Race and Class in the Educational Politics of W. E. B. Du Bois

by

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Dedication

For striking education workers

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At the same time as I was writing this dissertation, I became involved in various political campaigns and struggles within higher education–to advocate for a free Palestine and the right to boycott the apartheid state of Israel, to protect workers from austerity measures and uplift relations of care in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, to get cops and armed cops off campus, and to win a living wage for graduate students. I am grateful to so many GEO members, officers, organizing committee members, and department organizers, too many to name. The dozens of organizers who made up the Organizing Assembly during the 2023 contract campaign exemplified principled, brave, scrappy, justice-oriented unionism, the kind of unionism our universities need so much. The collective practice of building and leveraging power and doing so against the grain of what was deemed reasonable, acceptable, and possible was extremely

difficult and so rewarding. These experiences of struggling collectively have motivated and animated my approach to the study of education

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Abstract

This dissertation identifies and analyzes the anticapitalist dimensions of W. E. B. Du Bois's educational politics, arguing that Du Bois increasingly confronted what I term the equality paradox of capitalist schooling: that schools are institutions that advance equality by enabling class mobility and social status at the same time as they reproduce socioeconomic stratification. Early in his public career, Du Bois promoted the idea that a "Talented Tenth" of Black Americans should pursue liberal arts training, challenging Booker T. Washington's emphasis on industrial education. Du Bois initially maintained that liberal arts education would produce capable leaders who could guide Black Americans toward freedom and equality. However, by the 1930s, he increasingly viewed schooling through an economic lens, emphasizing the connections between schooling and the racialization of the division of labor and deepening class stratification. This shift led Du Bois to grapple with the contradictions inherent in his Talented Tenth framework. While education was essential for developing shared political consciousness, it simultaneously conferred socioeconomic privileges that distanced college-educated Black leaders from industrial workers and farmers. This dissertation's three chapters trace Du Bois's iterative engagement with this tension.

Chapter One discusses Washington's and Du Bois's competing curricular visions, illustrating how both approaches, though articulated in terms of racial uplift, reinforced class hierarchies and divisions. Chapter Two discusses Du Bois's portrayal of Black colleges as shaped by dynamics of class rule and struggle in the Black Flame trilogy. I interpret the novels as

offering a critical reflection on the talented tenth idea. Du Bois critiques elite-driven political strategies, emphasizing instead the everyday forms of class struggle enacted by teachers and students, whose persistent resistance continually challenged ruling-class domination and revealed the subversive potential of segregated schools. Chapter Three discusses Du Bois's turn to popular, working-class pedagogy as enacting an alternative educational practice by sidestepping the competitive dimension of American schooling and offering one possible solution to the equality paradox that had shaped his earlier efforts. Alongside communist educators, Du Bois taught at working-class adult schools aimed explicitly at fostering class consciousness and interracial and international solidarity. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that Du Bois's evolving educational thought reveals a sustained critique of capitalist schooling, and it highlights the constant struggle involved in turning schools into spaces of collective empowerment and solidarity.

Introduction Du Bois and the Class Struggle in Schools

"Du Bois! Du Bois! Down with McKenzie!" Fisk University students chanted as they marched through the campus while banging pots and pans and smashing windows.[1] Not only were the students causing a disruption, they were breaking curfew–a serious offense under the administration of the college's tyrannical President Fayette McKenzie. The year was 1925, and the location was one of the most prestigious Black universities in the country. Like most HBCUs in the South at the time, the University was overseen by a white president and Board of Trustees and governed according to extremely strict behavioral standards and rules of comportment. President McKenzie, for his part, was proud of this state of affairs, bragging that "the essential principles of efficiency exemplified in the military have been absorbed into the university."[2] In addition to rigid discipline in the form of strict dress codes, curfews, and bans on fraternization between men and women, President McKenzie also banned student organizations, student athletics, and the student newspaper. Despite numerous small demonstrations and attempts to present their grievances to the administration, President McKenzie informed the students on

[1] The students were chanting Du Bois's name because he had given the most recent commencement address at Fisk and in the address, he directly criticized President McKenzie's administration. Because of his high profile, Du Bois's critical commentary not only generated significant attention but also catalyzed the organization of alumni and faculty who started campaigning against McKenzie. Because of the speech, some speculated that Du Bois had catalyzed the evening protest, a claim which he himself denied in his editorial about the strike for the *Crisis*. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Diturni Silenti," June 1921, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Opinion," The Crisis 29, no. 6 (April 1925); and Martin Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 265.

[2] As quoted in Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 250.

February 4, 1925, at a university-wide assembly that the official policy of the Board would be to ignore the students' grievances. If they had a problem with that policy, they could unenroll.

Hearing the President's dismissive response, the students conducted the curfew-breaking demonstration, at which point the President called the Nashville police and had the seven students who had presented the students' grievances brought up on trumped-up felony charges. Aghast at the move to leverage the police against them, three hundred of four hundred students refused to follow President McKenzie's mandate that they sign a pledge signaling their disapproval of the evening demonstration. Instead, they went on "strike" and left campus. Without students attending classes, donations dried up, and in the end, President McKenzie was dismissed. For Du Bois, the strike's political significance could not be understated. In an editorial for the *Crisis*, one of numerous publications banned from Fisk's library during President McKenzie's tenure, he wrote: "I am uplifted by the student martyrs at Fisk. At last we have real radicalism of the young—radicalism that costs, that is not mere words and foam…Here is the real radical, the man who hits power in high places, white power, power backed by unlimited wealth; hits it and hits it openly and between the eyes; talks face to face and not down 'at the big gate.'"[3]

The student strike at Fisk was just that: a strike. It was a "struggle for emancipation," that, despite not involving "directly antagonistic subjects" in a clash over the valuation of labor, exemplifies class struggle.[4] My approach to class struggle follows Domenico Losurdo, who argues that limiting the term class struggle to describe confrontations between the industrial proletariat and the capitalist class misunderstands the lived reality of inter and intraclass

[3] Du Bois, "Opinion," *The Crisis*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (April 1925).
[4] Domenico Losurdo, *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13, 21.

contradictions characteristic of existing capitalist society. Losurdo proposes an expansive notion of class struggle inclusive of struggles for freedom: "On the one hand, there are conflicts that oppose exploiting classes…On the other hand, we have struggles for emancipation, which are class struggles from the standpoints of the social subjects engaged in achieving it and of those intent on preventing or impeding it."[5] Moreover, "Class struggle almost never presents itself in the pure state, almost never confines itself to involving directly antagonistic subjects."[6] Du Bois's account of the Fisk strike highlights that ruling-class whites used their wealth to establish white supremacist control over Black schools. Weaponizing and conditioning access to funding allowed ruling-class whites to establish curricula and behavioral codes aimed at ensuring rigid social control, and moreover, served as a defense against the dangers of an educated Black population. Controlling Black schools, then, was one avenue for cementing white ruling-class control over Southern society more broadly. By challenging white supremacist control over their college, the Fisk student strikers destabilized the social relations and material conditions on which ruling-class whites depended to reproduce their power.

Although "hitting" this power "openly and between the eyes" entailed significant sacrifice, these young Black students took the risk regardless. Making extreme personal sacrifices, including risking death in the pursuit of self-determination over their education, is a familiar theme in the history of the struggle for Black freedom in America that long predates the Fisk student strike. Frederick Douglass recounts in his autobiographies how learning to read became incredibly dangerous for him as a young boy. When an infuriated Hugh Auld forbade his wife Sophia from teaching Frederick how to read for fear it would make him "unfit" for life as a slave, Douglass proceeded to hide his Webster's spelling book under his hat to evade discovery

[5] Losurdo, *Class Struggle,* 13.
[6] Losurdo, *Class Struggle*, 21.

and punishment, and he would trade his scarce food resources for spelling lessons from poor white boys on the streets.[7] When the state of Missouri outlawed Black education in 1847, John Berry Meachum equipped a boat with desks and chairs and defiantly taught reading and writing to Black children just outside of Missouri's jurisdiction. Using a rather flimsy legal loophole to run the Floating Freedom School, Meachum and his students risked their lives to teach and to learn.[8]

Douglass and Meachum are just two examples of the extraordinary efforts Black people took in the pursuit of literacy while they were enslaved. Numerous enslaved people dug holes and held clandestine classes literally in pits underground.[9] During Reconstruction, the freedpeople continued to include education among their top priorities as new citizens and political officeholders.[10] Despite the threat and reality of violence from white supremacists, who regularly targeted the freedpeople's teachers and schools, the freedpeople took the establishment of education into their own hands, an effort that included running schools out of their own homes and churches and pooling their extremely limited resources to fund their schools.[11] In alliance with Radical Republicans from the North, Black politicians and other community leaders were instrumental in institutionalizing free, universal public education in the South. As Du Bois put it at the end of *Black Reconstruction*, "Public education for all at public expense, was, in the South,

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[7] Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (The Floating Press, 2008), 65-73; Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, written by Himself, 1818-1895* (Park Publishing Company, 1883), 86-92.
[8] Tamara Shiloh, "John Berry Meachum and the Floating Freedom School." *Oakland Post*, January 3, 2023.
[9] Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 28.
[10] Williams, *Self-Taught,* 70-81; Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[11] Campbell F. Scribner, "Surveying the Destruction of African American Schoolhouses in the South, 1864–1876," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 10, no. 1 (2020). Williams provides a rich archive of examples of the extraordinary methods that the enslaved and the freedpeople used to ensure schooling for themselves and their children. See 46, 95 for examples of repurposing churches and homes to conduct schools.

a Negro idea."[12] Ultimately, both enslaved and freed Black Americans made extraordinary efforts not only to educate themselves but to establish American citizenship on the foundation of education for all.[13]

Du Bois's writings on Black education reveal a distinctive view that acknowledges the profound stakes of struggles for education without subscribing to the idea that schooling alone could overcome white supremacy and racism absent structural change.[14] The idea that schooling could facilitate racial equality was prominent throughout the 20th century, echoing Horace Mann's infamous assertion that "education…beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men," [15] As educational historian Ronald Butchart has shown, Black educational historiography between the Great Depression to the 1960s reflects a widespread faith that "Black progress in education… would undermine separation."[16] As one liberal progressive reformer put it in 1938, for example: "Education is the best answer to the challenge of caste."[17]

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[12] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (Free Press, 1998), 638.

[13] Against the backdrop of enslaved Black Southerners' clandestine pursuit of education, reformers in the antebellum North were advancing a distinct educational agenda of their own. Leaders of the common school movement argued that education was a universal right that should be available to all children, regardless of their class background. To that end, they advocated for the state to create and fund "common schools." The social, political, and economic benefits of such a system, reformers emphasized, were numerous. Schooling would diminish the likelihood of class conflict, foster civic virtue and good moral character, and bolster economic productivity.

[14] Education scholars distinguish between terms *education and schooling* to emphasize that *schooling* typically describes the formal, institutionalized processes of teaching and learning (e.g., curriculum, standardized assessment, instruction), whereas *education* refers to a broader, lifelong processes of intellectual, moral, and social development. John Dewey notably stressed that schooling can become mere rote instruction unless it is grounded in students' real-world experiences and cultivated through democratic, reflective inquiry. Mwalimu Shujaa, applying this distinction to Black education, argues that African Americans have often relied on community-based forms of *education* to safeguard cultural identity and promote self-determination, particularly when formal *schooling* has neglected or undermined those aims. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Mwalimu Shujaa, "Education and Schooling: You Can Have One Without the Other," in Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1993).

[15] Horace Mann, "Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education," 1848.

[16] Ronald E. Butchart, ""Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World": A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1988), 348.

[17] Buell Gallagher, *American Caste and the Negro College* as quoted in Butchart, "Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," 348.

A more marginal tendency in the historiography of Black education from this same period cast doubt on education's equalizing powers. For these historians, education reflected society's existing arrangement of power; it could not overcome unequal power relations.[18] For example, Louis Harlan argued that social and economic factors were determinative of how Southern education developed, asserting that "education alone would never solve the major race problems."[19] Horace Mann Bond, in *The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order,* put it even more sharply: "Strictly speaking, the school has never built a new social order; it has been the product and interpreter of the existing system, *sustaining and being sustained by* the social complex."[20]

Harlan and Bond offer an important corrective to the reformers' view that education would be "the great equalizer." At the same time, the claim that schools only sustain and reflect the existing social order sidesteps that schools are themselves a terrain of struggle against unequal power relations. Because schools are sites through which capitalism sustains itself, to riff on Bond's formulation, they are also a significant front of struggle and resistance. While Bond emphasizes the role of schools in reflecting and reinforcing existing social arrangements, schools do more than mirror existing power relations; they actively contribute to the reproduction of unequal social relations.[21] Moreover, if schools are embedded within the social

[18] This paragraph reconstructs parts Butchart, "A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education." I reproduce Butchart's argument and quotations here to familiarize the reader with Black educational historiography.
[19] Louis R. Harlan, *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901–1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1958), xvii, as quoted in Butchart, "Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," 350.
[20] Horace Mann Bond, *The Education of the Negro in the American Social Order* (Prentice Hall, 1934), as quoted in Butchart, "Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," 342.
[21] Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James pioneered a critique that highlighted the significance of social reproduction, particularly housework and childcare, to capitalism in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling Wall Press, 1972). See also Sylvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, (Falling Wall Press, 1975) and Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," *New Left Review* 100 (2016): 99–117.

relations of capitalism, then they must be more than sites through which capitalism reproduces itself; they constitute a terrain for challenging that reproduction.

Du Bois's response to the strike demonstrates his view that schools were pivotal sites for contesting the contradictions of capitalism rather than only reflecting and sustaining existing social relations.[22] More specifically, Du Bois saw that schooling was bound up with the organization of and control over labor in American society. Given that, the fight for control over schools was central to the fight for Black self-determination *and* for socialism. This dissertation traces Du Bois's developing understanding of the relationship between Black colleges and work, examining the challenges of conceptualizing and practicing an emancipatory educational vision that he faced along the way.

Two decades before the strike at Fisk, Du Bois articulated his most memorable formulation of how education could be put in the service of emancipation. In 1903, Du Bois emphasized the importance of schooling for leadership. Only if the best and the brightest among Black Americans were afforded training in liberal arts colleges would this Talented Tenth be prepared to meet the high demands of race leadership. Especially in the context of severe racial violence and widespread impoverishment, knowledge of history, especially Black history, and

[22] John Dewey was likewise attentive to the embeddedness of schools in society. Indeed, Du Bois and John Dewey's ideas about schooling and education share many similarities. The resonance between their ideas is unsurprising given that both were trained in the pragmatic tradition of philosophy. Du Bois studied under William James at Harvard. Although I do not position Du Bois's educational thought in direct conversation with Dewey's here, other scholars have done so. Keith Gilyard has identified a common "rhetoric of education" shared between Du Bois and Dewey, characterized by (1) the centrality of dialogue and human development to democratic schooling, (2) the need to cultivate each student's full range of capacities, and (3) a commitment to reshaping society through critical inquiry. See "John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and a Rhetoric of Education," in *Trained Capacities: John Dewey, Rhetoric, and Democratic Practice*, ed. Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 125–41. Connie Goddard has also written a very interesting article about a school in Bordentown, New Jersey that she argues exemplifies Du Bois and Dewey's educational principles in action. The school integrated academic and vocational instruction. The Bordentown School stands as an example that meaningful vocational and academic education could be combined in a way that furthered both racial uplift and democratic empowerment**.** See Connie Goddard, "Bordentown: Where Dewey's 'Learning to Earn' Met Du Boisian Educational Priorities," *Education and Culture* 35, no. 1 (2019): 49–70. The question and problem of industrial and academic "tracks" is central to my concerns here and is a theme I return to in each of the subsequent chapters.

strong moral character might establish a foundation for advancing racial justice. Such race leadership, a young Du Bois was hopeful, was the key to bringing all Black Americans into a more free and equal future.

Du Bois tested the talented tenth idea against the many surprises and disappointments of experience. In *Souls* he had declared, "Only a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph" revealing his belief the "better class" of whites and blacks might work together to solve the country's problems.[23] Taking a turn away from this early view of the talented tenth's responsibility to represent the interests of the Black masses to white society, Du Bois admired the way the Fisk student strikers paved a more radical political path for the talented tenth when they refused to allow rich whites to control their behaviors, relations, and extracurricular priorities at school.

Du Bois would continually develop, revise, and question the talented tenth idea many times over after 1925. At key political moments, particularly the Great Depression and the early Cold War, Du Bois not only confronted that the talented did not become the leaders he hoped they would, but he developed an understanding of the ways that schools divide, organize, and value labor within capitalism. With this developing understanding of the contradictions of schooling and the high stakes of determining how and to what end Black students were educated, Du Bois worked to conceptualize and practice an educational politics that could genuinely advance freedom, equality, and justice.

Du Bois's educational politics reveals how education—often seen as epiphenomenal to the economy—is implicated in the reproduction of capitalist power and, by extension, a terrain of

[23] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 118-19.

struggle. By tracing this theme across Du Bois's writings, this dissertation offers an account of the evolving radicalism of Du Bois's educational politics.[24] It works to draw out how and why Du Bois continuously revised his ideas about the political purposes of college education, tracing the tensions between the idea that an educated elite should morally uplift the Black masses and the idea that white supremacy and capitalism could be most effectively challenged by the collective agency of workers.

Black Education in the South at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Why was having freedom over their lives at school more important to the striking students at Fisk than protecting their access to college education? Answering this question necessitates contextualizing the institutionalization of Black education within the political and economic forces that shaped the South at the turn of the 20th century. During Reconstruction, Radical Republican state governments passed resolutions to implement a publicly funded school system for the first time in the southern states. That this was a priority directly resulted from the deep significance education had for the freedpeople. Public education was seen as a key component of emancipation, providing formerly enslaved people with the tools to assert independence and pursue economic mobility.[25] Reconstruction-era educational gains were immediately threatened once Democrats regained control over the South following the Wormley Agreement, the 1877 compromise that gave Hayes the presidency and led to the removal of

[24] I focus specifically on the themes of work and capitalism in Du Bois's educational thought. I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of Du Bois's views on schooling and education. For a comprehensive overview, see Derrick P. Alridge, *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

[25] Ronald E. Butchart and Amy F. Rolleri, "Secondary Education and Emancipation: Secondary Schools for Freed Slaves in the American South, 1862–1875," *Paedagogica Historica* 40, no. 1–2 (2004): 157-181; Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861–1870* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Union troops from the South. Redeemers across the Southern states, placed funding responsibilities into the hands of local governments rather than the state, enforced racially segregated schooling and repealed compulsory education laws.[26]

As part of the growing popular support for the cross-racial farmers' movement, education again featured as a central demand for working-class Southerners in the late 1880s and 1890s. In the South's shifting economic and political landscape, the demand for public schooling and the need for cheap labor came into direct conflict. Children were a significant part of the workforce both in agriculture and industry.[27] For example, in Georgia, children comprised 19% of the agricultural workforce.[28] Across the states of the South during the 1890s, Populists advocated both for the South's children to receive education and for protections against child labor. Compulsory education laws were intended to push back against the widespread exploitation of children, especially in the tobacco and textile industries. These laws were met with fierce resistance from industrialists and planters, who relied on child labor to sustain economic production and feared that education would disrupt labor availability.[29] The pursuit of compulsory education hit right at the heart of ruling-class domination in the South, and the demand struck Southern society as quite radical.[30] To meet the demand of providing universal education for the working-class children of the South, working-class families would need more

[26] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 592–93; Tyack and Lowe, "The Constitutional Moment"
[27] Jeffrey Leiter and Cathy L. McHugh, *Mill Family: The Labor System in the Southern Cotton Textile Industry, 1880–1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Pamela Walters and Carl M. Briggs, "The Family Economy, Child Labor, and Schooling: Evidence from the Early Twentieth-Century South," *American Sociological Review,* 58, no. 2 (1993), 161-181.
[28] Richard Baker, "From the Field to the Classroom: The Boll Weevil's Impact on Education in Rural Georgia," *Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 3 (2015): 1131.
[29] Barbara Beatty, "Conflicting Constructions of Childhood and Children in Education History," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Education*, ed. John L. Rury and Eileen H. Tamura (Oxford University Press, 2019; online ed., 13 June 2019).
[30] Pamela Walters, "Schooling or Working? Public Education, Racial Politics, and the Organization of Production in 1910," *Sociology of Education* 63, no. 1 (1990).

than schools; they would need higher wages for themselves, a wage that could support a family on just the parents' labor.[31] Working-class demands for education clashed with the ruling class's demand for child labor, but state-funded public education nevertheless spread and grew across the Southern states.

The defeat of the Populists and the consolidation of power by the Democrats ushered in a wave of political losses for Black and working-class Southerners that involved disenfranchisement, economic servitude, and white supremacy. The decisive victory of the Redeemers, the Southern Democrats who sought to restore white supremacy after Reconstruction, constrained political possibilities significantly and led to the predominance of accommodation, gradualism, and elitism within Black politics.[32] It is against this political backdrop that Booker T. Washington, who continues to represent the politics of accommodation in the contemporary imagination, came to prominence in Black American politics.[33] More to the point, white supremacy significantly shaped how educational resources were distributed in the South. Racial jealousies and white political control meant that the lion's share of public funds went to white schools. The belief that Blacks could not or should not be educated was widespread.

Northern reformers offered financial support for Black schools in the South, given the paltry resources they received for their state governments. Philanthropic support, however, was

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[31] Philip M. Holleran, "Family Income and Child Labor in Carolina Cotton Mills," *Social Science History* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 297–320.
[32] Judith Stein, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States," *Science and Society* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 422-463; Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)
[33] I will discuss Washington and his political style in the first and second chapters respectively. For accounts that situate Washington's rise against the backdrop of the defeat of the Populists see Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Brian Kelly, "Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South," *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 337–57.

not exclusively or even primarily motivated by antiracist commitments. Northern philanthropists, sharing with Southern industrialists a desire to control what they viewed as a volatile working class, championed schooling as a tool of social control, echoing the arguments of Horace Mann and the advocates of the common school movement in the North. Far from opposing white supremacy, these Northern philanthropists supported Black education specifically to maintain ruling-class power. [34] The philanthropists used their money to institute schools that would meet these economic needs. Crucially, because they controlled the funding, they controlled the curriculum, directing resources only toward schools that aligned with the economic interests of the owners of agriculture and industry: industrial schools.[35] Funding for Black colleges was conditional on adopting an industrial curriculum, which entailed both training in particular types of manual labor as well as indoctrination in Christian values and white supremacist beliefs. Robert Ogden, George Foster Peabody, and William H. Baldwin were among the most important Northern philanthropists who provided funding to establish schools in the South. [36] They believed that training Black Southerners for agricultural labor would make the region maximally productive and profitable while keeping wages low. Control over labor training also served to

[34] In addition to Anderson, *Black Education in the South,* Chapters 3 and 4, see Michael Dennis, "Schooling Along the Color Line: Progressives and the Education of Blacks in the New South," *The Journal of Negro Education* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 142–156; Joan Malczewski, "Weak State, Stronger Schools: Northern Philanthropy and Organizational Change in the Jim Crow South," *History of Education Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2009).
[35] James D. Anderson, "Northern Foundations and the Shaping of Southern Black Rural Education, 1902–1935," *History of Education Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 371–396; Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902–1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); Joan Malczewski, "Weak State, Stronger Schools, 2009; Mark Ellis, "Race and Philanthropy in Georgia in the 1920s: The Case of Walter B. Hill, Supervisor of Negro Rural Schools," *American Educational History Journal* 40, no. 1 (2013): 93–109.
[36] James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 238-278. Fictionalized versions of these three men appear as main characters in Du Bois's *Black Flame* trilogy, which among other themes, deals with the political and economic aims of philanthropists at the turn of the century, how those aims intersected with the development of Black education in the South, and how philanthropists together with industrialists leveraged power in decidedly undemocratic ways. The fictionalized version of this history that Du Bois tells, including the specific figures he made central in the novels, has been verified by Anderson's historical research.

divide Black and white workers, with Black laborers undermining the power of white trade unions.

While some scholars argue that the larger political environment left Black Southerners with no options beyond accommodation to the white supremacist social order, this narrative erases the persistent efforts of Black Southerners to resist control by schooling and further to have self-determination over teaching and learning in their communities. Philanthropic support was often conditional on adopting an industrial curriculum, but historic liberal arts colleges like Fisk maintained their autonomy, especially compared to other institutions. Fisk's faculty members, which included sociologist Charles S. Johnson, philosopher Alain Locke, and historian Horace Mann Bond, created research agendas, research methods, and curricula that were markedly different than white institutions. In his biography of Lawrence Reddick, David Varel vividly captures intellectual life at Fisk. Fisk students read classical texts alongside African and African-American history, literature, and sociology. Its library contained an impressive Africana studies collective. The "Wranglers" club, where students and faculty debated in an informal salon setting, further enriched the intellectual and social life of the campus.[37] Through the use of campus newspapers and students clubs, venues, faculty at Virginia Union fostered political debate about many subjects, including prominently socialism and the labor movement.[38] Du Bois's own pedagogical priorities involved training graduate students in sociological methods and leading them in field research of Black communities. Given Fisk's Black-centered

[37] David A. Varel, "Coming of Age at Fisk University," in *The Scholar and the Struggle: Lawrence Reddick's Crusade for African American History and Black Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
[38] Claudrena N. Harold, "New Negro Messengers in Dixie: James Ivy, Thomas Dabney, and Black Cultural Criticism in the Post-War US South, 1919-1930" in *The Black Intellectual Tradition: African American Thought in the Twentieth Century, ed.* Derrick P. Aldridge et al (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

curriculum and rich community life, it is perhaps unsurprising that students struck against attempts to control their life and speech at school.

At industrial schools, Black school leaders, teachers, students, and community members found their own ways refuse the imposition of schooling as a mode of social control. This resistance was often conducted in secret. Black leaders at Fort Valley High refused to accept an industrial curriculum despite intense financial pressure to do so.[39] Harper Councill Trenholm, president of Alabama State College, adopted an industrial curriculum for the college while also implementing a "second curriculum" in liberal arts.[40] Although the political landscape appeared to be primarily accommodationist throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, accommodation was one facet of a more complicated reality.

Black teachers across the country engaged in an underground educational system that Jarvis Givens has called "fugitive" pedagogy.[41] Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's concept of fugitive justice, which highlights the tension between oppressive narratives and subversive counter histories, Givens identifies a "hidden transcript" of covert practices within the archives of Black education. Givens points to teachers like Tressie McGee, for instance, who covertly taught her students Black history. By keeping Carter G. Woodson's textbook hidden in her lap during lessons, she publicly adhered to the white supremacist curriculum while privately

[39] Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 115-135.
[40] Jelani M. Favors, "Our Aims Are High and Our Determinations Deep: Alabama State University and the Dissolution of Fear, 1930-1960," in *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 101-132.
[41] Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 1–25; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 34–37. See also Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Desmond Jagmohan has argued that a similar hidden political dimension is evident in Booker T. Washington's own thought and practice. See Desmond Jagmohan, "7. Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Deception," in *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 167–191.

exposing her students to the contributions of Black people to world history. These acts of resistance exemplify the broader legacy of Black education as a fugitive project in pursuit of intellectual and political liberation.[42]

The political and economic changes of the second half of the 1910s gave rise to more openly confrontational political activity. By the end of World War I, the balance of class forces was shifting,[43] and Black college students were more and more challenging the Southern social order directly, mounting protests against the excessive discipline and authoritarian governance of their colleges. Thirteen HBCUs saw strikes or boycotts between 1914 and 1927.[44] Between 1914 and 1926, these "rebellions on campus" exemplified a refusal to accept schooling as a method of social control and presented a challenged the existing arrangements of race and class power in the South. Refusing to accept control over and punishment for their speech, behaviors, and relationships, Black college students attempted to seize control over their own schooling.

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[42] As Lawrie Balfour has argued, Du Bois himself was attentive to fugitivity, a perspective which led him to understand "democratic life, not as an end to be accomplished once and for all but as an ongoing effort whose triumphs are always shadowed by losses and whose successes may prove to be their own undoing." I will return to this theme in Chapter 2, where I discuss how Du Bois renders fugitivity and authoritarianism across the history of Black schooling in the South. Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19.

[43] Harold M. Baron, "The Demand for Black Labor," *Radical America* 5, no. 2 (1971): 19–27. Baron identifies three major factors that improved the strategic position of Black labor during the post–World War I period: increased labor demand in key industries like steel, meatpacking, and auto manufacturing; restrictions on European immigration, which heightened the reliance on Black workers in northern industries; and the resulting labor shortages in Southern agriculture, where Black workers' essential role gave them increased leverage. These dynamics altered the balance of power between labor and capital, providing Black workers greater mobility and opportunities for resistance.

[44] Only one book length study on the Black student unrest currently exists. Raymond Wolters, *The Negro Rebellion on Campus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970). On this topic, see also Herbert Aptheker, "The Negro College Student in the 1920s: Years of Preparation and Protest—An Introduction," *Science and Society* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 150-167; Martin Summers, "A Tempestuous Spirit of Rebellion," chap. 6 in *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 242-286. For considerations of the Fisk strike exclusively, see Perzavia T. Praylow, "Striking Back: Student Self-Determination and the New Fiskite, 1914–1929," chap. 2 in *Re/Making Men and Women for the Race: Coeducation, Respectability, and Black Student Leadership at Fisk University, 1924–1970* (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 39-85; and Lester C. Lamon, "The Black Community in Nashville and the Fisk University Student Strike of 1924–1925," *The Journal of Southern History* 40, no. 2 (May 1974): 225–244.

Student-led organizations also flourished during this period, fostering networks of activism and intellectual exchange. Groups like the African Students' Union and the League of Youth connected Black students across institutions.[45] Each of these examples and many more fugitive educational practices reveal an ongoing struggle over control over Black colleges. Ruling-class whites attempted to use their financial influence to produce the subjectivities, comportments, ideas, and relations that would enable and facilitate their ongoing social control. Against this, Black Southerners both refused to accept attempts at social control, and enacted ways of teaching, learning, being, and relating in schools that interrupted the reproduction of unequal social relations.

