THE TALENTED TENTH: LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS AND THE AFRO-AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS, 1895-1919

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THE slogan “Talented Tenth” originated from the pen of W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903,1 when he set out in the following terms his optimistic yet subtle blend of elitism and noblesse oblige:

The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the worst, in their own and other races.2

Du Bois had felt it necessary to evolve a new and alternative form of racial leadership, as he had come to despair of the seemingly accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington, the Principal of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. Since his famous Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895, Washington had been recognized by many whites as the black spokesman on racial issues, and his effective censorship over the flow of white philanthropy enhanced his influence. It has now been shown from his covert operations that he was by no means as conciliatory to white Southern mores as he appeared at the time,3

1 William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) was educated at Fisk, Harvard and Berlin, being the first Negro to be awarded a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1896. He taught at Wilberforce and Atlanta, while continuing his research into the black situation. He was a founder member of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, and for a time President of the American Negro Academy. In addition he edited and published many works, and organized the first Pan-African Congress (Paris, 1919). After being indicted by a grand jury in 1951, he became increasingly disillusioned with life in the U.S.A., and accepted eventually President Nkrumah’s invitation to live in Ghana, where he died.


3 There are several biographies of Washington, and articles too numerous to list. Works to be noted include: L. R. Harlan, Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader (vol. 1, New York, 1972); A. Meier, Negro Thought
but the impression created by him and his "Tuskegee Machine" provoked the Talented Tenth to a more assertive and radical position. The dividing lines between the two groups were never absolute, and the debate seemed at times to be as much concerned with intra-racial power struggles as with policy, for the Talented Tenth objected as much to his political influence and patronage as to his philosophy. This article will examine how the Talented Tenth defined their alternative, and how they faced the realities that confronted Black America in the period which has come to be known as the "nadir" in race relations,\(^1\) an epoch characterized by segregation and disfranchisement in the South and discrimination in the North, and by the physical and psychological abuses these conditions fostered.

It is not possible to quantify precisely the Talented Tenth, but one can describe and enumerate the pool on which this group could draw. The Talented Tenth was never coterminous with either the upper or the middle class, and was, in principle at least, open to all satisfactory aspirants, admission being on the grounds of proven ability and a willingness to assume the responsibilities of utilizing that ability to help ameliorate the condition of the less fortunate of the race. A higher education was the most obvious qualification, but due to the difficulties which beset the race and impeded Black education,\(^2\) self-educated men, if they accepted the values the Talented Tenth encouraged, were common. As the self-taught cannot be enumerated, and as some graduates opted for self-aggrandisement, thus abdicating


their responsibilities for racial uplift, any discussion of black graduates will only give guidelines to the potential rather than to the actual size of this group. Between 1876 and 1930, 51 doctorates were conferred on Blacks, of which 90 per cent were Ph.D.s and only 10 per cent professional degrees, while between 1826 and 1936 a total of 43,821 Afro-Americans graduated from college or professional schools, 14.7 per cent from Northern and Western institutions and 85.3 per cent from segregated black schools in the South. Of these undergraduates, 70.9 per cent were academic and only 29.1 per cent professional.¹

The occupational distribution of the Talented Tenth was of paramount importance in the structuring of their leadership role and philosophy, which was framed so as to maximize their training and skills. In a 1912 survey of 1000 living black graduates out of an estimated 5000 since 1823, Du Bois enumerated 54 per cent teachers, 20 per cent preachers, 7 per cent physicians, dentists and pharmacists, 4 per cent lawyers, and 15 per cent in business and other occupations, including journalism.² Blacks were usually more successful in professional or technical work than in business, but even so, before 1890 very few had entered the professions.³

School teaching was the principal profession, and helps to account for the relatively high number of black women professionals. Despite the often grim conditions, many saw this as their best career opportunity. Demands for more and better education would not only benefit the race, but provide more numerous and interesting jobs for the Talented Tenth. It was basic self-preservation to increase the number of educational consumers, but at the same time education was also the embodiment of the very substance of the American way of life. Prohibited during slavery, education was symbolic of the black man's freedom and progress, and was seen as the pathway both to eventual acceptance by the white world and to happier race relations.

² *Crisis*, iv (July 1912), 133.
The Afro-American minister, in contrast to the teacher, had a virtually complete monopoly behind the caste wall. Negroes were more divided than whites in their religious affiliations, yet they tended to go to church more frequently. However, many ministers, although enumerated statistically as professionals, fall outside the definition of the Talented Tenth, for in many cases their position owed more to their ability to convert the unbelievers than to their literacy. On the other hand, there was a handful of prominent churchmen, who, in addition to their pastoral duties, were civic leaders, theologians and social theorists.

Black physicians and dentists were often the most prestigious members of their communities, being almost invariably the best educated. They were likely to be relatively affluent, but the struggle to finance their training had often necessitated manual work in the vacations, and had hence acquainted them with labourers and their problems. In contrast, the lawyer was the most likely of all the professionals to have had a white collar background. But as the legal profession in America was so closely related to politics, the disfranchisement of the Negro throughout the South, and the subsequent denigration of the Black man's stature in public life after 1877, sharply curtailed the opportunities for the entry of Blacks into the legal profession, especially in the South.

