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# The Academic Training of W. E. B. DuBois

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When W. E. B. DuBois returned from Berlin in 1894, he brought to his first job, at Wilberforce University in Ohio, an academic training which hardly any, if any, other young American scholar could match. Thirteen years had gone into his apprenticeship as a social scientist. He had studied institutional history with Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard and economic analysis with Adolph Wagner and Gustav von Schmoller at Berlin. Long uncertain about his career, he had wandered restlessly over the natural sciences and into philosophy before settling down in the social sciences. As a result, his training had remarkable breadth as well: not just the natural sciences and philosophy, but modern languages, mathematics, Greek and Latin.<sup>1</sup>

DuBois's preparation was well started at his high school in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where he took the standard "classical" college preparatory course: four years of Latin and three of Greek; arithmetic, algebra, and geometry in three of the four years; one year of English, a year of ancient and American history; and scattered terms of geography, physiology, and hygiene. In addition, like every other student, he presented compositions, declamations, and recitations, and performed occasional exercises in reading, spelling, and music.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Greek and Latin, as a matter of fact, were his primary assignments at Wilberforce, though he also taught German and English. W. E. B. DuBois, "A Pageant in Seven Decades, 1868-1938," pamphlet, n.p., n.d., 13.

His high school principal, Frank A. Hosmer, encouraged him to plan for college and even helped to provide the necessary text books.<sup>3</sup> Will rewarded Hosmer's confidence by completing the high school course with high honors,<sup>4</sup> along with various extracurricular distinctions such as the presidency of the high school lyceum.<sup>5</sup> Such a record encouraged young Will's townsmen to arrange for a scholarship to Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee.

DuBois had three enriching years at Fisk—the quality of his work in Great Barrington admitted him to sophomore standing upon entrance.<sup>6</sup> In his first year he studied the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the Greek Testament; conic sections and the calculus; rhetoric; French grammar and literature; and botany. In junior year he read Livy and Tacitus along with Demosthenes's *Oration on the Crown* and Sophocles's *Antigone*, studied German grammar and translations, and found time for physiology, hygiene, and astronomy. Finally, in his senior year he and six classmates studied "Mental Sciences," using John

<sup>2</sup> *Catalogue of the Great Barrington High School, 1882-1883*, Great Barrington, 1882, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> After ten years in Great Barrington, Hosmer became principal of Punahou School in Honolulu in 1890. Mary C. Alexander and Charlotte P. Dodge, *Punahou, 1841-1941*, Berkeley, 1941, 382. Many years after his school days in Great Barrington, DuBois wondered what would have happened to him if Hosmer had been "born with no faith in 'darkies'." DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, New York, 1921, 17.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Globe*, July 12, 1884.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Freeman*, January 31, 1885.

<sup>6</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, for the College Year, 1885-1886*, Nashville, 1886, 12.

Bascom's *Science of Mind*<sup>7</sup> and James McCosh's *Laws of Discursive Thought*.<sup>8</sup> Ethics, political economy, English literature, and a laboratory course in chemistry rounded out a heavy schedule<sup>9</sup>. The university explicitly rejected industrial education as part of its formal curriculum, but, as the catalog put it, "Manual labor is dignified and made honorable."<sup>10</sup>

Almost forty years later, on the occasion of a commencement address at Fisk, and perhaps under the influence of the occasion, DuBois recalled three years of "splendid inspiration" and "nearly perfect happiness" with teachers whom he respected, amid surroundings which inspired him. The ten years after Fisk he chronicled as "a sort of prolongation of my Fisk college days. I was at Harvard but not of it. I was a student of Berlin but still the son of Fisk . . ."<sup>11</sup>. There Adam Spence taught him Greek; Frederick A. Chase, the natural sciences; President Erastus Cravath, ethics and philosophy.<sup>12</sup> With a missionary commitment to the uplift of the Negro race, this devoted band of white men spurred DuBois on by judging his skills and knowledge without notice of his color. When, at the end of three years, DuBois looked North to

Harvard, they endorsed his application with praise beyond the usual platitudes of letters of recommendation.<sup>13</sup> Though Fisk did not have a regular marking and ranking system, President Cravath spoke of DuBois's high rank, noted his "unusually quick, active mind," and could hardly fail to mention that Will was ambitious. Helen C. Morgan, the Latin instructor, followed the more usual form: Will had won the confidence of the faculty by "manliness, faithfulness to duty and earnestness in study" and by "excellent" scholarship. Spence called him "one of my best," and Herbert Wright in mathematics spoke of DuBois's work as being "of very high order." Chase in the physical sciences gave a more revealing picture by recording that in addition to his regular assignments, Will had done outside work in anatomy, and, though he never overworked and had a "remarkable capacity for sleep," he achieved "first grade" in scholarship. He admitted that DuBois might give the impression of being "somewhat conceited," but added that this trait would not prevent "faithful work."<sup>14</sup>

As he approached Harvard, DuBois's academic plans were fluid.

