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W.E.B. Du Bois and the Basic American Negro Creed: The AA AE, Censorship, and Repressive Tolerance

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Abstract: The authors examine W.E.B. Du Bois Basic American Negro Creed and argue that its exclusion from the Carnegie Corporation funded Bronze Booklets series represents an example of repressive tolerance by the AA AE.

W.E.B. Du Bois is arguably the brightest star in African American intellectual history. He is frequently cited in adult education literature for his concept of double consciousness along with his educational and socio-political theory of the talented tenth. His oft cited book, *Souls of Black Folk* originally published in 1903, is an intellectual and literary masterpiece. Yet Du Bois can be understood as a complex figure who continually reassessed evolving American racial, political, and economic dynamics and to formulate a progressive educational, political, and economic agenda.

As Du Bois grew older, his views became increasingly radical and controversial which served to marginalize him not only from mainstream liberal minded whites but also among the black intellectual community. During the depression years, Du Bois was reformulating his ideas concerning race progress away from the NAACP's platform of civil rights reform toward a more radical view (Marable, 1982). Whereas he previously believed that racism was primarily due to ignorance, he had begun to conceptualize the stronger relation of economic factors to racism based on the analytical tools of Marxism (Du Bois 1982). By 1935 Du Bois had formulated a concrete plan for race progress and black liberation through political activism, group solidarity, community involvement through education.

In the second of his autobiographies, *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois recounts the development of his ideas and describes an episode with Alain Locke and the American Association of Adult Education (AA AE) sponsored Associates in Negro Folk Education (ANFE). He recalls (pp. 119-122) his being commissioned in 1936 by the ANFE to undertake a study that would be part of the larger series of Bronze Booklets to be used as source material for use by Black adult education groups. Du Bois mentions how at that time he was ready to put in permanent form "that economic program of the Negro which I believed should succeed, and implement the long fight for political and civil rights and social equality which it was my privilege for a quarter of a century to champion" (319). The idea of the piece was to describe the conditions of the Negro under Roosevelt's New Deal with suggestions for possible courses of action. In Du Bois' estimation *Negro and the New Deal* "made a fair and pretty exhaustive study of the experience of the Negro from 1933 to 1936" (319). As part of his study Du Bois included "a statement and credo which I had worked out through correspondence with a number of the younger Negro scholars" (319), whose identity he does not reveal. This work comprised four statements summarizing the current condition of the Negro race followed by an eleven-item *Basic American Negro Creed*.

Three pages later *Dusk of Dawn* contains three fascinating sentences that identify one of the most puzzling and provocative omissions in the history of American adult education.

Du Bois writes that his *Basic American Negro Creed* “proved unacceptable both to the Adult Education Association and to its colored affiliates. Consequently when I returned home from abroad the manuscript although ordered and already paid for, was returned to me as rejected for publication. Just who pronounced this veto I do not know” (322). Du Bois does not speculate in *Dusk of Dawn* why the creed was considered unacceptable, but a reading of it (it is reproduced in *Dusk of Dawn* on pages 319-322) gives strong clues. The creed is an uncompromising indictment of American democratic and egalitarian ideals arguing that Negroes are systematically excluded from economic and political processes while being relegated to the status of “disenfranchised peons” (319), “disinherited illiterates” (320) and “parasites” (320). In Du Bois’ estimation the way to create a truly democratic America is not through “the escape of individual genius into the white world” (320) but through “unity of racial effort, so far as this is necessary for self-defense and self-expression” (320).

Du Bois introduces his analysis by naming White supremacy as the enemy of the Negro race arguing that economic inequality has been forced upon the Negro race “by the unyielding determination of the mass of the white race to enslave, exploit and insult Negroes” (322). Second, the creed clearly situates racial advancement within a broader working class movement, in which trade unions will play a substantial role. Du Bois states that “we believe that Negro workers should join the labor movement and affiliate with such trade unions as welcome them and treat them fairly” (321) echoing other leaders such as Paul Robeson (an unjustifiably neglected adult educator) who over many years worked to influence American trade unions to make the fight against White supremacy a priority. Through workers’ councils organized by Negroes Du Bois believed that “interracial understanding should strive to fight race prejudice in the working class” (321).

Third, and most controversially, Du Bois linked the advancement of the Negro race, and the abolition of racism, to Socialism. The sixth element of his creed states baldly “We believe in the ultimate triumph of some form of Socialism the world over; that is, common ownership and control of the means of production and equality of income” (321). This equalizing of work and wealth is urged as “the beginning of the rise of the Negro race in this land and the world over, in power, learning, and accomplishment” (321). This equalization is to be achieved through taxation and through “vesting the ultimate power of the state in the hands of the workers” (321), a situation that will be accompanied by the working class demanding their “proportionate share in administration and public expenditure” (322). Du Bois ends the creed with an expansive appeal to people of all races to join in fighting White supremacy and creating Socialism. In his words “to this vision of work, organization and service, we welcome men (sic) of all colors so long as their basic subscription to this basic creed is sincere and proven by their deeds” (322).