Geographically, the Talented Tenth were heavily concentrated in Washington, D.C., which was partly due to the influence of Howard University, but which also partly reflects the history of black education in the nation's capital, and the continuing in-migration of those seeking employment in government clerical positions or in teaching. Although Washington was predominantly Southern in mores and outlook, the migration of intellectuals should be seen as part of a more general movement to the North. However, the impression of a mass exodus of the Talented Tenth from the South at the first available opportunity, is not borne out by the figures. As late as 1930, that is, even after the great migrations of 1915-19, 53 per cent of all black

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graduates lived in the Southern States, with a further 21.6 per cent in the Border states.¹

But residence is not the same as mobility; of all the Southern-born graduates, 74.5 per cent remained in the South, while 23.4 per cent migrated North, 1.1 per cent to the West, and 0.2 per cent abroad. Northern-born graduates tended to remain in or return to the North, but the proportion that went South is slightly larger than that of Southern graduates who went North.² It would appear, however, that those most likely to be designated "leaders" were also those who were most likely to move, but as a rule the Talented Tenth lived and worked where their race was concentrated.

Other factors tend to be more subjective. Accurate data on income levels is not available, but generally speaking professional and clerical workers were better paid, although their salaries were considerably less than their white counterparts. White prejudice and the poverty of their black clientele combined to diminish the remuneration of those dependent on the Negro market, while both income and the cost of living varied regionally.

Mulattos were often to be found among the Talented Tenth. The preponderance varied with the professions; where little training or ability was required, the number of darker-skinned Afro-Americans was relatively high, for example in the ministry, whereas in pursuits like medicine and the law which demanded more education, the number of blacks was relatively low. Before World War I, Afro-Americans often reflected white attitudes to mulattos, who for a time dominated the business and professional classes.³ But as the general population advanced, more of the latent talent of the race found expression. Until the War, most of the Talented Tenth were of mixed ancestry, but after 1919 they were no longer able to supply all the needs of the Black community.

Religious affiliation was not really an important criterion for membership of the Talented Tenth, except as a factor in more general social mobility. But while education and income

¹ C. S. Johnson, op. cit. p. 38.
² Ibid. p. 53.
³ Myrdal, op. cit. p. 697.
equipped the Talented Tenth for upper or middle class status, their life-style patterns ought not to be confused with those of the "Black Bourgeoisie". Any attempt to augment status by conspicuous consumption or the exploitation of the masses was the direct negation of their philosophy of self-sacrifice and virtuous example. Discretion, taste, piety and respectability were the virtues they revered, for the legacy of missionary influence and evangelical enthusiasm had diffused a middle-class value structure throughout the recipients of its benefactions. Du Bois himself drew a sharp contrast between the Black aristocracy in education, wealth and social efficiency, and those who were leaders or ideal makers in thought, work and morals.

The external pressure of colour prejudice bound all together and intensified the economic uncertainties which left little energy for social reform. Those who consciously became "Race leaders" in a very committed way, for example organization men, newspaper editors and some teachers and churchmen, in so doing often forfeited the financial remuneration, deference and status that could have been theirs had they concentrated on their personal careers.

The decision to participate actively in race leadership was consciously taken. Being black in white America, it was impossible not to be racially aware, but it was a different thing to become a race champion. It is thus only possible to delineate the pool of available talent from which the Talented Tenth could recruit, and the objective and subjective criteria which had to coincide before any individual felt that he was indeed a member of the Talented Tenth. Many opted out, while many heroic efforts go unrecorded. Never approaching anything like one tenth, and probably nearer one hundredth of the black population, the Talented Tenth wielded considerable influence

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1 E. F. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Ill., 1957), part II.
in opinion forming, protest leadership, and mediation with the white world. It is this ultra-active role and self-sacrificing ideology that distinguished them and bound them together spiritually as a leadership group.

Fusing together an ideal of education, a philosophy of social uplift and a creed of morality, Du Bois claimed that this privileged group would elevate those "worth saving", so that the Talented Tenth would always welcome those who had proved their fitness to be enumerated in its ranks. In this sense it was not to be a closed caste, but rather the pinnacle of a meritocracy. Acknowledging the immediate benefits of industrial education for the majority of his race and pointing out the interdependence between the higher and the industrial types of education, Du Bois united his ideals of education and leadership into a codified scheme:

... human education is not simply a matter of schools, it is much more a matter of family and group life—the training of one's home, of one's daily companions, of one's social class... Education must not simply teach work—it must teach life.

Education in this way became a total experience—the socialization of the personality and the development of morality in addition to the acquisition of knowledge; for it was hoped that sufficient good teaching would enable self-control to take over from instruction in the sphere of personal conduct. Sometimes the suggestion was also implicit that the school and the teacher were often necessary to remedy the moral deficiencies in the early background of the scholar. Only forty years after Emancipation it was too much to expect the negation of all the evil legacies of slavery, so the Talented Tenth looked on themselves not only as leaders and teachers, but also as living examples of the morally and materially attainable. The idea of the Talented Tenth also drew partially on the self-help tradition in Black thought, by insisting that the race should furnish its own leaders to regenerate itself from within. They thus provided an intellectual parallel to the self-help formulae Booker T. Washington was propounding at this time with regard to agriculture and business. As the concept had first appeared in its systematized form in a book edited by Washington, a certain amount of ideological reciprocity.