Does Capitalism Need Schools? Mapping Schooling and Work in the American South

Historically, schools have undoubtedly been an important mechanism of maintaining and legitimating capitalist social relations. An industrializing and modernizing economy necessitated the moral training of the laboring classes. This was the belief of universal education advocates at the turn of the century, and these reformers brought their ideas to the South, where universal education remained a controversial idea among the ruling classes. The plantation economy had utilized coercive modes of social control, predominantly enslavement, to meet the economic needs of the planters, but throughout the process of developing a new Southern economy after the abolition of slavery, advocates of universal education argued that labor control could be achieved through subtler methods. According to James D. Anderson, "The new school reformers' central task was to convince the planters that particular forms of education would produce a more productive and contented agricultural workforce and to allay suspicion among

[45] Aptheker, "The Negro College Student," 162-164.

industrialists that universal schooling would increase competition between whites and blacks for the better urban working-class jobs."[46] In other words, the process of institutionalizing public education in the South, for Black and white children alike, depended on addressing what was seen as a more fundamental issue for both reformers and for the planters: what was the best approach to control workers?

What does the institutionalization of public education in the South suggest about how schooling has been put in the service of dividing, organizing, and valuing labor within capitalism? 20th-century Marxists have posited numerous ways that schools further these goals. Althusser, for instance, argues that schools are one especially important Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that shape subjectivities to align with the needs of the capitalist mode of production. Schools produce subjects who perceive themselves as free and autonomous, even as their roles are structured by economic and social hierarchies. Bowles and Gintis emphasize the material and social structures of schooling, arguing that schools reflect and reinforce class divisions through what they call the correspondence principle. By habituating students to hierarchical relations and sorting them into roles based on their class background, schools train individuals to fill their place within the capitalist labor market. Social reproduction theorists highlight another dimension, focusing on how schools contribute to the reproduction of labor power and social relations necessary for capitalism's survival. Taken together, these conceptions of the relationship between capitalism and schooling highlight the multifaceted role of schools in reproducing and sustaining capitalist social relations.[47]

[46] Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 82.
[47] Although my concerns here are limited to questions of schooling and the reproduction of labor, I do not mean to suggest that schools are reducible to this.

Schools are perhaps the most important civil society institution for legitimizing and manufacturing widespread consent for the exploitation of the working class, particularly among workers themselves.[48] In feudal Europe, the church had concentrated religious, educational, and cultural functions, ensuring the ideological reproduction of feudal social relations. However, with the rise of capitalism, the bourgeoisie sought to wrest ideological power from the church, and schools became the primary institution for inculcating values and norms that reproduce the relations of production.[49] In the U.S., a similar shift can be observed in the transition from slavery to freedom. Under slavery, labor control was maintained through direct coercion and the exclusion of enslaved people from legal personhood. However, the abolition of slavery created a problem for Southern elites: how to meet labor demands absent the system of slavery? Social reformers proposed education as a partial solution, suggesting that schooling could prepare freedpeople to accept subordinate roles in the post-slavery economy. At the same time, the Southern ruling classes used extrajudicial violence, disfranchisement, and labor control through sharecropping, child labor, and prison labor to ensure their ability to profit and to maintain overarching social control, suggesting that schooling in itself was not sufficient as a mechanism for organizing and controlling labor.

Schools in the South also came to serve an important ideological purpose, as elites leveraged their control over Black schools in an effort to get Black students to accept their place within a society stratified by racialized civic hierarchies. Indeed, schools perform a critical ideological function within capitalism by shaping how we understand ourselves as individuals

[48] Some of the most influential early articulations of this idea that have informed contemporary scholarship include Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1979); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage Publications, 1977).
[49] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 143–145.

and our place in society. Schools socialize children into the norms and values necessary for participation in the capitalist economy, complementing the family's function.[50] They do this not simply by transmitting knowledge from the top down by a group of ruling class puppet masters but by producing subjects—people who see and experience themselves as free-willed even as their roles are structured by the social order.[51] While some interpretations suggest that schools are institutions of more or less mechanistic manipulation by the ruling class, this perspective risks oversimplifying the process of ideological reproduction.[52] For example, it would be both reductive and ahistorical to argue that Black students in the segregated South, exposed to teachings rooted in scientific racism, simply internalized and adopted those ideas.

The students at Fisk University, who actively protested the McKenzie's attempts to discipline and punish how they lived at school, is just one example of how ideological reproduction is a process that unfolds through struggle rather than through passive transmission. Althusser's conception that ideology reproduces itself through interpellation is instructive here: ideology works because it shapes not just what we believe but how we recognize ourselves. Individuals must see themselves in the terms in which they are being identified. For Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses, including schools, achieve this effect through daily rituals and practices that align individuals with their expected roles in the social order. In Southern schools, ruling-class whites attempted to reproduce ideological beliefs favorable to their social control

[50] Althusser identifies the "Family-School couple" as the most important ISA in late capitalism, noting its critical role in the reproduction of the labor force and the perpetuation of dominant ideologies. He emphasizes the interconnection between the family, which shapes early individual dispositions, and the school, which cements those dispositions into values and beliefs. See pp 132-133.
[51] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 174–175.
[52] Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), argue that schools reproduce capitalist social hierarchies through the "correspondence principle," which aligns the structure of schooling with workplace hierarchies. Henry A. Giroux has argued that Bowles and Gintis' explanation is excessively mechanistic and does not capture the realities of contestation, resistance, and struggle. See "Beyond the Correspondence Theory: Notes on the Dynamics of Educational Reproduction and Transformation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 10, no. 3 (1980): 225–247.

both through a white supremacist curriculum and through rigid discipline, daily drills, and regular work responsibilities. Even with these strenuous efforts to produce docile Black subjects through rigid discipline, hard labor requirements, and religious instruction, these efforts largely failed on an ideological level, and the predominance of industrial education fell out of favor by the 1920s. Schools, then, are not just transmitters of ideas but sites where the terms of subjectivity itself are constructed and contested.

In addition to ideological reproduction, schools play a critical sorting individuals into roles that align with the sociotechnical division of labor, a process that ties skills, jobs, and social status into a cohesive whole. In capitalist society, schools prepare students for their future positions in the workforce, differentiating them by skills and abilities, a process that Bowles and Gintis have identified as the correspondence principle.[53] This process is evident in how working-class students are steered toward manual labor or technical training while middle and upper-class students are funneled into academic and professional tracks, reinforcing social stratification.[54] The Hampton Institute and Tuskegee University, established as industrial schools for Black students, offer an especially significant example of how this sorting process operated alongside the industrialization of the South. These institutions specifically deprived Black students of training in the skilled trades and instead focused on menial labor and teacher education designed to ensure second-class status for Black workers upon graduation.[55]

The official curriculums at Hampton and Tuskegee were directly tied to the racial and

[53] This particular mode of reproducing equality through schooling is my central concern throughout the dissertation. Bowles and Gintis's correspondence principle is a seminal account, but it is certainly not the only one.
[54] There is an extensive literature on the ways that tracking in schools produces and reinforces racial, gender, and class inequality. For two seminal works along these lines see Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). See also Ken Browne, "Schooling, Capitalism and the Mental/Manual Division of Labour." *The Sociological Review* 29 (1981): 445–73.
[55] This is a central thesis of James D. Anderson's *Black Education in the South*. I will discuss the curriculums at these institutions in much greater detail the next chapter.

economic anxieties of ruling-class whites in the South. After the abolition of slavery, the plantation economy faced a labor crisis; its reliance on direct coercion was no longer tenable in the same way. Using schools to construct a content and obedient class of industrial and agricultural workers and to train Black workers for subservient social roles was one important proposal that ruling-class whites pursued as they rebuilt the Southern economy. At the same time, white trade unions contributed to the sorting function of schools by actively excluding Black laborers from membership in skilled trade unions to maintain racial divisions and protect their access to better-paying positions. As Bowles and Gintis observe, the sorting process that happens within the school system mirrors the capitalist workplace, where the division of labor serves to uphold social hierarchies and ensure the reproduction of the system.

In addition to the family, schools perform the care work necessary for children to become workers and, therefore, are a producer of that all-important commodity, labor power. While Marx identifies the wage as the key mechanism through which workers are able to reproduce themselves, Marxist feminists have expanded this analysis by highlighting the unwaged, reproductive labor performed within the family—work that sustains the daily lives of workers and prepares the next generation of workers.[56] Unwaged labor is "the part of the working day that capital appropriates without exchange."[57] Social reproduction theorists have expanded this important Marxist feminist insight about the reproductive labor involved in housework by

[56] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin Books, 1990), chap. 23; Dalla Costa and James, *The Power of Women*, 23–27. While my account here is limited to Marxist perspectives on schooling and social reproduction, Black feminist thought has long theorized social reproduction in ways both similar to and distinct from the Marxist feminist tradition. In particular, Black feminists have noted the ways that enslaved and Black women's oppression has been enforced in part through particular kinds of reproductive labor. Moreover, Black feminists have emphasized how Black women's labor, both paid and unpaid, has been central to family and community survival, even as it has been marginalized or devalued within slavery and capitalism. See especially Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997).
[57] George Caffentzis, "Throwing Away the Ladder," *Zerowork* no. 1 (1975): 129.

showing how reproductive labor is dispersed across other institutions, with schools being especially significant.[58] Capitalism depends on the reproduction of the workforce but externalizes its costs, outsourcing much of this labor to families and schools.[59] Additionally, schools provide basic care functions, such as meals, and facilitate emotional and social development, taking on responsibilities traditionally associated with the family. By complementing housework, schools too ensure the continuity of the labor force, playing a critical but often invisible role in sustaining capitalist relations.

If schools perform such an important function for capitalist society, why, we may ask, have schools been starved for funding so consistently across the last two centuries? Why do workers and citizens have to fight for equal access to and resources for schools if capitalism does, in fact, need schools? Historians of Black education in the South have shown that Black schools faced an intensifying funding crisis during the first half of the 20th century. Many Black schools, including those that received state appropriations, relied heavily on philanthropic funding and consistently struggled to secure adequate resources. Philanthropists and social reformers conditionally supported Black schooling and funnelled resources toward specific educational initiatives to materially demonstrate their support. Underfunding of Black schools supported the reproduction of a social order in which Blacks were positioned as unequally valuable citizens and seen as less entitled to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. When Du Bois asked in his *Crisis* editorial about the Fisk strike, "Suppose we lose Fisk?" he captured the

[58] Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," *New Left Review* 86 (March–April 2014): 55–72; Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017). Fraser expands the concept of social reproduction to include institutions beyond the family, such as schools, as essential for maintaining capitalist relations of production. Bhattacharya's work develops this insight further, situating schools within the framework of social reproduction theory as critical sites where class relations are reproduced and mediated.
[59] Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care."

spirit of refusal to simply accept such devaluation that permeated Black people's struggles for control over schools and schooling.

Black communities challenged efforts to establish unequal social value through control over school funding by pooling their shared resources and through a shared ethos of care. Vanessa Siddle Walker's history of Caswell County Training School in North Carolina provides an illuminating example.[60] When the school board failed to provide sufficient resources, Black parents offered their own scarce money and time to operate the school. The entire community invested in the goal of supporting the children reach "their highest potential," a goal which necessitated equal attention to practical details such as how to transport students to offering extracurricular activities such as theatre and music. Whereas the wider social and political dynamics of the South sought to devalue the lives of these Black children living in rural North Carolina, their families and teachers constructed an alternative world of caring relationships and shared obligations.

The Duality of Du Bois's Socialist Imagination

"Socialism was desirable for Du Bois," argues Adolph Reed Jr., "ultimately because it promised to realize the principles of administrative rationality and meritocratic equality."[61] Reed writes against the grain of conventional narratives that depict Du Bois's radicalization as culminating in his joining the Communist Party and ostensibly aligning himself with revolutionary Marxism, instead arguing that Du Bois's socialism remained relatively consistent throughout his life. Du Bois imagined a world that could use scientific rationality to distribute

[60] Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential*, 1996.
[61] Adolph Reed Jr., *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.

resources according to need, and that would come about through a trained vanguard—be that in the form of an intelligentsia or a Party.[62] Reed's tracing of the gradualist, reformist, Fabian socialism of Du Bois is compelling, but the analysis leaves unaddressed how to make sense of *Black Reconstruction* as a part of Du Bois's oeuvre.[63] While Reed might be right that Du Bois was committed, all the way up until his final days, to a process of overcoming capitalism's contradictions by way of cultural and technical problem-solving from the top down, this picture nevertheless cannot be applied to the theory of history employed in *Black Reconstruction*, which centers the self-directed and spontaneous collective action of enslaved workers as an engine of political and economic reorganization.

How, then, do we make sense of Du Bois's socialism if it is not merely vanguardist but indeed, includes a story of Black workers taking spontaneous action, sparking generalized

[62] Scholars disagree over how to categorize Du Bois politically and ideologically. In addition to Reed's account, three other pioneering studies of Du Bois's political thought in the 1980s capture the main lines of disagreement. Manning Marable's influential 1986 study interpreted Du Bois as a "Black radical democrat." Tracing a consistent thread of socialism across Du Bois's life and work, Marable argues that Du Bois saw the problems of capitalism and racism as intertwined, and that the Talented Tenth idea speaks to a strategic proposition for how to win democracy rather than revealing elitist views. Marxist historian Gerald Horne, in *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963*, also published in 1986, narrates Du Bois's life as a steady march to the left, situating his peace activism and internationalism within the radical elements of the early civil rights movement. Charisse Burden-Stelly builds on Horne's scholarship by situating Du Bois within what she calls the "tradition of radical Blackness," a tradition that centers "critical political economy analysis" in the study and practice of Black politics. Another early and important interpretation was advanced by Cedric Robinson in his still widely influential 1983 book *Black Marxism*, where he contends that Du Bois was a sympathetic critic of Marxism, going beyond Marxism's limitations by foregrounding racism and colonialism. More recently, Reiland Rabaka develops an interpretation that shares similarities with both Marable's and Robinson's accounts, highlighting the influence of Pan-Africanism and Marxism on Du Bois's thought but concluding that Du Bois is best characterized as a social democrat. See Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (State University of New York Press, 1986); Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Twayne, 1986); Charisse Burden-Stelly and Gerald Horne, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Life in American History* (ABC-CLIO, 2019); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Reiland Rabaka, *Du Bois: A Critical Introduction* (Press, 2021).

[63] Reed mentions *Black Reconstruction* only once in the entire book. He does not provide a thorough analysis of the work or include it within his construction of Du Bois's ideological commitments. For Reed, Black Reconstruction is one of several examples that demonstrates Du Bois's use of academic pursuits to provide public education. He writes, "Moreover, Du Bois often tended to see his scholarly work in a utilitarian vein as well. He declared the intention of *The World and Africa* to be a demonstration 'that black Africans are men in the same sense as white Europeans and yellow Asiatics, and that history can easily prove this.' *The Gift of Black Folk*, Black *Folk: Then and Now*, and *Black Reconstruction* were to some degree similarly motivated." Reed, *Fabianism*, 49.

withdrawal of various segments of the working class of the American South, and creating a dramatic reorganization of relations of production?[64] Perhaps *Black Reconstruction* is an anomaly in his oeuvre and does not tell us much about his deeper ideological commitments. I argue that, rather than being an aberration, the political sensibilities in *Black Reconstruction* are a recurring, if underdeveloped, dimension of Du Bois's socialist imagination.[65] Counterintuitively, these sensibilities can be found exactly where his Fabianism has been identified—in his writings on the role of elites in creating a better society. Tracing the contradictions, tensions, and doubts that Du Bois had about the program he laid out for the Talented Tenth, I find a second, albeit underdeveloped, Du Boisian socialism. It is not a revolutionary Marxist program, but rather, it highlights the transformative capacity of ordinary people's collective action in driving historical change.[66]

According to Reed, debates about whether Du Bois became a revolutionary Marxist later in life often overlook the shared features of revolutionary Marxism and other collectivist perspectives circulating in the early 20th century. This oversight leads to misunderstanding the precise nature of the political commitments underpinning the distributivist, technocratic socialism Du Bois advocated and overstates the extent to which Du Bois broke from earlier

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[64] The many interpretations of Du Bois's complicated political legacy all offer illuminating perspectives, and my own interpretation has been significantly enriched by them. At the same time as I agree with many elements of other interpretations of Du Bois, I agree with and take as my starting point Reed's claim that Du Bois's elitism was an enduring feature of his political outlook. The implications that Reed drew out of his analysis of Du Bois's elitism, in particular the question of the relationship between elites and the people, establishes the thematic questions that lead me to the foundational challenge I explore in the dissertation's main body chapters: how to anchor a liberatory politics in higher education if higher education produces and solidifies a hierarchy of socioeconomic status?

[65] I use the term "socialism" as shorthand for any political ideology centered on the principle that resources should be distributed according to human need. I do not use socialism in the way that Du Bois himself would have understood its meaning nor in a way that is consistent with his historical moment. For an overview of the capacious ways in which socialism was understood at the turn of the 20th century see Reed, *Fabianism and the Color Line,* 83-89. Additionally, my use of socialism does not reference the ideological divisions within the Second International, which split over questions of reform versus revolution and the relationship between socialism and nationalism.

[66] Bill V. Mullen has argued that Du Bois's late work contains an unorthodox theory of world revolution that should rightly be categorized as a species of revolutionary Marxism. See *Un-American: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Century of World Revolution* (Temple University Press, 2015).

ideas. Reed's argument goes like this: Revolutionary Marxism is distinct for its emphasis on class struggle and the belief that ending capitalism requires the violent seizure of the means of production and state infrastructure. At the same time, it shares key characteristics with Fabian socialism: "Both exalt science and scientificity, both advocate rationalistic organization led by an intellectual vanguard, and both display elements of inevitability and utopianism."[67] While some contend that Du Bois moved beyond his Talented Tenth framework to embrace the revolutionary agency of the proletariat, his conception of workers' agency was mediated by the Party—a body he envisioned as a representative of the proletariat that would be composed of a trained intelligentsia akin to the Talented Tenth. In this sense, the young social reformer Du Bois and the older communist Du Bois shared a central belief: that rational planning could and should be guided by an educated elite.[68]

While Reed's analysis convincingly details Du Bois's Fabian socialism, it leaves open an important question: how to reconcile this with the perspective of *Black Reconstruction*? At the same time as Du Bois conceptualized socialism as rational planning from the top down for the purpose of redistribution of resources and the optimization of society through science, the perspective on history and revolution contained within *Black Reconstruction* suggests that Fabianism does not exhaust Du Bois's understanding of socialism. Indeed, *Black Reconstruction* exemplifies a different variety of socialism as it tells a version of history that moves in dramatic

[67] Reed, *Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 20.
[68] This argument comes from Reed, *Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 87-89. Commentators often cite Du Bois's admiration for the Bolsheviks and his support for Stalin's USSR as evidence of a shift toward authoritarian communism. However, rather than reflecting a straightforward endorsement of authoritarianism, Du Bois's admiration for Stalin and the USSR underscores his belief that centralized planning could fundamentally address problems of unequal distribution. This belief stemmed from his analysis of capitalism, which he criticized primarily for its failure to allocate resources according to human needs rather than identifying production itself as the object of critique. Thus, Du Bois's support for Stalin aligns more closely with his Fabian socialism than with revolutionary Marxism, contrary to what some interpreters have suggested. According to Bill V. Mullen, Du Bois had much more mixed/complicated thoughts and feelings with respect to Stalin and the USSR than is usually acknowledged. See *Un-American*, 83–85.

leaps rather than depicting a gradual, steady march forward. Significantly, the leap depicted in the text is produced by the spontaneous self-activity of enslaved workers, rather than by a disciplined central body of professional revolutionaries.

Though widely celebrated and today regarded as pathbreaking, critics have stopped short of appreciating the full implications of *Black Reconstruction* for a Marxist understanding of capitalism.[69] *Black Reconstruction* is rightly praised for its challenge to the Dunning School's white supremacist understanding of Reconstruction and its centering of Black agency in the process of the emancipation of the slaves.[70] Yet, its portrayal of the relationship between class struggle and economic development of the United States points to additional theoretical insights. By reframing slaves as workers, Du Bois portrays emancipation as the result of enslaved people's resistance rather than a function of Radical Republican benevolence. In response to the question, "Who freed the slaves?" Du Bois proclaims: the slaves freed themselves. Many commentators stop short of delving into the question of how, specifically, the slaves freed themselves and instead point to the work as an example of an acknowledgment and celebration of Black agency.

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[69] At the time of its publishing, *Black Reconstruction* was not well received by Black Marxists. Today, however, *Black Reconstruction* is widely regarded as a pathbreaking history that continues to influence contemporary historical scholarship. According to Guy Emerson Mount, the provocative thesis that the slaves freed themselves by way of a general strike gave way to an ongoing historical investigation of slave resistance during the Civil War and Reconstruction that has been taken up by numerous scholars including Vincent Harding, Thavolia Glypmh, Steven Hahn, and David Williams. Guy Emerson Mount, "When Slaves Go on Strike," *Black Perspectives* (African American Intellectual History Society), August 24, 2016, https://www.aaihs.org/when-slaves-go-on-strike/. For a recent historical account of the way that the emphasis on slave's agency might have been overstated at the exclusion of other political forces see Brian Kelly, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Agency and the Slaves' Civil War," *International Socialist Review*, no. 100 (Spring 2016): 48–68.

[70] The Dunning School refers to a group of early twentieth-century historians associated with Columbia University professor William Archibald Dunning. Their scholarship framed Reconstruction as a tragic misstep marked by corrupt Northern "carpetbaggers" and inept Black legislators, reinforcing racist narratives of Black incapacity for self-government and portraying the restoration of white Southern rule as necessary and just.

But how we understand the nature of this agency makes all the difference. According to Du Bois, enslaved people's agency was rooted in the relations of production, in their status as Southern workers. Du Bois's focus on the relationship between production and struggle unfolds in the book's infamous fourth chapter, "The General Strike."[71] As he tells it, the war itself created a new demand for Black labor for the South. Slaves were employed to do a variety of war work in the early days of the war, and this was formalized through the declaration of martial law in numerous Southern cities. The need for Black workers to do military work intensified to the point where Black workers were needed not only to service the existing army but also to fight in it as soldiers. This demand for enslaved people to conduct evermore war work shifted the balance of racialized class forces on the plantation:

> Distinctly and inevitably, the rigor of the slave system in the South softened as war proceeded. The harshness and the cruelty, in part, had to disappear since there were left on the plantations mainly women and children, with only a few men, and *there was a certain feeling and apprehension in the air on the part of the whites* which led them to capitalize all the friendship and kindness which had existed between them and the slaves. No race could have responded to this so quickly and thoroughly as the Negroes. They *felt pity and responsibility and also a certain new undercurrent of independence*.[72]

The passage illuminates that the growing desperation for Black labor opened the possibility of newfound social relations; the relations of slave-based production themselves contained the seeds of its emancipatory opposite. The agency exerted in the general strike was not just human; it was the agency of a working-class fraction. Focusing on shifting dynamics of class struggle instead of Black agency per se shines a light on the materialist and political dimensions of the

[71] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction,* 55-83.
[72] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 59, emphasis mine.

action rather than its ethical or cultural dimensions.[73] According to Du Bois, the general strike of slave labor in the American South led to a cataclysmic shift in the balance of class forces in the United States. C. L. R. James later pushed Du Bois's analysis further, emphasizing that the slaves' resistance that Du Bois narrated laid the preconditions for subsequent episodes of working-class activity that advanced socialist possibilities in the postbellum United States, including the Populist Party challenge and the mass organization of workers undertaken by the Congress of Industrial Organization in the South.[74]

This bottom-up vision, which attributes world-historical significance to workers' self-activity, appears elsewhere in Du Bois's thought. For example, Du Bois opens *The Autobiography* with a meditation on why he was so impressed with Soviet society.[75] He admired the USSR for its democratic culture wherein public opinion is constructed from the bottom up: "Each problem of existence is discussed in village and factory. Comments, spoken and written, are welcome, until every aspect, every opinion has been expressed and listened to, and the matter rises to higher echelons, and is discussed again. Gradually, agreement is approached, until when the thrashed our result reaches the All-Soviet heights, there is usually but one opinion and decision."[76] Additionally, and central to my purposes here, this bottom-up vision of how

[73] The cultural dimension of Du Bois's interpretation of "the general strike" has been emphasized as definitive by Cedric Robinson, an interpretation which has inspired future generations of interpreters of Du Bois and Black politics in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). At the same time, the materialist dimension has not gone unnoticed by scholars. See for example Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "General Strike," *Rethinking Marxism* 26, no. 1 (2014): 9–14, (Summer 2022): 277–284; Inés Valdez, "The Dividends of Democracy's Destruction: Surplus, Ideology, and Militarism in the Turn to Empire in Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*," *The Monist* 107, no. 1 (2024): 57-68.

[74] While W.E.B. Du Bois did not explicitly connect emancipation to the Populist movement or the successes of the CIO, C.L.R. James drew on *Black Reconstruction* to argue that Black resistance laid the groundwork for the growth of socialism in the American South. See C.L.R. James, *The Future in the Present* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), 126-27. See also Paul Buhle, "Marxism in the USA," *Urgent Tasks*, no. 12 (Summer 1981).

[75] For a discussion of how Du Bois and other internationalist radicals' perspectives were deliberately manipulated as part of the political strategy of communist countries see Robeson Taj Fraser, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination*, (Duke University Press, 2015).

[76] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (Oxford University Press, 1968), 20.

opinions become policy is also present in various speeches and other writings about education. In these speeches, he directly engages the problem of alienated labor, suggesting that schools should not be simply tools of the world of work as one finds it. Instead, Du Bois implores, schools should actively construct how we conceptualize and prioritize what works needs to be done and additionally should contribute to actualizing society's ability to carry out that work and distribute its spoils equitably.[77]

Furthermore, Du Bois's cooperative economic program, an unpopular political strategy that he was advocating at the same time as he was researching and writing *Black Reconstruction*, also reveals the significance workers' collective self-rule in his socialist imagination. The stated purpose behind Du Bois's separate consumers' economy was to advance class struggle from within the Black community by building independent structures of economic cooperation. The approach was suggested in contrast to what Du Bois's contemporaries who were further to the left had identified as the most strategic front of struggle: the labor movement. Du Bois rejected the prevailing strategic approach put forward by Black Marxists, including radical labor organizer George Streator and Marxist theorist Abram Harris.[78] Streator and Harris both agreed that uniting the working class across racial lines was a prerequisite for advancing the cause of socialism in the United States. For Du Bois, the racism entrenched in the white proletariat and the "capitalistic" nature of American trade unions rendered such alliances ineffective. As he wrote to Streator, "Your plan, as it seems to me, involves co-operation with organized labor. I

[77] I discuss this perspective in greater detail in the subsequent chapter through a reading of a commencement address Du Bois delivered to Howard University graduates in 1930.

[78] George Streator was a labor organizer and journalist who had a very close relationship with Du Bois. He worked for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and served as managing editor of the *Crisis*. Letters between the two reveal heated disagreements about the political significance of the labor movement. Abram Harris was a Marxist economist who taught at Howard University and was a leading figure in Black Marxist thought. In his seminal *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1931) cowritten with Sterling Sparo, Harris critiqued racial essentialism and argued for prioritizing class struggle within the labor movement.

have no faith in this...The union movement in the United States, as a whole, is just as petty bourgeois and capitalistic as the capitalists themselves. I see no salvation in that direction."[79]

Instead, he believed a cooperative economy built within Black communities could cultivate class consciousness and build a "conscious and intelligent proletariat" capable of securing democratic control over collective life. Though Du Bois pinned his hopes on a Black middle-class intelligentsia to make this happen, his writings on the cooperative economy still point to a world led by and for workers.[80] And though Du Bois laid his political faith in a middle-class intelligentsia, his writings about the cooperative economy also contain suggestions of a world led by and for workers. This vision was articulated most fully in his *Atlanta Creed*, where he proclaimed that "the labor force and intelligence of 12 million people is more than sufficient to supply their own wants and make their advancement secure."[81] For Du Bois, the consumers' cooperative effort was not about retreating from socialist struggle but about waging struggles that could cultivate class consciousness and lay the groundwork for a "conscious and intelligent proletariat" that would ultimately achieve democratic control over their collective life. He emphasized that this racially specific form of class struggle, or what he called "socialism as racial struggle," was a temporary necessity, writing, "This narrowed goal is forced upon us today by the unyielding determination of the mass of the white race to enslave, exploit, and insult Negroes."

[79] Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to George Streator, April 17, 1935. Du Bois Papers. This was a strong statement indeed given that it was uttered in 1935 during the heyday of the CIO, which was carrying out some of the most impressive experiments in interracial labor solidarity that had ever been tried in the United States.
[80] Letter from George Streator to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 9, 1935. Du Bois Papers. The reliance on middle class morality is one of the primary reasons why Streator found the plan so ridiculous. Responding to Streator's critique that the Black middle class was a "lousy minority bourgeoisie," Du Bois defended his reliance on leadership, emphasizing the importance of cultivating leadership within the community.
[81] Du Bois, "A New Creed for American Negroes," ca. October 5, 1935. Du Bois Papers.

