

Talented Tenth



Since Reconstruction, African American race leadership has been identified with the development of black elites schooled on the model of privileged, white educational institutions. In a society where intellectual ability denotes college or university training and socialization, intellectualism is tied to academe. Consequently, it has been aligned with a somewhat conservative state-corporate structure that is traditionally geared to middle-class, white males. (In the late twentieth century, only thirty percent of European Americans and fifteen percent of African Americans possessed college or university degrees.) Contemporary understandings of black intellectualism are traceable to late-nineteenth-century liberalism and its conventional antiracism tied to classism and elitism. The phrase *talented tenth*, generally associated with W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 essay of the same title (a response to Booker T. Washington's accommodationist politics), originated in the late nineteenth century among Northern white liberals of the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS), which established Southern black colleges to train and educate Negro elites. In her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham describes how, the year after Booker T. Washington's infamous 1895 Atlanta Compromise speech, Henry Morehouse, who would twice serve as ABHMS's executive secretary, developed the phrase the *talented tenth* to distinguish his liberal arts education programs and their students from the "mediocre" black intellect that aligned itself with Washington's ideology of vocational education for race advancement.

The Christian missionary founders and funders of black higher education, who included women in their construction of race leadership, prioritized race management. Their *talented tenth* was to provide a racial-class buffer zone between unprivileged blacks and white society. Believing that educational migration weakened the links between elite race leaders and poor and working-class African Americans, ABHMS disapproved of black Southern students relocating to Northern colleges. (Although Du Bois would later obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard, he was sent South for undergraduate studies by white clergy funding black education, in this case to Fisk rather than to Harvard, which was actually closer to his home and family in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.)

In the nineteenth century ABHMS college-trained blacks sought to supplant the power of illiterate black leaders and, to a great extent, succeeded. In the twentieth century conventional academics gauged black intellectual ability by prestigious publications. The *talented tenth* at the end of the twentieth century appeared more ideologically and socially separate from nonelite blacks than were their predecessors. Perhaps this was partly owing to the integrationist successes of previous generations. The select members of the *tenth* work at elite institutions and live in places vastly different from those of their nineteenth-century counterparts or contemporary peers teaching in urban or vocational schools. Distance, or even estrangement, from black communities does not negate the contributions of elite black intellectuals. However, historically the conservative, managerial function of such an educated elite formed an intellectual and political leadership scrutinized with some suspicion by nonelites. Like their predecessors, most contemporary black intellectuals rarely publicly ask to what extent they intentionally or inadvertently fulfill the nineteenth-century missionary mandate for race management. The eventual repudiation of the conservatism or antiradicalism of this elite formation by W. E. B. Du Bois—at one time the greatest promoter

of the concept of a **talented tenth**—provides a critical, analytical dimension to discussions and debates about historical and contemporary antiracist leadership.

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