1 B. T. Washington et al., op. cit. pp. 45, 61 and 75.
is not unexpected. These ideas were amplified in an article which appeared in October 1903, where Du Bois was able to explore the consequences of his earlier proposals and present the needs of the race in a coherent format. Du Bois contended that the necessary equipment to stamp out ignorance, poverty and crime included first and foremost education and social organization, but also the more important power of the ballot and the protection of the law—the logical adjuncts of the demand for citizenship rights.\(^1\) Du Bois never lost sight of the economic aspects of racial development, so he added to material achievement the need for political rights, and cultural and social uplift. In so doing, he incorporated into his philosophy some of the ideas propounded by the most notable black thinkers of the era.

Eminent among these thinkers was Alexander Crummell, who had long denounced in resounding terms the emphasis on materialism at the expense of manhood; rather than property, position or heredity, a race needed civilization, which could only be supplied “by the scholars and thinkers, who have secured the vision which penetrates the centre of nature”\(^2\). There was an explicit paternalism in Crummell’s statements, for he felt that the learned should “guide both the opinions and the habits of the crude masses” who could never aspire to being scientific or learned. But the scholar could not afford the luxury of purely intellectual pursuits, for on him rested the burden of philanthropy—it was incumbent upon him to share his cultural wealth. These ideas soon filtered out beyond the exclusive confines of the American Negro Academy (A.N.A.), which Crummell had founded in 1897, into the black press. In 1901 the Colored American could editorialize that higher education was meant “for such only whose talents and capabilities lead them to make sacrifices and submit to the discipline requisite to mastering the conditions of higher education”\(^3\). Thus the privilege of higher education entailed the necessity of making sacrifices for the general

\(^3\) Colored American, 20 April 1901, p. 8.
racial good, and the duty to diffuse the fruits of one's achievements among the less fortunate of the race.

The notion of a Talented Tenth cuts across received sociological thinking on the definitions of both the élite and the intelligentsia, and the problems are compounded by the complicating factor of minority group status. T. B. Bottomore has made a useful distinction between the "intelligentsia", those with higher education who have professional or clerical occupations, and the intellectuals, a much smaller group who contribute directly to the creation, transmission and criticism of ideas.¹ The Talented Tenth embraced both these groups, for paucity of numbers prohibited concentration on the latter alone, while lack of economic opportunity forced many blacks into menial, clerical positions, when they were suitably qualified for those employments traditionally associated with intellectuals, such as writers, artists, scientists, philosophers, religious thinkers, social theorists, political commentators, etc. Although blacks engaged in intellectual pursuits, they could rarely rely on them for total, or even adequate, remuneration or sustenance.

Another facet of the Talented Tenth was the insistence on the combination of thought and action, so precipitating the intellectuals directly into the social, economic and political currents of their day. The common bond uniting intellectuals is usually recognized as their advanced education, with its application rather than its possession as the paramount consideration. In the case of the Talented Tenth, both education and "culture" were criteria; in this sense "culture" was a concept which amalgamated an appreciation of the Arts with middle-class morality and values, and was used interchangeably with "refinement". Because of pressure of circumstances, that education did not always have to be formal; in fact, many of the Talented Tenth were at least partially self-taught. In an age which glorified the self-made businessman, the self-taught intellectual was no anomaly. This outlook was reinforced by the American tradition of the social commitment of the intellectual, an idea venerated by the Founding Fathers and transmitted via Emerson. "The happy combination of

learning and experience which made the black intellectual "a storage battery of moral power" was the rationalization in ideology of what had become a fact through necessity.

The majority of the Talented Tenth were both voluntarily and involuntarily "actively ethnic"; it was a matter of principle as well as of necessity. By definition, the actively ethnic person remains within his ethnic group, focusing his attention on ethnicity, although he maintains an acquaintance with broader intellectual developments. Although some blacks managed to pursue their careers in their chosen fields without undue emphasis on race, in the standard branches of scholarship most were channelled into studies with a racial bias. James Weldon Johnson described this process as

...the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates on each and every coloured man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man.

The black intellectual, therefore, had a specific grievance to rectify—racial prejudice—and his choice of social and political interests and issues was subordinated to his prior interest in the attainment of racial equality. The most illustrious example of this process was W. E. B. Du Bois himself:

Forced by pressure of circumstances, gradually he has been led from the congenial retreat of the scholar into the arena of the social struggle.

The recognition of these dilemmas was contemporary as well as retrospective. Timothy Thomas Fortune, realizing that "the pursuit of scholarship will claim the few while the pursuit of material things will claim the many", nevertheless lamented

1 R. H. Terrell to E. H. Hall, 6 January 1890 (R. H. Terrell MSS., Library of Congress.)
5 Timothy Thomas Fortune (1856-1928) was editor of the New York Rumor, Globe, Freeman and Age, founder of the National Afro-American League, and President of the Afro-American Council. There is a helpful biography, E. L. Thornborough, T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist (Chicago, 1972).
the deadening effect that this had on the Talented Tenth. When it was discovered that the best minds were tormented with the race problem, and that group solidarity "discourages if not precludes that development to the utmost of the individual which Goethe thought the most precious of human privileges"; a vicious circle of prejudice, exclusion, group solidarity, then rejuvenated prejudice, seemed complete. The materialism of which Fortune complained affected significantly the debate on the role and function of the black intellectual, whose usefulness had to be seen to be conceded. Although he subscribed to and lived up to the recognized criteria of scholarship, lofty ideals and high aspirations, his utility remained his prime justification.