<sup>7</sup> John Bascom, *The Science of Mind*, New York, 1881.

<sup>8</sup> James McCosh, *The Laws of Discursive Thought*, New York, 1881.

<sup>9</sup> This account of DuBois's studies is drawn from successive issues of the Fisk catalog from 1885 to 1888.

<sup>10</sup> *Catalogue of . . . Fisk University . . . 1887-1888*, Nashville, 1888, 42.

<sup>11</sup> DuBois, "Diuturni Silenti," ms. of speech, 1924, W. E. B. DuBois Papers, in Dr. DuBois's possessions (hereafter, DuBois papers); reprinted in *Fisk Herald*, XXXIII, 1-12 (1924).

<sup>12</sup> Answering an unidentified questionnaire dated May 14, 1930, DuBois listed Chase and Spence, along with William James and Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard, as the persons outside his own family who had influenced him most. DuBois papers.

<sup>13</sup> In his application for a Price Greenleaf scholarship at Harvard, DuBois himself learned about the rhetoric of college applications. In answer to a query about his "special reason for wishing to enter Harvard College," DuBois answered: "I have finished the course of one of the new southern institutions and wish to enjoy the advantages of an older and broader institution. I had not hoped to be able to do this on account of limited means until I saw the advertisement of this aid." This tactful statement was pasted over an earlier version: "I have very little money and think I can get more aid there than elsewhere."—a tribute to Harvard's solvency, but hardly to its educational standing. "W. E. B. DuBois, Class of 1890," folder in the Harvard University Archives, Widener Library, Harvard University. Hereafter cited, Harvard archives.

<sup>14</sup> These letters are all in the DuBois folder, Harvard archives.

Fisk had given inspiration but not direction. DuBois had already rejected President Cravath's suggestion of the ministry as a career. Trained in a Congregational Sunday School,<sup>15</sup> he had during his first year at Fisk proudly joined the Fisk congregation and asked for the prayers of his Great Barrington Sunday School to "help guide me in the path of Christian duty."<sup>16</sup> He approved of a recent revival which had won forty converts.<sup>17</sup> But during the next three years, organized religion ceased to be a meaningful part of Will's experience: he simply believed too little in Christian dogma to become a minister.<sup>18</sup> In his autobiography, DuBois blamed this attitude on the heresy trials, especially the suspension of Charles A. Briggs from the Presbyterian Church,<sup>19</sup> and on the insistence of the local church at Fisk that dancing was a sin. Furthermore, the compulsory "book on 'Christian Evidences'" struck him as a "cheap piece of special pleading."<sup>20</sup> For him religion, especially Christianity, became more a system of ethics than a matter of dogma, and he saw only indifferent ethical purpose in established Christian denominations. At the first symptoms of higher longings among

Negroes, DuBois said the year after he left Fisk, "there is no devil in Hell that would countenance more flagrant infringements upon Human Liberty, to crush the rising genius of a People, than the average deacon of the Methodist Church South."<sup>21</sup>

What career, if not the ministry? It took several years for DuBois to decide. In later years, he reconstructed his education as a straight-line preparation for the life's work which in shadowy form he had planned from his youth. Actually the decision came relatively late as the terminal point of desultory intellectual meandering. His preliminary inquiry to the Secretary of the University spoke of study leading to a Ph.D. in political science with political economy as a special field.<sup>22</sup> Six months later, in his application for scholarship aid, he proposed to give "especial attention to the sciences and Philosophy" as preparation for a post-graduate course, probably in philosophy.<sup>23</sup> On arrival at Harvard, where he repeated the junior and senior years of college, his first-year courses favored the sciences:<sup>24</sup> in addition to a prescribed course in English composition, a half course in "earlier English Ethics," and an economics course,<sup>25</sup> he

<sup>15</sup> DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, New York, 1940, 10.

