undoubtedly influential to his alternative perspective on the subject: unlike Washington, DuBois was born free in Massachusetts in 1868, three years following the end of the Civil War. DuBois attended a racially integrated high school in Great Barrington and later enrolled in Harvard University, where he was the first African American to graduate, earning a PhD in history. In 1903, DuBois published his seminal work, which firmly established him as a top scholar within the Black community—composed of a series of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* explored racial dynamics and the role of African Americans within society.¹¹ As racial violence grew more prominent in America in the early twentieth century, DuBois helped to establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which overtly disapproved of Washington's accommodationist views—in stark contrast to Washington's position on racial injustices, the NAACP actively funded and undertook action against racial violence and the discriminatory Jim Crow system.¹² *The Souls of Black Folk* is best demonstrative of DuBois's opinions on social and

¹¹ “W. E. B. Du Bois,” The Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, 2008, <https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/web-dubois>.

¹² Ibid.

economic progress for African Americans: “By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”¹³ Rather than accepting racial inequality and dubious progress, DuBois strove to peacefully advocate for civil rights. DuBois denounced the hypocrisy of legislators who did not honor America’s founding principles, appealing to the core tenets of the Constitution to justify his support for equal rights. Although the 14th and 15th Amendments established citizenship for all African Americans and the right to vote for African American men, the reality faced by many was quite different. Southern legislatures utilized legal loopholes (“separate but equal” doctrines) to suppress voters on a massive scale, ensuring the continuing oppression of African Americans through voting measures such as literacy tests as well as intimidation by terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Full civil rights—including the actual right to vote—were essential to African American socioeconomic advancement. With African American representation in legislatures and the abolition of voter suppression, the African American community would have been able to advocate for its socio-political interests and work to overcome economic barriers. Within *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois further elaborated on the necessity of true suffrage rights for African Americans: “[Booker T. Washington] is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.”¹⁴ DuBois exposed a fundamental contradiction within Washington’s arguments for industrial

¹³ W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co, 1903, Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

education and vocational labor—without the right of suffrage or to advocate for their rights as workers, African Americans would be unable to make social and economic progress within society.

DuBois advocated for classic college educations for the best academically-performing African American students in his 1903 book *The Talented Tenth*: “The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people... The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”¹⁵ In his writings on the “Talented Tenth,” DuBois envisioned a thorough college education for a select few within the African American community—these select few, he postulated, would act as spearheads for the African American community at large, navigating it forward to progress. DuBois referenced work and education as means to “uplift a people” within social and economic mediums, but also cited the importance of working with purpose and intelligence; work without thought, he argued, would lead to the stagnation of progress for African Americans. Arguing against Washington, he stressed the importance of college education for certain African Americans—the talented few, or “tenth”—as a means to guide the rest through purposeful vocational work. Although DuBois accorded importance to industrial education and vocational work to a certain extent, his vision for the “Talented Tenth” combatted the manipulability of a purely vocational Black workforce—with college-educated African Americans as community leaders, industrial education and vocational labor could have been used as a tool for societal advancement.

Despite its more definitive nature, DuBois’ stance on socioeconomic advancement through civil rights had its shortcomings. For one, DuBois campaigned for equality within a

¹⁵ Dubois, W.E.B, “The Talented Tenth,” from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day*, New York: J. Pott & Company, 1903, http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/Talented_Tenth.pdf.

society that was neither ready nor willing to grant African Americans full civil rights. American legislature was helmed almost exclusively by White individuals, rendering social change a behemoth task. For instance, Theodore Roosevelt, the President of the United States at the time of publication of DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, held a cautious approach to civil rights for Black Americans—Roosevelt, similarly to Washington, favored a gradual approach to White acceptance of civil rights.¹⁶ Thus, like Washington, DuBois displayed an overconfidence (although to a lesser extent) in the willingness of White society to accept African American advancement. This is highlighted by Theophilus Bolden Steward, an African American scholar and contemporary of DuBois who authored a brief review on DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. Within his review, Steward highlighted the somewhat theoretical nature of DuBois' writings: "As a practical solution of the color-line problem, which is assuredly assuming national importance, Professor DuBois' book cannot be said to do more than offer rich hints from a vast store of sympathy and knowledge."¹⁷ However, Steward also praised DuBois' argument, labeling it "the best statement of the factors that greatly complicated the negro's life and destiny" and a significant contributor to the advent of a "systematic discussion" of rights for Black Americans.¹⁸

In conclusion, Booker T. Washington's accommodationist views were contradictory and manipulable—in asking Black Americans to submit themselves to tyranny for the sake of a theoretical, highly improbable future, Washington's plan was not a feasible solution. DuBois, in contrast, advocated for civil rights, a definitive—if not slightly unrealistic—strategy for Black America's socio-political and economic advancement. Although white legislators were ultimately responsible for the enshrinement of civil rights in the U.S. Constitution, DuBois offered a feasible course of action, contributing tangibly to the fledgling civil rights movement.

¹⁶ Andrew Glass, "Theodore Roosevelt Reviews Race Relations, Feb. 13, 1905," POLITICO, March 2, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/theodore-roosevelt-reviews-race-relations-feb-13-1905-234938>.

¹⁷ Theophilus Bolden Steward, *American Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1903): 136–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2762314>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

This is best exemplified within his work as a founding member of the NAACP, a critical civil rights organization which held support from both African Americans and a minority of white Americans. Despite their feud over African American advancement and social integration, both Washington and DuBois harbored great respect for one another, recognizing the effects of their differing life experiences on their respective stances. Washington and DuBois were passionate, tireless advocates for the oppressed African American community; their early activism ultimately set the stage for the civil rights movement, the most important social movement in the history of the United States.

Bibliography

- “Booker T. Washington and the ‘Atlanta Compromise.’” National Museum of African American History and Culture, February 8, 2018.
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/booker-t-washington-and-atlanta-compromise>.
- Desmond, Matthew. “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace That to the Plantation.” The New York Times, August 14, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>.
- “Dr. Booker Taliaferro Washington.” Tuskegee University. Accessed May 25, 2023.
<https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>.
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co, 1903. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>
- Dubois, W.E.B. “The Talented Tenth,” from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day*. New York: J. Pott & Company, 1903.
http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/Talented_Tenth.pdf
- Glass, Andrew. “Theodore Roosevelt Reviews Race Relations, Feb. 13, 1905.” POLITICO, March 2, 2017.
<https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/theodore-roosevelt-reviews-race-relations-feb-13-1905-234938>.
- McGill, Ralph. “W.E.B. DuBois.” *The Atlantic*, November 1965.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/black/mcgillbh.htm>
- Mitchell, S. Augustus. *Map of the United States, and territories*. Philadelphia, Pa., Together with Canada &c. Mitchell's map publication office, 1861. Map.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/99447041/>.
- “Plessy v. Ferguson (1896).” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed May 25, 2023. <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>.
- Steward, Theophilus Bolden. *American Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1903): 136–37.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2762314>.

“Virginia: Booker T. Washington.” National Parks Service, August 23, 2017.
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/btwash.htm>.

Washington, Booker T. *Up From Slavery*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1901. Project Gutenberg.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2376/pg2376-images.html>

“W. E. B. Du Bois.” The Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, 2008.
<https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/web-dubois>.