While deploring this increasing defensiveness, W. S. Scarborough echoed the words of Crummell and Du Bois, and suggested that "Ich Dien" would be an appropriate motto for the Talented Tenth. In fact, "noblesse oblige" would appear to have been one of the primary motivations in their assumption of the mantle of leadership. Rewards in both status and money were higher in many fields other than racial leadership, especially if this was in any way militant. None seemingly aimed to make a career out of championing the race; "leadership" usually became additional to or a consequence of a full-time occupation, although there were always opportunists who could spot the means of self-aggrandisement and publicity. The majority of the latter were neither welcomed nor accepted by the Talented Tenth. The most common experience was that of William Monroe Trotter, the radical editor of the Boston Guardian, who

1 New York Age, 20 April 1905, p. 2.
2 William S. Scarborough (1852-1926) was a noted linguist and President of Wilberforce University.
... did not seek a career of agitation or organisation for equality for his race... The burden was dropped upon him by the desertion of others and he would not desert that duty.¹

An editorial in the Competitor, which admitted that "not a man have we ever financed or encouraged";² adroitly posed the dilemmas of selection and support that plagued the aspirant black leaders, but like many of the black organs of the day, it assumed that the meaning of leadership was self-evident. It was such a frequent topic for editorials in the coloured press, that E. E. Cooper, the editor of the Colored American, remarked "Leadership, like the tarriff [sic] is an issue that is always with us...".³ While he bemoaned a situation where anyone was a "leader" who, by persistent agitation or unusual activity, became identified as the embodiment of an idea, Cooper was fully aware that no single leader could possibly represent all the varied conditions and interests of the race. He therefore advocated that people ought to be recognized in their own specialized fields, but not to have pretensions to overall race leadership. He liked to reprint his editorial, which had first appeared in May 1898, stressing the need for "shrewd, courageous and unselfish leadership" which was neither dictatorial nor exclusive.⁴ Cooper further believed that these leaders, although acting altruistically in the interests of the masses, were not obliged to be responsive either to the immediate demands of the generality of the race or to their assessment of their predicament.⁵ The paternalism of the Talented Tenth was becoming self-confident enough for them to say categorically that they knew better than the people themselves what was in their best interests.

The press was able both to highlight and to intensify the problem of leadership selection; they denounced the influence of whites in the nominating of black spokesmen, but they often chose their own candidates in a similarly arbitrary and haphazard manner. Candidates to leadership were rarely reluctant, and selection was principally by means of white recognition,

³ Colored American, 1 February 1902, p. 8.  ⁴ Ibid. 28 May 1898, p. 4.  ⁵ Ibid. 7 December 1901, p. 8.
acknowledged eminence, organizational position or community status, self-appointment or opportunism. In one sense most of the Talented Tenth designated themselves "leaders" out of the compulsion of a strong sense of duty, but even then they still had to convince a wider constituency of their merit. The few who did achieve prestigious positions were forced into the role of representing group aspirations. Such was the fate of Judson W. Lyons when he became Register of the Treasury, for this office was seen to carry with it "the political primacy of the colored race in the U.S." Instead of being acknowledged as a political appointee, the recipient of patronage in return for services rendered to the Republican Party, Lyons was glorified as "Blameless in integrity, ripe in scholarship, vigorous in mentality, loyal to race, crowned with achievement and recognised and commanded by the strongest forces in our national life...". Once a man had risen to prominence, if he was respectable, preferably to both races, he was invested with the virtues traditionally ascribed to an idealized leader.

Early in its history the Talented Tenth rebelled against the willingness of the race to accept only those leaders forced upon them by a consensus of white opinion. Whites were rarely able or inclined to select intra-racial leaders, but anyone with aspirations to inter-racial mediation obviously had to be acceptable to the white community. If the acclaim of prominent whites "was indispensable to any generalised leadership in the Negro world" in the days before Marcus Garvey, there was no necessary correlation between the respect in which the black leaders were held by other blacks and their acceptance as group spokesmen by whites. For example, Perry Howard was accepted as the political champion of his race by senior white Republicans, although he was scorned by most blacks, while Giles B. Jackson was entrusted with the "Negro Pavilion" at the Jamestown Exposition, to the utter horror of most of his race.

One factor in the apparent ineffectiveness of the black leadership in asserting itself, was that it had begun partially to

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1 Ibid. February 1901, pp. 8 and 12.
2 Indianapolis Freeman, 18 April 1896, p. 4.
3 R. J. Bunche, A Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership, Carnegie-Myrdal Research Memorandum, p. 18, in the Schomburg Library.
believe the doubts about its abilities which had been raised in
the white press and repeated in the black. Black leaders had
first of all to counteract the negative stereotypes of themselves
in particular and their race in general, which had been projected
by the white media. In so doing, they often fell into the trap
of creating a different but equally limiting stereotype, by the
assignation of virtues or faults to the whole group; thus
confirming the conviction of many whites that all blacks were
identical anyway. Basically the black leaders had little room for
manoeuvre; even if they could have altered the black world,
they certainly could never have reconstructed the white one.
In order to accomplish anything in the wider society they had a
fundamental need of white influence and assistance, for neither
as intellectuals nor as blacks could they hope to attain access to
the sources of power in the United States. In particular, the
Talented Tenth, whose roots were in the black experience but
whose education and occupations had brought them into contact
and cooperation with whites of similar status, were inclined to
suffer from feelings of marginality, which critically altered their
goal selection. Concommitant, however, with the acceptance
of the sphere of operations outlined by the white world went
acquiescence in the prevailing American value structure, and this
value orientation had a direct bearing on their goal selection
processes.