<sup>16</sup> DuBois to [Evarts] Scudder, February 3, 1886, DuBois papers.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> DuBois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," in Rayford W. Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants*, Chapel Hill, 1944, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898 (A History of American Life, X)*. New York: 1933, 328.

<sup>20</sup> DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 33. The reference is probably to William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, London, 1794, a text written in the spirit of rationalism to prove the truth of Christian doctrines. It was widely used in the nineteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> DuBois, "What the Negro Will Do," ms. of unpublished article, February 4, 1889, DuBois papers; written in reply to George Washington Cable, "A Simpler Southern Question," *Forum*, VI, 392-403 (December 1888).

<sup>22</sup> DuBois to the secretary of Harvard University, October 29, 1887, Harvard archives.

<sup>23</sup> DuBois to the Harvard faculty, March 30, 1888, Harvard archives.

<sup>24</sup> The factual basis for this discussion of DuBois's course work is derived from successive issues of the *Harvard University Catalogue*, Cambridge, 1888-1892; Registrar's Records, "Record of the Class of 1890," 314, in the Registrar's office at Harvard; and the "Record of the Graduate Department, 1888 [sic]," at the office of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>25</sup> The records do not indicate clearly which economics course he took.

concentrated on scientific subjects: qualitative analysis based chiefly on laboratory work, a beginner's laboratory course in geology, and a more advanced geology course given by Nathaniel Shaler. Though he scored A's in all these scientific courses, the following year the exact sciences departed without explanation from his schedule. Perhaps chemistry and geology seemed remote from Negro advancement and deprived him of an adequate outlet for what he regarded as his talent for creative writing.

In the second year, the bulk of his work was in philosophy: George Santayana's *Philosophy 6*, a study of French philosophy from Descartes to Leibnitz, and of German philosophy from Kant to Hegel; William James's *Philosophy 2*, logic and psychology; and F. G. Peabody's *Philosophy 11*, the ethics of social reform. To this he added the senior composition course; a half course in elocution; *Political Economy 1*, a survey of railroads and bimetallicism; and Albert Bushnell Hart's *Constitutional and Political History of the United States from 1788 to 1861*.

This philosophical schedule was more appealing. There was inspirational teaching by Santayana and James. Furthermore, his admission into the realm of speculative ideas implied that here was a Negro at the frontiers of knowledge, working under the developing philosophy of pragmatism, and participating in the most advanced developments of modern thought. DuBois thoroughly enjoyed jousting with ideas. His account book and diary for this period is full of random sentences reflecting his current ideas about basic questions. "The very conception of the Caused carries with it the con-

ception of the Uncaused." "The Infinite—that specious invention for making something out of nothing." "I hold it Truth: that every argument rests on an unprovable postulate which contains *implicit* the whole conclusion." "Science is Mathematics. Mathematics is Identity. Science is Identity."<sup>26</sup>

Yet the field of philosophy did not hold DuBois either, and by his graduate years, he shifted to political economy and to history. The reason for this second change is only slightly clearer than for the first. Years later, he recalled that James, like Chase at Fisk,<sup>27</sup> had urged him away from philosophy: "It is hard to earn a living with philosophy."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps his recollection of James's advice was milder than the original. Perhaps James, famous for his gentleness in dealing with his students,<sup>29</sup> preferred this way of saying that his talents were ill adapted to the logical and speculative disciplines.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the two B's which DuBois received in senior year from James and Santayana compared to the A plus from Hart in *Constitutional and Political History of the United States* indicated the latter as a field better oriented to his talents. Perhaps problems of social reform attracted his missionary sense more urgently than early French philosophy, or James's logic and psychology. *Philosophy 11*,

<sup>26</sup> DuBois, diary and account book, 1888-1890, DuBois papers.

<sup>27</sup> DuBois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," 38.

<sup>28</sup> DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., *The Development of Harvard University . . .*, Cambridge, 1930, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly Miller, the late dean of Howard University, has reported that James told him that the style of DuBois's papers impressed him more than the content. *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13, 1932. (It should perhaps be added that Miller and DuBois were never too friendly.)

in which he did score an A, concerned itself with the ethics of social reform—questions of charity, divorce, labor, prisons, and temperance—and might have impressed him as more germane to Negro problems.

