



# W.E.B. Dubois and Cornel West

Issues of Caste for Black Americans



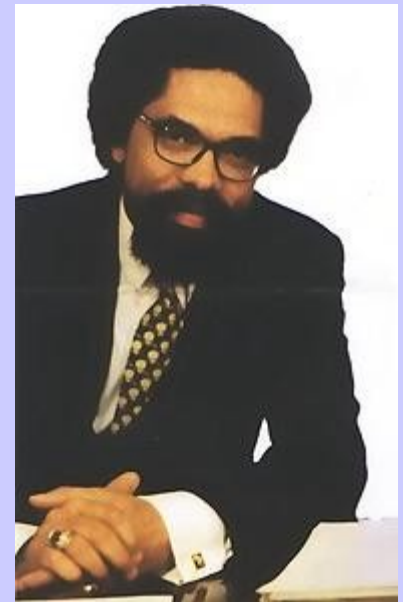


W.E.B. DuBois

**Cornel West and W.E.B. DuBois** are the two most prominent black scholars and intellectuals, living and writing on opposite ends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Both men devote(d) significant attention in their scholarship to the question of the role of the black elite, whether economic, political, or academic, in addressing the problems created by institutionalized American racism.

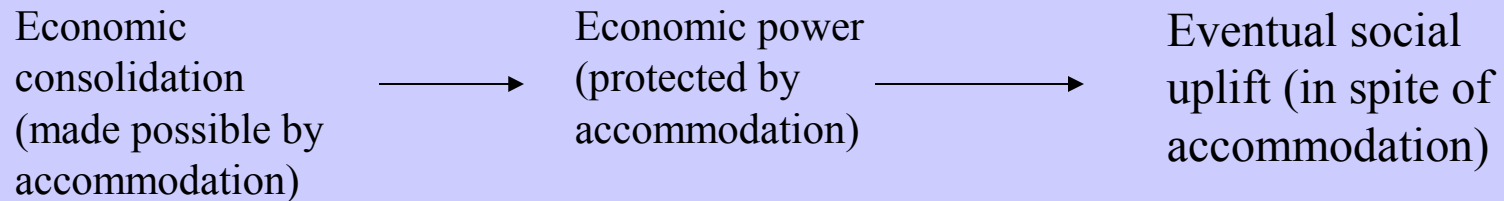
Cornel West



-- In *The Souls of Black Folk* and “The Talented Tenth,” DuBois argued for an educated black elite to take leadership in the fight against American apartheid and racial terrorism.

-- DuBois believed that the bottom-up, economic-consolidation strategy of Booker T. Washington was insufficient due to its inherent structural constraints:

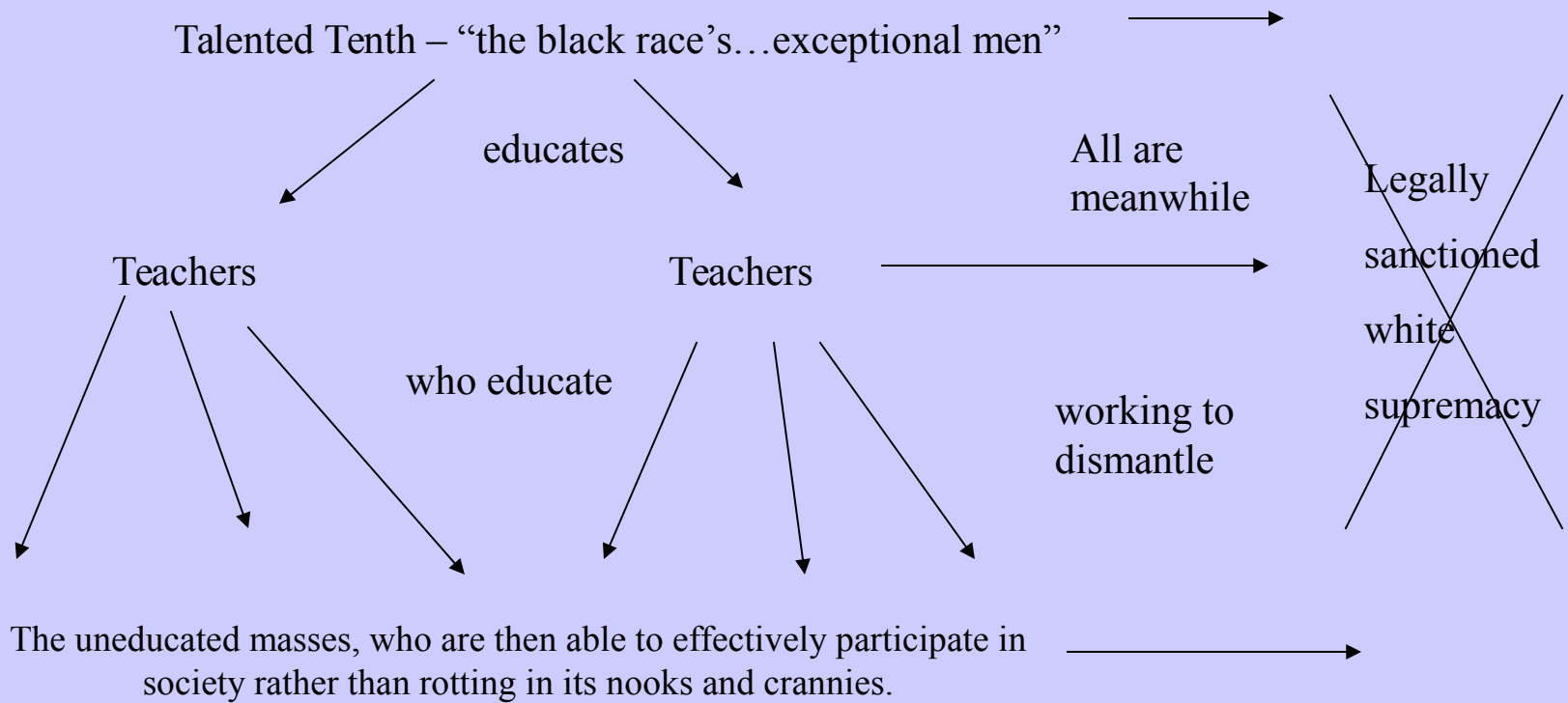
#### Washington’s Atlanta Compromise Plan