The power of philanthropy in black education had had two
primary effects on its beneficiaries—they became imbued with
Northern ideals of middle class virtues, and they accepted the
doctrines of Christianity as expounded by their missionary
teachers. There were some exceptions, most notably W. E. B.
Du Bois, to the rule that the pre-World War I black leadership
"revolved upon the pivot of religion", but nearly all emphasized
the priority of moral development, centring on the home, the
church and the school. The sermons of Francis J. Grimké
echoed throughout Afro-America, and even those who were not

1 *Afro-American*, 29 May 1926, Clipping in the Kelly Miller MSS. at Howard
University; A. B. Walker, "Our Negro Leaders", *The Review*, i (March
1909), Clipping in the Charles Waddell Chesnutt MSS. at Fisk University.

2 C. G. Woodson, ed., *The Works of Francis J. Grimké* (Washington, D.C.,
1942).
conscientious churchgoers themselves used such rhetoric, exhorting the people to place an unflinching trust in the Providence of God, for with a little encouragement, He was going to open the way to full black participation in all things American.

Perhaps the assumption which pervaded the ethos and more than anything else dominated Afro-American thinking, was the conviction of black identity as Americans. This meant that there was also a model for racial elevation:

We must climb the ladder the same way that the white man climbed it centuries ago, and submit as patiently as he did to rebuffs that could not be helped at the time.1

When put to the test in War, the Negro’s loyalty was indisputable, both in 1896 and in 1917, even if it meant the temporary suspension of the black cause.

The desire for Americanization involved responsibilities too, for basically it was the right to compete in the rat-race for “the fruits and blessings sought and achieved by any other American.”2 At no time did blacks accept that their subordinate status was morally, ethically or legally just³; this non-acceptance of the status quo led to reactions that ranged along a spectrum from complete integration to total separation, either within completely autonomous communities within the United States, or by emigration overseas. Those who wanted to quit America altogether were more often visionaries than intellectuals, although Henry M. Turner⁴ and Marcus M. Garvey⁵ had ideologies and programmes that cannot be so lightly dismissed. In general, the Talented Tenth were those who had, to a greater degree than most, overcome at least some of the disabilities inflicted by the American racial mores, and were therefore inclined to favour

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1 Indianapolis Freeman, 3 August 1901, p. 8.
2 Competitor, i (January 1920), 2.
4 Henry McNeil Turner (1834-1915) was the first Negro Army chaplain, and later a senior bishop in the A. M. E. Church. He edited the Voice of Missions, and was the leading advocate of American colonization.
5 Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), the Jamaican who led the “back-to-Africa” movement after World War I, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and preached a doctrine of black pride, which rapidly gained a mass following.
agitation for fulfilment in those fields where they had already made some headway. Emigrants are more likely to be drawn from the ranks of the desperate than from amongst the relatively affluent, so the Talented Tenth were predisposed to fight for their rights where they were, rather than to undertake to hew a Utopia out of the West Coast of Africa or the swamps of Mississippi. More exposed than the lesser educated to the slogans of democracy, liberty, freedom and equality, they intensely resented the restrictions on their full participation in American life, a participation they sought not only for themselves, but also in terms of opportunities for the rest of the race at least to attempt to attain what the Talented Tenth had already achieved.

The problem of being both an Afro-American and an American simultaneously had an inbuilt ambivalence. Having internalized the American value-system, the blacks subscribed therefore to its central tenet of the efficacy of individualism. If, as W. S. Scarborough said, "every man is the architect of his own fortunes, be he white or black",1 there was a fundamental discrepancy between group loyalty and true Americanism, for it was logically impossible to integrate successfully as a group into a society geared to individual progress. Moreover, the Afro-American was trying to elevate himself in accordance with a strict moral code, which could be a handicap in a society that acclaimed only success, however indiscriminate.

The common denominator of the black experience was the fact of white racism, which operated on two distinct but interacting levels—the personal and the institutional. It was feasible to attack anomalies in the democratic system and expose injustices, but it was impossible to depersonalize the shock and distress of being the recipient of racial prejudice. In the short term, it was possible to set immediate goals and aims, but the long term solution really involved a total change in the outlook of the majority of white Americans. These dreams were the subject of constant frustration, for "to conquer prejudice" or "to achieve equality" were such amorphous goals that even

1 W. S. Scarborough, "White vs. Black", Voice of the Negro, i (January 1904), 28.
when a minor victory was won, the final realization seemed no closer. The indeterminate nature of the ultimate aim made it the object of varying interpretations and definitions, but no matter how much their methods or secondary targets diverged, the majority of all leaders espoused the fulfilment of the American dream and promise as their over-riding goal. W. E. B. Du Bois later looked back on his own and his colleagues' unquestioning acceptance of America's belief in her own myths:

What the white world was doing, its goals and ideals, I had not doubted were quite right. What was wrong was that I and people like me and thousands of others who might have my ability and aspiration, were refused permission to be a part of this world.¹