The Locke-Bryson Correspondence

What reasons can be inferred for Du Bois’ paper being excluded from the Bronze Booklets series? In what follows we examine aspects of the historical record to reveal what happened and to argue that the Bronze booklets – though lauded as an important landmark in African American adult education scholarship – had their full impact blunted by the forced removal of Du Bois’ work from their catalog.

Over the course of ANFE activity, Locke and Lyman Bryson, who represented the AAAE board, exchanged a series of letters in which the issues shaping the development of the Bronze booklet series took shape. As series co-editor Locke envisioned the Booklets to

be used in Negro adult education programs across the country. However, there are always existed tension between what the AAAE leadership was willing to support and what the Negro adult education leadership wanted to do. In a 1932 letter, Morse Cartwright, executive director of AAAE, wrote to Locke that “the Negro adult education experiments were yet in such early stages that to propagandize for them at the present time might be dangerous” (Guy, 1993, p. 150). Specifically, Cartwright’s concern had to do with sanctioning a racialist curriculum that was relevant to the special needs of African Americans in a racist society.

AAAE’s role in circumscribing permissible Negro adult education was replayed in the development of the Bronze Booklets. Writing to Bryson in February 1935 Locke indicated that Du Bois had taken several editorial suggestions to heart but asked in the letter “do you agree with me that it is debatable about printing Du Bois’ summary creed?” Locke proposed either printing a summary of the creed or omitting it entirely. In June 1936 Locke further wrote to Bryson saying he had paid Du Bois for the manuscript and that he had curbed Du Bois’ style (to Du Bois’ evident annoyance). But he goes on to object to Bryson’s view that the Du Bois pamphlet was too controversial:-

[A]s much as I agree with you about the style, inexactitude of some of the statements ... and the desirability of toning down as many of the strictures and propagandist flings as possible, I do not agree that we were or can be committed to purely neutral subject matter dealing with ‘what was fine and worthy in Negro culture and in the contributions which they have made to American culture’. It was clear to me from the beginning, and I hope I made it clear, that part of the series would treat contemporary social and economic issues and their connection with the problems and the programs of the Negro. Fortunately, I myself had perfectly neutral topics, but others like Economic Reconstruction and the Negro, A World View of Race, The Negro and Social Reconstruction were intended to be controversial. Of course, originally I had planned authors who I thought would be a bit more judicial and sportsmanlike; giving the other side a fair show. And I had banked on the demi-Marxian slant of the Bunche point of view to balance the racialist view of Du Bois in a very interesting way. The project would justify itself not by avoiding such issues but by balancing up and boxing the compass as far as our resources permitted us to.

Several points are of interest here. First, Locke apparently subordinated to Bryson implying that it was Bryson who held ultimate power over editorial decisions. Second, Locke characterized his disagreements with Du Bois as ones of style and balance, not of perspective. Indeed, he defends Du Bois’ position as a necessary counterbalance to that of Ralph Bunche (author of *World Aspects of the Race Problem*). Third, it appears that Bryson’s presence as a White person on the ANFE committee compromised the freedom of action of the organization. “Locke’s experience with ANFE underscores the dependent nature of the relationship between the ANFE and the Corporation. His authority over the affairs of the organization was in name rather than fact” (Guy, 1993, p. 166). To Du Bois’ credit, he does not directly accuse Locke of censorship in *Dusk of Dawn*, nor does he speculate who stopped publication of the Pamphlet but there can be little doubt this episode adversely affected their previous respectful relationship.

Below is Du Bois’ creed as it appears in *Dusk of Dawn* (pp. 320-322). The emphasis in the text is added to indicate what elements possibly were too controversial: “Not by the development of upper classes anxious to exploit the workers, nor by the escape of individual genius into the white world, can we effect the salvation of our group in America. And the salvation of this group carries with it the emancipation not only of the darker races

of men who make the vast majority of mankind, but all men of all races. We therefore propose this:

BASIC AMERICAN NEGRO CREED

- a) As American Negroes, *we believe in unity of racial effort, so far as this is necessary for self-defense and self-expression, leading ultimately to the goal of a united humanity and the abolition of all racial distinctions.*
- b) We repudiate all artificial and hate-engendering deification of race separation as such; but just as sternly, *we repudiate an enervating philosophy of Negro escape into an artificially privileged white race which has long sought to enslave, exploit and tyrannize over all mankind.*
- c) We believe that the Talented Tenth among American Negroes, fitted by education and character to think and do, should find primary employment in determining by study and measurement the present field and demand for racial action and the method by which the masses may be guided along this path.
- d) We believe that the problems which now call for such racial planning are Employment, Education and Health; these three; but the greatest of these is Employment.
- e) We believe that the labor force and intelligence of twelve million people is more than sufficient to supply their own wants and make their advancement secure. Therefore, we believe that, if carefully and intelligently planned, *a co-operative Negro industrial system in America can be established in the midst of and in conjunction with the surrounding national industrial organization and in intelligent accord with that reconstruction of the economic basis of the nation which must sooner or later be accomplished.*
- f) *We believe that Negro workers should join the labor movement and affiliate with such trade unions as welcome them and treat them fairly. We believe that Workers' Councils organized by Negroes for interracial understanding should strive to fight race prejudice in the working class.*
- g) *We believe in the ultimate triumph of some form of Socialism the world over; that is, common ownership and control of the means of production and equality of income.*
- h) We do not believe in lynching as a cure for crime; nor in war as a necessary defense of culture; nor in violence as the only path to economic revolution. Whatever may have been true in other times and places, we believe that today in America we can abolish poverty by reason and the intelligent use of the ballot, and above all by that dynamic discipline of soul and sacrifice of comfort which, revolution or no revolution, must ever be the only real path to economic justice and world peace.
- i) *We conceive this matter of work and equality of adequate income as not the end of our effort, but the beginning of the rise of the Negro race in this land and the world over, in power, learning and accomplishment.*
- j) *We believe in the use of our vote for equalizing wealth through taxation, for vesting the ultimate power of the state in the hands of the workers; and as an integral part of the working class, we demand our proportionate share in administration and public expenditure.*
- k) *This is and is designed to be a program of racial effort and 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; but to this vision of work,*

