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## What elite theory should have learned, and can still learn, from W.E.B. DuBois

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One of W.E.B. DuBois' most famous concepts, the "Talented Tenth", is a theory of elites<sup>1</sup> (1903). Yet elite scholars have completely ignored this contribution. In this brief essay, we outline what elite theory should have learned, and can still learn, from the work of DuBois. We begin by very briefly outlining DuBois' theory of the Talented Tenth. We suggest some of its implications for elite theory. Finally, we highlight DuBois' own criticism and abandonment of this early idea, and consider the implications of later DuBois upon how we might think about elites in society.

DuBois was understandably sceptical of whites' capacity to help or interest in helping "lift up" poorer blacks. Jim Crow segregation and White supremacy led him to suggest that improving the situation of black Americans would have to be done by blacks themselves. DuBois placed his faith in liberal education and social influence<sup>2</sup>: in particular how through education, "knowledge of life and its wider meaning" could disseminate through a population. Colleges and universities could develop the exceptional 10 per cent of black Americans into leaders of the black masses and guide them to civilization. DuBois even suggested that his model had a kind of permanent truth; he claimed that never had "a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward ... it will be from the top downward that culture filters". The influence of cultured, educated blacks would not be limited to the cultural uplift of their fellow blacks; to Whites the Talented Tenth will "show the capability of Negro blood, the promise of Black men".

For DuBois, education was not relegated simply to schools, but as,

that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develops men ... 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.

DuBois' elite theory thus has political, cultural, institutional, and social dimensions.

Politically, elites are positioned as a potential solution to social problems. DuBois argues that the Talented Tenth would civilize blacks, and help them acquire “political rights and righteously guarded civic status”. Culturally, the Talented Tenth would, “reach the full measure of the best type of modern European culture”. Yet this tenth was not to be a kind of black aristocracy; DuBois imagined that institutions could be designed wherein, through their talents, the “best” among black people could become elite. He took his elite position seriously, arguing against universal higher education; he didn’t want “too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses”.

The modern reader may bristle at such a model: where mastery of European culture, developed through exclusive schooling, would create social influence wherein elites might improve the lives of the masses.<sup>3</sup> Yet just as we should be careful not to dis-embed DuBois’ arguments from the context of their making, so too should we not protect DuBois from his arguments that today we may find unpalatable.

DuBois’ elite theory is not so enormously rich that it should become the basis of elite research. DuBois has far more to teach us in his methodological interventions, his attentive empirical research, and his deep dialogue between theory and empirics. But we do argue that the denial of DuBois’ elite theory left some fertile concepts still-born within the field of elite studies for decades.

First, his conceptualization of culture and dissemination moves us beyond the rather fanciful account of Veblen wherein cultural dimensions of elites are defined in opposition to others. Indeed, DuBois asks us to think about how culture can move across class divisions – a question that still provides fresh lines of inquiry if we are to adopt a Bourdieuan model of cultural distinctions.

Second, his attentiveness to education – broadly understood – as a key dimension of elite production, while well recognized today, hardly appeared within elite theory for some decades after his writing.

Third, DuBois’ suggestion that we should look not at an elite, but instead at different kinds of elites, which may have different influences and social uses is a lesson we still have not fully integrated into our thinking. Early attention of classic elite scholars to a cabal-like or interlocked group of elites, while at times fruitful, ignores how we should not simply think of an elite, but instead of different kinds of elites.

Finally, in suggesting that a small group of elites, through education, socialization, and acculturate, could serve as a virtuous model to help lift of the conditions of those who shared a defining characteristic of that elite (in this instance, “Negro Blood”), DuBois posits something that scholars have been unwilling to take up: that elites may be capable of benefiting the masses. Yet DuBois was unafraid to ask a question we largely shy away from: how can power be deployed for the social good?

Much later in his life, DuBois comes to critique his theory and takes back the idea that a black elite would uplift blacks. Instead, DuBois argues that the development of blacks would only come if the masses and the elite worked together. His model is not one of upliftment, but of solidarity: “mass and class must unite for the world’s salvation ... It can be done through consumers’ groups and the mutual interests that these members have in the success of the groups” (*Dusk of Dawn*).

We close with a suggestion, a final lesson we might extract from DuBois (one he himself did not argue, at least to our knowledge). And that is that we may be more sensitive to constructing socially contingent theories of elites. Let us return to where we began and ask what the conditions were under which DuBois imagined the benefits of a Talented Tenth. Where segregation was so great, and racial dominance so powerful, we might imagine different roles of elites than we would under conditions of greater integration and broader recognition of racial equality. More specifically, DuBois inspires us to consider the different capacities, impacts, and roles of elites under different social arrangements. Our final lesson from DuBois may be that just as he was willing to abandon his models as the world around him changed, so too might we want to do the same with our own.

## Notes

1. DuBois did not coin the term “Talented Tenth”. The term came from a White northerner named Henry Morehouse. Morehouse also believed that an exceptionally Talented Tenth of Blacks would need superior educational training to become leaders of their people. The term was used to promote the establishment of Black colleges.
2. In emphasizing the importance of liberal education, DuBois is staking a position against that advocated for by his ideological adversary, Booker T. Washington, who instead argued for the importance of industrial education of Blacks. It is important to note that DuBois was not against industrial schools, but instead prioritized the development of “broadly cultured men and women” who could go on to lead and teach the masses in every type of school.
3. The modern reader might also reflect upon the fact that one of DuBois’ best known concepts is indeed his least radical (and perhaps even most conservative). It is also a concept that can rather easily help Whites abdicate responsibility for white supremacy.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.