To others, the road to progress was straightforward:

The race problem can be settled by a district adherence to the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of Independence, the Golden Rule of the Holy Bible, either any or all of them. They are the eternal principles of justice to all men, the immortal gospel of truth and righteousness.²

Fundamentally, American law was regarded as right and just, but in need of enforcement. The way to accomplish this was to create a climate of opinion that would demand that enforcement. Without ever specifying exactly how, many black writers postulated that public opinion could be controlled, reasserting their faith that in time not only would the American value system vindicate itself, but also that the American people would live up to their own ideals. The ultimate justification for the self-appointment of leaders was grounded in their role as pathfinders—they had succeeded within the American definition of success and in American conditions. If, as T. T. Fortune claimed,

The African here is an American by birth, education and religious belief. He takes only an American's interest in Africa and what goes on there...³

the Talented Tenth had opted to put all their eggs in the American basket, and had thereby committed themselves to the aims of integration and equality, achieved by democratic means.

² Colored American, 29 November 1902, p. 8.
Having ascribed to itself the burden of racial leadership, the Talented Tenth then faced the problem of what it should actually do. The most obvious means at their disposal was to create and maintain racial organizations, and it is these organizations which go some way to clarifying their aims and hopes. These societies were both inter- and intra-racial, but were at best only a tiny fraction of the total of all black organizations, for the majority of the race preferred to belong to lodges and friendly societies, or to the more practical concerns, than to the idealistic betterment organizations. Despite the race’s apparent apathy towards their organizations, and their failure to recruit a large, quite apart from a mass, membership, it was through these intra-racial groups that the Talented Tenth initially tried to organize itself. These meetings provided a forum where views and issues could be aired, a network whereby those involved could meet congenial friends, and a platform from which the race’s spokesmen could proclaim their grievances and achievements. Space would not permit the discussion of each and every one of these organizations in any meaningful detail; it is only feasible to draw some general conclusions on how these societies drew the Talented Tenth loosely together.

Some organizations were predominantly devoted to intellectual or cultural pursuits, and provided little more than a debating chamber and a social meeting place. The prototype of these was the Bethel Literary and Historical Association of Washington, D.C.,¹ whose national eminence went unchallenged until 1911, by which time the Boston Literary and Historical Association had grown to include most of the race’s more radical intellectuals.² Although Bethel was more accommodating and conservative than Boston, both were unashamedly elitist and neither aspired to activities beyond the rhetorical. Other similar societies blossomed and died without making any such national impact. Examples of such short-lived ventures are the Society

¹ A. Cromwell, History of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association (Washington, D.C., 1896). The Association’s Minutes and Papers are held in Howard University.
for the Promotion of Afro-American Literature (Philadelphia)¹ and the Savannah Sunday Men’s Club,² but similar meetings were held all over the United States. Some organizations aspired to the more practical functions of rediscovering the race’s history and heritage, and the articulate codification and formulation of racial philosophies. The Negro Society for Historical Research, founded in 1911 by Arthur A. Schomburg and John E. Bruce had an avowedly utilitarian mission in rediscovering the Negro’s past, both in Africa and America, in the hope that knowledge of previous civilizations and achievements would dispel feelings of racial inferiority, and lead to enhanced racial solidarity, self-respect and unity.³ Still more scholarly was the work of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, organized in 1915 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, which planned for academic studies and the preservation of documents. Although it quickly won the respect and attention of the intellectuals, during its first decade it had a very limited impact on the people at large.⁴ It set out to put the record straight rather than to involve itself in partisan activities, and, when the work of the American Negro Association and the Atlanta University Studies had virtually ceased, continued to “to apply science to the race problem”. Even so, when Woodson was trying to raise funds in 1919, he found to his dismay that, “every penny of the $1200.00 already pledged has come from white persons”.⁵ When even such an eminent organization had trouble acquiring an adequate working capital, it is no surprise to learn that many of the smaller, unknown societies quickly folded.

¹ Charles Alexander to J. E. Bruce, 11 April 1896 (J. E. Bruce MSS., Schomburg).
³ A. A. Schomburg to G. W. Forbes, 18 July 1914 (Forbes MSS., Boston Public Library); A. A. Schomburg to J. E. Bruce, 24 November 1911 (Bruce MSS., Schomburg); Dusé Mohammed, “The Negro Society for Historical Research in Yonkers, New York”, African Times and Orient Review (December 1912), pp. 6-7.
⁵ C. G. Woodson to Col. C. Young, 11 March 1919 (Woodson MSS., Library of Congress).
Of all the black, scholarly organizations, the American Negro Academy in particular was the very embodiment of the concept of a Talented Tenth. It aimed to make the intellectual élite the mouthpiece of the whole race, to inform white America of the black man's abilities and aspirations, to oppose discrimination, and to counteract the accommodationism and materialism of Booker T. Washington. It planned both to inspire the race and to instill pride within it, and to overcome in the white American mind the reluctance to admit not only the intellect but also the humanity of the Negro.¹ When Crummell died in 1898 his place as president was taken by Du Bois, who was able to use it to advance his belief in what would now be called cultural pluralism. He hoped to prove that the black had a mission within American society, and to resolve the vacillation that plagued the Afro-American, "Am I American, or am I a Negro".² The Academy was able to put intellectuals who would otherwise have been inaccessible to one another into contact, but it never managed to meet even its own self-imposed membership quota.³ What it did do was cover the whole range of debate and discussion of the issues of black protest at the turn of the century, codifying and articulating the sentiments of those who considered themselves to be the Talented Tenth.

