

Talented Tenth Theory: The Controversy of the Black Elite

Meeting Topic for Wednesday September 13th, 2006

“[Talented tenth] it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”

- I. **History:** The Souls of Black Folk written by W.E.B DuBois (1903) provides an insight on the talented tenth theory.
 - A) Booker T. Washington- African American educator as well as the founder of the Tuskegee Institute
 - 1) Taught African Americans trade skills and industrial training
 - 2) Felt that having a trade would gain the respect of the White community
 - 3) Felt that trade skills provided economic security to all African Americans
 - 4) Gained place and consideration in the north
 - B) W.E.B DuBois highly criticized the acts of this industrial movement
 - 1) DuBois believed that academic education was more important than trade education
 - 2) Emphasis on industrial education actually kept African Americans trapped in lower social and economic classes if African Americans stuck with trades
 - 3) Felt that if all we asked for was to be recognized by the White community for our trades; then that would be the extent to which what we were given
 - 4) Felt that arts and sciences were the best route to achieving an equal state
 - 5) Argued that although arts and sciences through education was a direct way to deal with this problem, it was NOT meant for all people. (leads into the theory)

II. Talented Tenth Theory

Definitions

Elite:

a group of persons exercising the major share of authority or influence within a larger group

representing the most choice or select; best

Elitism:

1. practice of or belief in rule by an elite.
2. consciousness of or pride in belonging to a select or favored group.

- A) The theory of the talented tenth provided by W.E.B DuBois is an essay which describes the necessity of the top 10% of the African American people to take responsibility and lead the rest of the 90%.
- B) The core of his theory is the idea that educated African Americans are obliged to sacrifice their “personal interest and endeavors in favor of community leadership activities designed to improve the social, economic, and political condition of the race” (DuBois, 1948)

C) Controversies

- a. The talented tenth theory separates African Americans
 - i. Did DuBois really believe that only those with means could become members of this elitist group?
 - ii. Was he only cultivating an entourage of elitist who would exploit the rest of the people or seek individual gain at the expense of the masses?
 - iii. Program contemplated the uplift of a few rather than the development of many
 - iv. Criticism by other leaders (Booker T.) showed that they disapproved of this concept because it looked as if he separated the race and only those that were financially capable of attaining a higher education were basically responsible for leading the rest of the people and did not effectively involve or portray anyone’s interest
- b. DuBois’ defense
 - i. Rejecting the criticisms as not being “fair” to his original meaning
 - ii. Years after proposing this concept he acknowledged that he did not fully articulate the responsibilities or obligations of the Talented tenth that could prevent the misconception of his theory
 - iii. Theory based on the educated who would future educate many generations
 - iv. Leadership of African Americans was much more needed in intellect rather than physical muscle

c. Questions

- 1. Is DuBois’ Talented Tenth engaging in leadership activities as was the original idea?
- 2. Have the Talented Tenth forsaken their responsibility to their communities in response to personal gratification and accomplishments?
- 3. Is the theory of the Talented Tenth still needed today?
- 4. Should we be defined by our educational attainment, our occupation, and income?
- 5. DuBois stated that to belong to this Talented Tenth you must get an education through higher education; such as college. Do you agree with this?
- 6. Are these Blacks lifting as they climb?

7. Are members of the Black Middle Class engaging in the leadership activities of their respective communities?
8. Is there a distinction between the Talented Tenth and the Black Middle Class?

Study which shows the talented tenth are actually engaged and working in their communities, yet the Black Middle Class look to attain personal gratification and success through materials and class issues.

“Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will no do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must no simply teach work – it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.” (William Edward Burghardt Du Bois)