organization and service, we welcome all men of colors so long as their subscription to this basic creed is sincere and proven by their deeds.”

Repressive Tolerance

As articulated by Herbert Marcuse (1965) repressive tolerance describes the way institutions and organizations – such as philanthropic organizations (the Carnegie Corporation) and professional associations (AAAE) - marginalize dissenting views and efforts for democratic social change whilst appearing to support them. How does repressive tolerance work to achieve this? Essentially it ensures the continued marginality of minority views by placing them in close, comparative association with dominant ones. When a curriculum is widened to include dissenting and radical perspectives that are considered alongside the mainstream perspective, the minority perspectives are always overshadowed by the mainstream one. This happens even if the radical perspectives are scrupulously accorded equal time and space. As long as the dominant, Whitemainstream perspective is included as one of several possible options for study its presence inevitably overshadows the minority ones which will always be perceived as alternatives, as others – never as the natural center to which students should turn.

Marcuse argues that repressive tolerance is hard to detect because it masks its repressive dimensions behind the façade of open, even-handedness. Alternative ideas are not banned or even censored. Critical texts are published and critical messages circulated. Previously subjugated knowledges and perspectives (Marxism, Africentrism or Queer Theory for example) are inserted into the curriculum. The defenders of the status quo can point to the existence of multiple perspectives, as in the case of the *Bronze Booklets* series, even while marginalizing and minimizing truly radical and threatening voices (as in the case of Du Bois). What results is that real democratic debate is muted by the fact that the repressed texts themselves are hard to get, or incredibly expensive. More likely the radical meanings are neutered because they are framed as the expressions of obviously weird minority opinion. As Marcuse writes; “other words can be spoken and heard, other ideas can be expressed, but, at the massive scale of the conservative majority ... they are immediately ‘evaluated’ (i.e. automatically understood) in terms of the public language – a language which determined ‘a priori’ the direction in which the thought process moves. Thus the process of reflection ends where it started: in the given conditions and relations” (p. 96).

The contemporary discourse of diversity, of opening up the field of adult education to diverse voices, perspectives and traditions, can be analyzed quite effectively using the idea of repressive tolerance. Providing an array of alternative perspectives and sensibilities seems to be a major step in moving away from a situation in which White, male, European voices dominate. Yet Marcuse alerts us to the possibility that this apparent broadening of voices can actually reinforce the ideology of White supremacy that it purports to undercut. By widening curricula to include a variety of traditions we appear to be celebrating all positions. But the history of White supremacy, and the way that language and structures of feeling frame Whiteness as the natural, inevitable conceptual center, means that the newly included voices, sensibilities and traditions are always positioned as the exotic other. Adult educators can soothe their consciences by believing progress is being made towards racial inclusivity and cultural equity, and can feel they have played their small but important part in the struggle. But as long as these subjugated traditions are considered alongside the dominant ideology, repressive tolerance ensures they will always be subtly marginalized as exotic, quaint, other than the natural center. The logic of liberating or discriminating tolerance would require an immersion only in a racial or cultural tradition that diverged radically from mainstream

ideology; for example, an adult education graduate program that allowed only the consideration of Africentric ideas and perspectives. The logic of repressive tolerance holds that as long as Africentrism is considered as one of many possible perspectives, including Eurocentrism, it will always be positioned as the marginal alternative to the White supremacist center.

The exclusion of the Du Bois booklet, and of the Basic American Negro Creed, was an example of repressive tolerance par excellence. AAAE could point to the existence of the ANFE, and the publication of the Bronze booklets, as evidence of their democratic commitment to the abolition of racial superiority. Yet the power of the series was compromised in two ways. First, by the framing of the series as compiling how the most worthy aspects of Negro culture has contributed to American culture – a semantic framing implying that Black culture exists outside of and separate from (White) American life and culture, rather than being constitutive of and endemic to it. Second, by exorcising from the booklets the ideologically radical aspects of Du Bois' work, particularly his indictment of the persistence of an ideology of White Supremacy bent on continual degradation and enslavement of Negroes, his advocacy of American and world socialism, and his location of Negro advancement within a broader labor movement and revolution of the American working class.

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