Finally, Du Bois's misgivings about the talented tenth idea reveal further tension between his faith in top-down leadership and his growing sense that workers would supply their own leaders. From early in his career, Du Bois was adamant that social change required "intelligent leadership," placing faith in the Black intelligentsia to guide the masses toward freedom. Over time, however, his personal and political experiences eroded his faith in the talented tenth idea and led him to reconsider the important place he had carved out for them in his strategic vision.[82] In a 1948 speech delivered to the Boule, Du Bois explained his rethinking of the assumptions underlying the concept of the Talented Tenth, arguing that leadership was not confined to an elite few but could arise from many within the community, and hinting at a democratized and expansive notion of leadership that diverged from his earlier emphasis on exceptional individuals. As he put it:

> As the philosophy of Karl Marx and many of his successors seeped into my understanding, I tried to change my own doctrine with regard to Negroes. My talented tenth need not be a few persons: it could be many, very many. Its passport to leadership was not simply learning. Learning, science, and knowledge carefully inculcated and deeply studied it must have: but fundamental would be its willingness to sacrifice and plan for such economic revolution in industry and just distribution of wealth as would make the rise of the group possible.[83]

This rethinking of leadership reflects Du Bois's growing recognition that the capacity for transformative action was not the exclusive domain of an educated elite but could be cultivated among many, provided they were equipped with both knowledge and a commitment to collective

[82] David Levering Lewis, in *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (2000), 508-509.
[83] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address (1948)," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race*, New York: Knopf, 1996, pp.159–177. The typed copy of this speech in Du Bois's collected paper show the title "The Talented Tenth: The Re-examination of a Concept."

sacrifice for economic and social revolution.[84] Yet even as he critiqued the limitations of the Talented Tenth idea in this 1948 speech, Du Bois never fully decoupled leadership from socialism in his political imagination, remaining tethered to the idea that morally exceptional individuals would ultimately guide the masses instead of the other way around, even if he granted that those individuals could rise from the ranks of the masses.

This tension is especially striking, given Du Bois's own analysis of the general strike in *Black Reconstruction*. The general strike demonstrated the capacity of enslaved people to resist oppression without the kind of training Du Bois elsewhere argued was necessary, a reality that implicitly challenged the centrality of leadership in Du Bois's framework. In his later writings, Du Bois critiqued the Black intelligentsia for their assimilation into what he called "Western acquisitive society," lamenting their complicity in systems of exploitation and private profit. He admitted that his earlier faith in this group to foment not just socialism among African Americans but an international Black socialism was far off the mark, acknowledging in a speech on his 91st birthday that "we could not even lead ourselves, much less you [Africans]."[85] While he approached an alternative vision by recognizing that "Africans will provide their own leadership," Du Bois never fully came to terms with the implications of his misgivings of talented tenth leadership . But, this unresolved tension underscores the duality of his socialist imagination, envisioning both top-down and bottom-up theories of resistance.

Du Bois's conception of socialism was shaped by unanswered questions about how best to resolve the contradictions of capitalist modernity. He remained committed to defining a

[84] The expression "carefully inculcated" recalls Paolo Freire's conception of the "banking model of education, where the teacher "deposits" knowledge into passive students. "Banking model" pedagogy comes through often, exemplified by Du Bois's emphasis on education as "training." At the same time, Du Bois trained a generation of young sociologists by taking them "into the field" in ways that also recall Freire's problem-solving approach. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1981).
[85] Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 263.

positive role for Black intelligentsia, yet his experiences and reflections increasingly pointed to the inherent capacity of the masses to remake social relations without the guidance of an elite vanguard. While Du Bois never fully abandoned his faith in the necessity of leadership over the masses and, more central to his efforts, never stopped trying to define a positive and radical role for the Black intelligentsia, his reflections increasingly pointed to the inherent capacity of the masses to resist oppression and reimagine social relations without the guidance of an elite vanguard. His emphasis on workers' self-activity in *Black Reconstruction*, his advocacy for cooperative economics, and his growing critique of the Talented Tenth reveal a persistent, if underdeveloped, belief in the power of ordinary people to drive social transformation. By recognizing this tension, we gain a more nuanced understanding of Du Bois's politics: on the one hand, a devotion to harnessing modern science and expert knowledge for social planning; on the other, a recognition that the agency of the masses themselves is indispensable in any genuine challenge to capitalism.

Du Bois on Class Struggle and Schooling

Thomas Holt, in his essay for a special issue of *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* honoring the enduring significance of *Black Reconstruction*, observes that the book ends on an unexpected note: "A study decidedly committed to a labor-oriented, if not Marxian, analysis of social development… privileges education as the central enduring achievement of that revolutionary struggle."[86] This striking conclusion invites us to consider how Du Bois understood the connection between education, capitalism, and Black resistance. Unlike some Marxists who saw schools primarily as mechanisms for reproducing the power dynamics of racial capitalist society,

[86] Thomas C. Holt, "A Story of Ordinary Human Beings: The Sources of Du Bois's Historical Imagination in *Black Reconstruction*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 431–432.

and unlike reformers who envisioned schools as able to overcome the ills of capitalism in and of themselves, Du Bois held a distinctive view: schools were embedded within the structures of racial capitalism and were one important site of struggle for advancing democracy and socialism. Schools mirrored and reproduced existing hierarchies but also provided spaces where those hierarchies could be challenged. Du Bois's conception of the significance of educational struggles includes four key dimensions. First, his analysis was deeply informed by the pursuit of education by slaves and freedpeople, who connected literacy and knowledge to their fight for freedom. Second, his emphasis on the importance of education to the socialist and Black freedom struggles was shaped by a historically specific analysis of the loss of Black economic and political power during Reconstruction and its aftermath. Third, Du Bois's understanding of education's role in socialism diverged from that of his contemporaries, particularly the progressive reformers known as the Social Reconstructionists.[87] Finally, Du Bois viewed struggles over education as a site of direct confrontation with the owners of capital. This vision of educational politics, which foregrounded control over schools as central to confronting the deprivations of racial capitalism and building a more democratic society, would later be taken up by students in the 1960s.

Du Bois's educational philosophy was distinctive from that of other educationally-minded social reformers of his times, particularly the Social Reconstructionists, who, during the 1930s, argued that education could be leveraged to address social problems, most especially the "exploitation of the masses" toward the end of "usher[ing] in an age of plenty, to make secure

[87] Du Bois also *shared* many ideas with Social Reconstructionists. For a discussion of the similarities between Du Bois and Social Reconstructionism see William H. Watkins, "A Marxian and Radical Reconstructionist Critique of American Education: Searching Out Black Voices," in *Black Protest Thought and Education*, ed. William H. Watkins, foreword by James D. Anderson (Lang, 2011), 107–35.

the lives of all, and to banish poverty forever from the land."[88] University of Chicago professor and educational theorist George Counts, one of the leading figures of this movement, captured this vision in his widely-read and debated pamphlet, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order*: "The times are literally crying for a new vision of American destiny…To refuse to face the task of creating a vision of a future America immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the America of today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task." For the Social Reconstructionists, education's transformative power lay in raising awareness about the problems impacting society, instilling cooperative values in the masses, and empowering educators and students to actively contribute to creating a free and equal society. While Du Bois shared the belief that education could cultivate critical awareness, he was skeptical about education serving as the driver of fundamental economic change. He perceived schools as embedded within the structures of racial capitalism, reflecting existing hierarchies and power dynamics. For Du Bois, education alone could not resolve the fundamental conflicts inherent in a racially stratified class society. Instead, he viewed schools as important institutions where Black people could develop a shared political outlook and produce the knowledge needed to engage in struggle.

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois argues that the desire for literacy among enslaved people arose organically as a direct response to the conditions of slavery and, more specifically, to the imposition of illiteracy as a key technique of the slaveholder's control. He writes: "The very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education."[89] In other words, the enslaved people resisted the conditions of slavery through the act of learning to read and write. This push toward literacy was

[88] George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day Company, 1932).
[89] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 570.

a concrete and widespread reaction to the deliberate use of ignorance by slaveholders as a means of domination. In an attempt to maintain control over the slaves and in response to individual and collective acts of resistance such as Nat Turner's rebellion, Du Bois relates that the slaveholders criminalized teaching reading and writing to slaves during the 1830s and 40s. Conversely, enslaved people recognized that literacy was a pathway to freedom, sparking clandestine efforts to teach and learn despite the increased danger of teaching and learning.[90] Having excavated enslaved people's pursuit of education while researching *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois concluded that the act of learning to read and write stood at the heart of a broader struggle for autonomy and self-definition, challenging the slaveholders' deliberate weaponization of ignorance and shaping the very meaning of emancipation.

Du Bois's understanding of the connection between education, racial capitalism, and democratic life was further shaped by the efforts of freedmen to establish publicly funded universal education in the former slaveholding states during Reconstruction. For Du Bois, the commitment to universal education was an extension of the emancipatory struggles for literacy of the slaves, who now, as freedpeople, sought to redefine American citizenship on universal, democratic terms. The freedmen's vision of universal education was broadly inclusive, extending not only to the newly freed Black population but also to poor whites as well as others who society had deemed uneducable, such as the blind, deaf, and mentally ill.[91] Du Bois goes state by state identifying how Reconstruction-era state constitutions reflected this vision of education for all, with provisions like South Carolina's 1868 resolution that ensured "no distinction to be made

[90] Williams's *Self-Taught* confirms Du Bois's analysis by documenting the persistent efforts of enslaved people to seek education despite the legal and existential risks they faced. Williams demonstrates how efforts to learn how to read were directly connected to the urgency around being able to construct and communicate across underground networks needed to escape slavery. In this way, literacy was a concrete tool of emancipation before it became a more generalized ideal.

[91] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction,* 580, writing about the debates surrounding the constitutional resolution to establish universal education in South Carolina.

in favor of any class of persons" or Louisiana's, which stated that schools were to be open to all children "regardless of color." This marked a profound departure from the prewar South, where publicly funded education was attempted in some places but widely underdeveloped and actively hindered by planters who were hostile to the idea of education for the poor. According to Dunning, the planters opposed universal education on the grounds that it would "make laborers more difficult to exploit."[92] Meanwhile, Du Bois judges, poor white Southerners' own experience of class domination did not point so directly to education for all as had the slaves' experience. As he saw them, poor whites "accepted without murmur their subordination to the slaveholders and looked for an escape from their condition only to the possibility of becoming slaveholders themselves. Education they regarded as a luxury connected with wealth."[93]

In contrast, the freedmen connected education with power and freedom and saw literacy and schooling as a cornerstone to establishing real democracy in the South. Du Bois highlights how the "extraordinary mass demand on the part of the black laboring class for education" became the driving force behind the establishment of public schools in the South.[94] This demand was rooted in the lived experience of resistance under slavery and the recognition that education was central to achieving freedom. The freedmen's vision of universal education stood in sharp contrast to the narrow economic and political commitments of the planters and poor whites, making it a site of intense conflict during Reconstruction. As Du Bois observes, the substantive disagreements over public schooling—particularly around funding, racial inclusion, and local versus state control—reflected deeper struggles over the meaning and practice of democracy in a post-slavery society. Ultimately, the freedmen's efforts to enshrine universal education in the

[92] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 594, quoting William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907).
[93] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 572-73.
[94] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 573.

Reconstruction constitutions embodied a new vision for the South and for America, a vision informed by the experience of enslavement and what was entailed in escaping and destroying the institution of forced labor.

Du Bois's emphasis on education as essential to freedom was historically specific, rooted in the legacy of Reconstruction and, perhaps more importantly, its demise. For Du Bois, the importance of educational struggles during his lifetime lay not in an abstract belief in the importance of education for democracy but in its role as a site of resistance against the racial and class oppression faced by Black Southerners after Reconstruction was lost. He argued that "had it not been for the Negro school and college, the Negro would, to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery."[95] Following the counter-revolution of 1876, the economic and political gains of Reconstruction were dismantled, leaving Black Southerners with few footholds to defend against the violent resurgence of "home rule." Yet, the freedpeople built an enduring infrastructure by establishing schools and colleges alongside the organization of the Black church. Du Bois highlights how these institutions nurtured leadership and collective knowledge, enabling Black Southerners to "thwart the worst designs of the new slave drivers" and preserve their dignity amidst lynching, economic subjugation, and political repression.[96]

The Struggle Against the White Ruling Class

His historical sensibilities led Du Bois to recognize schools as an enduring site of race and class struggle, a perspective he had already applied to the student strike at Fisk. In his *Crisis* editorial on the student strike, Du Bois debunks the notion that schools for Black Americans were a privilege generously bestowed by wealthy white philanthropists—a view that, for many,

[95] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 596.
[96] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 596.

justified accommodating white supremacy. Du Bois exposes the material realities of Fisk's operations, emphasizing that the school was not a gift but a product of historic Black struggle and, more concretely, the tuition payments of Black families. He highlights that Fisk's financial foundation rested heavily on Black families' contributions: "The $50,000 which the white South promised Fisk has not yet been paid, while even Negroes forget that black students pay $75,000 to Fisk every year, not to mention tens of thousands which they put into the pockets of white Nashville merchants."[97] By pointing out that Black tuition dollars not only sustained the school but also that Fisk itself enriched local white businesses, Du Bois shows rather than owing its existence to white largesse, Fisk was an economic asset. Du Bois highlights the high political stakes of accepting the narrative of gifting and gratitude. In contrast to those who advocated accommodation in exchange for such gifts, Du Bois calls on his readers to consider the risks of accepting the "gift" of white supremacist schooling. "Suppose we do lose Fisk," he writes. "Suppose we lose every cent that the entrenched millionaires have set aside to buy our freedom and stifle our complaints… Let us never forget that the arch enemy of the Negro race is the false philanthropist who kicks us in the mouth when we cry out in honest and justifiable protest."

For Du Bois, the student strike at Fisk illuminated a fundamental question of the democratic rights of Black parents and students. In his analysis of the strike, Du Bois highlights what Amy Gutmann has identified as the central question of democratic education: who has the authority to govern the conscious social reproduction–and, we might add, drawing on Du Bois, transformation–of society?[98] For Du Bois, this issue was deeply entangled with the influence of the white ruling class over Fisk, which undermined the possibility of democratic control. "It is

[97] Du Bois, "Opinion," *The Crisis*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (April 1925).
[98] In *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), Amy Gutmann identifies conscious social reproduction as the definitive characteristic of democratic education.

not a question of color or race," he writes. "No colored man has demanded a colored president at Fisk. No colored man has demanded a white president at Fisk; but we do demand a president who can teach and inspire and not merely drive and repress, and we care not what his color may be." While the question of representation was important, Du Bois argued that the deeper problem lay in the authoritarian nature of Fisk's governance, which served as a violation of the right of Black parents to consciously reproduce–or change–their own society. While Black parents and students were given no say over education at Fisk, President McKenzie actively sought out the participation of wealthy whites. "He has consulted neither alumni nor colored leaders," Du Bois writes, noting that McKenzie instead "cultivated the white Southerners, joined their clubs, [and] made friends with them." For Du Bois, rejecting white supremacy at Fisk also required directly confronting the influence of white philanthropists, whose ties to the owners of industry created an environment of dominance that violated Black parents' democratic control over their children's education. Over the course of his editorial, Du Bois ties the fundamental impulse of the students to reject the indignities of McKenzie's white supremacy directly to the undemocratic influence of ruling-class whites over Fisk, linking racial struggle to class struggle in the process.

By protesting their subjection to authoritarian discipline and indignity under President McKenzie, the striking Fisk students exposed a contradiction between democracy and racial capitalism: the owners of industry ruled the South. McKenzie's administration fit easily into the Southern racial order, where wealth and whiteness provided access to control of education, reinforcing a system that excluded Black communities from participating in the reproduction of society. Du Bois asserts that this state of affairs would not change except by force, "McKenzie is going to be held in his place just as long as money, influence and propaganda can hold him. The Fisk case is going to be made an example. We accept the challenge: Shall we surrender all

control over the education of our children to those who despise Negroes and seek to hold them down by caste, or shall we drive this man and his methods from Fisk and from the colored educational field?" The students rejected subordination and indignity, risking their access to college to assert their right to shape their own education and futures. Du Bois celebrated their action. His eloquence underscored its profound stakes. Additionally, Du Bois drew attention to the material cost of the students' action. Unlike a workers' strike, the cost of the Fisk student strike was not to production but a halt in the flow of donations to Fisk, a process Du Bois reveals was necessary to reproduce relations of racial domination. By refusing to comply with McKenzie's racially motivated disciplinary standards, the students disrupted the mechanisms of white supremacy embedded in the institution and affirmed education as a site of struggle against capitalism and for democracy.

Du Bois's reflections on education as a site of class struggle reveal the tensions between schooling, the reproduction of social relations within capitalism, and collective self-rule. He recognized that the struggle for Black community control over Fisk illuminated the entanglement of racial domination and economic exploitation. The students' refusal to accept white supremacist control over their education disrupted the social reproduction of racial capitalism. Decades later, the radical student movements of the 1960s would demanding Black Studies programs, asserting their rights to free speech, and resisting U.S. imperialism—would pick up the thread and carry out the political vision of the striking students at Fisk.

Chapter Outline

The three essays that follow trace the theme of class struggle across Du Bois's evolving educational politics. Chapter one traces how Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois each confronted what I call the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, a term that describes how

schools offer both a path toward higher socioeconomic status and also reproduce distinctions of socioeconomic status. I illustrate how both Washington and Du Bois argued that schools were vehicles of Black economic advancement at the same time as each, in different ways, advanced educational visions that relied on reinforcing and reproducing inequality. Washington's approach self-avowedly involved creating a racialized division of labor in the South, while Du Bois's Talented Tenth idea downplayed class stratification. In the context of the Great Depression, Du Bois came to see the way that schooling reproduces class stratification as a significant problem. The chapter ends with a discussion of a 1930 speech that imagines how Black education might be organized differently such that they do not retrench class distinctions among Black Americans.

The second chapter considers the tensions between Du Bois's emphasis on education as leadership training and his attentiveness to dynamics of class struggle through a discussion of a trilogy of novels he wrote in the 1950s called *Black Flame*. I examine how Du Bois dramatizes the dilemmas of elite Black leadership in his *Black Flame* trilogy through the story of Manuel Mansart, a school administrator who struggles to secure resources and opportunities for Atlanta's Black schools in the Jim Crow South. As superintendent, Mansart faces a profound dilemma: effectively advocating for his community would require mobilizing collective resistance, but doing so risks alienating the white elites whose support sustains his influence. This chapter discusses Du Bois's portrayal of this dilemma, situating it within Du Bois's view that schools are shaped through dynamics of class rule and struggle. I discuss the trilogy along two key themes: the political limits of elite leadership and the possibilities of collective and collaborative practices of class struggle in schools. Du Bois's perspective is given emotional texture and historical detail across the three novels, as major and minor characters take various actions to

resist and challenge white ruling-class domination over Black colleges and Southern society. Taken together, I show how *Black Flame* offers a complex picture of Du Bois's evolving educational politics, critically reflecting on the political limits of elite leadership while emphasizing the persistent forms of resistance enacted by teachers and students, who continually challenged ruling-class power.

Building on Du Bois's earlier attempt to overcome the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, Chapter 3 examines how his educational politics evolved under the pressures and possibilities of the early Cold War. The chapter begins by discussing *Higher Education for American Democracy*, the 1947 report by President Truman's Commission on Higher Education, which envisioned mass access to college as key to bolstering national competitiveness and democratic ideals. Du Bois, for his part, looked pessimistically upon the Cold War university, having been pushed out of Atlanta University in the intensifying anticommunism. During the 1950s, Du Bois found an alternative space for his teaching: Marxist and labor schools that served working-class adults. Through these institutions, Du Bois moved even further away from the talented tenth idea than he had in the past and developed a new pedagogical practice oriented toward the goal of building interracial and international working-class solidarity.

The conclusion then turns to the contemporary neoliberal university and today's student movements for divestment from Israel. The contemporary student movement underscores the ongoing relevance of class struggle politics in higher education, especially as decision-making has been concentrated in the hands of top administrators and trustees. As universities become more deeply beholden to market imperatives, bottom-up efforts to contest unaccountable governance and establish democratic control over academic life grow ever more urgent.

Chapter 1 Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, and the Equality Paradox of Capitalist Schooling

Upon conducting his meticulous and mammoth sociological study of American race relations in the 1940s, Gunnar Myrdal held up American as an inspiring example of how education further equality, writing that "In American democratic thought and life, education has always been the great hope for both individual and society... Education has been, and is increasingly becoming, a chief means of climbing the social status scale."[1] Moreover, writing about the unequal treatment of Black Americans, Myrdal holds out hope that the particular American passion for pursuing individual advancement through education would contribute to solving what he famously deemed "the American dilemma," the way that entrenched racial prejudice and discrimination inhibited America from living up to its higher civic ideals. Myrdal affirmed that "an increasing stress" was being placed "the desirability of raising the educational level," and that this change was "part of a much more general tendency of the American Creed to include ideals of greater economic equalization…The Negroes' chance of getting more equality in education is bound up with this movement."[2]

For Du Bois, such optimism about the gradual realization of the American Creed in American life obscured the class conflict at the heart of American society. In a 1930 commencement address to the graduates of Howard University, Du Bois added a healthy dose of

[1] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose (Harper, 1944), 882, 935.
[2] Myrdal, *An American Dilemma,* 937.

skepticism to the idea that the goal of expanding access to education and achieving greater economic equality were both part of the gradual realization of the American Creed.[3] If education was to secure economic prosperity for Black Americans, Du Bois contended, "We are going to [have to] force ourselves in by organized far-seeing effort, by out-thinking and out-flanking the owners of the world today."[4] While Myrdal saw education as an important tool for advancing the ideals of the American Creed, Du Bois saw it as a site of class struggle where economic and political inequalities could be both challenged *and* exacerbated. Moreover, in Du Bois's telling, not all Americans are equal contributors to a grand democratic project. Instead, some Americans–namely American capitalists–had laid the foundation for the whole society and had gained control over Black workers through their philanthropic gifts to industrial schools. Addressing this problem, Du Bois argued, was a matter of taking collective ownership and agency not just education but work–to steer the economic trajectory of the country in an altogether new direction, rather than including Black Americans into the economy as it was.

Whether and how education can deliver greater economic equality is a question that continues to be asked today. Some echo Myrdal's optimism that expanding access to schooling will promote greater economic fairness. Yet others warn that, as Du Bois insisted, schooling under capitalism consolidates ruling class power rather than disrupting it. This chapter takes up Du Bois's insistence that struggles over work and economic control are central to understanding both the promise and the peril of education as a solution to economic inequality. Through a discussion of the historic disagreement between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, we see how

[3] Joel Olson contrasts Myrdal's formulation of the contradiction between American ideals and practices with Du Bois's theory of race and whiteness in *The Abolition of White Democracy*. In part by developing Du Bois's ideas, he argues that there is no necessary contradiction between American ideals and practices, but rather that when these two appear as contradictions it has been a result of active resistance.
[4] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Education and Work," June 6, 1930. Du Bois Papers.

debates about Black education have long revolved around an enduring problem: that education fosters class mobility and simultaneously retrenches class stratification.

This chapter traces Du Bois's attempts to link a political vision anchored by access to schooling to the goal of economic justice to both excavate Du Bois's intellectual and political development and shine a light on how the equality paradox at the center of capitalist schooling undergirded debates over the purpose of education among Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. In the first section of the chapter, I elaborate the contradictory relationship between schooling and equality. After identifying education's equality paradox as a characteristic of schooling in a capitalist democracy, I then show how this contradiction shaped the debate between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois over whether Black Americans should receive industrial or liberal arts education. Despite the apparent differences in their educational programs, I emphasize that both men justified their educational programs by linking schooling to economic outcomes. I draw out their competing ideas about how schooling could advance equality, emphasizing how both came up against the equality paradox. Next, I elaborate further on Du Bois's educational approach to economic inequality by tracing his many attempts to reconcile a political vision rooted in elitism with the goal of advancing economic justice. I conclude with a discussion of Du Bois's 1930s speech to Howard graduates, drawing out its lessons for contemporary debates about how education can further the goals of economic justice.

The Equality Paradox of Capitalist Schooling

Education has long been positioned as the primary mechanism for reducing economic inequality in the United States. It has been widely accepted that expanding educational access would serve as a pathway to class mobility, allowing individuals to rise above poverty through

skill acquisition and credentialing. As literary historian John Marsh puts it: "Nothing dominates our thinking about poverty and economic inequality so much as the belief that education (or lack of it) causes these problems and thus that education (and more of it) will fix them."[5] Danielle Allen likewise observes that "discussions of educational reform are very often proxies for conversations about poverty."[6]

Even as policymakers have placed increasing faith in schools as a solution to economic injustice, scholars have shown that education does not simply distribute opportunity but also reproduces inequality. Education's dual function in facilitating class mobility and reproducing class stratification creates what intellectual historian Cristina Viviana Groeg calls the "education trap," which dates back to the late 19th century, where social elites leverage their educational opportunities to construct and remake economic hierarchies. Rather than straightforwardly facilitating class mobility, she shows, the goal of using education to promote economic equality is trapped by its the ability of elites to use their educational access as a tool for consolidating power.[7] To put it in somewhat different terms, because it is positional good, educational attainment simultaneously creates and denies opportunities; when one individual gains, another loses.[8] John F. Coaleskie further illuminates that education is a positional good precisely because

[5] John Marsh, *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality* (Monthly Review Press, 2011), 16.
[6] Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality*, with comments by Tommie Shelby et al. (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 3.
[7] Cristina Viviana Groeger, *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston* (Harvard University Press, 2021).
[8] Educational philosophers disagree about the appropriate way to solve this problem. Adam Swift, for example, argues that the state and parents are obligated to limit their investments in privileged children to level the playing field. *How Not to Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (Routledge, 2003). By contrast, Bryan Warnick suggests that wealthy parents should still be able to invest in their children even if it gives those children a competitive advantage. The best way to address that inequality is through policies that are external to educational institutions, such as a more robust social safety net. "Taming the Conflict over Educational Equality," *Journal of Applied* Philosophy 32, no. 1 (2015): 50-66. For a third distinctive position, Elizabeth Anderson argues for a "democratic equality perspective," which involves shifting focus away from material equality and toward the goal of constituting an elite capable of attending to the interests and desires of people in a mass democracy. "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective," *Ethics* 117 (July 2007): 595-622.

capitalism is itself competitive: "If everyone were equally well educated, even perfectly so, the surplus of labor would still mean some jobs would pay less than a living wage. In a competitive economy, the educated reap economic benefits only from their education *relative to others.*"[9] In short, the ability of education to limit, let alone eliminate, inequality is severely constrained by the structural inequality inherent in how labor is organized within capitalism. It is further constrained by the reproduction of social hierarchy enabled by the competitive dimension of educational attainment.

By eclipsing education's function as a reproducer of social inequality, which inevitably results when we position education as a solution to economic inequality, we obscure how educational politics has emerged at the nexus of two distinct functions: class mobility for the disadvantaged and consolidating power for the privileged. Different political actors have worked to further one function over the other, revealing an underlying class struggle motivating debates over educational priorities and policies. The equality paradox of capitalist schooling and the underlying class struggle that it has produced has been an enduring feature of educational struggles, reappearing in different times in places in United States history: in Boston during the Gilded Age, as Groeger narrates, in debates over industrial versus liberal arts education in the postbellum South as I will discuss, and into contemporary debates over affirmative action and legacy college admissions.

The contradiction between education's role in facilitating class mobility and its function in entrenching social inequality was at play when Black education was being institutionalized in the South after the Civil War and especially after the end of Reconstruction. Education became a battleground over competing visions of how best to pursue economic equality for Black

[9] John F. Covaleskie, "Educational Attainment and Economic Inequality: What Schools Cannot Do," *Journal of Thought* 45, no. 1–2 (2010): 84.

Americans. What kind of schooling would best secure their financial and political future? Should schools be designed to provide economic security within the constraints of the existing racial and economic order, or should it cultivate leadership capable of challenging that order? Booker T. Washington and Du Bois's competing answers to this question were both ultimately frustrated by the same problem: the equality paradox of capitalist schooling.

Booker T. Washington versus Du Bois: Educational Paths to Equality

Black Americans' struggle for access to and control over education has played an important role in locating education at the center of the American democratic imagination. Historians of African American politics have shown that debates over Black education consistently reflected larger struggles over racial equality and economic survival. In this section, I explore how the contradictions between the economics and politics of education have shaped African American political thought, focusing on the competing educational programs advanced by Booker T. Washington and Du Bois. While their visions are usually depicted as diametrically opposed—Washington's industrial education emphasizing self-help and economic self-sufficiency, and Du Bois's liberal arts model prioritizing intellectual leadership and civil rights—both grappled with the same fundamental issue: the inability of schooling of any kind to provide economic security to Black Americans in the South.

The rivalry between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois over the trajectory of Black education in the U.S. looms large in the history of African American politics. Indeed, the debate between early 20th-century advocates of industrial education and advocates for liberal arts education has been lifted up as showcasing a deeper cleavage within African American politics: the dichotomy between accommodation and protest. Rather than being strictly about the

merits of either vocational or liberal arts curricula, historians have shown, at issue was the whole direction of the Black freedom struggle.[10] Within that story, Booker T. Washington represents the strategy of accommodation to the segregationist social order, whereas Du Bois represents the approach of mobilization and protest directly against white supremacist culture and politics.

One drawback to reading the Washington-Du Bois debate as reflecting the difference between accommodation and protest is that the emphasis on competing strategic approaches to *racial* politics obscures the economic stakes of the question of industrial or liberal arts education.[11] Moreover, the idea that Washington's model prioritized Black economic success while Du Bois focused on political and social advancement ignores the reality that their educational visions were inextricably linked to questions of the organization of social relations and the distribution of power within capitalism, even if neither men put it in those precise terms. Their competing educational ideas reflect different attempts at navigating the equality paradox at the center of schooling in the context of racial capitalism. How could education serve as a pathway to Black equality if the education system itself was embedded in an economic system structured by workers' inequality? Both Washington and Du Bois saw education as a means of advancing the race, but they disagreed on how to navigate the white supremacist economic and political structures that shaped Black life in the post-Reconstruction era. By recentering their debate on this problem, we can better understand how their educational programs functioned within the broader political economy of racial inequality.