By the spring of 1890, when DuBois applied for a graduate fellowship, he had decided to pursue the Ph.D. in social science “with a view to the ultimate application of its principles to the social and economic rise of the Negro people.”<sup>31</sup> Having canvassed the catalog thoroughly, he bombarded the graduate school with applications for every type of aid even remotely connected with his project. Many scholarship funds were unspecified as to the branch of study which they would underwrite; he applied for all these and added applications for funds available to students of political economy, of constitutional or international law, and of ethics. Actually he ended up with the \$450 from the Rogers scholarship for the study of ethics in relation to jurisprudence or sociology.<sup>32</sup>

For the next two years, DuBois dug into political and constitutional history. The historians of the generation of Hart and Herbert Baxter Adams sought to understand the present through a study of the development of institutions; Hart’s course, which he had already taken, was almost exclusively devoted to this type of history,<sup>33</sup> and little else was included in Harvard’s history curriculum.<sup>34</sup> Hart had

<sup>31</sup> DuBois to Harvard faculty, undated, ca. April 1890, Harvard archives.

<sup>32</sup> *Harvard University Catalogue*, 1890–1891, 401.

<sup>33</sup> See the printed syllabus of Hart’s course: “Topical Outline of the Courses in Constitutional and Political History of the United States . . .,” pamphlet, Cambridge, 1888, Harvard archives.

<sup>34</sup> Morison, ed., *The Development of Harvard University . . .*, 180–181.

helped to introduce the German universities’ research seminar into Harvard’s history department a few years before DuBois entered the graduate school.<sup>35</sup> DuBois joined Hart’s “seminary” and following the methodology of his mentor, combed the statutes of the United States, colonial and state laws, the *Congressional Record*, executive documents, and “contemporary sources” for material on the African slave trade. It was slow, painstaking research; by March 1891, he reported to the faculty that he had located 146 pertinent statutes on the period from 1638 to 1788.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, he was carrying a full course load: in his first year, another history course, a course in English composition, one in political economy and one in Roman law; in his second year, four half-year courses in history and one in political economy.<sup>37</sup> Once in a while he took time out to compete for a prize in a field related to his work. But all these took second place to his research. In the late fall of his second year at graduate school, a joint meeting of Harvard’s history and political economy seminars heard a preliminary summary of his researches on the slave trade,<sup>38</sup> and when DuBois repeated this report for an early meeting of the American Historical Association, Herbert Baxter Adams praised it as a “scholarly and spirited paper.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>36</sup> DuBois to Harvard faculty, March 23, 1891, Harvard archives.

<sup>37</sup> “Records of the Graduate Department, 1888,” 237.

<sup>38</sup> *Harvard University Calendar*, No. 384 (December 1891).

<sup>39</sup> Herbert B. Adams, “The American Historical Association in Washington,” *Independent*, XLIV, 10 (January 7, 1892). DuBois’s paper, “The Enforcement of the Slave-Trade Laws,” was later published in the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1891*

The Harvard faculty accepted him easily and encouraged his work. Barrett Wendell flattered him by reading a part of one of his themes to a crowded class.<sup>40</sup> Hart not only guided his work, but helped him to secure successive Harvard scholarships and probably arranged for his appearance before the American Historical Association. A "smoker" of history professors, instructors, and graduate students included DuBois as a member.<sup>41</sup> William James, to whom DuBois refers as "my favorite teacher and my closest friend"<sup>42</sup> and "guide to clear thinking,"<sup>43</sup> welcomed him to his home "repeatedly."<sup>44</sup> James commended a long theme by DuBois as very original, full of independent thought, vigorously expressed—an "exceptionally promising production."<sup>45</sup> George Santayana read Kant privately with DuBois.<sup>46</sup> From Ephraim Emerson and Frank Taussig, President Charles W. Eliot, Josiah Royce, and Charles Eliot Norton came invitations to call on specified evenings.<sup>47</sup> Looking back later on, he was to say: "God was good to let me sit awhile at their feet and see the fair vision of a commonwealth of culture open to all creeds and races and colors."<sup>48</sup>

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(52nd Congress, 1st Session, *Senate Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 173) Washington, 1892, 161-174.

<sup>40</sup> DuBois, "A Pageant in Seven Decades, 1868-1938," 8.

<sup>41</sup> DuBois, "Methods in History," English 12 theme at Harvard, November 3, 1890, DuBois papers.

<sup>42</sup> DuBois, "Comments on My Life," ms., c. 1943, DuBois papers.

<sup>43</sup> DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> DuBois, "A Pageant in Seven Decades, 1868-1938," 7.

<sup>45</sup> The comment is written on DuBois's paper, "The Renaissance of Ethics: a critical comparison of scholastic and modern ethics," ms., 1899, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Yale University Library.