The National Afro-American Council on the other hand moved away from the purely academic to propose a platform that was an amalgam of protest, self-help and paternalism. It planned to investigate and report on all outrages perpetrated on American citizens; to assist in testing the constitutionality of all laws which oppressed blacks; to promote legislation in the individual states in order to secure to citizens the rights guaranteed by the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments; to aid in prison reform work; to recommend migration from terror-torn to law-abiding parts of the country; to encourage both higher and industrial education; to promote black business

enterprises; to educate the race on racial issues; to inaugurate plans for the moral elevation of blacks; and to urge Federal funds for the education of those citizens denied school privileges by discriminatory state laws.\(^1\) Always hampered by a chronic lack of funds, the Council eventually ceased to exist after ten precarious years in 1908 through apathy, internal squabbling and financial paralysis. The Council had briefly united the Talented Tenth and the Washingtonians, but there were too many fundamental strategy decisions to be resolved before there could be any feasibility of permanent union.\(^2\)

At first the Niagara Movement seemed to be a duplication of the work of other protest organizations; but it was designed to fill the void left as the Council languished after 1902, to give voice and expression to the uncompromising element of the Talented Tenth, and to give organizational format to the rift with Washington. Although the Niagara Men were saying nothing new, they were saying it in a new and more militant way. They claimed that persistent agitation was the way, but that also the rights they claimed conferred duties on the recipients; namely the duty to vote, to respect the rights of others, to work, to obey the laws, to be clean and orderly and to send their children to school.\(^3\) The Movement was generously covered by *The Voice of the Negro* until it was able to organize its own organs, the *Moon* and later the more impressive *Horizon*. As a result of the efforts and agitation of the Movement, by 1909 Du Bois was able to claim that he edited a radical paper which advocated human equality, universal suffrage, pacifism, the overthrow of monopoly values, the gradual socialization of capital and the ending of religious persecution.\(^4\) With justification, he claimed that the Niagara Movement had encouraged increasing unrest, sterner impatience with cowardice and a deeper determination to be men at any cost. Despite this death-rattle, both the Movement and the *Horizon* expired in 1910,

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\(^{3}\) Niagara Movement, *Declaration of Principles* (1905). In the Bruce MSS., Schomburg.

when they were superceded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.).

Those mentioned above are only the more prominent of the organizations of the Talented Tenth. The *Negro Year Book*, for the years from 1912 to 1919 listed 28 national organizations of which 4 were directly concerned with education, 10 were business or professional associations, 2 were women's, 3 were inter-racial, 3 were overtly political, and 4 were avowedly racial uplift organizations. This would not seem to be a comprehensive list, for it excludes many flourishing and useful local organizations, and it is both an illustration of the multiplicity of these organizations and an index of their ineffectiveness.

The aspect most fully dealt with in other secondary material is the inter-racial aspect of the Talented Tenth activities. The most equitable, durable and significant of these inter-racial contacts were at an organizational rather than a personal and social level, and it would appear that the more definite the purpose of the organization, the more harmonious the relationships appeared. White sympathizers can broadly be classified as liberals and philanthropists; the former participating in joint ventures for socio-racial uplift, and the latter financing both these activities and the cause of black education. In both cases, they followed their own aspirations and transitory enthusiasms, rather than the long-term needs and purposes of the black community. The Talented Tenth were in an ambiguous position; they could not function effectively without a certain degree of white goodwill and support, yet they clung to the belief that the race ought to be able to solve its own problems from within.

The most famous of these inter-racial ventures must be the N.A.A.C.P. which, although founded and initially organized by

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1 *Horizon* (July 1910).


3 In addition to those named below, James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy* (Princeton, 1975), recounts the white perspective on these relationships.

whites, made an effort to be inter-racial by including eight former members of the Niagara Movement on its Board of Directors. Du Bois was the only black elected officer in 1910, but his position as Director of Publicity and Research gave him what was to prove a unique opportunity for spreading his doctrines—the editorship of the Crisis. The project was fraught with a difficulty which was never satisfactorily resolved:

Is this a work for colored and white people to do together, or is it a work of revolution for the colored people only? Should we preach race consciousness just as the socialist preaches class consciousness, and should we teach the black man to regard the white man as his enemy except he who repudiates his race?¹

Not only were the white liberals caught in a dilemma in their dealings with the Talented Tenth: conversely Du Bois managed occasionally to offend his white readers, by using his nominally inter-racial organ to advance a black perspective. Simultaneously, radical blacks like W. M. Trotter persistently complained that white involvement tempered black agitation,² for even those whites who donned the mantle of their abolitionist forebears preferred to work with the black élite. In its zeal to maintain respectability instead of achieving a mass basis, the N.A.A.C.P. preferred that its local branches should remain in the hands of the Talented Tenth. In fact, Du Bois never denied that the Crisis was aimed at this class. In 1911 he appealed to “1000 of the best colored people in the United States” to raise $2500 for the N.A.A.C.P.³ The white connection of the organization was also responsible for the emphasis on poor white accountability for white prejudice, rather than any consideration being given to the role of upper-class whites and the generally exploitative nature of the system.⁴ The tone of the movement had been set by Oswald Garrison Villard’s Call, which confined itself to the civil and political difficulties of blacks, and did not deal with their economic burdens—a philosophy of non-economic

² Bay State Banner, 8 October 1966.
³ W. E. B. Du Bois to J. E. Bruce, 27 September 1911 (Bruce MSS., Schomburg).
⁴ New Masses, 8 January 1935, p. 4.
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liberalism which ignored the fundamentals of oppression and was couched in traditional terms. This in turn necessitated the tactics of legal redress being attempts to operate through the black professionals, and "the people who count".¹ In this way, the Talented Tenth could be directed away from class and racial conflict with counterfeit substitutes, in search of palliatives rather than solutions.