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[10] Gary Dorrien, "The Crucible: Du Bois Versus Washington" In *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, 124-220. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963.

[11] In making this claim I am riffing on Judith's Stein's critique of August Meier's approach to African American political history. Judith Stein, "'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others': The Political Economy of Racism in the United States," *Science & Society* 38, no. 4 (1974): 422–463.

Earning Respect, Earning Equality: Booker T. Washington and Industrial Education

Although he has become an antihero of African American history, Booker Taliaferro Washington's personal story is nothing short of extraordinary. Washington was born into slavery. He and his family were freed after the Civil War, and they relocated from Virginia to West Virginia. As a young child of 9, Washington worked in salt and coal mines and eventually became a servant for the wife of the man who owned the local mines, who taught him how to read. Deciding that he wanted to attend Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia but not having the money to travel there, Washington hitchhiked, worked as a stevedore, and slept under the docks for a month until he could make his way to Hampton. He worked as a janitor for the school to pay his tuition. As a student, he earned the favor and admiration of Principal Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who later recommended him to be the founder of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Washington toured rural Alabama as one of his first tasks in opening the school and found Black Alabamians living in deep poverty, naked and malnourished. By fostering relationships with white businessmen, he was able to purchase a farm for the school, and he had the students learn brickmaking to construct further buildings to create Tuskegee's campus. After his success as Tuskegee's principal, Washington became a powerhouse of Black politics, serving as a political advisor to Teddy Roosevelt and William H. Taft, exercising significant influence in making political appointments in the South and playing a significant role in the Black press.[12]

[12] Washington's life story was recorded by himself in three autobiographies. *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (Doubleday, 1902); *My Larger Education: Being Chapters from My Experience* (Doubleday, Page, 1911); and *An Autobiography of Booker T. Washington: The Story of My Life and Work* (J. L. Nichols and Co., 1901). His most notable biographer is Louis Harlan, whose effort to tell Washington's life story and collect his papers enabled subsequent scholarship on Washington. See Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (Oxford University Press, 1972) and *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

Shocked and appalled by the conditions of abject poverty in which he found rural Black Alabamians, Washington worked concertedly to build Tuskegee's economic power. In Washington's view, Black Americans needed to compile economic resources and work their way up the economic ladder to position themselves as rightful citizens. Industrial schools were a core component of this vision because of the skills they taught to rural Black people and because the schools themselves were centers of Black property ownership and economic power. His approach to building Tuskegee and other industrial schools for Blacks as centers of economic power was multifaceted. On the one hand, Tuskegee's curriculum emphasized cultivating the right mentality in its students, namely a mentality of Christian obedience and subservience, as Washington himself had been taught at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. Indeed, the curriculum at Tuskegee, as well as most other industrial schools for Black Southerners, followed a military-like educational program that included hours of manual labor as well as book study and strict enforcement of Christian social conduct.[13]

In addition to behavioral discipline, the training at Tuskegee prepared its students for jobs that fit the segregated racial culture of the South. Central to Washington's philosophy of gradually accruing economic resources and respect was treading carefully around the white supremacist culture of the South. Washington counseled an approach of avoiding instigating and enflaming racial jealousies by occupying only those positions that were the least valued. He wrote, "The surest way for the Negro to reach the highest positions is to prepare himself to fill

[13] James D. Anderson has pieced together the curriculum envisioned and developed by Samuel Armstrong that was used at Hampton, Tuskegee and other Southern industrial schools though painstaking archival research, and he unpacks the political implications of the austere, Christian mentality that was being taught. Anderson, The *Education of Blacks in the South,* chapters 2 and 3. See also William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954*, foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley (Teachers College Press, 2001), 43-61. By contrast, Crystal Sanders has argued that Washington's efforts to hire and maintain an all-black faculty at Tuskegee significantly departed from the original Hampton idea and worked to undermine the white supremacist culture of the south. Crystal R. Sanders, "We Very Much Prefer to Have a Colored Man in Charge: Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee's All-Black Faculty," *The Alabama Review* 74, no. 2 (2021), 99-128.

well at the present time the basic occupations. This will give him a foundation upon which to stand while securing what is called the more exalted positions."[14] But Washington did not advocate that Black Americans stay in this lowly station always and forever. He predicted that hard work would enable Black workers to earn the respect of the dominant race. As a result, they would gradually improve their collective situation, up to and including being granted political rights.

A third component of Washington's program for building Black economic power through industrial education was forging alliances with white industrialists interested in developing the postbellum South. Through his exceptional skills as a diplomat, Washington successfully garnered significant financial support for Black education in the South. Indeed, Washington built deep relationships with Northern philanthropists such as William H. Baldwin, Julius Rosenwald, and Andrew Carnegie. Support from white industrialists for Black education was conditional on calibrating the purposes of Black education to the economic aspirations of the industrialists. From their perspective, the South was potentially a land of untapped economic opportunity. Looming political and racial instability meant that investment in the economic development of the South also came with significant risks. Foremost among those risks was the growing leverage of Southern white workers. Black labor was therefore seen as crucial to the economic development of the region, and the accommodationist educational politics of Booker T. Washington supported this goal by cohering a conservative Black middle class.[15] Ultimately, by

[14] Booker T. Washington, "The Future of the American Negro," in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, vol. 5 (University of Illinois Press, 1972), as quoted in Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 49.
[15] Brian Kelly, "Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South," *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 337–357.

linking Black industrial education to philanthropic support, Washington contributed to putting a ceiling on schooling as a path to economic prosperity.

This plan, in which Black students would receive training to contribute to the Southern economy by filling the lowest valued jobs, was articulated by Booker T. Washington in an 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition, a world fair held in Atlanta, Georgia.[16] Through a parable about stranded sailors and a metaphor of how a human hand works, we can see how Washington's political outlook rested on a particular understanding of capitalism. In the speech, Washington describes a group of sailors stuck at sea and without water. Another ship appears, and they communicate that they need water. The crew from the other ship responds, "Cast down your buckets where you are." Unbeknownst to the thirsty sailors, the water surrounding their ship was from the river, not the sea, so it could quench their thirst. The advice to cast down buckets where you are was advice given to both the political leaders of the white South and Black southerners. Both were ignorant, Washington argued, of the ways that the one could serve as the resource–the freshwater–that the other needed; it's just that they couldn't see that clearly. More succinctly, Washington distinguished between the functions of the human hand and its fingers to assure his audience that mutual benefit for Black workers and ruling class whites was not mutually exclusive with segregation or disfranchisement: "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." In the parable and the metaphor, Washington declares that workers and owners can work cooperatively to advance each other's interests. Black workers can contribute to making the New South a center of profit, and white industrialists can lend their resources to alleviate Black poverty. The economic facets of Washington's argument are crucial, as his belief

[16] The full text of the speech is available online through the Library of Congress. "Atlanta Exposition Speech,". 18 September 1895. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mss44669_01/

that political inequality would eventually wither away rested on the premise that hard work alleviates poverty. As a theory of Black advancement, Washington's parable implied that capitalism would "lift all boats."

Despite Washington's faith in industrial education as a path to economic advancement, work did not alleviate Black poverty, nor did occupying the lowest positions lead to greater respect or upward mobility for Blacks within the South.[17] Statistics on Black economic conditions in the early 20th century reveal that industrial education did not significantly improve economic outcomes for Black Americans. While the number of Black individuals who owned land increased from 121,000 in 1890 to 500,000 in 1920, the majority of Black workers remained trapped in agricultural labor with diminishing economic returns.[18] When Black workers and entrepreneurs achieved economic success, they were met not with respect but, rather, with violent backlash. For example, Ida B. Wells memorably documented a case of three Black grocery store owners in Memphis who were lynched for the "crime" of operating a successfully competing with white businesses.[19]

Industrial training at Tuskegee and similar institutions emphasized unskilled labor and subservience rather than equipping Black workers with skills for higher-paying jobs. This meant that Black workers remained locked in low-wage agricultural and domestic work rather than advancing into skilled trades.[20] Furthermore, Washington's alliance with white industrialists

[17] Dan B. Croom and Antoine Alston, "The Problem of Agricultural and Industrial Education for African Americans: A Historical Inquiry," *Journal of Agricultural Education* 50, no. 3 (2009).
[18] Allen W. Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," *The Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 2 (1975): 252–267.
[19] Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York Age, 1892). Faron Levesque, "Eat the Rich: Radical Food Justice in Memphis and Chicago," in *Acquired Tastes: Stories about the Origins of Modern Food*, ed. Benjamin R. Cohen, Michael S. Kideckel, and Anna Zeide (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).
[20] Maura Lucking shows how the teaching of technical drawing at Tuskegee was a case in point. The technical drawing curriculum that Washington enforced emphasized the technical skills of blueprint drawing rather than the creative skills of design. The curriculum was intentionally designed to sift students into technical rather than

ensured that Black education served the economic interests of white employers over and above Black self-help.[21] Rather than lifting Black workers out of poverty, industrial education reinforced economic subjugation. Faced with economic stagnation and racial terror in the South, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans sought better opportunities elsewhere. When, by 1930, over a million Black Southerners had left the region, they were effectively rejecting Washington's plea to "cast down their buckets" where they were. Instead, they pursued economic and social security in the North. Ultimately, Washington's educational program did not resolve the paradox of Black education's role in economic inequality; instead, it intensified and retrenched racialized labor hierarchies in the South.

The Making of Men: Du Bois and Teaching to Inspire

Du Bois's views on the role of education in the project of Black advancement were significantly different from Washington's. Washington, having seen the extreme poverty of rural Black Alabamians with his own eyes and having experienced the economic benefits of industrial education through his schooling at Hampton, was disdainful of the way that elite intellectual training disregarded the urgent material needs of impoverished Black Southerners.[22] Du Bois, too, had become intimately familiar with Black poverty through various sociological studies of urban and rural Black life in the South.[23] But Du Bois viewed the dehumanization that resulted

professional roles. Maura Lucking, "Self-Suggestion in the Tuskegee Machine: Technical Drawing under Jim Crow," *Grey Room* 87 (2022): 6–43.

[21] The labor control dimensions of the industrial educational philosophy were particularly apparent when the model was exported to Africa. Donald Spivey, "The African Crusade for Black Industrial Schooling," *The Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 1 (1978): 1–17.

[22] Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals*, 46.

[23] The most significant early study was *The Philadelphia Negro* (1889). In collaboration with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, he wrote "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study" (1898), as well as a study of rural Blacks in Lowndes County, Georgia that was never fully completed. Du Bois had also taught in rural Tennessee while a student at Fisk. He recounts his impressions of how impoverished Black Tennesseans lived in *The Souls of Black Folk.*

from poverty rather than poverty per se as the heart of the problem. Degradation threatened the spiritual and psychic life of Black Americans.

Like Washington, Du Bois viewed the moral training of Black students as one of the most important functions of education. However, for Du Bois, the right training had to do much more than teach adherence to the standards of Victorian morality; it involved passion and curiosity for improving humanity itself. As he puts it in *The Souls of Black Folk:* "The final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living, —not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold."[24] Here, Du Bois frames economic goals as more base than human development, which he sees as a higher, more worthy aim of education.

One area where Washington and Du Bois's divergent educational visions had starkly different political implications for teacher training. The Hampton-Tuskegee model of teacher training involved a rigorous curriculum of multiple hours of hard labor per day. The purpose of laboring as part of teacher training was to instill the habits of hard work and obedience into teachers. As Armstrong envisioned the program when he was creating the Hampton, work requirements were to help Blacks integrate into Southern society by leading them towards occupations appropriate to their station. According to James D. Anderson, the official publication of Hampton, *The Southern Workman,* which often doubled as a textbook for Hampton students, expressed the views of the conservative planter class and was intended to propagate servility and a sense of caste status in the students.[25] As a program of teacher training, work requirements "qualified" the students at Hampton to pass these lessons of character,

[24] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 61.
[25] Anderson, *Black Education in the South*, Chapter 2.

morality, and servility through Black elementary schools in the South. Brian Kelley's analysis of the relationship between "Washington-style accommodation and white elite designs for the industrializing South" further illuminates the political stakes of teaching training in this style– because it helped create a conservative Black leadership class that would stifle and control Black labor unrest.[26]

Du Bois took a starkly different approach to teacher training, regarding teachers' indoctrination as politically dangerous. He argued that it was necessary to train teachers in a way that was appropriate to such an important role: "Teach workers to work, —a wise saying; wise when applied to German boys and American girls; wiser when said of Negro boys, for they have less knowledge of working and none to teach them. Teach thinkers to think, —a needed knowledge in a day of loose and careless logic; and they whose lot is gravest must have the careful training to think aright."[27] Reversing the view that intellectual training is merely a luxury for the wealthy, Du Bois asserts that philosophical education is a particular necessity for a marginalized group like Black Americans. Du Bois and Washington's significantly different views on the political agency and leadership teachers should exercise within Black political life highlight one significant and fundamental difference in their political orientations. Even in the early twentieth century, before Du Bois had more fully developed a critique of capitalism, his incisive ethical critique of how white supremacy stifled the human flourishing of Black individuals led him away from accepting or ignoring that Black teachers were being conscripted to fight a class war against Black workers and on behalf of white planters and industrialists.

Moreover, Du Bois did not see leadership training as unrelated to the problem of Black poverty. Education, and more specifically, social research, was a critical component in lifting

[26] Kelley, "Sentinels for New South Industry," 339.
[27] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 61.

Black Americans out of both poverty and degradation in Du Bois's view. Setting the example of what his educational vision entailed through his celebrated Atlanta University studies, Du Bois laid out a plan that involved university training in the liberal arts for the most capable Black Americans, who would then use that training to conduct research and develop policy programs that would address the unique problems faced by Black Americans. Indeed, he developed entirely new methods of sociological study, methods that profoundly shaped what we now recognize as sociological methods, precisely to create useful knowledge.[28] Whereas Washington saw liberal arts training as hopelessly abstracted from the quotidian concerns of ordinary Southern Blacks, Du Bois saw university training as practical even when it was not directly imparting economic survival skills to Black workers.

Even as Du Bois problematized approaches to schooling that uncritically reproduced socioeconomic hierarchy, ultimately, Du Bois did not fully resolve the equality paradox of capitalist schooling. While Du Bois envisioned an educated leadership class that would advocate for policies to benefit the masses, elite training often provided access to bourgeois inclusion, distancing educated Black leaders from the working-class communities they were meant to serve. The Talented Tenth framework did not fully grapple with the foundations of economic oppression, nor did it offer a concrete strategy for addressing Black labor exploitation beyond the expectation that good leadership would eventually give way to better outcomes through increased political power and policy influence. More critically, Du Bois's moral and humanistic framing of education, in some sense, minimized the problem of poverty. By insisting that "apples of gold" were not the proper goal of schooling, he trivialized the desire for comfort and

[28] Du Bois was central in creating the modern discipline of sociology even though his contributions have been widely understated and underappreciated. Aldon D. Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (University of California Press, 2015).

prosperity. His prediction that intellectual and political power would inevitably translate into a more just distribution of material wealth did not come to fruition. While Du Bois and other early NAACP leaders successfully pushed for legal and political victories, these advances did not yield the economic transformation that would have made education an actual engine of equality rather than a vehicle of continued stratification. In this sense, Du Bois, like Washington, was ultimately constrained by the paradox he sought to overcome. While education was a pathway available to some to raise their social status, as a pathway to economic equality, it was fundamentally limited by its imbrication in an exploitative and hierarchical economic system.

Both Washington and Du Bois's efforts to navigate around the paradox of Black education were frustrated. Washington's model ultimately reinforced the racial labor hierarchy, ensuring that industrial education served white industrialists' interests over and above Black self-determination. Du Bois, for his part, overestimated the extent to which elite training for a select few could act as the engine for improving the conditions of Black workers. Subsequent political experience stubbornly reflected back to him the limits of this idea, and decade after decade, he attempted time and again to reconcile the idea of Talented Tenth leadership to his ever-evolving socialist vision. In the next section, I trace Du Bois's multiple efforts to bring economic concerns into a political program rooted in the agency and leadership of the Talented Tenth.

The Educational Theory of the Talented Tenth

The Great Depression made it clear that the moral and intellectual leadership of a trained elite was not, on its own, capable of securing economic justice for Black Americans. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois had drawn a sharp distinction between the "inspiring ends of living" and the mere pursuit of "apples of gold," but the suffering of the 1930s made such

distinctions increasingly untenable. From the Depression onward, Du Bois repeatedly reworked the Talented Tenth idea, struggling to reconcile his faith in political leadership with the reality of Black poverty. Each revision brought him back to the same fundamental question: could the right kind of leadership bring about economic justice, or even less ambitiously, economic relief? Du Bois's multiple revisions of the Talented Tenth idea reveal the educational theory at the core of his aristocratic theory of politics: that the political function of education was to cultivate the consciousness necessary for economic and social transformation.[29]

Indeed, Du Bois believed that education was the foundation of Black leadership and that a trained vanguard would be best equipped to lay down a political program for all of Black America to follow. This assumption underpinned his multiple attempts to reconceptualize the Talented Tenth throughout his life. Throughout his career, Du Bois repeatedly asserted that the right kind of education could produce the right kind of political subjects, but this belief stood in tension with his materialist understanding of history. If economic conditions shape political consciousness, how could an educated vanguard create political transformation independent of class struggle? As Du Bois's political experiences grew wider, he increasingly questioned whether education—understood as leadership training--could generate the political action necessary for economic justice. Indeed, his revisions to the Talented Tenth idea reflect a growing awareness of the limits of leadership at the same time as they reflect his deep commitment to the political leadership of the Black intelligentsia.

When he first laid out the idea for the Talented Tenth, Du Bois believed that the intellectual and humanistic training involved in liberal arts education would create individuals with strong ethics and altruistic political vision. He believed that a broad, high-minded education

[29] Here I am building on and extending Robert Gooding-Williams' analysis in *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, 1st ed. (Harvard University Press, 2009).

would prepare and train Black students to lead and guide the Black masses on a particular path of cultural and political development. This emphasis on education as a form of leadership training was reflective of the politics and ideology of uplift.[30] In this early formulation, he thought the best leaders would be those willing to sacrifice economic success for service to the people. His was "an aristocracy of talent" rather than uncritical acceptance of those with privilege into leadership positions.[31]

The Black unemployment crisis during the Great Depression led Du Bois to reconsider whether the educational theory at the core of the Talented Tenth could be extended to Black business owners. Could Black capitalists, he wondered, be trained in ideals of self-sacrifice and community uplift such that economic cooperation, rather than exploitation, could lift the Black masses out of poverty? For Du Bois, this vision required an alternative to Booker T. Washington's Negro Business League, which he saw as encouraging an exploitative impulse within capitalism. Of the Negro Business League, he said: "Negroes were to become not only professional men for their own people, but capitalists and employers chiefly exploiting their own group because of the differential advantage which prejudice and discrimination gave them."[32] While Du Bois sought a cooperative economic model, Black Marxists such as Abram Harris saw Black capitalism as inherently exploitative. Harris saw a fundamental class contradiction between Black capitalists and Black workers, arguing that the rise of a Black owning class would inevitably lead to collaboration with the white capitalist class and reinforce "economic

[30] For an extended analysis of the ideology of uplift see Touré F. Reed, *Not Alms but Opportunity: The Urban League and the Politics of Racial Uplift, 1910-1950* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008) and Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1997)

[31] By his own admission, Du Bois underestimated the extent to which class inequality would shape the interests of the Talented Tenth. As a segment of American Blacks started to accumulate capital, Black political interests became more sharply divided across class lines than it had been immediately following emancipation.

[32] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, introduction by Brent Edwards, afterword by Mark Sanders (Oxford University Press, 2007), 216.

individualism and private profit."[33] Any attempt to insulate Black capital from broader capitalist development, he contended, would ultimately fail under the pressures of market competition and profit motives.

Unlike Harris, who believed exploitation was inherent to capitalism, Du Bois saw education as a means of overcoming it, a force for fostering a culture of ethical leadership among the Black bourgeoisie. For Du Bois, the problem with exploitation was not inherent to capitalism as Marx and Harris described; it was moral and political. He saw unregulated profit-seeking as corrupting the higher aims of Black leadership, undermining the possibility of cross-class racial solidarity, and weakening the basis for collective uplift. He envisioned an educated Black leadership guiding the community toward a "consumer-conscious economy," one that prioritized production for use over profit and that would contribute to the gradual evolution of capitalism to socialism: "They would develop into a consumer-conscious people, producing for use and not primarily for profit and working into the surrounding industrial organization so as to reinforce the economic revolution bound to develop in the United States and all over Europe and Asian sooner or later."[34] Du Bois recognized that Black capitalism if left unchecked, could be extremely destructive, but he held onto the hope that education could overpower the profit motive among the Black bourgeoisie. However, Du Bois's "hope of precluding…inner class struggle" never became a reality, and in 1948, he once again reflected on how to improve the Talented Tenth idea.[35]

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[33] Abram Harris, "The Negro Worker: A Problem of Progressive Labor Action." *The Crisis* 37, no. 3 (March 1930): 82-83.
[34] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, introduction by Arnold Rampersad (Oxford University Press, 2007),185.
[35] Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 235.

Du Bois's reflections on the Talented Tenth idea reveal both the limits of his analysis and his investment in a certain kind of elitism.[36] Reflecting on the absence of an analysis of "the inner class struggle" in his previous Talented Tenth formulations, in a speech delivered before the Sigma Pi Phi fraternity in 1948, Du Bois proposed that instead of a Talented Tenth, what was needed was a "Guiding Hundredth." In the speech, he traces the development of his Talented Tenth idea, explaining that he imagined the Talented Tenth would gain influence and power through intellectual merit, not wealth. This made his position distinct from that of Booker T. Washington, who envisioned a class of Black capitalists to serve as leaders of the race. Du Bois goes on to say that he mistakenly did not foresee how class interests would separate Blacks from one another along class lines as more Blacks found their way into positions of relative political and economic power. Because his Talented Tenth idea lacked a rigorous analysis of capitalism, the strategy had a latent class character.

However, the Guiding Hundredth idea was very similar to the idea of the Talented Tenth, except that rather than focusing on the uplift of Black Americans, the Guiding Hundredth's task would be to guide Black Americans toward socialism. Rather than leading Black Americans toward inclusion into American society, the goal of Black leaders would be to transform the American political and economic order. Yet, even as he embraced socialism as the ultimate goal, he remained committed to the idea that education was a means to create leaders and leaders would bring about socialism: "The question then is: who can lead the way in this effort [socialism]? Here comes a new idea of the Talented Tenth. The concept of a group leadership,

[36] Joy James has pointed to the idea of the "Guiding Hundredth" as evidence for the "slow whittling away of [Du Bois's] elitism. There is good reason to believe that James overstates this point, given the numerous examples of his enduring elitism. Relatedly, there is no necessary contradiction between elitism and left radicalism, so it would be more accurate, I would argue, to say that Du Bois struggled to reconcile his radicalism and his elitism, especially in the latter part of his career. Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (Routledge, 1997).

not simply educated and self-sacrificing but with clear vision of world conditions and dangers and conducting an integrated group of American Negroes. Educated and abreast with the world…We have the ability. The only question is, have we the will?"[37] Socialism, for Du Bois, would create the foundation for mass education and democratic participation, which would, in turn, create a more perfect world: "Out of the masses of men would flood ability and genius if we freed men by plan and not chance."

While he envisioned a future led by the masses, he maintained that before the masses could lead, college-educated leaders first needed to institute socialism. In practice, this meant that Du Bois still saw a select group of leaders as the necessary agents of political change, much like in his earlier conception of the Talented Tenth. The key difference was that now, this leadership needed to be more knowledgeable and sympathetic to Black workers than the existing Black professional class, which he had come to see as conservative and disconnected from the struggles of ordinary Black people. He critiqued the organization for being dominated by professionals and business interests while neglecting "the poor and hungry or even... the ordinary laborer." Du Bois proposed a dramatic expansion of leadership recruitment to counteract this conservatism, calling for the organization to increase membership from 400 to 4,000 and then 40,000 by 1960, ultimately forming an actual tenth of the Black population. By recruiting younger men, particularly those who had graduated after World War I, he believed the leadership class could become more inclusive and more responsive to the needs of Black workers. Ultimately, he maintained that "unselfish, far-seeing leadership," --namely, political will combined with expert knowledge–was what stood between Black America and economic prosperity.

[37] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address (1948)," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, The Future of the Race, New York: Knopf, 1996.

Du Bois's conception of the role of political leadership in advancing socialism has important similarities and differences with Lenin's conception of the revolutionary vanguard party, a connection on which that Du Bois himself commented. Lenin's theory of the vanguard party rejected the Menshevik idea that revolutionary consciousness develops spontaneously within the working class. While the Mensheviks sought to build a broad party that would reflect the workers' gradual political development, Lenin argued that revolutionary consciousness had to be actively cultivated, requiring a disciplined vanguard party to lead the socialist revolution. The core educational theory at the heart of the Talented Tenth idea distinguishes Du Bois's approach to the problem of political organization from both of these. In the second novel in his *Black Flame* Trilogy*,* Du Bois refers to and reflects back on his intentions behind the Talented Tenth, situating the idea within the particular political and intellectual context of the NAACP's founding. After relating the different personalities and political inclinations of the NAACP's founding board members. Du Bois narrates "In this intermixture of opinion it was difficult to form a labor program, especially with Negro leaders who knew nothing of Karl Marx and his philosophy. The nearest approach to unconscious Marxism was the Negro demand for the production of social leadership by the education of a 'Talented Tenth;' but these leaders were not envisaged as workers but as thinkers, with no dictatorship over the mass beyond appeal to reason and right among an ignorant and inexperienced folk."[38] Like Lenin, Du Bois saw the need for organization and discipline in order to gain political leverage. Thus, he proposed the idea of the Talented Tenth to address the need for coordinated effort and vision among the freedpeople. But unlike Lenin, Du Bois believed that ideas and the bonds of shared heritage and experience—even absent a centralized organization like a political party—would serve as a sufficiently powerful

[38] W. E. B. Du Bois*, The Black Flame, A Trilogy: Book Two: Mansart Builds a School,* (Mainstream Publishers, 1959), 71.

binding force to instill in Black Americans a unified political vision and bring them into coordinated political activity.

However, Du Bois's theory of leadership suffered from a latent class character. Those college-educated, professional Blacks who composed the Talented Tenth were social elites. After all, intellectuals possess intellectual capital, which translates to social power.[39] Additionally, intellectuals owe their power to institutions embedded within and beholden to the power relations and social structures of the dominant society. By extension, Black intellectuals have historically served a double and even contradictory function as managers of the masses on the one hand and leaders and philosophers of Black freedom on the other.[40] Overall, Du Bois was perhaps too optimistic about what the Talented Tenth would be able to collectively accomplish. That optimism was a function of inadequately understanding how capital-labor relations shaped both the Talented Tenth's leadership and the endeavor of education itself.

Du Bois's evolving theory of leadership reflected his ongoing attempt to resolve the educational paradox: while education alleviated economic inequality for some, it simultaneously intensified class inequality and enabled leadership by a small elite. His shift from the Talented Tenth to the Guiding Hundredth reveals his efforts to align his vision of leadership with a broader socialist framework. Even this revision retained the elitist character of the Talented Tenth. More importantly, the problem of how to use education for the purposes of economic justice—whether it was a means of producing political leadership or an effect of broader economic transformation—remained unresolved in Du Bois's thought. The question of the relationship between education and economic justice appears again in a commencement address

[39] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," trans. Richard Nice, chapter 9 in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Greenwood Press, 1986).
[40] This formulation of intellectuals' contradictory role comes from James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, 6, 16-18. I will return to this idea in the subsequent chapter.

to the graduates of Howard University in 1930. In this speech, Du Bois asks an altogether different question that leads him away from the dilemmas of elite leadership: What is the role of education in a world shaped by economic inequality?

The Socialist Imagination of "Education and Work"

By 1930, Du Bois's faith in leadership-driven uplift had eroded. Faced with the failures of both Washington's vocationalism and his own Talented Tenth approach, he turned to a critique of capitalism itself. In his 1930 speech "Education and Work," Du Bois reexamined Black education through the lens of class struggle, asking not how education could produce Black leaders but how or if education could challenge the capitalist organization of labor. Rather than restating the liberal ideals he had championed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois used this speech to argue that Black education had failed not just because of racial barriers but because it was embedded in a capitalist system that relied on a division of manual and intellectual labor.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois had defended the liberal arts as essential to developing leadership and cultivating the "soul" of Black America. Whereas Washington was willing to deprive Blacks of the opportunity to read and think widely and deeply and to nurture the development of their souls in exchange for work and survival, Du Bois was unwilling to subject the intellectual and spiritual life of Black people to the expediency required to maintain favorable political alliances. At the same time, the intransigence of racial prejudice in American culture, the intensity of white reaction, and the destruction wrought by the Great Depression all contributed to Du Bois's eventual reconsideration of the promises and possibilities of the liberal arts.

In an infrequently discussed speech to the 1930 graduates of Howard University, "Education and Work," Du Bois provides a retrospective account and critique of the industrial versus liberal arts education debate that ripped and roared its way through Black America at the turn of the twentieth century. This speech assesses the failures of both Washington's and his own educational programs. It identifies how four decades of Black education had failed to deliver on the promise of Black freedom. Most importantly, "Education and Work" contains a class critique of Black education.