-- DuBois questioned how mere economic solidarity could ever provide social uplift in the absence of effective education, or indeed any civil or political rights, for the vast majority of blacks.

-- Instead, DuBois advocated a top-down approach to black education, accompanied by unequivocal agitation for full civil and political rights.

DuBois's "Talented Tenth" Theory (in simplistic terms...)



-- Furthermore, DuBois saw something even more fundamental in broad, liberal education and “sinister” in technical, vocational education advocated by Washington.

-- If blacks (or any people) were educated solely to work industrial jobs, then their humanity was limited to their function in industry – as cogs in the Machine.

-- If, on the other hand, blacks (or any people) were educated fully in the moral, intellectual, and scientific discourse of mankind, then their humanity was extended to include being moral, intellectual, rational *people*.

-- Merely industrial training, therefore, for DuBois was yet another example of the dehumanization and objectification of black people in America.

-- Nearly 100 years have now passed since DuBois outlined his beliefs and strategy.

-- Many of the civil and political reforms DuBois championed – full voting rights, black attendance to elite universities, an end to lynching and other overt forms of racial terrorism – have been achieved. Yet little of the social uplift DuBois believed would result has taken place.

So...what happened?



Thurgood Marshall  
(Library of Congress)



The Talented Tenth, then  
and now?



## Cornel West's Critique of the Modern Black Elite



In *Race Matters*, Cornel West argues that the black elite – the “Talented Tenth” of today – are not fulfilling their responsibilities towards the rest of the nation as outlined by DuBois.



-- West accuses contemporary black political elites of being “too hungry for status to be angry, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in advancement to be defiant.”

-- On scholars: Black scholars, West says, tend to be too complacent, overspecialized, and cynical to articulate the kind of broad critiques of American culture that DuBois offered at the beginning of the century.

-- On the black middle class in general: The black middle class, West says, has bloomed in quantity but not in quality. It epitomizes the worst aspects of American culture and abandons the best parts of pre-Civil Rights era black culture.

*“so many black people themselves are deferential to the imperial project...to the militarism...to the free-market fundamentalism...  
They are running into a burning house.”* -- Cornel West



on



-- Cornel West has said that W.E.B. DuBois is by far the most important black intellectual ever to have lived. However, West has also been very critical of DuBois, particularly on the subject of classism and elitism.

*“The Victorian three-piece suit worn by...DuBois...dignified his sense of intellectual vocation, a sense of rendering service by means of critical intelligence and moral action.” – West*

*“DuBois’s...worldview...underestimated the capacity of everyday people to “know” about life.” – Also West*

-- DuBois wrote extensively about slave “sorrow songs” that he claimed were “the greatest gift of the Negro people.” He did so from a largely academic standpoint, however, and expressed horror upon visiting an ecstatic prayer meeting in rural TN.

-- In spite of his statement that he was “in Harvard but not of it,” DuBois was a product of the white, highly educated New England culture in which he was raised. His mild elitism (“pulling up all that are worth saving,” as well as direct references to an “aristocracy of talent,” for example) can probably be traced to this upbringing.

-- West, on the other hands, views jazz, blues, and other black folk arts to be critical modes of black – and human – self-expression.

-- The improvisational freedom of jazz and the mourning self-reliance of blues West sees as expressions of moral and political approaches to life. He has called them “musical democracy.”

-- In final analysis, however, West and DuBois must both be seen as brilliant men applying their considerable intelligences to find solutions to American institutionalized white supremacy.



*“Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment? ... The tendency is here, born of slavery and quickened...by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends.”* – W.E.B. DuBois.

*“By the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if...we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight the forces of hell in our own land.”* – W.E.B. DuBois.



*“There’s voices...there’s cries.”* –Cornel West on the content of history.