Although the most important, the N.A.A.C.P. had not been the first national inter-racial organization. Preliminary steps had been taken by the Constitutional League and the Cosmopolitan Club; whereas the latter ran into difficulties as it was mainly social, the former, despite some black hostility, had campaigned with genuine ardour for black rights, especially for the freeing of the Brownsville soldiers.² The National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (N.U.L.) was essentially more practical in its aims. It did not have members in any real sense; it was rather a self-perpetuating board of trustees selected from the community, which dealt with the effects of racial and urban conditions rather than tackling the causes.³ By dealing with a limited and carefully demarcated sphere, the League managed to avoid controversial issues, which it left to the labour unions and the N.A.A.C.P.

The central problem in discussing the Talented Tenth has therefore become one of definition, for when Du Bois first used the phrase he was postulating an altruistic elite who would donate its talents to racial uplift, not describing the style or structure of any existing leadership group. Yet his words were eagerly received by the educated few, who found an identity and a cohesion in this concept. But having assumed this role, the Talented Tenth were without any clear directional focus. They

¹ R. J. Bunche, The Programs, ideologies, tactics and achievements of Negro Betterment and inter-racial organisations, Carnegie–Myrdal Research Memo- randum, Schomburg.
² M. W. Ovington, "Reminiscences", Baltimore Afro-American, 11 February 1933; Clipping in James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at Yale; The Voice (May 1907), p. 161; Voice of the Negro, iii (April 1906), 239; The Moon (17 March 1906), p. 5; New York Age (8 February 1906), p. 2.
strove to achieve full black participation in American life, and this proved to be the crucial determinant of their methods of style, organization and group selection.

The Talented Tenth operated from a position of weakness, being impotent in the white world and sometimes marginal in the black. Their leadership role was self-delegated, and the whole race was classified as their following. Whether it wished to be led or not, it was expected to be grateful. They set themselves up not only as examples and role-models, but as spokesmen and intermediaries for the race. They spoke for the race without consulting it, keeping it informed of their activities and interpreting events in the white world; the consent and approval of the black masses were taken for granted. Circumstances limited their role to one that was principally inspirational and exemplary, but where they could they often engaged in practical racial uplift, which they defined as giving evidence to congressional committees, agitation, educational and social work, and political activities. They also produced both polemic and literature, using their literary and analytical talents to examine the black predicament. As much as the leaders of their race, the Talented Tenth became its defenders, trying to present a favourable racial image in the white media and a positive self-image in the black. Their outlook on both domestic and international issues was, to quote Du Bois, "provincial in thought and dream".\(^1\) Seeing everything from the perspective of blacks in a white world, the issues on the home front which they selected for discussion were those that were of immediate racial significance, while foreign affairs were interpreted as an extension of the colour problem.

The Talented Tenth were never unanimous on any one issue; they were not obliged to be by their definition of themselves, and they had no single socio-economic creed. They did share a naive belief that reason would ultimately overcome the irrationality of prejudice, but some seized on race and colour as the reason for their plight, thus avoiding the deeper examination of possibly unpleasant issues. "The Negro Problem" was simultaneously their raison d'être and their obsession, but their approach was one of protest and description rather than analysis.

\(^1\) Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 136.
and penetration. Two socialists, Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, resisted this trend, disassociating themselves from the Talented Tenth which they perceived as bourgeois and reactionary, but they were able to muster even less support than those whom they criticized. Another reason for the apparent disunity of the Talented Tenth was its espousal of the creeds of individualism and democracy. By advocating freedom of speech, they encouraged ideological diffusion, and by believing in the individual's ultimate responsibility for his own status, they weakened their own group unity. This does not mean that they did not share many generalized views and aims, but their cohesion and identity stemmed from their sense of élitism, noblesse oblige and mission, not from organizational unity or philosophical unanimity. Their financial dependence on white philanthropy precluded their development of a "truly black" ideology before World War I, but their commitment to Americanism and integration was such that any radical formulae would have been unlikely anyway.

The Talented Tenth should not be described as failures or inadequates, as this presumes that they did not accomplish feasible objectives. They did take many strides forward, but could not overcome the sheer volume of white prejudice. No amount of small, disjointed improvements in black conditions could change a national way of thought quickly, leaving the Talented Tenth in the untenable position of trying to rectify the amorphous by the concrete. Despite each achievement, the final goal seemed no closer. Apparently doomed to frustration, by 1919 the Talented Tenth were ready to reappraise their traditional and hitherto frustrated methods and thoughts, and were ready, like the race they claimed to represent, to turn in new directions and to consider more radical possibilities.