By 1930, Du Bois had come to see the debate between industrial and liberal arts education as having failed to overcome the equality paradox. While education can create class mobility for some individuals, it can also entrench class stratification**.** When he had first opposed Booker T. Washington's vision of industrial education in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he had done so on the grounds that Washington's model reduced education to mere labor training, depriving Black Americans of the opportunity to cultivate their intellectual and spiritual life. Washington, he had argued, was too willing to forego intellectual and spiritual thriving if it meant economic survival. But industrial education did not significantly improve Black economic outcomes; leaving the South was the surest path to economic survival, not "casting one's buckets down." Against Washington, Du Bois had championed the liberal arts as a means of training Black leaders, men of culture and vision who could guide the race politically, morally, and intellectually. But neither had Du Bois's plan played out as he predicted. College education had not resulted in the kind of leadership he imagined it would, nor had it created the kind of social cooperation he thought it might.

At the heart of *The Souls of Black Folk* was a belief in liberal democracy. Du Bois framed Black inclusion into American democracy as a question of rights and duties, a perspective that

shaped his early critique of Washington. Whereas Washington placed the burden of racial uplift solely on the shoulders of Black people, Du Bois insisted that the problem of racial inequality was a shared burden of the nation. He argued: "While it is a great truth to say that the Negro must strive mightily to help himself, it is equally true that unless his striving be not simply seconded, but rather aroused and encouraged, by the initiative of the richer and wiser environing group, he cannot hope for great success."[41] This passage reveals two key aspects of Du Bois's early thought. First, his emphasis on mutual obligation reflects his belief that a more just society could be achieved through an inclusive, reformed democracy. Second, he believed that white Americans would contribute to making American democracy more inclusive and more just. While Du Bois shared Washington's pragmatism in considering the existing political and economic power of whites, he rejected the idea that white power was eternal or unchangeable. Unlike Washington, who accepted white dominance as part of the objective conditions to adapt to, Du Bois wrote: "The South is not 'solid'; it is a land in the ferment of social change, wherein forces of all kinds are fighting for supremacy." [42]

Despite his opposition to Washington, Du Bois's vision in *Souls* remained limited by his cultural elitism and his conception of American citizenship. His belief that Black people needed to develop a "higher culture" in order to claim their place in democracy mirrored broader assimilationist ideals, which framed Black political legitimacy in terms of adherence to modern norms. As Robert Gooding-Williams argues, Du Bois's appeal to the Declaration of Independence as the foundation for Black citizenship reinforced, rather than challenged, existing ascriptive hierarchies. Gooding-Williams writes: "Du Bois describes the Black folk-spirit in terms that simply echo the American political ideals that has to be satisfied to assimilate the

[41] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 44.
[42] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 44.

behavior and attitudes of the Black masses to modern norms."[43] By defining Black freedom in terms of inclusion within American economic and political institutions, Du Bois's early vision, like Washington's, assumed that racial progress would unfold within capitalism rather than in opposition to it. He viewed Black exclusion as a failure of democracy, not as a feature of capitalism.

By the time of "Education and Work," Du Bois had begun to rethink the assumptions behind his own model and Washington's. Neither industrial education nor the liberal arts, he observed, had secured economic justice for Black Americans. One of his main tasks in the speech is to trace the roots of respective failures of industrial and liberal arts education. First, he argued that Black liberal arts colleges had failed to educate students to think critically about capitalism, leaving graduates unprepared to lead a movement for economic justice in a capitalist society. He pointed out that Black colleges instilled in their students a desire for wealth and upward mobility but failed to provide them with any critical framework for understanding how wealth was produced, who controlled it, and why it remained out of reach for the majority of Black Americans. He wrote: "Acquiring as we do in college no guidance to a broad economic comprehension and a sure industrial foundation, and simultaneously a tendency to live beyond our means, and spend for show, we are graduating young men and women with an intense and overwhelming appetite for wealth and no reasonable way of gratifying it, no philosophy for counteracting it."[44] The failure of Black colleges, Du Bois contends, was not that they did not prepare graduates for economic opportunities but that they propagated the myth of class mobility. By producing a class of professionals who did not understand how capitalism

[43] Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 154.
[44] Du Bois, "Education and Work."

reproduces inequality, these institutions ultimately failed to enact their political role in cohering a leadership class, at least as Du Bois understood it.

At the same time, Du Bois was equally critical of industrial education, arguing that it, too, had failed to overcome the educational paradox**.** While industrial schools had been designed to equip Black students with practical skills for economic survival, they had done so in a way that was harmfully shaped by ruling class ideology. By encouraging its students to avoid the labor movement and serve the boss, industrial schools trained Black workers to accept their place within the racialized division of labor. As Du Bois put it: "Both in its general program and in its classroom, [industrial education] neglected almost entirely the modern labor movement. It had little or nothing to teach about the rise of trade unions, their present condition, and their future development. It had no conception of any future democracy in industry." While *The Souls of Black Folk* had proposed that education could be a means of providing Black leaders in the fight for equality, Du Bois also considered how education could achieve just the opposite. Black schools, he feared, had brought forth professional misleaders who were happy to climb the social ladder or, worse, participate in beating Black workers into submission for the sake of white profits.

Recognizing that leadership would not organically lead to a just economic distribution as he had predicted earlier in his career, he turned his attention to the relations of production and its relationship to education. His alternative idea builds on a critical insight: that the distinction between intellectual and manual labor had fundamentally shaped Black schooling in ways that limited its potential as a tool for economic advancement. At both Black colleges and industrial schools, students were being filtered into work in ways that reinforced this division rather than challenging it. Colleges trained students for professional roles detached from the laboring

masses, while industrial schools conditioned Black workers for subordination within a racialized division of labor.

Du Bois saw this dynamic at play in Black education. As he put it, industrial schools were designed to *"*set their face toward the employer and the capitalist," while liberal arts colleges produced professionals who "help the world know what it ought to want done." In hindsight, both his and Washington's educational programs were flawed because they both sought to use education to enable Blacks to fit into American society. By extension, both industrial and liberal arts education reinforced troubling aspects of America. He argued that the divide between industrial and liberal arts education was artificial, and that education should instead prepare students to take an "intelligent part in the production of goods" and contribute to the "democratic distribution of income" in ways that would allow Black Americans to build independent economic power. Rather than seeing schooling as a means of achieving inclusion in an already existing economic order, Du Bois wondered what it would look like if schools dictated work rather than the other way around. Du Bois similarly wondered about the possibility of using Black-controlled education to challenge the capitalist organization of labor. As he argued, education should not just train individuals to adapt to existing economic conditions but should enable them to shape and redefine the conditions under which they worked. His vision of education as a means of reshaping labor relations resonates with Dewey's insistence that separating vocational learning from the broader curriculum was intellectually damaging and that advancing the democratic aims of education necessitated a comprehensive, integrated approach to teaching and learning.[45] Du Bois's implication that overcoming the intellectual-manual

[45] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Macmillan, 1916), 358-374.

division of labor could be accomplished by reorganizing higher education was more useful for imagining an alternative to capitalist education than it was a concrete plan for bringing that alternative about, however.

Ultimately, Du Bois did not fully resolve the equality paradox of capitalist schooling. While he had identified the manual-intellectual division of labor as an obstacle to turning education into an engine of economic justice, his proposal of combining the industrial schools and the colleges sidestepped the question of the system of power that organized labor—and by extension, schooling--that way in the first place. Nevertheless, his reflections in "Education and Work" reveal a crucial shift in his thinking, away from education as leadership training and toward a materialist critique of capitalist schooling. The recognition that schooling shaped how Black people were made to work in the world gestured towards an idea that he would continue developing, especially during the Cold War: that Black schooling could only serve as a path to equality if it engaged in working-class struggle. The subsequent chapters trace and develop this theme across Du Bois's intellectual and political output in the 1950s.

Conclusion

While schooling has been positioned as a primary vehicle for economic mobility, it has simultaneously functioned as a mechanism for consolidating existing status hierarchies. The historical debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois over Black education in the post-Reconstruction era reveals how attempts to reconcile these competing functions of schooling have consistently encountered structural limits. Washington's industrial schooling sought to secure Black economic stability within the racialized division of labor in the South, while Du Bois envisioned an elite leadership class that would advocate for ordinary Black people. Ultimately, both models came up against the same problem: if schooling serves to

reproduce a racialized class hierarchy, how could it also function as a mechanism for economic justice?

This dilemma remains central to contemporary debates over whether and how equal educational opportunities can alleviate economic inequality. Since the mid-20th century, college education has become available to many more Americans. Current empirical research shows that having a college degree significantly improves a person's ability to secure a better-paying jobs.[46] At the same time, Josipa Roksa and Richard Arum have found evidence of the continuing relevance of "the education trap." The expansion of higher education in the United States was accomplished through establishing institutional tiers, including four-year colleges, community colleges, and vocational schools. Even as the United States higher education system has expanded, individuals from privileged class backgrounds continue to enjoy systematic advantages within this tiered system.[47] Moreover, as college degrees have become increasingly important for securing employment, the economic and social consequences of not having a degree have become more pronounced.[48]

The persistent reproduction and retrenchment of socioeconomic stratification through schooling illuminate the challenges of relying on expanded educational access to bring about a more equal society. Danielle Allen offers an alternative perspective on how education can advance equality. According to Allen: "The preparation of citizens through education for civil and political engagement supports the pursuit of political equality, but political equality, in turn, may well engender more egalitarian approaches to the economy. An education that prepares

[46] See for example Michael Hout, "Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 379–400.
[47] Josipa Roksa, Eric Grodsky, Richard Arum, and Adam Gamoran, "United States: Changes in Higher Education and Social Stratification," in *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*, ed. Yossi Shavit, Richard Arum, and Adam Gamoran (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 165–192.
[48] Pew Research Center, *The Rising Cost of Not Going to College* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2014).

students for civic and political engagement brings into play the prospect of political contestation around issues of economic fairness."[49] When we see schools as *tools* for economic advancement, she contends, we mistake what education is really for: human flourishing at the social and individual levels. Schools that center human flourishing, she proposes, may make way for struggles against equality in surprising ways. Allen's argument makes an important intervention by refusing to reduce education to an economic function. At the same time, her account implies, perhaps too optimistically, that schooling can be reoriented toward justice without addressing its role in *structuring* economic inequality. As Du Bois recognized, the issue is not only that colleges were too focused on economic utility but that colleges, as they operate within American capitalism, persistently recreate the conditions that thwart relations among equals. His insistence that addressing this problem demands conceptualizing schooling and work together still resonates. In the subsequent decades of his life, he would continue to pursue this line of thought, developing a conception of education that placed work at the center of democratic politics.

[49] Allen, *Education and Equality*, 32.

Chapter 2 Class Struggle in Du Bois's *Black Flame* Trilogy

In the aftermath of the 1906 Atlanta Riot, the main character of Du Bois's *The Ordeal of Mansart*, the first novel in his *Black Flame* trilogy, finds himself confronting a profound dilemma. Having risen to the position of Superintendent of Atlanta Colored Schools, the chronic underfunding and neglect of Atlanta's Black schools weighed heavily on Manuel Mansart's mind. But "Worst of all, Mansart could not see what he could do about it. Patience, pulling strings, using white influence; all this might accomplish something. But what was needed was a stirring up of the parents; exposition of the facts, and strong demands…any attempt at such a movement might cost him his job," and by extension, the position that empowered him to be an advocate for his community. "And that was the trouble with the South...He must crawl and beg."[1] This passage gives narrative voice to a historically-specific dilemma of elite race leadership: the very force that could advance Mansart's political goals—popular resistance—is also what would strip him of his access to ruling class whites. Moreover, to maintain access to influence, he must ingratiate himself to ruling-class whites and distance himself from the collective power that could challenge that rule.

Mansart's ordeal dramatizes how holding a position of influence shapes and constrains relations between leaders and the wider community. After attending college at Atlanta University, Mansart takes up the call of community uplift, but the status he gains along shapes his relationships with his family and his community in complicated ways. Having to "crawl and

[1] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart,* 85.

beg" alienates him from his son, who sees him as an "Uncle Tom." Meanwhile, his intimate knowledge of the motivations and machinations of the ruling class elites sometimes puts him in an uneasy relation with parents and teachers, whose discontent he is, at times, tempted to temper and manage. This chapter discusses Du Bois's portrayal of this dilemma in the *Black Flame*, situating it within Du Bois's view that schools are shaped through dynamics of class rule and struggle.

Du Bois's narration of Mansart's ordeal reflects a broader historical development in Black politics at the turn of the 20th century. As the rise and consolidation of white supremacist rule severely restricted political possibilities, Black elites emerged as intermediaries who could negotiate incremental gains within oppressive conditions. This historical situation produced a specific form of Black politics in which authority was consolidated within a small class of Black elites mediating between marginalized Black constituencies and ruling-class whites.[2] According to Adolph Reed, the predominance of elite-brokerage politics carried significant democratic costs. By treating Black communities as a unified racial constituency with singular interests, brokerage politics flattened internal differences and silenced democratic contestation, effectively depoliticizing fundamental disagreements over political priorities and strategies. Moreover, Reed highlights the underlying class dynamics obscured by elite-driven racial representation: brokerage systematically privileged the interests of the Black petite bourgeoisie, who framed their particular class concerns as universal racial interests. Reed thus concludes, "the dominant politics of generic racial advancement—though it has won genuinely popular victories and has had many beneficial consequences, especially during the anti-segregation period—has always

[2] A compelling account of this history alongside a critical examination of its political implications can be found in Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (Columbia University Press, 2006). See also Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

rested on a non-participatory, undemocratic foundation of elite custodianship and brokerage."[3]

Reed's account of the undemocratic character of elite-brokerage politics points to a serious problem, but his critique unwittingly erases the fugitive political practices that coexisted alongside elite-brokerage. This chapter examines the novel's portrayal of elite-brokerage, highlighting how it was shaped by broader forces of class struggle from both above *and below*. As I discussed earlier, Du Bois saw Black schools as sites of class struggle and class rule. This perspective is given emotional texture and historical detail across the three novels as major and minor characters take various actions in order to resist and challenge white ruling-class domination over Black colleges and Southern society. The novel's portrayal of class relations and conflict call to mind Losurdo's conception of class struggle, which includes both the emancipatory struggles of oppressed groups and attempts by ruling-class fractions to stifle those emancipatory struggles. As Losurdo points out, class struggle need not be revolutionary; rather, class struggle is a pervasive feature of society, a key dynamic through which capitalism reproduces itself.

I begin this chapter by situating my analysis of *Black Flame* in the context of its reception at the time of its publication as well as within contemporary scholarship on Du Bois. After establishing that context, I discuss the trilogy along two key themes: the political limits of elite leadership and the possibilities of collective and collaborative practices of class struggle in schools. Taken together, I show how *Black Flame* offers a complex picture of Du Bois's evolving educational politics. More specifically, the novels reveal Du Bois's critical reflections

[3] Adolph Reed Jr., "The Study of Black Politics and the Practice of Black Politics: Their Historical Relation and Evolution," in *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics*, ed. Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek E. Masoud (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106–138.

on the limits of elite-driven politics and further highlight his understanding that schools are shaped through dynamics of class struggle.

The Reception of *Black Flame*

Of Du Bois's major published works, *Black Flame* has been paid the least scholarly attention."[4] Many have attempted to rescue the acclaimed author of *Souls of Black Folk* from himself by insulating his legacy from the views he espoused and the writing he produced in the last two decades of his life, which is at least one reason why the *Black Flame* trilogy has been virtually ignored. Historians of political thought should take an interest in the uneven reception of Du Bois's writing and consider how they have unwittingly brought that uneven reception into the present day.[5] Scholars who have called for a serious study of Du Bois's radicalism have argued for the need to engage in analysis and debate of the works written at the end of Du Bois's life. However, Du Bois's radicalism has been primarily understood through his masterwork on

[4] Arnold Rampersad's biography is unique in that he included a chapter on *Black Flame*, constituting a notable exception. Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). There are two unpublished manuscripts which are also significant and understudied. The first is *The Black Man and The Wounded Man* written about the experiences of Black soldiers who fought in World War 1. The second is *Russia and America*, which remained unpublished because Du Bois's publisher thought it was too sympathetic to the USSR. Williams, Chad L. *The Wounded World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the First World War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023) has offered illuminating scholarly consideration of the first. See Mullen, Bill V. *Un-American: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Century of World Revolution* (Temple University Press, 2015) for discussion of the second.

[5] Adolph Reed locates Du Bois's selective reception within the larger history of the study of Black politics, arguing that his articulation of the political challenges of Black Americans in *Souls* is representative of a dominant political perspective among black political elites both then and now: "The political perspective that Du Bois helped to articulate…was not the expression of a generic racial voice. He elaborated a perspective that was especially congenial to, and reflected the sensibility of, a particular stratum of the black American population…The distinctive political accomplishment of *Souls* was to help galvanize members of this stratus, to fortify them with a rhetoric that both define political goals and strategies for themselves and the race as a whole…the political perspective that consolidated among black political elites during the first two decades of the twentieth century has largely shaped what has been recognized as black political discourse and practice–including the academic study of black politics–ever since." Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Color Line Then and Now: The Souls of Black Folk and the Changing Context of Black American Politics." In *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of Black American Thought*, edited by Adolph Reed Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren, 151-173 (Paradigm Publishers, 2010), 253-254.

the Reconstruction era, even though this was published in 1935, or just shy of 30 years before the end of his life.[6]

Compared to the beautiful and haunting prose of *Souls*, the penetrating voice of *Dusk of Dawn,* or the provocative mobilization of a Marxist lexicon in *Black Reconstruction,* the *Black Flame* trilogy's literary style does not lend itself to popular or scholarly audiences. Indeed, the storyline is choppy and convoluted; there are too many characters, and many of them are underdeveloped. Long sections sometimes read more like a history textbook than a novel. Still, I contend that the three books are worthy of sustained scholarly attention and can help us better understand not only Du Bois's lifelong move toward the left, but more specifically, how his ideas about the politics of education changed alongside his developing critique of capitalism and deepening commitment to socialism.

The Cold War environment affected Du Bois's ability to publish his writings in the 1950s. Although historical fiction was not a popular genre at the time, he ultimately found a publisher in Herbert Aptheker's *Masses and Mainstream*, a Communist press with a relatively narrow circulation.[7] As an active participant in numerous peace advocacy organizations and eventually being indicted in the wake of Cold War anticommunism, it is unsurprising that *Black Flame* struggled to see the light of day and did not receive a warm reception when it finally came

[6] Between the end of World War II and his death, Du Bois published three books besides the *Black Flame* novels. They include: *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History*, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd*, and *Africa in Battle Against Colonialism, Racialism, Imperialism*. He was also working on a third autobiography, which was edited and posthumously published: *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*.

[7] For an analysis of how the political and literary context of the 1950s contributed to an underwhelming reception of the *Black Flame* novels, see Mark Sanders, "Afterword." In *Worlds of Color*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (Oxford University Press, 2007), 311-318.

off the presses. Furthermore, Cold War repression shaped perceptions, influenced what was circulated, and swayed public tastes toward different literary and artistic forms.[8]

Scholars who have worked to rescue Du Bois's radicalism from the long shadow of Cold War intellectual history have themselves overlooked *Black Flame* as a significant text in Du Bois's *oeuvre*. Du Bois's other late works, including *The Autobiography, In Battle for Peace*, and *The World and Africa*, have received lively scholarly engagement and debate. It is understandable that the novels might not be immediately recognized as important for understanding Du Bois's radicalism. In contrast to *Black Reconstruction*, for example, which positions enslaved Blacks as the primary agents of economic and political transformation, *Black Flame* features virtually no main characters who are both Black and working class.[9] However, I argue that these novels are a crucial part of understanding Du Bois's socialist imagination.

Black Flame is important for understanding Du Bois's socialist imagination because it contains an implicit critique of a political program anchored by the relationship between powerful, rich whites and the Talented Tenth. *Black Flame* shows that even at the end of his life, Du Bois continued to evaluate the possibility of educated Black race leaders serving as the vanguard of Black politics. The main character, Manuel Mansart, struggles throughout the novels to understand the historical events shaping his world and to maneuver politically within the

[8] Sanders explains that concerning historical fiction in particular, the genre was primarily written and marketed as escapist literature, such as *Gone with the Wind*. Du Bois's historical precision and detail was out of sync with the purposes of historical fiction's popular consumption. "Afterword," to *Worlds of Color*.

[9] One exception to this is the character of Bruce Mansart, the second eldest son of the protagonist, Mansart. After becoming embroiled in a dangerous scuffle with a white football player, Bruce flees Atlanta, receives training as an electrician, and finds some success due to his exceptional skill. Unfortunately, the terrain of skilled electrical labor is exceedingly treacherous for a young black man, and he is unable to stay in one place for too long. Bruce's story unravels into a tragedy of criminality and insanity, and he ultimately dies at the hands of a lynch mob. When Black workers do appear they mostly appear as generic types rather than humanized characters. Joy James has made a similar observation about Du Bois's fictional portrayal of nonelite Black women, who she notes "appear largely without specifics or names. Du Bois frequently withheld the attribute of political agency from those who had earned a place in political history." Joy James, "Profeminism and Gender Elites: W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Susan Kay Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 88.

constricted space of a Black school administrator in the Jim Crow South. The three novels comprising *Black Flame* provide a historically specific assessment of the Black leadership class with whom Du Bois identified and in whom he invested his political hopes. Whereas *Black Reconstruction* laments a progressive and democratic politics that never fully came into being, *Black Flame* assesses the political program Du Bois himself laid out during his lifetime, the reasons for what he saw as its failure, and gestures towards its alternatives. In this way, the historical stories that the novels bring into focus also constitute an attempt to illuminate and critique his present moment through the creation of a usable past.[10]

Black Flame paints a textured picture that illuminates the complexity of Du Bois's socialism. The catalog of historical episodes within *Black Flame* works to construct a rich account of American history, told from the vantage point of "minor" Southern Blacks. Starting where *Black Reconstruction* ends, *Black Flame* serves as a sequel to *Black Reconstruction* in that he picks up the theme of how race operates as a technology of labor exploitation but extends this analysis to connect the exploitation of Black workers in the American South with those in the Global South.[11] Additionally, the three novels are a retrospective of Du Bois's entire career.[12] Moreover, the novels portray how educated Black leaders navigated a racialized capitalist society, a story told through numerous characters that demonstrates the way that the ubiquitous threats to survival, the desire for prosperity, and the commitment to dignity for all shaped Black perspectives about capitalism as well as the possibility as well as the necessity of resisting it.

[10] Lawrie Balfour describes the contours of Du Bois's historical approach as an effort to "craft a usable past" in *Democracy's Reconstruction*, 1-22.
[11] Christa Buschendorf, "'Race' as a Function of Capitalism and Imperialism: W. E. B. Du Bois's Appropriation of Marxian Ideas in *The Black Flame*," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 62, no. 4 (2017): 567–584.
[12] Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, "The Black Flame Revisited: Recursion and Return in the Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's Trilogy," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 157–170.

The Limits of Leadership

Although Du Bois's radicalism has been widely acknowledged, scholars have likewise identified a persistent elitist character to Du Bois's politics. Robert Gooding-Williams has offered a valuable framework for understanding the connections between Du Bois's elitism and his understanding of the political importance of Black education. Gooding-Williams describes Du Bois's conception of Black politics as a form of "group rule."[13] The aristocratic character of his politics is especially significant for a study of Du Bois's educational thought as he "conceptualizes academy leadership as a form of rule–that is, as leadership that enjoins rules for action and attitude-formation for the Negro people to obey and implement."[14] Based on Gooding-Williams' illuminating analysis, higher education has such a prominent place in Du Bois's political vision for two interrelated reasons: (1) if Blacks in leadership positions were not properly educated, they could be manipulated by demagogues, leaving the masses vulnerable to manipulation and (2) education was necessary to equip Black leaders with the knowledge needed to articulate the best policies for Black people. For Gooding-Williams, Du Bois's vision of higher education reflects this aristocratic approach, positioning education as a tool for shaping the attitudes and actions of the masses.

Being attentive to the development of Du Bois's ideas in the 1950s highlights a somewhat different formulation of the link between education, leadership, and socialism, however. In the third novel of the trilogy, *World of Color*, Du Bois describes "the dream of Karl Marx" in this way: that "the mass of people would be so well educated and trained, so

[13] It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to fully unpack Gooding-Williams' assertion that Du Bois's view of politics is aristocratic. In short, Gooding-Williams contrasts Du Bois's concept of politics as "group leadership," rooted in a Weberian conception of politics as rule with Hannah Arendt's vision of politics as collective action and deliberation among equals in the public sphere. See the introduction to *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-18.
[14] Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 24.

experienced and so schooled in new folk ways, that they would not need a state."[15] Later in life, Du Bois imagined socialism as a society where power was shared among all people. Arriving at this end, however, entailed the education of a few who would make this world possible. Nevertheless, as Gooding-Williams notes, Du Bois's conception of politics as a form of ruling leadership "conceptually restricts the horizon of possibilities available to African American politics."[16]

It is precisely this restricted horizon, I will show in the following sections, that *Black Flame* critically exposes. *Black Flame* speaks to Du Bois's own political and intellectual questioning of the compatibility of elitism and socialism, finding significant limits in elitism while also gesturing towards the possibility and power of practices of resistance enacted by ordinary people. The novels offer a critical reflection Du Bois's earlier ideas about the relationship between schooling and leadership that reflect his ongoing attempt to reconcile the Talented Tenth idea with his evolving vision of socialism.[17] The story shows that the political and strategic limits of elite brokerage cannot be overcome by well-trained leaders. Instead, the narrative arc of the trilogy implies that the failures and limitations of both accommodation and uplift politics are rooted in the class character of the political approach common to both.

Ultimately, *Black Flame* emphasizes the need to move beyond elite-brokerage politics and toward a practice of class struggle from below. In drawing out the subversive elements and dynamics of segregated schools, Du Bois gestures towards a broader political horizon than the one delimited by a politics of group rule by the talented tenth, highlighting the ways in which

[15] Du Bois, *Worlds of Color,* 34.
[16] Gooding-Williams. *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 28.
[17] Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, "The Black Flame Revisited: Recursion and Return in the Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's Trilogy," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 157–170.

Black colleges could be what bell hooks referred to as spaces of "radical possibility" rather than being spaces of deprivation.[18]

Reading the *Black Flame* Trilogy

Readers familiar with Du Bois might be surprised to find out that across the hundreds of pages of *Black Flame's* three novels, Du Bois does not concern himself very much with "the training of men."[19] As I have been discussing, Du Bois infamously called for a Talented Tenth of Black Americans to receive college training so that they could learn the knowledge, skills, and comportments of group leadership. *Black Flame* shifts its focus away from this programmatic vision of leadership training, centering instead on the political and economic forces that shaped Black colleges in the early 20th century—and the administrative, teaching, and learning practices that developed in response. Through the perspective of Manuel Mansart, a Black college president in Georgia, Du Bois examines how Black institutions of higher education were enmeshed in white supremacist governance and the reproduction of white ruling class domination. For the Du Bois of *Black Flame*, the political purpose of Black education is less about leadership training and the creation of a vanguard for the Black freedom struggle and more

[18] This concept is drawn from bell hooks bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 15–23. For hooks, the margin is not merely "a site of deprivation" but rather the opposite. The margin "is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse…I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose - to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre - but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds," (20).

[19] This expression is a reference to a phrase commonly used by Du Bois throughout his writings on education and the talented tenth. The chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* that addresses his differences with Booker T. Washington is called "On the Training of Black Men." Before being published as a chapter in *Souls*, Du Bois published a similar essay with the title for *The Atlantic.* W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Training of Men," *The Atlantic Monthly* 92, no. 551 (September 1903).

about shining a light on the collaborative and collective practices that challenge and defy white ruling-class control.

Du Bois's *Black Flame* trilogy–a coming-of-age story of a Black man born at the end of Reconstruction who navigates the Jim Crow South as a student, a teacher, and a college president–approaches the theme of elite leadership through a telling of the history of the race and class struggles that brought about Black higher education in the South. Throughout the novels, Du Bois provides a class analysis of Black college education and dramatizes the competing interests of the characters based on their race and class positions. Despite having antagonistic class interests, the characters in the novels converge around Black colleges, each pursuing their own ends through them. Du Bois's focus on the racial and class dynamics shaping the endeavor to institutionalize Black colleges highlights how they functioned as sites of racialized class struggle.

Distinct from the version of Du Bois, who saw educated leaders as the salvation of the race and schools as sites for leadership training, *Black Flame* focuses on the implications of Black educational institutions' ensnarement within the forces of white supremacy and capitalism. The story of Mansart's educational leadership unfolds after the fall of Reconstruction. It runs through the first half of the 20th century, a period of political and economic transformation in the South. The "New South" economy came into being through investments by Northern capitalists who forged business partnerships with the new Southern bourgeoisie that sought to fill the seat of power formerly occupied by the plantation-owning class.[20] The growth of this new Southern economy was built on a racialized division of labor and a culture of white supremacy and was

[20] The term "New South" was originated by journalist and editor of the prominent *Atlanta Constitution*, Henry W. Grady used it to describe a vision for a post-Reconstruction South marked by economic modernization, industrial development, and reduced reliance on slavery-era agriculture.

fortified by the legalization of Black disenfranchisement.[21] Du Bois portrays Black education as significant within this political and economic order, [22] highlighting how white capitalists supported Black colleges for two key reasons: (1) to stifle cross-racial worker solidarity by controlling job training and (2) to attempt to avoid and contain social unrest.

However, simultaneously pursuing these two ends–of keeping the working class divided and of avoiding maintaining social stability–was not always easy or even possible to advance simultaneously. While financial support of Black colleges may have appeased Black southerners in the face of rolling back their civil rights and silencing of their political voices, Black education was felt by some white Southerners as an affront to the white supremacist sensibilities that dominated the South, as a challenge to what Du Bois termed "the public and psychological wages" of whiteness.[23] As a result, financial support for public education took on a racial character, where white schools received the dominant share of available funds such that white politicians could maintain support from their white-majority electorates.[24] Moreover, access to technical education facilitated Black access to skilled jobs, which incited the ire of white organized labor and led to strikes by white unions against employers who hired Black skilled labor.[25] *Black Flame* underscores how Black colleges were enmeshed in these racialized labor struggles. As Du Bois reveals, controlling significant financial resources enabled ruling-class

[21] C. Vann Woodward, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Belknap Press, 2003); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Joe William Trotter Jr., *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* (University of California Press, 2019); William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861–1915* (State University Press, 1991); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986).
[22] Contemporary historical scholarship on the development of education in the South supports this view. See for example James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*; and William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954* (Teachers College Press, 2001).
[23] The term "public and psychological wage" of whiteness comes from Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction.*
[24] This dynamic is described in detail by Anderson, *Black Education in the South,* 148-161.
[25] For example, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen struck the Georgia Railroad in 1909 to protest the hiring of Black locomotive operators. The strike is referenced in *Mansart Builds a School*.

whites to direct and manipulate educational institutions in ways that reproduced and reinforced their power.

The Limits and Possibilities of School Leadership

Based on the generative framing offered by August Meier in his influential *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* historians of Black American political thought have interpreted postbellum Black politics through the lens of the accommodation and protest dichotomy. While this analytic has been key for illuminating the stakes of taking different strategic directions among Black political leaders, the categories have also had their limitations for diagnosing the broader political and economic situation that gave birth to Jim Crow-era politics. For Brian Kelly, "The outworn practice of juxtaposing protest and accommodation in an attempt to measure the tactical efficacy of each rests on the premise that one or the other might have delivered better results for the race as a whole. But this method ignores the shared class outlook embedded in the strategy espoused by both camps."[26]

Black Flame provides a historical and critical view of the class foundations of Black politics in the South such that the sharp distinction between accommodation and protest that Du Bois draws in other works mostly disappears. As a work of history, *Black Flame* provides a perspective on how Black politics changed from Reconstruction to the end of legalized segregation. This history suggests that the growing centrality of education in Black politics was a function of the defeat of class-based struggles. Between the first and second novels, Du Bois exposes the narrowing of political debate and deliberation among Black political leaders and the disappearing horizon of a politics based on interracial class solidarity. In the first novel, which

[26] Kelley, "Sentinels of New South Industry"

narrates the fall of the Reconstruction governments and the struggle to consolidate class power in the southern states, Du Bois takes great pains to represent the variety of political disagreement that occur among the mostly Republican-aligned Black leaders in the South and the significance of the Populist Party at the end of the 19th century. Taking us from union meetings to picket lines to clandestine conferences, Du Bois portrays Black political leaders in the late 1870s taking seriously the question of how to leverage Black political organization to challenge and overcome existing power dynamics.

He sets the stage of Mansart's political world, which occupies the second two novels, by showing how it was birthed by the decisive defeat of first the Republicans and then the Populists. The stark contrast between Tom Mansart and Manuel Mansart's political worlds highlights the loss of class-based racial politics between the generations. Whereas Tom Mansart is the leader of a labor union who engages in strike action as a way of translating Black workers' labor power into political power, Manuel Mansart, Tom's son, has virtually no connections to organized labor or to Black workers. Lastly, Du Bois pays close attention to the rise and fall of the Populist Party challenge in the first novel. The scenes discussing Populist politics are notable in that they depict cross-racial, working-class collaboration as a force that is extremely threatening to the forces of capital that were trying to establish the New South economy and highlight the vitality of interracial working-class solidarity, which does not appear in the novels again until the 1930s with the arrival of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to the South. Mansart's rise to political leadership is something that happens against the backdrop of widespread defeat of the significant political challenges of the Southern working classes.[27]

[27] This historical account is drawn from Judith Stein's seminal "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States"

By situating Mansart's political leadership as a college president against the backdrop of the demise of class struggle politics in the South, Du Bois provides an alternative way of reading Mansart's political activity than as an exemplar of either accommodation or protest. Mansart himself is, for the most part, an accommodationist, but importantly, his taking up of accommodation appears less as an ideological position and more as a function of the demands of his position as a school leader. As Mansart navigates the world of Black schooling, first as a teacher and eventually as president of the segregated state college in Macon, Georgia, resourcing Black schools depends on the decisions of white elites. Thus, he is accommodating to the norms and behaviors of white supremacist culture as is dictated by his adjacency to people in power and is something demanded of him if he is to maintain his position, the thing which gives him any influence over what happens to Black students in the first place. Moreover, the distinction between accommodation and protest appears rather blunted as both strategies coexist side by side, with Mansart following closely the developments of the NAACP as well as other efforts happening around him that involved the use of protest to advance Black civil rights. All in all, *Black Flame* presents accommodation and protest as harmonious even if the same person cannot pursue both approaches. Significantly, both strategies rely on appeals to white elites to implement changes that Black elites have determined are in the interests of Black people and portray white workers and their representatives as the most significant impediments to Black equality and inclusion.

Du Bois explores the nature of accommodation with an eye toward its limitations. His portrayal of Mansart's leadership–a style that involves accommodation to white supremacist culture, shrewd maneuvering of fractures within the white ruling class that he negotiates with, and principled commitment to Black advancement–highlights both that individual leaders who

gain access to positions of influence materially benefited Black people and also that the power exercised by school leaders was ultimately incapable of fundamentally challenging the underlying racial and class forces that shaped the political landscape.

The second novel, *Mansart Builds a School,* details numerous ways that Mansart exercises power through his position as a college administrator. His careful efforts and skillful maneuvering enable him to appropriate significant funds for the Georgia Colored State College, to build an expansive curriculum that could maximize student success, to hire and pay exceptional teachers and administrators well, and to select members of the college's Board of Trustees. Through the effective exercise of power enabled by his position and his leadership skill, "Mansart came to be a respected official of the state of George, whose position as president of a college was recognized…the black president was listened to with courtesy."[28] Not only is Mansart recognized and respected, but Du Bois also describes him as "a real center of power."[29]

In addition to using his influence to improve his college, Du Bois portrays Mansart's power primarily through his ability to limit how white capitalists attempted to corruptly profit from Mansart's college. With the building of a new institution comes various business opportunities, such as the sale of textbooks and the construction of new buildings. In one tense scene of the second novel, *Mansart Builds a School*, Mansart uses the influence he has built up to inhibit a Georgia developer from using the school for his own profit at the expense of Black students and workers. Though he tries to buy Mansart off to accomplish it, Mansart successfully turns the Board of Trustees against the deal by using his limited political capital and tactical skills.

[28] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School,* 137.
[29] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 146.

Despite these accomplishments, Du Bois emphasizes the ultimate futility of a political strategy reliant on the influence of position holders if the end goal is socialism--as he increasingly thought it should be. While Mansart successfully leverages his position to improve conditions for Black students and faculty, he alone is not empowered to undermine the relations of power that keep both him and the community of his school subservient to Jim Crow and white ruling class domination. His principled pursuit of making a way for members of his community to pursue their highest path eventually leads to his inevitable termination, replaced by an individual who the ruling-class whites in Georgia determine would be less troublesome than Mansart. In this way, Mansart is an embodiment of the limits of elite-driven politics.

In a similar vein, Du Bois uses the metaphor of the black flame to reflect on the tensions between the politics of accommodation and aspirations for a different and better future, a socialist future. In one scene, Mansart describes the black flame as "burning without heat and destruction," capturing the contradiction between the methods and goals of accommodation. Du Bois revisits and develops this metaphor across the three novels, reflecting each time on the challenges of translating vision into reality and exploring the political and personal dimensions of the gap between hope and possibility.

At its core, the black flame represents the contradictions and sacrifices of Black politics in the Jim Crow South, encapsulating both the persistence of hope and the realities of constrained possibility. When the metaphor is introduced for the first time in *The Ordeal of Mansart*, it is tied to the tradition of accommodation. In a pivotal moment, Mansart's grandmother christens him "the Black Flame" as she carries him through the streets on the night his father, a labor leader, is murdered by the Klan. Her advice to "crawl with the snake" reflects her belief in accommodation as a survival strategy, a belief grounded in the political realities of the

postbellum South.[30] However, the circumstances that led to Manuel's christening—the murder of his father by the same white elites whom Mansart's grandmother hoped would be their salvation—foreshadow the high costs of this path.

By the third novel, *Worlds of Color*, the black flame takes on an explicitly utopian character, symbolizing a fantastic future that remains out of reach. This shift is epitomized by Jean Du Bignon, Mansart's secretary and mentor, who has a vision of the black flame calling forth a new world. In one scene, Jean describes the black flame as a towering presence that will reappear "between the pillars of the universe, looming from the highest Heaven to the lowest Hell" to bring about a new order. The image comes over her as if it were a divine prophecy, and after she describes her vision, she collapses. The unreal image, which inspires faith but also causes her to faint, serves as a representation of the burden of bridging political dreams and constrained possibilities.[31]

Jean's fantastical vision of the black flame as "looming from the highest Heaven" intertextually references a scene from *Mansart Builds a School.* In the closing pages of *Mansart Builds a School*, Du Bois underscores this tension between hope and possibility by invoking the Black spiritual "City of Heaven" in a fictional exchange between Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins. Roosevelt interprets the hymn as reflecting socialist ideals: "no poverty, homes for all, no fear of age, children in schools," but the song's actual lyrics carry a note of resignation: "No hope have I for tomorrow, I've started to make heaven my home."[32] By setting Roosevelt's optimism against the spiritual's words of despair, Du Bois highlights how hope, when unmoored

[30] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 41.
[31] Du Bois, *Worlds of Color*, 216.
[32] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School,* 365.

from material possibilities, risks lapsing into a depoliticized faith that the future will be better even without political struggle.

Through the evolving symbol of the black flame, Du Bois traces how Mansart's early optimism for effecting change becomes increasingly detached from real political conditions, ultimately revealing Du Bois's broader disappointment with elite-driven strategies for uplifting the masses. Early in the trilogy, Mansart embraces his role as the black flame, resolving to "burn right here in Atlanta" in reference to Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise."[33] Yet as Mansart's career progresses, his faith in his ability to effect change is increasingly disconnected from the realities of the political landscape. By the end of *Mansart Builds a School*, he imagines the black flame as burning "beyond the mist," representing a future resolution of contradictions that remains perpetually out of reach.[34] This dislocation of hope from the present reflects Du Bois's disappointment that elite-driven politics has failed to open up a path for the uplift of the masses, as he once thought it would.

Ultimately, *Black Flame* implicitly challenges Du Bois's earlier faith in the talented tenth idea, offering instead a sobering reflection on the limitations of elite leadership. The trilogy critiques the reliance on access to positions of influence as a political strategy, emphasizing the limitations of such an approach, especially in the absence of broader class struggle. Through Mansart's story, Du Bois highlights the inadequacies of elite-led politics. At the same time, he shines a light on the way that quotidian practices of class struggle by teachers and students persistently challenged white ruling-class domination.

Enacting Democratic Education from Below

[33] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 228.
[34] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School,* 367.

At the same time as the novels emphasize the sweeping power of ruling-class whites in the South and express disappointment over the limits of Mansart's personal influence, Du Bois does not portray Black colleges as mere tools of white supremacist and capitalist domination.[35] Instead, Mansart's college appears as a site of active political struggle through which various groups attempt to achieve different, sometimes contradictory aims even while the owners of capital exercise outsized influence. While Black colleges were in some ways economically advantageous to white capitalists and were to some extent under their political control, Du Bois highlights that Black colleges could not be reduced to their control by ruling-class whites. On the contrary, Black colleges existed as "microcosms" of an alternative society built on the principles of equality, freedom, and justice. They served as spaces for the pursuit of inquiry, protected from the racial violence that loomed over the South at the time. Narrating Mansart's reflections on his college, he muses that "the Negro college was … a microcosm of the world in which he lived" and was "as unmolested by the outer world as was possible for any group encased and dominated by that world."[36]

Du Bois resists defining Black colleges by their material inadequacies or by comparing them to white institutions. Rather than focusing on the limited funding and facilities available to these colleges, he emphasizes the relationships that flourished within them to draw a contrast with white schools and society. Mansart recalls that his college "had poor equipment–how poor Manuel never knew; but it had sincerity, it had object and high ideal; it was quite uninfluenced

[35] Many historians of education follow Du Bois in highlighting the rich political life that developed within segregated schools. For example, see Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

[36] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 147.

by wealth or renown." He contrasts this environment with institutions shaped by careerism and status-seeking, where educators used their positions as "stepping-stone[s] to high places." Mansart concludes, "Out of this simple fellowship of souls, this close acquaintanceship and deep sympathy, came something like that which once blossomed in the groves of Academus."[37] The relationships that Mansart celebrate echo Siddle Walker's portrayal of the ethos of care and community responsibility that Black parents, teachers, and community members brought to Caswell County Training School. Walker locates caring relationships as central to Black schooling in the context of segregation, a caring which "encompassed both the human relationships that existed between the major participants and the institutional structures created as a result of that caring."[38] Rather than suggesting that Black colleges need to become more like white institutions, Du Bois turns to Black colleges to argue that for schools to resist ruling-class control, the social relations of schooling need to be characterized by sincerity and care. For Du Bois, the relational ethos of Black colleges represents an essential component of resistance to domination by industrialists and philanthropists. Moreover, he suggests that the integrity of such relations is undermined when educators pursue individual success within a capitalist system that prizes social status over collective well-being.

Beyond fostering relationships of care, Black colleges also provided physical and psychological sanctuary from and resistance to Jim Crow society. Du Bois contrasts the violence and coercion of the broader South with the relative safety of Mansart's campus: "Mansart realized here at last, in the South, he escaped the recurrent threat of the mob. The whites were always armed and ready to cow and kill the blacks; to chase a runaway, to capture a rebel…But on Mansart's campus, the dark dwellers were safe; no white man dared to invade this sanctuary

[37] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 85.
[38] Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential*, 202.

and swagger and kick. Here swarmed a group of husky, red-blooded youth, with great eyes too easily filled with hate; white police could be called but they brought warrants, walked warily, and watched; they were careful to follow the forms of law."[39] The college shielded students from white supremacist violence, and by extension, offered a space for enacting social relations that thwarted the attempt to use Black schools to produce compliant students and docile workers. The college itself serves as a mechanism for enforcing equality before the law, against the grain of Black inequality and vulnerability that characterized the Jim Crow South.

This protective function underscores the broader argument that I have been tracing throughout Du Bois's educational thought: that schools are not separate from society but embedded within it. That black colleges impacted the balance of race and class forces in society and influenced the fair enforcement of laws fits well with a position that Andrew Douglas has attributed to Du Bois. He argues that, for Du Bois, Black colleges were important because they nurtured "an oppositional stance toward White world ideals and practices, essentially a critical orientation toward the liberal form of the competitive society."[40] For Du Bois, this oppositional stance was not limited to the ideas taught within Black colleges, though ideas were certainly crucially important. The "oppositional stance" extended to their collective material impact on the surrounding society. In presenting this perspective and power of Black colleges, *Black Flame* gestures towards the possibility, and desirability, of a form of schooling that resists reproducing unequal social relations. It emphasizes that the enactment of equal social relations in schools constitutes a practice of class struggle in that it undermines one of the sources through which ruling class domination is maintained.

[39] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 147.
[40] Andrew J. Douglas, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Critique of the Competitive Society* (University of Georgia Press, 2019), 53.

Du Bois's acknowledgment of the state's unequal and violent treatment of Black Southerners also highlights the significance of having the freedom to think and teach critically about the state itself. The integrity of the academic and pedagogical pursuits of Mansart's college was ensured by protecting it against surrounding state forces that were sympathetic to white supremacy and complicit in anti-Black violence. Across the three novels, Du Bois includes scenes from the classroom where the line between teacher and citizen and student and citizen becomes blurred, scenes where teachers and students, as Judith Butler has put it, "develop forms of thought in relation to historical crisis."[41] Indeed, Du Bois construes the development of critical thought as a practice of resistance to ruling-class control and manipulation. Du Bois's portrayal anticipates bell hooks' understanding of the practice of democratic education: "Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the 'real world' and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life."[42]

Following this emphasis on teaching and learning as a mode of resistance to class rule and racial violence, Du Bois includes many scenes within *Black Flame* that depict the lived realities of teachers engaging in political and pedagogical struggle in quite a different light than earlier articulations of the talented tenth. In "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois describes teachers as "the group-leaders of the Negro people."[43] In other words, Du Bois imagines a process where a small group of enlightened Blacks will uplift the Black masses out of poverty and cultural

[41] Judith Butler, "Academic Freedom and the Critical Task of the University," *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2018), 859.
[42] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (Routledge, 2003), 41.
[43] Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" originally published in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day*, ed. Booker T. Washington (James Pott & Company, 1903).

backwardness by delivering them to enlightenment.[44] When considering what this vision looks like in practice, as embodied by real individuals, one might imagine Du Bois himself as an ideal type. Equipped with the right ideas, the talented tenth would both develop the right political program and bring that right program and those right ideas to the Black masses.[45] Such ideological propagation was, in fact, the stated purpose of *The Crisis*.[46] *Black Flame*, however, portrays school leaders in quite a different light. By taking the reader inside Mansart's lifelong process of education, which is characterized by uncertainty and searching much more than expertise, *Black Flame* does not lend itself to being read as an endorsement of the vanguard strategy typically associated with Du Bois's talented tenth idea.

The portrayal of teachers in *Black Flame,* especially Mansart, highlights the talented tenth's vulnerability, fallibilities, and shortcomings. Mansart is far from confident about his own interpretation of the world, and he stumbles and struggles to make sense of both his own position within it and the path forward in the struggle for Black freedom. At the end of the second novel, for example, Mansart asks a fellow teacher how to present socialism to his students: "'I read the *Communist Manifesto* last night,' said Mansart. 'I like it, but will it work? Looking at its advocates, I should say no. But I do not know yet. As a practical and present matter, I've got to ask myself what shall I say to my students about Socialism? How shall I guide them? They are

[44] This sharper interpretation of uplift ideology follows Joy James' interpretation of young Du Bois as well as Robert Gooding-Williams. *In the Shadow of Du Bois*. James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, 1997.
[45] For a detailed account of the contours of uplift ideology in historical context see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
[46] Du Bois recounts in *The Autobiography*, "With *The Crisis* I essayed a new role of interpreting to the world the hindrances and aspirations of American Negroes…With this organ of propaganda and defense we were able to organize on of the most effective assaults of liberalism upon reaction that the modern world had seen." and "I think I may say without boasting that in the period from 1910 to 1930 I was a main factor in revolutionizing the attitude of the American Negro toward caste. My stinging hammer blows made Negroes aware of themselves, confident of their possibilities and determined in self-assertion. So much so that today common slogans among the Negro people are taken bodily from the words of my mouth." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., (Oxford University Press, 2018), 165, 188.

bound to ask searching questions, and my teachers must answer honestly and know what is true and right."[47] At the same time as Mansart feels the pressure for him and his teachers to teach "what is true and right," he himself is grappling with his understanding of socialism. *Black Flame* portrays teachers as citizens struggling to understand the world, emphasizing not their enlightenment or ability to "train" their students as much as he presents the classroom within the Black college as one important space for parsing political life. While Du Bois represents teachers as having special responsibilities to take the lead in initiating the interpretation of the political world, he does not portray them as expert interpreters in *Black Flame*.

Continuing the shift away from his earlier conception of the talented tenth as an enlightened vanguard, Du Bois portrays the pedagogical practices of teachers as challenges to the material and ideological inequalities of segregation and racialized capitalism. Recognizing gaps in his teachers' knowledge of Black history, Mansart takes it upon himself to address them: "The evident interest of his teachers in current Negro events and their ignorance of Negro history gave Mansart a clue for further action. He got an increasing number of them to form the habit of meeting at his house and work out ways and means for a study of Negro history. There was no text-book in the schools and no such study laid down. But also, Negro history was not forbidden."[48] Here, Mansart does not position himself as an all-knowing guide; rather, he collaborates with his colleagues to overcome the lack of resources and curriculum, portraying politics and knowledge production as collaborative rather than a practice of guidance. As opposed to starker depictions of top-down training expressed in earlier years, in *Black Flame*, Du Bois reimagines talented tenth leadership as a collective practice of navigating political challenges and collaboratively countering material inequality.

[47] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 361.
[48] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School,* 62.

Following from the political and economic analysis of Black education in the South, Du Bois emphasizes a unique dimension of the teacher-student relationship in Black colleges; he portrays the process of interpreting the world that happens between teachers and students as a complicated form of political partnership. Du Bois portrays this teacher-student dynamic when relating Mansart's educational upbringing at Atlanta University through an especially influential teacher, Ms. Freiburg.[49] Mansart credits Ms. Freiburg with bringing to him a "world view of race, which she applied to Georgia."[50] Applying the world view to race to Georgia involved discussing key current events with the students, including discussions of the Homestead Strike of 1892, the rise of Populism, and Booker T. Washington's proposition for a "compromise" with the white South. Notably, Ms. Freiburg does not present these issues as a neutral observer: "She distinctly sniffed in class when Mansart expressed his doubt about the use of bringing the wrongs of Negroes to the attention of the poor whites. 'They want Negroes to suffer,' he maintained. She retorted, 'Until they learn that they are in the same boat with Negroes.'"[51] In addition to providing Mansart with intellectual resources to interpret his political world, she also challenges his views, not primarily as an expert, but as a fellow citizen.

Contemporary education professionals would likely object to teachers publicly judging their students' political views. The standards of academic freedom laid out by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), for example, states that "Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject."[52] However, Du

[49] Brent Hayes Edwards suggests that Ms. Freiburg is one of the novels' many avatars of Du Bois. "Introduction," *The Ordeal of Mansart: The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (Oxford University Press, 2014), xxvii.
[50] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, 86.
[51] Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart,* 88.
[52] American Association of University Professors, *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.*

Bois's portrayal of teaching within Black colleges in the Jim Crow South highlights the limitations of applying such universal standards. The principle of fair presentation of information may exclude the kind of political partnership Du Bois illustrates between teachers and students who collectively grapple how to understand and struggle against race and class rule. While limiting classroom discussion to a teacher's expertise seems like a reasonable safeguard for fairness, Du Bois emphasizes that the partisan dimension of Black colleges was in tension with universal liberal principles like fairness. He highlights a less conventional but deeply meaningful view of the classroom: as a space for deliberation between teachers and students, who are also citizens confronting unevenly shared political realities. Universal standards of academic freedom aimed at ensuring fairness conflict with the vision of education as a practice of class struggle advanced by Du Bois, in which educators strive to bring the world into the classroom rather than insulating it from contemporary political problems and which is geared explicitly toward transforming unjust social relations.

Black Flame portrays the political dimensions of teacher-student relationships as necessary in the context of unequal social relations. The novels portray the classroom as inherently political, in part by depicting the political risks the novel's teachers sometimes take. This theme becomes particularly vivid in the third novel of the trilogy, *Worlds of Color*. In one scene, a student asks the teacher, Jean, about the imprisonment of Ben Davis, a member of the Communist Party USA and a New York City Councilmember: "'Do you think it was right to send Ben Davis to jail?'" Jean hesitates, recognizing the possible consequences of answering honestly. "Perhaps it was not wise to discuss such matters in class. But why not? Was this not the place to teach truth?"[53] Ultimately, she decides to answer honestly, arguing that Davis does not

[53] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 176.

deserve imprisonment for his political affiliation. Later in the novel, it is revealed that the student is an FBI informant who reports Jean, leading to her summons before the House Un-American Activities Committee and eventual termination.

Jean's termination recalls the intense repression and punishment of leftists of all stripes during the Cold War, a tendency that was especially intense for Black teachers who were radicals.[54] Du Bois wrote the novels in the wake of this repression, and he was one of its victims.[55] This scene situates the classroom within rather than outside of the fraught political landscape of the Cold War, and it challenges the assumption that in the classroom, the teacher inherently has the upper hand over the student. Furthermore, the novel suggests that inequality and lack of freedom in social and political life undermine the ideal of academic freedom. The classroom, as depicted in *Black Flame*, is not simply a place where students receive knowledge, nor is it even limited to a space of discussion and debate.[56] Rather, Du Bois portrays classrooms as sites where different actors engage in power struggles and where individuals pursue competing political agendas. Jean enacts her vision of a truthful pedagogy while the student furthers his anti-communism. In this way, Du Bois positions both teachers and students as political agents whose actions influence and are influenced by the power dynamics that lie beyond the classroom.

[54] See Andrew Hartman, *Bad Faith: Teachers, Liberalism, and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York: Fordham University Press 2019) for a detailed account of anticommunist repression faced by teachers.
[55] I turn to the early Cold War and Du Bois's political and intellectual life in that period in the next chapter.
[56] Here I am riffing on Paolo Freire's distinction between the banking model of education and the problem-posing approach. The scene discussed above puts an interesting spin on the problem-posing approach because of the way real world inequality raises the stakes of the pedagogical practice.

Conclusion

Du Bois's portrayal of Black colleges throughout *Black Flame* highlights the dynamics of class struggle as initiated from above and below. Even though the ruling class whites in the story have outsized political power and material resources, their control over Black schools and over workers in the South is constantly under threat. As such, Du Bois shows how ruling-class whites had to continually reestablish the terms of their political domination and their control over workers even in an era that is remembered for its incredibly constrained political horizon.

In Du Bois's narrative, ruling-class whites imagine that Black colleges can be used as a tool to secure their power. However, from within the walls of the Mansart's college, teachers, students, and Mansart himself thwart the designs of ruling-class whites. Importantly, Du Bois places Mansart simultaneously within and outside of the frame of class struggle politics. On the one hand, his birth marks the demise of class struggle politics, the death of his union leader father symbolizing the constrained political possibilities of the moment. Despite this, however, Mansart finds ways to challenge ruling-class whites individually and collectively.

Perhaps surprisingly, Du Bois emphasized the practice of class struggle in these novels because he was attentive to the rising and receding tides of political possibility. The predominance of elite-brokerage politics at the turn of the 20th century has typically been understood as the inevitable response to a highly constrained and deadly political landscape. *Black Flame* suggests, by contrast, that engaging in class struggle, even in small and muted ways, was the most sensible, most powerful way to challenge and change the Jim Crow South. In this way, *Black Flame* recalls and elaborates on Du Bois's assertion in *Black Reconstruction* that

"had it not been for the Negro school and college, the Negro would, to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery."[57]

[57] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 596.

Chapter 3 From Uplift to Solidarity: Du Bois's Turn to Working-Class Education in the Cold War

"Between the dentist and the miner," Du Bois ventured while addressing the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, "there is no fundamental difference. They both dig and extract, but the one is given education, training, and a reward that furnishes him with the leisure to enjoy life, with recognition from his fellow men, while the miner is fortunate if he gets insufficient food and poor clothes and the disesteem of his own family."[1] Du Bois had long theorized the ways in which access to education and training could serve as a solution to the problems of racial inequality and injustice. Here, by contrast, he referred to education as creating a problem rather than solving one. Since education awarded prestige and status, it also reproduced a hierarchical, competitive division of labor. The implications of this problem were profound. Du Bois explained, "Almost universally…we see the working class of the world looking upon most work as something to be avoided and regarding escape from the status of laborer as the main object of their efforts through trade unions."[2] If securing a fulfilling job depended on competing for finite educational resources, then performing less prestigious work became a punishment, driving those who do it to seek escape. This built-in incentive to escape essential work ultimately undermined society's capacity to meet its own needs.

At the dawn of the Cold War, Du Bois's concern over this latest articulation of the equality paradox of capitalist schooling was not marginal or unique to radicals. On the contrary,

[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Trade Unions and Colonies," September 9, 1952. Du Bois Papers.
[2] Du Bois, "Trade Unions and Colonies." Du Bois Papers.

the United States's competition with the Soviet Union for global dominance placed the question of the relationship between economic productivity and competition for educational resources at the very center of U.S. politics. The twin imperatives of harnessing economic power and establishing ideological and moral superiority over the Soviet Union meant that U.S. political leaders needed both a productive workforce and a free citizenry. To what extent was it possible to have both? More to the point, was it possible to distribute educational resources in a way that avoided devaluing essential labor, and by extension, possibly threatening the United States' ability to grow its economy?

Cold War-era liberals and radicals offered different solutions for how to overcome the threat to productivity posed by the competition for educational resources. For the Truman administration, the answer lay in leveraging the abundant resources of the postwar economy to dramatically expand access to higher education, thus making the competition for educational resources less fierce. Instead of Americans competing against each other, the Administration encouraged Americans to compete together as a nation against the Soviet Union, a shift that was facilitated by massive investments in higher education infrastructure, staff, research, and scholarships. This investment went part of the way toward overcoming the problem of the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, but only partly. Broadly expanded educational access provided many more Americans with the opportunity to compete for desirable jobs and to improve their economic well-being, especially for veterans.[3] At the same time, the solidification of a tiered system of higher education entrenched socioeconomic stratification.[4] Moreover, the

[3] John Bound and Sarah Turner, "Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans?" *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, no. 4 (October 2002): 784–815; and Marvin Lazerson, "The Disappointments of Success: Higher Education after World War II," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 559 (September 1998): 64–76.
[4] Roksa, Grodsky, Arum, and Gamoran, "United States: Changes in Higher Education and Social Stratification," 165–192.

impact of legal segregation and white supremacist ideology over the distribution of educational resources undermined the government's ability to effectively execute its vision of broad educational access.[5]

Many Cold War-era radicals, for their part, were distrustful of the US government's zealous investment in higher education, skeptical of the underlying motives and unconvinced that productivity depended on capitalist accumulation. As such, their approach to the equality paradox of capitalist schooling was fundamentally different than the Truman administration's. The Truman administration attempted to resolve the paradox by giving many more people access to the dream and reality of class mobility. Cold War radicals, by contrast, pursued education separately from the competition for jobs and from social status altogether, as reflected by the operation of radical schools and learning programs for working-class adults that cropped up during the early Cold War. Du Bois, for his part, was a frequent guest lecturer and teacher at many of these institutions, including the Jefferson School for Social Science, the American Forum for Socialist Education, and the California Labor School.

These schools were not for credentialing nor for workforce preparation. Instead, the stated object of these institutions was to examine the world's problems and to offer solutions to those problems from the perspective of workers. Operating from a position of political marginality and under direct attack by the US government, these schools nevertheless practiced a prefigurative educational politics that glimpsed the contours of an anticapitalist mode of study

[5] Larry Johnson, Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, and Barbara Shircliffe, "African Americans and the Struggle for Opportunity in Florida Public Higher Education, 1947–1977," *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2007): 328–58. Sarah Turner and John Bound, "Closing the Gap or Widening the Divide: The Effects of the G.I. Bill and World War II on the Educational Outcomes of Black Americans," *The Journal of Economic History* 63, no. 1 (2003): 145–77.

rooted in the politics of class struggle.[6] Rather than trying to resolve the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, they instead refused the terms of the paradox in favor of building working-class solidarity across lines of ascriptive difference and encouraging workers to imagine alternatives to capitalism.[7]

This chapter examines how the equality paradox of capitalist schooling manifested in early Cold War-era political discourse and practice. While access to schooling had long been lifted up as the most important tool for advancing equality in American society, the significance of advancing social equality through higher education became especially urgent within the Cold War political landscape. I begin by reading the 1947 report *Higher Education for American Democracy*—a six-volume assessment of existing U.S. higher education and detailed recommendations for how to reform it authored by a 28-person commission of university administrators and policymakers—through the lens of the equality paradox of capitalist schooling. In particular, I highlight how the report recasts the competition for educational resources in terms of national competitiveness. Moreover, I discuss the report's educational proposals for addressing the devaluation of essential labor. The chapter then traces Du Bois's intellectual and political trajectory after World War II, situating him within a wider network of Cold War radicals who pursued alternative educational projects outside of official higher

[6] I borrow the term "*mode of study"* from Eli Meyerhoff, who distinguishes between education as an institutionalized form of learning and other possible forms of study that emerge from political struggle. Meyerhoff defines modes of study as "bound up with different modes of world-making—ways of making ourselves, politics, economies, communities, cultures, and so forth." He critiques what he calls the "education-based mode of study" for reinforcing capitalist, colonial, and statist norms, and calls instead for partisan forms of study aligned with abolitionist, anticapitalist, and decolonial movements. See Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 5.

[7] Du Bois's participation in non-competitive educational projects during the Cold War aligns with what Andrew Douglas has identified as Du Bois's broader "critique of the competitive society." According to Douglas, Du Bois's critique of capitalism is best understood as a *political* critique of relations of competition, of a society organized by winners and losers, distinct from an ethical or economic critique. Douglas, *Du Bois and the Critique of the Competitive Society*, 2019. My analysis in this chapter extends this analysis by identifying Du Bois's critique of the competitive society within his educational politics.

education. I analyze their working-class schools through the lens of the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, pointing to their refusal of the very terms of that problem. Finally, I examine Du Bois's contributions to these schools, discussing how his pedagogical practice aimed to erode historic barriers to building interracial and international working-class solidarity, specifically by showing white Americans that white supremacy and American imperialism had ultimately impoverished and disempowered them.

From Class Mobility to National Competitiveness: Reading *Higher Education for American Democracy*

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman established the President's Commission on Higher Education, chaired by George F. Zook, to evaluate and redefine the role of higher education in the United States. The Truman Commission's six-volume report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, proposed ambitious changes, including the creation of a nationwide network of public community colleges offering free education, the integration of vocational and liberal arts education, and substantially increasing federal funding for scholarships, research grants, and salaries.[8] The investment the Commission called for was massive, but the Commissioners reminded their readers: "Higher education is an investment, not a cost," underscoring the view that blunting the competitive nature of higher education would benefit the country as a whole.[9] Indeed, at the dawn of the Cold War, higher education was increasingly framed as essential to national security and economic growth and, by extension, to America's national

[8] In the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, progressive Democrats including Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have included elements of the Truman Commission's recommendations in their platforms, most notably in their respective proposals for free public college. While their proposals for free college struck many Americans as radical, these are not entirely new ideas.
[9] President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 6 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 5:26.

competitiveness.[10] By linking educational access to national productivity and global influence, the Commission placed colleges and universities at the core of America's Cold War ambitions.

By the onset of the Cold War, the equality paradox of capitalist schooling took on a newfound national significance. Whereas earlier reformers had highlighted the importance of making the competition over scarce educational resources maximally fair, the Truman Commission positioned access to well-funded and well-resourced higher education for all as a necessity, vital not only for domestic democratic renewal but also for the United States' competitiveness on the international stage. *Higher Education for American Democracy* argued that a broadly educated population would secure national stability, project moral authority worldwide, and strengthen the American economy vis-a-vis the USSR. The report reinforced Cold War–era ideology and molded higher education around the prevailing anticommunist agenda.[11] Moreover, its Deweyan conception of democracy as an ethical ideal led the Commission's authors to emphasize higher education's role in cultivating democracy as a shared, cooperative way of life, positioning individual self-realization as fundamentally linked to participatory citizenship.[12] Translated to the concrete political context of the Cold War, this

[10] Before the Truman Commission was established, the question of the relationship of higher education to American politics had been considered in three other reports, one by the Association of American Colleges (1943), one by the American Council of Learned Societies (1943), and one by Harvard University (1945). Ethan Schrum has argued that The Truman Commission report provides a better window into the politics of the Cold War than the more frequently cited Harvard report, *General Education in a Free* Society, commonly referred to as the Harvard Redbook. Schrum argues that intellectual historians' claims that the Redbook is a Cold War document conflates concerns of social fracture and moral relativism with the politics of the Cold War. Meanwhile, *Higher Education for American Democracy* is straightforwardly a product of Cold War concerns. "Shaping Minds or Defending Democracy? How Scholars Have Interpreted Major Reports on Higher Education From the 1940s," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98 no 3, 335-344.

[11] Allison L. Palmadessa, "American Superiority, Democratic Idealism, and the Truman Commission: A Critical Discourse Historical Analysis of Higher Education for American Democracy," *Peabody Journal of Education* 98, no. 3 (2023): 284–300.

[12] George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 391-92; Ethan Schrum, "Establishing a Democratic Religion: Metaphysics and Democracy in the Debates over the President's Commission on Higher Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2007): 277–301.

Deweyan ethos positioned higher education as a tool to foster social cooperation and unity of purpose, ensuring that Americans could compete as a nation on the world stage.

The Truman Commission sought to address the equality paradox of capitalist schooling by tempering education's competitive character and channeling it into a collective, national competitiveness. Earlier arguments about the significance of access to education framed schooling as a means to ensure fair competition and foster social mobility for the deserving. By contrast, *Higher Education for American Democracy* redefined a college-educated populace as a national resource. College education, the report asserts, would prepare Americans "to contribute their utmost to the achievement of world order and peace among men."[13] The Commission insisted that the state had a direct stake in producing an educated populace, not only to meet its obligations to individual citizens but also to meet "the demands of the twentieth-century American economy" and to enhance Cold War competitiveness.[14]

The Truman Commission's justification of investing in higher education for purposes of national competitiveness departed from how investment in public education was justified during the New Deal. New Deal policymakers treated access to public education as a means of stabilizing the economy. A 1942 FDR administration report, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies,* straightforwardly connected public education to economic productivity: "We have become aware of the need of low-income persons for higher levels of services: access to education, to medical care, to recreational and cultural facilities, to adequate housing and other community facilities…High national productivity cannot be achieved only by wide diffusion of these

[13] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy,* 1:102.
[14] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy,* 1:68.

services."[15] Here, schooling functioned as a mechanism to secure economic well-being for as many individuals as possible rather than to promote class mobility for deserving competitors. By contrast, the Truman Commission reintroduced competition but recast the competition as one between United States citizens and its foreign policy rivals rather than as a competition among Americans.

The Commission was careful to point out that segregation and racial discrimination posed significant barriers to leveraging higher education for national competitiveness. It stressed that "for this country's functioning as a nation—as a leading nation among nations," the United States could "readily afford to draw upon [its] wealth of material resources to narrow greatly and rapidly… the gap between the presently available educational opportunities and those needed to realize the national potential."[16] The commissioners warned that "in a world striving for international understanding and permanent peace it is essential that this Nation achieve unity and intergroup cooperation within its own borders," because racial discrimination "weakens our position in international affairs" and exacts "grievous economic, moral, and political costs" at home.[17] By framing racial equality partly as a national security concern, the Commission suggested that entrenched racial divides threatened not only American ideals but also the broader objective of using higher education to create collective prosperity and power. The report's expansive conception of educational equality contrasted with their policy recommendations, recommendations that were constrained by segregation.[18] While the commissioners unequivocally asserted that Jim Crow laws were incompatible with their vision of higher

[15] U.S. National Resources Planning Board, Committee on Long-Range Work and Relief Policies, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies, 1942: Report of the Committee on Long-Range Work and Relief Policies to the National Resources Planning Board* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 3.
[16] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy,* 2:5.
[17] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy,* 2:26.
[18] Palmadessa, "American Superiority, Democratic Idealism, and the Truman Commission, 2023.

education as a national resource, they also admitted that increasing funds for Black colleges would not suffice to meet the broader goals of "higher education for American democracy."

The Truman Commission acknowledged and earnestly grappled with the equality paradox of capitalist education. Even if all Americans were provided access to a college education, some Americans would nevertheless need to perform socially undesirable labor, and higher levels of education would nevertheless grant some individuals more comfort and prestige than others. How did the Commission propose dealing with this reality? And, could schools, curricula, and pedagogy be designed in such a way that would facilitate mutual respect among Americans even as completing different levels of education awarded some individuals a higher socioeconomic status than others? The Commission's answer rested on its conviction that "the democratic way of life can endure only as private careers and social obligations are made to mesh, as personal ambition is reconciled with public responsibility."[19] In their view, balancing individual ambition with social needs was both possible and urgent, given that "the complexity of modern technological society demands a high degree of social and economic intelligence on the part of workers in all fields." [20] Education would thus prepare citizens "for mutually productive and cooperative human relationships among all the groups that share the responsibilities and benefits of economic enterprise." [21] The Commission paints a picture of a modern economy run by civically minded workers who enjoy significant personal liberty. But their account does not fully grapple with the question of how responsibilities come to be shared in particular ways that distribute suffering, dignity, and prosperity unequally.

To be sure, the Commission did not pretend that differences in socioeconomic status were

[19] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:10.
[20] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:63.
[21] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:63.

insignificant or unproblematic for a democratic society. At the same time, the Commission overstated the extent to which schooling could mitigate the negative effects of class stratification. In a telling passage, the report's authors imply that inequality between employees and employers is a function of workers' intellectual underdevelopment rather than structural economic conditions. The report states: "If workers are to meet their obligations and realize their opportunities…they will need to be well-informed and socially-minded, so as to cooperate on equal terms with well-informed and socially-minded members of management."[22] By framing the problem as related to workers' mentality, the Commission shifts attention away from the power imbalances that shape the division of labor. The emphasis on the workers' mentalities not only sidesteps the power dynamics inherent in the workplace but also suggests that the undemocratic qualities that attend class stratification can be overcome through mutual understanding rather than through any substantive redistribution of power, at work or otherwise.

The report's portrayal of factory work again highlights how the Commission seeks to manage workers' dissatisfaction through education rather than altering working conditions themselves. At one moment, the authors acknowledge the alienating effects of repetitive work, writing: "Highly repetitive simple operations performed day after day kill the imagination, dull the mind, and fail to give any satisfying sense of creative accomplishment."[23] Elsewhere, they assert: "The factory is becoming a new sort of community—a medium through which the worker can achieve a satisfying life."[24] The Commission proposes reshaping workers' perceptions can alleviate inequality. Education is thus portrayed as capable of improving how workers experience hierarchical, monotonous jobs, even when those jobs remain unchanged. While the

[22] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:64.
[23] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:64.
[24] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:64.

report does recognize the dehumanizing aspects of industrial labor, it ultimately places the burden on workers themselves to cope with its monotony.

While the Commission's vision of workplace democracy remains underdeveloped, its proposal to merge vocational and liberal education demonstrates a genuine concern with resolving the equality paradox of capitalist schooling. "Satisfactory vocational adjustment might occur more often if there were less occupational snobbery among us, if all forms of useful work were accorded equal social status—manual labor as well as the white-collar job."[25] By condemning "occupational snobbery," the Commission echoed Du Bois's concern that devaluing necessary labor can destabilize the broader economy. Furthermore, they insist that trades and white-collar jobs require many of the same skills despite the social perception that manual and intellectual labor are starkly different. Recalling Du Bois's comparison of the miner and the dentist, the authors observe that "perhaps more than we commonly think…the elements of vocational competence" are exactly those we associate with intellectual labor: "to have some insight into the values and standards that men have found good in governing their lives, to be able to define problems and bring to their solution the habits of critical thinking, to be able to communicate ideas clearly, to possess the ability to deal with people in a friendly and considerate manner."[26] By integrating liberal arts and vocational schooling, the Commission sought to eliminate or minimize the extent to which schooling teaches students to associate work with social status. Although the proposal was never adopted in the way they envisioned, the proposal and its rationale underscore how profoundly entrenched the equality paradox is, offering one of

[25] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:57.
[26] Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy*, 1:63. Du Bois draws the comparison differently than the Commission in one interesting respect. For the Commission, manual labor should be respected because it involves skills of the mind. Du Bois sets up the argument in the opposite way: the miner and the dentist both "dig and extract," i.e., the labor that requires higher learning is also physical.

the Commission's most pointed efforts to diminish the extent to which schools reproduce class distinctions.

The Truman Commission constructed a sweeping vision that took seriously the question of how higher education could advance equality despite the inherent contradictions of that goal. Realizing this vision, the Commission suggested, would require dramatically expanding access, integrating vocational and liberal arts curricula, and preparing students for the profound responsibilities of collective self-rule. In the next section, I situate Du Bois within the evolving Cold War landscape of higher education, showing how the actual trajectory of universities diverged significantly from the Commission's ambitious vision and setting the stage for some Cold War radicals, Du Bois among them, to approach the equality paradox of capitalist schooling in an altogether different way than recommended by the Truman Commission.

Du Bois and the Cold War

Du Bois stands out among those whose lives were profoundly impacted by the political forces that shaped America's reconstruction of higher education in the postwar years. An infusion of funding for national defense profoundly shaped research agendas around developing military technology, creating newfound partnerships between research universities like Stanford and MIT and the United States military.[27] Cold War priorities influenced what research projects were pursued and shaped methodological developments in the humanities and social sciences.

[27] Rebecca S. Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (University of California Press, 1997). Stuart W. Leslie, *The Cold War and American Science: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

Marxism and historical materialism were significantly marginalized within official academia as the concepts of scientific objectivity and market-based rationality became predominant.[28]

Du Bois became a pariah of academia against this backdrop. In 1944, he was forced to resign as a faculty member at Atlanta University, [29] and in 1948, he was fired from his position as the NAACP Director of Special Research. [30] In this section, I detail how Du Bois became part of a different political milieu as a result of this repression.[31] By excavating these relationships, we can see how Du Bois's last decade involved serious intellectual pursuits and earnest political activity that marks both a continuation of and a shift in his political priorities and strategic outlook, especially as it concerned the role of education in advancing the goals racial and economic justice.

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[28] Henry Heller, "The Humanities and Social Sciences in the Cold War (1945–1960)," in *The Capitalist University: The Transformations of Higher Education in the United States Since 1945* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 42–91; John McCumber, *The Philosophy Scare: The Politics of Reason in the Early Cold War* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[29] Du Bois's forced resignation from Atlanta University in 1944 exemplifies how expanding investment in higher education during World War II and the Cold War came with intensified ideological repression. At Atlanta University, he launched *Phylon*, an interdisciplinary journal on race, and proposed the Phylon Institute, a research initiative linking HBCUs, but institutional politics and external scrutiny thwarted his ambitions. HBCU administrators were caught between promoting their institutions as symbols of Black educational progress and avoiding political controversy to maintain crucial funding from white philanthropists and state governments wary of radicalism. Florence Read, Atlanta University's superintendent, did not see Du Bois's projects as priorities or necessarily prudential to support, and Du Bois believed she was actively inhibiting his pursuits. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 443–48.

[30] Du Bois's firing from the NAACP in 1948 epitomizes the "Faustian bargain" that many civil rights leaders struck with the US government. By actively supporting Truman's anticommunism, civil rights leaders sought to gain the favor and influence of the Truman administration such that they could advance civil rights reforms. During World War II, the NAACP had linked US racism to broader systems of colonialism and imperialism, but the shifting political environment of the Cold War profoundly impacted domestic civil rights discourse and politics. Liberal civil rights leaders attempted to leverage international criticism of racial discrimination in America to make the case for antidiscrimination legislation. Whereas internationalism had been central to civil rights politics in the decades before, civil rights liberals now aligned themselves with American foreign policy. At the time Du Bois was employed by the NAACP in the position of Director of Special Research. In this role, perhaps unsurprisingly, Du Bois continued to unabashedly insist on the importance of internationalism and Pan-Africanism, which contributed to rising tensions between him and NAACP executive secretary Walter White. See Penny M. Von Eschen, "Domesticating Anticolonialism," in *Race against Empire* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 96-121.

[31] Charisse Burden-Stelley argues that Du Bois's political thought in this period was shaped by a dialectic between repression and radicalism. "W.E.B. Du Bois in the Tradition of Radical Blackness: Radicalism, Repression, and Mutual Comradeship, 1930–1960," *Socialism and Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 181–206. My argument here is indebted to hers and extends it by focusing specifically on Du Bois's relationships with trade union leaders and Marxists, and in the next section, on how those relationships led him to radical working-class schools.

Though the political and intellectual activity of Du Bois's last decade has often been regarded as insignificant, this representation is shadowed by the legacy of Cold War anticommunism. Until the last ten years, most scholarly commentary on Du Bois's late intellectual and political life regarded this period as negligible or even regrettable, given his uncritical praise of Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China. This perception of Du Bois's late life was first seriously challenged by Gerald Horne in his 1986 biography *Black and Red*, which argued that far from fading into irrelevance, Du Bois's principled stand against anticommunism deepened his ties with younger radicals who would later take center stage in the explosive civil rights protests of the late 1950s and 1960s. While mainstream accounts portrayed the NAACP's Cold War turn as necessary for the survival of the civil rights movement, Horne showed that by the time the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other protest organizations emerged, it was the NAACP that was out of step with the movement, with its legalist strategy increasingly seen as insufficient by the younger generation of movement leaders.[32] Over the past decade, scholars have brought renewed attention to Du Bois's intellectual contributions in the 1950s, engaging his late-career writings on race, empire, and socialism with serious scholarly consideration.[33] Building on this recent work, I draw on archival materials to show that Du Bois's supposed isolation and irrelevance during this period is belied by his sustained engagement with a community of leftists and trade unionists.

Du Bois's political and intellectual circle transformed in the wake of Cold War repression. His indictment under the Smith Act in 1951 contributed most dramatically to the

[32] Gerald Horne, *Black and Red,* 1986.
[33] See especially Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Duke University Press, 2010); Phillip Luke Sinitiere, ed., *Citizen of the World: The Late Career and Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Northwestern University Press, 2019); Bill V. Mullen, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Revolutionary across the Color Line* (Pluto Press, 2016); and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, ed., *Forging Freedom in W. E. B. Du Bois's Twilight Years: No Deed but Memory* (University Press of Mississippi, 2023).

reconstitution of his political milieu. In 1951, Du Bois was put on trial for "failing to register as an agent of a foreign principle." The United States government alleged that the Peace Information Center, a short-lived organization founded by Du Bois, was following orders from the Soviet Union. The Center sent "Peacegrams," newsletters about international peace efforts, to its members. Its other main activity was collecting signatures on the "Ban the Bomb" petition. The Peace Information Center gathered countless signatures from American citizens for the petition, with 2.5 million American signatures and 273 million worldwide by the end of its circulation. Though he was eventually acquitted, the trial was a polarizing event, and Du Bois expressed disappointment that he did not receive support from longtime friends or the NAACP. At the same time, he was surprised by the coalition of supporters that did gather around him.

Resisting repression brought communists, trade unionists, and others who refused anticommunism together into common struggles. Alice Citron, a Harlem schoolteacher fired in 1951 for refusing to renounce communism, chaired the National Committee to Defend Dr. Du Bois, a coalition of trade unionists, radicals, and ordinary citizens who raised legal funds and mobilized on his behalf. That December, the International Fur and Leather Workers Union organized a benefit dinner, bringing together union leaders and members from thirteen different international unions, all of which had been purged from the CIO in 1949 for alleged Communist ties and sympathies. The union members in attendance raised $2,300 for Du Bois's legal defense.

Du Bois also became an active participant in defending others when they came under attack. So, when Ben Gold, the Communist Party member and leader of the Fur and Leather Workers Union, who had organized Du Bois's defense dinner, was later put on trial himself for perjury for denying being a Communist Party member, Du Bois testified in his defense. The political environment of repression necessitated interdependent networks of communists and

"fellow travelers" who refused to capitulate to Cold War anticommunism. Moreover, these acts of solidarity illustrate how, rather than falling into irrelevance, Du Bois's political alliances shifted toward a broad coalition of trade unionists, communists, and noncommunist radicals.

It wasn't just his social and political network that changed for Du Bois in the 1950s; his deepening ties with trade unions led Du Bois to give more serious attention to labor movement politics.[34] He researched the conditions of Black workers and studied international labor struggles. In 1952, he corresponded with the Agricultural Workers Union to obtain reports on the working conditions and organizational strength of Southern Black agricultural laborers. That same year, he contacted Robert Dunn of the Labor Research Association, requesting statistics on textile workers. He later drew on this research both for various lectures and for his *Black Flame* trilogy. His intellectual focus was shifting toward a sustained analysis of the political economy of racism.[35] The changing composition of his audience, the kinds of questions he was asking, and his evolving arguments all reflected this shift.

Du Bois likewise seems to have had an influence on the left wing of the labor movement as well. Various unions sought out Du Bois as an expert on race, colonialism, and civil rights. The United Office and Professional Workers of America invited him to address the impact of anticommunism on racial minorities in 1949. The United Electrical Workers also requested he

[34] Cody Melcher argues that at least until World War II, one of Du Bois's "core assumptions" was that class-based, interracial cooperation among white and Black workers is extremely unlikely, if not totally impossible. In a subsequent section I will discuss how Du Bois moved away from this assumption after World War II. "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce: W. E. B. Du Bois, Left-Wing Radicalism, and the Problem of Interracial Labor Unionism," Critical Sociology 46, no. 7–8 (2020): 1041–1055.

[35] I use the term "political economy of racism" here to suggest that Du Bois's late-career writings refuse "race reductionism" and reveal an interest in identifying how capitalism shaped race and racism in particular ways. This argument is developed in Jeff Goodwin, "Black Reconstruction as Class War," *Catalyst* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2022). Goodwin traces this view to *Black Reconstruction*. For an analysis rejecting the idea that *Black Reconstruction* marks a break in Du Bois's approach to racism, see Aaron Major, "Race, Labor and Postbellum Capitalism in Du Bois's 'The Negro Worker in America,'" *Critical Sociology* 49, no. 3 (2023). Major argues that a materialist understanding of racism can be found even in Du Bois's earliest writings.

speak at a trade union forum in 1949. The National Negro Labor Council sought his participation in its founding convention in Cincinnati in 1951.[36] The New York City Teachers Union presented him with an award for "distinguished service in the cause of education for peace and freedom" in 1953. Ben Gold asked Du Bois to participate in a symposium on *We Charge Genocide*, a petition to the United Nations spearheaded by attorney William Patterson, which argued that the United States was guilty of human rights violations against Black Americans. "We expect some 1,500 shop chairmen and active trade unionists to attend," Gold wrote to Du Bois.[37] These many invitations reflected not only Du Bois's stature but also a growing realization among at least some unionists that struggles for racial justice were an important part of a working-class political agenda.[38] In the next section, I turn to how Du Bois's involvement in radical political circles led him to once dramatically rework his approach to the equality paradox of capitalist schooling.

Cold War Falsework Schools

For much of his life, Du Bois's educational politics was focused intently on how to build a self-sacrificial Black leadership class committed to uplifting the masses over and above

[36] For the history and politics of regional Negro labor councils and the National Negro Labor Council see Clarence Lang, "Freedom Train Derailed: The National Negro Labor Council and the Nadir of Black Radicalism," in *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: "Another Side of the Story,"* ed. Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 161–88; Mindy Thompson, *The National Negro Labor Council: A History* (AIMS, 1978); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1982* (University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 31-41.

[37] Letter from International Fur and Leather Workers Union of the United States and Canada to W. E. B. Du Bois, December 13, 1951. Du Bois Papers.

[38] The history of the U.S. labor movement's racial discrimination is long and complex, with racially exclusionary practices persisting well into the twentieth century. See Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1981* (New York: International Publishers, 1981). During the early Cold War years, left-led or communist trade unionists who had been expelled from mainstream federations embraced racial justice more actively than communists in previous decades, framing it as essential to broader working-class unity; see Robert R. Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

pursuing their individual success or prosperity. Moreover, Du Bois was concerned about how sharpening class divisions among Black Americans could threaten the foundation of racial solidarity. Leadership training, he believed, could be a powerful force in inspiring young Black students to give up self-serving goals and instead take on a higher calling of uplift and community service. When the leaders of the NAACP and prominent HBCUs and others in the Black leadership class capitulated to the anticommunism of the era, Du Bois was disappointed, and once again, he reconsidered the shortcomings of the Talented Tenth idea. From within a very different kind of school than he had been in before, however, he turned his back on the Talented Tenth idea rather than trying to rework it. Instead, he set his sights on shaping working-class consciousness in ways that might contribute to cohering a multiracial and international working-class coalition. This turn away from questions of leadership to fostering multiracial, international solidarity marked a decisive shift in Du Bois's educational politics and practice.

By the early 1950s, Du Bois was contributing to Marxist and working-class educational programs whose approach to schooling diverged significantly from his earlier vision of education for Black leadership. Facilitated by his participation in communist and non-communist working-class educational institutions, including the California Labor School, the Jefferson School for Social Science, and the American Forum for Socialist Education, Du Bois adopted a new educational practice grounded in the goal of building working-class knowledge and solidarity. These radical schools aimed to reimagine education free of the contradictory pursuit of enhancing individual competitiveness while simultaneously making society more equal. Although relatively small and ultimately short-lived, they provided Du Bois with a critical space to rethink how schooling might serve social equality in a way that avoided the pitfalls of the

Talented Tenth idea that he had struggled to resolve throughout his life. This section situates Du Bois within these educational projects and details their core principles.

In addition to losing faith in the Talented Tenth idea, Du Bois's new educational practice was shaped by a growing sense of urgency about the influence of corporate and military funding on knowledge production. Du Bois's longstanding skepticism of philanthropy intensified alongside the influx of corporate and defense funding for higher education. Although he previously pursued his own research through grants from philanthropists such as Julius Rosenwald and Anson Phelps Stokes, he had always insisted on the necessity of Black scholars having independence over their research and the importance Black self-determination over their own education, even when it jeopardized his access to much-needed resources.[39] Under threat of nuclear war, however, Du Bois viewed the stakes of academic and pedagogical freedom as being even higher. In a 1954 California Labor School lecture, "Democracy Fails in America," he warned that "Under a determined effort on an unprecedented scale, this nation was forced by big business to apply the new discoveries of psychological science" to make Americans "believe what was not so" and to "force the nation and the world precipitately toward a third world war."[40] He further pointed to the absence of socialism and communism in college curricula as evidence of corporate influence over academic priorities. For Du Bois, corporate influence over college curricula was especially dangerous in an era when nuclear war loomed, underscoring the

[39] Scholars have examined in detail how, in Du Bois's dealings with philanthropic foundations, he was consistently pressured to conform to acceptable and palatable scholarly pursuits—pressure he consistently rebuffed. See Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); and Julia Bates, "Scholarship Denied: The Phelps Stokes Fund's Use of the 'Race Relations' Paradigm to Silence Du Bois' Critiques of Racial Capitalism," *Critical Sociology* (2024).

[40] I treat the role of philanthropic funding in Black education as a method of social control in greater detail in the introduction and chapter 1. Two important sources on this topic are James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865–1954*, foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

urgency of countering elite control over what could be taught and studied. This realization helped propel Du Bois toward radical schools, where he believed genuine academic freedom and political autonomy might still be found, in contrast to the compromised independence of colleges and universities, including many Black colleges.[41]

As a teacher in working-class education programs, Du Bois found himself addressing a new audience composed of workers, union members, and radicals. At the same time as the topics on which he spoke remained the same, the different audience and different institutional home enabled him to bridge his longstanding scholarly questions with the political exigencies of Cold War leftists, who were committed to building an international working-class movement that could stand up to the palpable threat of nuclear war. At the Jefferson School, Du Bois offered courses on Reconstruction, African history, and imperialism. In 1949, Du Bois joined Marxist historian Philip Foner and communist, lawyer, and NYC councilmen Ben Davis for a Negro History Week talk entitled "Africa and the World." That same year, the school paid him a modest $300 for running a ten-week seminar on Africa and World Imperialism. He was regularly invited back, teaching a course on Reconstruction in the fall of 1954 and a seminar called Present Problems in Africa after that. Moreover, Du Bois regularly incorporated the California Labor School into his West Coast lecture tours. The school's bookstore sold his books, and a 1952 brochure listed him alongside Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker and the president of the National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards. These engagements provided him with both a paycheck and a platform to connect his historical materialist perspective on race and empire to a

[41] See Joy Ann Williamson, "This Has Been Quite a Year for Heads Falling: Institutional Autonomy in the Civil Rights Era," *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2004): 554–76 for an overview of how the pressures of Cold War anticommunism shaped disagreements within HBCUs about whether colleges should participate in activism or take on a more depoliticized character than they had in the past.

developing leftist project of building interracial and international working-class knowledge and solidarity.

Whereas earlier he had, for the most part, viewed his research and teaching as useful for cohering a politics based on racial solidarity, during the Cold War, Du Bois was an active participant in developing a race-conscious approach to working-class education. He served on the National Committee of the American Forum for Socialist Education, which sought to bring socialists of many tendencies together to discuss and debate the state of the left. For the Forum, Du Bois proposed a series of lectures covering the African Slave Trade, American Slavery, the Cotton Kingdom, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Citizenship. In 1961, he sponsored the American Institute for Marxist Studies, an institution founded by his close friend and colleague Herbert Aptheker. Aptheker, despite being an accomplished historian, had been blacklisted from most American universities because of his ties to Communist Party.[42] Du Bois agreed to sponsor Aptheker's institute, affirming that "People have the right to study Marxism, and to do this under the direction of other people who believe Marxism to be the most illuminating outlook available today."[43]

Although Cold War discourse cast communism as totalitarian, the Marxist-led schools of the Cold War era were not narrowly focused on propagating Marxism or recruiting party members. Marxist schools, such as the Jefferson School and the American Institute for Marxist Studies, were devoted to analyzing and proposing solutions to the most difficult social problems, a task they believed could be best accomplished from a Marxist perspective. The American

[42] Herbert Aptheker was a longtime party member and studied history from the perspective of Marxism. He sat on CPUSA's national committee from 1957 to 1991. Edgar Hoover once memorably referred to him as the most dangerous communist in the United States. His remarkable life has been memorialized by Gary Murrell, *"The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States": A Biography of Herbert Aptheker*, with an afterword by Bettina Aptheker (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015)
[43]Letter from Herbert Aptheker to W. E. B. Du Bois, July 8, 1959. Du Bois Papers.

Institute for Marxist Studies' *Statement of Principles* described its mission as finding "basic solutions to the problems of unemployment, poverty, racism, and war." The Institute's approach to solving these problems was to take "the actual conditions, major issues, and currents of thought of the world in which we live" as its starting point.[44] The California Labor School, which was not communist, expressed a similar ethos, calling itself "a school that is partisan to the people." According to one brochure, "The curriculum met the need for a School of a sharply different type, with a program of labor and social sciences centered on the issues of daily life."[45]

Whereas earlier, Du Bois had attempted to reconcile the competitive character of educational advancement with the goal of social and economic equality, the radical schools Du Bois taught in during the early Cold War sidestepped credentialism and competition. Students enrolled at the Jefferson School, a school pamphlet pointed out, "solely to learn: There are no degrees and no honors offered. Teachers hold their students only by their ability to make their teaching interesting and vital."[46] In refusing the competitive dimension of schooling, these institutions aimed to circumvent the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, wherein schooling facilitates class mobility at the same time as it reproduces class stratification. Across these institutions, the objective was not to make capitalist competition fairer by giving more people access to educational credentials but to empower workers to imagine ways of addressing their daily struggles. Simply put, these schools represented a concerted effort to create learning environments where class solidarity, rather than individual advancement, took precedence.

The US government's anticommunist fervor ultimately forced each of these institutions to close prematurely. At its peak, the Jefferson School enrolled some 5,000 students in courses on

[44] Herbert Aptheker, *Statement of Principles*, ca. July 1959, Du Bois Papers.
[45] California Labor School, Leaflet, 1952. Du Bois Papers.
[46] Jefferson School of Social Science, *Man's Right to Knowledge: The Case of the Jefferson School*, February 1954. Du Bois Papers.

labor history, Marxism, and global politics. By 1954, however, federal authorities brought charges over the school's refusal to register as a "Communist-controlled organization." In response, the school published a pamphlet, called *Man's Right to Knowledge*, describing its legal battle as a fight over "the whole fabric of our Constitutional liberties, our right to free speech, our right to learn, to teach, to think."[47] Despite their earnest defense, mounting legal and financial burdens forced the Jefferson School to close in 1956. The California Labor School likewise faced government repression. Founded in 1942 and initially accredited under the G.I. Bill, it lost that accreditation by 1947, was placed on the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations in 1948, and eventually had its tax-exempt status revoked, prompting its eventual shutdown in 1957. "In the last four years, the Cold War has hindered our growth," a 1952 pamphlet admitted. "But today our students and faculty are at work in their unions and democratic people's organizations."[48]

Where the Truman Commission sought national prosperity and a more profound democracy via expanded access to higher education, these radical programs identified working-class empowerment and international solidarity as their end goals. Cold War radicals were decidedly less optimistic about the possibility that higher education could advance genuine social equality in the way the Truman Commission suggested. These Marxist educational programs rejected cross-class collaboration as a strategy and instead emphasized the possibility of using education to turn the working class into a political and emancipatory force. Their educational practice pursued modes of inquiry rooted in working-class experiences and perspectives, emphasizing the belief that solidarity and collective organization were essential for challenging

[47] Jefferson School of Social Science, *Man's Right to Knowledge,* 1954.
[48] California Labor School, Leaflet, 1952.

global inequality and injustice. In doing so, these radical educators positioned their projects as critiques of the logic of competition so central to American capitalist schooling.

Du Bois's earlier notion of higher education as a path for a Talented Tenth to gain leadership training and social influence had long troubled him, given the tensions between personal advancement and collective racial uplift. The tensions between individual class mobility and broader racial progress had prompted him to rethink the Talented Tenth concept multiple times. Now, in these self-avowedly working-class institutions, he developed an educational practice that confronted the equality paradox of capitalist schooling differently. Rather than framing education as a tool for either individual or group competitiveness, these programs detached learning from the demands of social and economic competition altogether. In doing so, Du Bois turned away from his focus on self-sacrificial leadership and prioritized sharing historical and economic knowledge that could help forge a more unified, solidaristic working class. In the next section, I discuss how Du Bois developed a new pedagogical practice during the 1950s as he worked to make his research and teaching on race and empire useful for advancing a working-class political agenda.

Du Bois's Cold War Pedagogy

Du Bois's involvement in radical schools during the Cold War led him to reorient his educational politics away from attempting to resolve the equality paradox of capitalist schooling. Du Bois increasingly saw education as a tool for cultivating working-class solidarity and collective understanding rather than as a tool for training an elite cadre of Black leaders. This section explores the character and substance of Du Bois's Cold War-era pedagogy. In particular, I show how Du Bois's 1950s speeches and lectures reveal a pedagogical commitment to leveraging the lessons of race-conscious labor history to illustrate to white workers and radicals

that their fate was inextricably linked to the fates of Black American workers and workers of color worldwide.[49]

Du Bois's evolving politics during the early Cold War increasingly centered on the power of trade unions and organized workers, reflecting a turn toward interracial and international working-class politics rather than the cross-class, race-based alliances he had advanced in prior decades.[50] As I discussed earlier, during the Great Depression, Du Bois advocated for a political program of Black economic cooperation as opposed to a program based on a militant, interracial labor movement supported by his Marxist contemporaries. He was doubtful that white workers would put aside their racism to fight alongside Black workers and skeptical of the extent to which trade union leaders would prioritize or consider the needs of Black workers. As political scientist Cody Melcher has noted, Du Bois's skepticism toward interracial unionism reflected a long-standing "core assumption" that it was extremely unlikely that white and Black workers would cooperate politically on a class basis.[51]

However, by the 1950s, Du Bois had become disillusioned with the racial solidarity he had once championed. At the same time, his growing personal and political ties with radical union leaders and members made him more aware of trade union struggles, including antiracist efforts within the labor movement. In 1954, at the annual convention of the Peace Progressive

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[49] This emphasis on the costs of imperialism to white workers was distinct from an earlier view that white workers were the *beneficiaries* of U.S. imperialism. He described white American workers as a labor aristocracy who exploited Black workers to protect their own benefits. E.g. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk" in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) [Orig 1920]; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Class Struggle," *The Crisis* 22, no. 4 (August 1921). Elsewhere, Du Bois described this problem as "democratic despotism," a term he used to contrast how democracy in Western countries was secured by way of exploiting colonial peoples. For a discussion of these themes as understood by Du Bois see Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitts, "Democracy and Empire: An Introduction to the International Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought*, ed. Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitts, xv–lvii, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[50] The problems of imperialism, colonialism, and war had long been among Du Bois's most central concerns and continued to be during the 1950s. In other words, Du Bois's growing participation in working-class politics was not a turn to "class reductionism." Rather, Du Bois saw international solidarity as solutions to those problems.

[51] Melcher, "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce."

Party of Massachusetts, he remarked: "The only control which effectively limits the power of big business and introduces a degree of democracy is the trade union. If the trade union is effective and democratic, it can tremendously limit the power of big business. If, on the other hand, it is ruined by dishonesty and inefficiency or more often than that, if it is infiltrated by representatives of big business betraying the workers, then it becomes a part of the tyranny of the capitalistic method."[52] While Du Bois had previously discounted trade unions for being "capitalistic" on the whole, here Du Bois grants not all trade unions are necessarily capitalistic, but also that trade unions are an important democratic force to the extent that they can limit the antidemocratic influence of corporations. This shift away from a politics of racial solidarity anchored by an elite class of Black leaders and toward a politics of interracial and international class solidarity marked a decisive turn, a turn which likewise influenced how he understood the political purpose of education.

Du Bois increasingly saw independent working-class institutions such as the schools he taught at and labor unions as important educational spaces. At a 1952 dinner honoring Progressive Party presidential candidate Vincent Hallinan, he characterized trade unions as "an attempt by primary democratic methods to provide for the education…of workers," underscoring how unions could cultivate "wide social contact," and encourage workers to "demand recognition of [their] manhood."[53] This characterization of the purpose and contribution of trade unions, at least in part, as educational reflected Du Bois's newfound belief in the importance of the education of workers, of the masses, for generating political change. Such education, Du Bois implied, might not always or even predominantly come from instruction by teachers, but rather,

[52] Du Bois, "*Progressive Party and Peace*," September 14, 1952. Du Bois Papers.
[53] Du Bois, "*Hallinan Dinner*," September 24, 1952. Du Bois Papers.

working-class education could instead stem from the experience of engaging in conversation and collective struggle with fellow union members.

Du Bois did not limit the educational character of trade unions to the organic consciousness-raising that came from union membership and collective struggle. He also urged workers to engage in rigorous study of economic, social, and political problems. In a 1954 address to the Greater New York Negro Labor Council, an important though short-lived organization of leftist Black unionists who had been working to initiate a militant, rank-and-file led unionism, he urged his audience to "make careful study of the possibilities of this world."[54] Such study was crucial, he argued, for two reasons. First, it enabled workers to grasp "the hard facts about…the way in which goods are produced and services furnished," helping them overcome the widespread economic illiteracy that Du Bois believed left Americans vulnerable to manipulation.

Beyond economic literacy, Du Bois argued that workers should engage in collective discussion of the limits of possibilities of human existence and cooperation. He asked his audience of Black union militants: "What is the object of unions? Is it that the workers should become better-paid workers or that they should cease to be workers at all and gradually become employers?... In the case of Negroes, is the object of their movement to enter unions on the same condition as white laborers and work in the same way to better the conditions of all workers? Or are they seeking to better the condition of all colored workers no matter how white labor fares?" Du Bois viewed collective study and debate as essential to tackling the enduring dilemmas of interracial competition and solidarity underlying these questions. Importantly, he stressed that answering them was not solely a matter of being better informed, but a serious political

[54] Du Bois, "*Negro Labor Council*," February 12, 1954. Du Bois Papers.

undertaking that demanded collective deliberation among workers. "I am not presuming to point out the conclusions to which you are to come," he noted, implying that by engaging in collective inquiry, workers should develop a shared understanding of the American labor movement's historical shortcomings and a collective vision for changing them. "No one is born with the intuitive answers to such questions," he explained, and "an organization like yours could do its best work if it encouraged this sort of study… [so that] your membership [might] come to intelligent and just conclusions." Through such a process, Du Bois suggested, workers could decide whether to settle for modest improvements within a competitive system or strive for more profound goals of fighting for a more just system of production and distribution.

Du Bois's commitment to interracial and international working-class solidarity was accompanied by a newfound optimism in the possibility of white workers overcoming their racism and a strengthened resolve to educate white workers in a way that would enable them to critically examine their whiteness and facilitate class solidarity with Black workers. Where his earlier writing had emphasized the irrationality and intransigence of white working-class racism, he now believed this prejudice would eventually "yield to reason, experience and economic pressure," as he put it in a 1954 lecture delivered at the Jefferson School.[55]

In the *Black Flame* trilogy, Du Bois explores how shared struggle can loosen the grip of racial hatred, dramatized in the shifting attitudes of successive generations of the poor white Scroggs family. In the first novel, Du Bois depicts how the ravages of poverty became twisted up with bitter racial hatred for Blacks, especially for those Blacks with education or who achieve

[55] Du Bois, "*The Future of the American Negro*," February 4, 1954. Du Bois Papers. Du Bois suggested in *Black Reconstruction* that the enduring appeal of whiteness was related to the way whiteness paid a "public and psychological wage." Ella Myers has recently brought to light other dimensions of Du Bois's understanding of the appeal of whiteness. In addition to "whiteness as wage," she identifies the pleasure of whiteness and whiteness as a certain "perspectival regime" of ownership. Ella Myers, *The Gratifications of Whiteness: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Enduring Rewards of Anti-Blackness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

any measure economic success. The first Scroggs Du Bois introduces is a South Carolina labor leader by day and KKK rider by night. He attends an event where Populist Tom Watson gives a speech on behalf of the Populist Party, articulating a platform that united white and Black farmers into a common cause. While the speech piques his interest, he ultimately becomes a follower of Ben Tillman, whose pro-farmer platform was articulated through the frame of white supremacy and hatred for Blacks.

Du Bois uses the next generation of Scroggs to show how white workers might begin questioning the "wages of whiteness." Like his father and uncle, Joe Scroggs is both labor leader and committed racist, until repeated political and economic crises prompt a gradual shift in his worldview. Returning from World War 1 and with the failed Steel Strike of 1919 fresh in his mind, Scroggs muses: "What did white workers want? All to be rich? Impossible. Could a few, including himself, be rich while the rest remained in poverty, ignorance and disease? Who could or would decide which were the undeserving? It might include white as well as black."[56] His experience of economic crisis in 1929 leads him to question racial violence as a union strategy: "The policy of murder began again, but it did not seem so clear for Scroggs as it had before…He grew less dogmatic on questions of labor and race…he realized the fight which the rich were making on the poor, the employers on the laborers."[57]

The last appearance of Scroggs comes amidst the formation of the CIO, which organized workers according to industry rather than by craft, which also meant organizing Black workers alongside white. Scroggs stands on the other side of the KKK than his father and uncle as his fellow CIO organizers are attacked by mobs. Being on the side of the victims of racial violence, inspires a wider political vision than ever before: "It might mean Socialism, but Scroggs had no

[56] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 309.
[57] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 307-08.

objection to that. The government ought to help people, he argued. And therefore, he made plans to increase the strength of the labor unions to go in for social legislation, and then, in time, to face 'the race problem and the relation of black workers to white." By tracing Joe's progression, Du Bois underscores how economic crisis and participating in shared struggle can erode entrenched racial resentment and open the door to genuine solidarity among workers.[58]

In addition to writing the *Black Flame* novels during the 1950s, Du Bois delivered lectures to union members and gave speeches American workers that provided historical view of how racial division and prejudice had undercut the labor movement to the detriment of all workers. For example, in a 1952 speech delivered on the campaign trail for Progressive Party presidential candidate Vincent Hallinan and vice-presidential candidate Charlotta Bass, Du Bois offered his audience a materialist analysis of white supremacy. He emphasized how white supremacy had been used to enrich corporate developers and impoverish Southern workers. Tracing key moments in Southern history, he points out the contradiction between the industrial and agricultural wealth of the South and its widespread impoverishment: "Southern progress by means of…poverty is the creed of the present South and over it floats the Confederate flag."[59] He reinterpreted the Confederate flag as a symbol of both racial hatred and a tool of ruling-class

[58] Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School*, 330. Juliet Hooker sees a similarly notes how Du Bois connects interracial contact to antiracism in his fiction. Hooker traces interracial intimacy rather than interracial labor solidarity, but her conclusions resonate with my claims here in that she shows how Du Bois portrays interracial intimacy as potentially positive and politically powerful though not in a way that is straightforward, simple, or guaranteed. Juliet Hooker, "To See, Foresee, and Prophesy: Du Bois's Mulatto Fictions and Afro-Futurism," in *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 113–153. For an interpretation that *Black Flame* instead speaks to Du Bois's belief that "reasoned argument with such an obtuse population is not effective in the struggle against white supremacy" see Lisa J. McLeod, "The Rational and the Irrational: W. E. B. Du Bois's Excavation of Whiteness, 1935–1960," in *Forging Freedom in W. E. B. Du Bois's Twilight Years: No Deed but Memory*, ed. Philip Luke Sinitiere (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 17–38.

[59] Du Bois, "The Confederate Flag," October 27, 1952. Du Bois Papers.

domination, used to facilitate the subjugation and impoverishment of Black Americans and white workers.

Du Bois also contends that the Confederate flag discreetly reflects the ruling class's pride in their effective defeat of organized labor. This symbolism, he adds, explains why the flag was flown at both Democratic and Republican campaign events in that year's presidential race. Du Bois argued that the flag represented the defeat of workers in both the North and the South: northern workers lost manufacturing jobs due to the disorganization of workers in the South, while Southern workers faced persistently low wages. Moreover, the exclusion of Black workers from Southern unions prevented effective resistance, as demonstrated by the failed 1951 textile strike. All this evidence taken together, Du Bois concluded, "Here looms the fight of the great corporations for cheap labor and disfranchisement, and this is what the new waving of the Confederate flag means today." Whereas both Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower and Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson's campaigns appealed to white supremacy to court Southern voters, Du Bois worked to build a new working-class coalition through his pedagogical practice.

This same pedagogical practice is evident in the lecture to the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, the speech with which I opened this chapter. Echoing the argument he presented in his Confederate flag address but focusing on South Africa, Du Bois showed how major U.S. investors and corporations, including Morgan, Rockefeller, Ford, General Motors, Firestone, amassed considerable wealth from gold and diamond mining while Black South Africans labored at poverty wages of ten cents a day. He emphasized that these exploitative conditions remained intact only through a rigid, racialized division of labor between white and Black miners and through violent repression of any organizing efforts.

Du Bois's purpose for describing the deathly consequences Black South African miners faced for trying to organize was not only to inspire moral outrage in his audience but also to show how the subjugation of those workers made American workers vulnerable to exploitation and subjugation. More specifically, he linked the exploitative circumstances of Black South African miners to imperialist wars. He argued that the possibility of relatively higher wages for American miners depended on "compulsory military service, increasing taxation, inflated prices, and the deterioration of public education, housing, and social services."[60] In other words, Du Bois maintained, American workers were paying for their comparatively better wages with both their lives and their tax dollars—the raw materials of war. Moreover, the outcome of these wars forced U.S. laborers to compete with an unorganized, extremely low-paid global workforce, thereby depressing wages and weakening unions' bargaining power. "The present Cold War, the Korean War, and the imminent third world war," he warned, were designed "to reduce the labor of the world and its materials to the control of American business," compelling American unions "to compete with the cheapest and most ignorant, unorganized labor of the world." By illuminating the costs and consequences of imperialism for workers of all races, Du Bois employed a pedagogical practice that could cultivate the race- and class-consciousness needed for international working-class solidarity.

In short, Du Bois's Cold War-era pedagogy reflected a turn away from his politics of racial solidarity and toward an antiracist, class-based politics. By drawing from the historical record repeated instances of the U.S. labor movement undermining its own power because of conscious and unconscious white solidarity, Du Bois sought to lay a foundation for a more inclusive and effective working-class politics. This sharpened commitment to race-conscious

[60] Du Bois, "Trade Unions and Colonies," 1952.

labor education not only reflected Du Bois's deepening anticapitalism but also his growing faith in the possibility that ordinary workers would lead the world toward a more just, more equal, and more humane existence.

Conclusion

This chapter began with Du Bois's description of a new and troubling manifestation of the equality paradox of capitalist schooling, one that became especially prevalent in postwar America: a society that organizes education around competition over different kinds of job training may undermine its own capacity to meet its needs. At the dawn of the Cold War, this concern did not belong to radicals alone. The Truman Commission's *Higher Education for American Democracy* earnestly confronted the political consequences of the competition for limited educational resources. They envisioned expanded access, curricular reform, and a democratic ethos as ways to reconcile the demands of economic productivity with social and political freedom and equality.

Du Bois, by contrast, increasingly rejected the premise that capitalist society could overcome its contradictions through the right distribution of educational resources, even if those resources were abundant. Losing faith in elite leadership as a vehicle for racial uplift, Du Bois turned instead to independent, working-class institutions as the site of a new kind of educational politics. This new educational politics did not offer a plan or program for overcoming the equality paradox but rather illuminated an alternative horizon.

In the radical labor schools of the 1950s, Du Bois joined others in cultivating educational practices grounded not in credentialism or class mobility, but in working-class study, struggle, and solidarity. These spaces offered a different answer to the problem with which this chapter

began: how to ensure economic and social stability in a society that devalues essential labor? For Du Bois and his fellow travelers, the solution lay in building the working-class power necessary to transform the terms under which all labor is valued. In this way, Du Bois and his fellow radical educators show how education might be put in the service of empowering workers to understand, contest, and remake the world.

Conclusion The Democratic Case for Class Struggle Politics in the Neoliberal University

I began this dissertation with an account of the 1925 student strike at Fisk University, suggesting that strikers' personal sacrifice illuminated the high political stakes of struggles for dignity and self-determination over Black higher education in the Jim Crow South. Moreover, by situating the development of Du Bois's educational politics within the history of ruling-class whites using schooling for their own purposes, I have tried to illuminate the historically specific political implications of different ideas about the economic and political purposes of education. And although we are undeniably in a very different political moment than the segregation era and the Cold War, the lessons of this history should not be completely relegated to the past.

Du Bois's developing and sometimes contradictory educational politics provides an illuminating lens from which to look at the intertwined challenges of civic status hierarchies, capitalist power relations, and leadership. First, education for Du Bois was a key technology for advancing political aims, and for this reason, his educational writings lay bare the underlying political purposes of education perhaps more than those concerned more centrally with questions of pedagogy, curriculum, and access. Secondly, Du Bois's near century-long life gave him the unique vantage point that attended participating in struggles and debates over Black education from the beginning to the end of the segregation era. Third Du Bois's ever-deepening commitment to socialism provides an inside look into the efforts to reconcile the ideology and politics of elite-brokerage with the goal of the liberation of the masses. Ultimately, tracing Du Bois's political thought illuminates much more than his own political and intellectual journey;

this study also shines a light on the competing political and strategic visions for Black schooling and Black politics, even those muted ones that were repressed and suffocated in the Jim Crow and Cold War contexts.

Throughout the dissertation, I have focused on questions of power–how it is reproduced asymmetrically and how it is built and leveraged from both the top down and the bottom up. I have tried to show along the way that the organization and distribution of power that has characterized American capitalism has significantly undermined the practice of collective self-rule. Class struggle, as a practice that challenges the inherently undemocratic social relations of capitalism, gestures towards the possibility of a more democratic way of being and relating to each other, both in school and in society.

To conclude, I draw out this final point about the relationship between class struggle and democratic politics by considering the contemporary neoliberal university. Although the contemporary period is undoubtedly a vastly different moment than the one I have examined in this dissertation—politically, economically, and racially—the politics of class struggle that the Fisk students embodied nevertheless provides an occasion to consider the efficacy of class struggle politics in the neoliberal university. Countless scholars have identified that the neoliberal university rests on a logic of competition and market-driven imperatives: it prioritizes revenue generation, adopts corporate management styles, and increasingly frames education as an individual investment rather than a public good. This shift produces a more transactional conception of learning, one that caters to economic productivity over civic or ethical ends. Students and parents become customers, faculty members become service providers, and the goal of meeting quantifiable metrics of success eclipses the concerns of civic and democratic life.

Moreover, the intensifying centralization of power in the hands of upper-level administrators and university boards, creates a troubling dilemma: at the same time as members of the university community are increasingly dependent on administrators and trustees to represent and advocate for their interests, these same leaders are increasingly accountable to external economic and political pressures. The result is a climate in which efficiency and managerial control prevail, reducing the autonomy of schools and departments in favor of a more hierarchical, corporate-style governance model, and by extension, the erosion of democratic self-rule in universities. Administrators and trustees are inadequate as representatives because they are unequally accountable to different parts of their "constituency."

In response to these concerns, many have called for strengthening shared governance between administrators and faculty. Shared governance, as defined by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) envisions a system in which faculty, administrators, trustees, and sometimes students all share in the university's decision-making processes, each with distinct yet interlocking spheres of responsibility. According to the AAUP, faculty should have primary responsibility over academic matters—curriculum, research, faculty status—while boards of trustees generally oversee financial and institutional policy. Though trustees may hold the final legal authority, the AAUP insists that robust consultation and respect for faculty expertise protect academic freedom and uphold the integrity of the university's educational mission.[265] However, as Timothy Kaufman-Osborne cautions, shared governance may function as "placebo," obscuring the fact that boards and senior managers, legally and structurally, still hold ultimate power to override faculty participation whenever it conflicts with financial or political imperatives. Because boards of trustees are the final legal authority, faculty and students

[265] These principles are laid out in American Association of University Professors, "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," *AAUP Bulletin* 52, no. 4 (1966): 375–379.

may be consulted, but their input can be disregarded whenever it conflicts with economic calculations or donor interests.[266] Kaufman-Osborne underscores that the effectiveness of shared governance, therefore, does not get at the root of the problem: the autocratic underpinnings of universities' corporate charters.

It is in light of the autocratic character of universities that we can see the democratic character of efforts to wrest control over decisions from university trustees and administrators that are attempted through collective action. The campus movement that sprung up in the wake of Hamas' breach of the border wall separating Gaza from Israel in October 2023 and Israel's subsequent military campaign provides a relevant and recent example. One of the central demands being made by protestors on college campuses concerned university finances. Specifically, protestors demanded that their university leaders disclose their financial holdings such that members of the university community could trace connections between their university's investment portfolio and the Israeli Defense Forces, for example through investments in weapons research conducted in Israel.[267] Additionally, protestors demanded that wherever these connections might be, universities should divest.

At the University of Michigan, protestors attempted to subject these demands to scrutiny by a wider constituency than just those participating in the protest movement through a student-wide referendum on a resolution that would demonstrate popular support for their demands.[268] The resolution involved calling on the University to characterize the violence against

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[266] Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, *The Autocratic Academy: Reenvisioning Rule within America's Universities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 163-193.

[267] The coalition of University of Michigan and Washtenaw County community members that anchored the campus protests conducted research through the information that was publicly available to demonstrate financial connections between the University of Michigan's investment portfolio and Israel. Tahrir Coalition, *The University Endowment and the Genocide in Gaza: An Investigation of the University of Michigan Endowment*, November, February 2024. https://tahrirumich.org/research/endowment-guide

[268] Students at the University of Michigan have various opportunities to put forward popular referenda and elections are overseen by the Central Student Government.

Palestinians in Gaza (a) as genocidal and (b) as part of a larger history of settler colonialism and to create a committee to gather information and recommendations on divestment.[269] A competing resolution called for the University to actively work to ease tensions between students on campus.[270] After the vote had been open for three days, the University's general counsel, Tim Lynch, notified the student body that a violation of procedure necessitated that the vote be cancelled.[271] More recently, University of Michigan President Santa Ono admitted at an Anti-Defamation League event that he personally decided to cancel the vote because he thought it was "wrong." Moreover, with respect to the protestors demands, he said: "My response and the board's response to this call to divest and to cut those relationships was to actually invest even more."[272]

We do not need to take any particular stance on the student government referendum or on the demands to disclose and divest the University's financial holdings from Israel to appreciate the democratic efforts of the protestors compared to the university's official leaders. After their vote was cancelled by official authorities, the protestors held what they called "a people's referendum," further insisting on greater democratic scrutiny over the University's budget. While the independently run referendum did not represent the entire student body because it did not have the reach or legitimacy that a student government-run referendum would have, the efforts of the protestors nevertheless involved a laudable earnestness for building a majority and

[269] University of Michigan Central Student Government, *Assembly Resolution 13-025: University Accountability in the Face of Genocide,* "Revised Assembly Resolution: University Accountability in the Face of Genocide," Nov 2023.
[270] University of Michigan Central Student Government, *Assembly Resolution 13-026: CSG Response to Atrocities in the Middle East,* "A Resolution Regarding the Preservation of the University Community and the Support of Those Impacted by the Current War in Israel and Gaza," Nov 2023.
[271] Office of the Vice President for Communications, "CSG Resolutions and Voting Process," https://publicaffairs.vpcomm.umich.edu/key-issues/csg-resolutions-and-voting-process/.
[272] As quoted in Steve Neavling, "After Boycott Calls, U-M President Doubled Down on Israeli Investments: President Santa Ono's Statements at an Anti-Defamation League Conference Raise Serious Questions about His Role in the School's Crackdown on Pro-Palestinian Protests," *Detroit Metro Times*, March 12, 2025.

engaging in collective deliberation. The model of the people's referendum also offers a distinct approach to that of shared governance articulated by the AAUP in that the goals of the protestors was not limited to challenging the distribution of authority in the existing institution but to enact what it might look like if collective self-rule were a founding principle rather than a check on the basic hierarchical model that insulates questions of finances and budgets from public scrutiny.

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