<sup>46</sup> DuBois, "A Pageant in Seven Decades, 1868-1938," 7.

<sup>47</sup> DuBois, "Harvard and Democracy," type-script of speech, undated, DuBois papers.

DuBois's own recollection of these years indicates nothing but advances toward a goal well conceived from the beginning. Actually, there were distinct disappointments. Toward the end of his first term of graduate school, his English 12 instructor summarized his work sharply: "Unthinking seems to me the word for your style. With a good deal of emotional power, you blaze away pretty much anyhow. Occasionally, a sentence or a paragraph, and sometimes even a whole composition, will be fine. Oftener there will be a nebulous, almost sulphurous indistinctness of outline. As for reserve of power, it is rarely to be found. More than most men, you need . . . an appreciation of good literature."<sup>49</sup> The graduate school, at the end of his second year, apparently felt some reservation about his progress, for his application for a fellowship for the third year, preferably to be taken abroad, was not approved, and the defensive tone of his application suggests that he was under some criticism for inattention to course work and for his slow progress toward preparation for his doctoral examinations.<sup>50</sup>

In general, however, DuBois could regard his academic career at Harvard with intense satisfactions. Though his record did little to increase his modesty, it more than justified the confidence of his friends at Fisk. His five A's and one C (in English composition) in junior year, four A's and three B's in senior year, and honorable mention in philosophy at graduation constituted a creditable showing,<sup>51</sup> and his A plus in

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Instructor's note on DuBois, "Hunted Mouse," December 11, 1890, DuBois papers.

<sup>50</sup> DuBois to the Harvard faculty, undated, c. February 1892, DuBois papers.

<sup>51</sup> Registrar's Records, "Record of the Class of

History 13 led Hart to endorse him as a likely candidate for a graduate fellowship.<sup>52</sup> In two years of graduate school residence, he was awarded five A's and five B's,<sup>53</sup> and though the completion of his degree took somewhat longer than he intended, his thesis, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870," was published as the first volume in the *Harvard Historical Series*.<sup>54</sup>

In 1892, after two years of graduate study at Harvard, DuBois went abroad on a grant—half gift, half loan—from the Slater Fund, a philanthropic foundation headed by ex-President Rutherford B. Hayes.<sup>55</sup> At the University of Berlin, he continued his course work in the social sciences. His program for the fall term of his first year, for example, included a course in politics under Heinrich von Treitschke; a study of the beginnings of the modern state; Rudolph von Gneist's Prussian state reform; theoretical political economy and "industrialism and society" under Adolph Wagner; and Gustav von Schmoller's Prussian constitutional history.<sup>56</sup> In addition, he was admitted to Schmoller's seminar and, as at Harvard, spent the bulk of his time pre-

paring a research paper, this time on "The Plantation and Peasant Proprietorship System of Agriculture in the Southern United States."<sup>57</sup>

Schmoller pulled DuBois away from political history and introduced him to the type of economic history which crosses easily into sociology. Encouraging the young American into a career of scholarship,<sup>58</sup> he taught him that from a careful collection of historical and factual material would emerge the "science of economics which would supply the concrete basis for national policy."<sup>59</sup> First, the facts; then, a program based on those facts.<sup>60</sup> This view did much to influence his later work, both *The Philadelphia Negro*<sup>61</sup> and the *Atlanta University Publications*,<sup>62</sup> his "Program of a Hundred Years."

As DuBois went west in the hot August of 1894, the years of training were over. He received his Ph.D. the following year. Within four more years the publication of *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade* and *The Philadelphia Negro* were to show the superior product which his ability and training could produce.

<sup>57</sup> DuBois to Gilman, c. April 1893, DuBois papers.

<sup>58</sup> DuBois, "Gustav Schmoller," ms. of lecture, probably given soon after DuBois's return to the United States, DuBois papers.

<sup>59</sup> Hans Gehrig, "Gustav von Schmoller," in Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 15 vol., New York, 1934; XIII, 577.

<sup>60</sup> DuBois, "Schmoller u. Wagner Notebook," 1893-1894, DuBois papers. In this notebook, DuBois quotes Schmoller as saying: "My school tries as far as possible to leave the 'sollen' for a later stage and study the 'geschehen' as other sciences have done."

<sup>61</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (Publications of the University of Pennsylvania, Series in Political Economy and Public Law, XIV)*, Philadelphia, 1899.

<sup>62</sup> DuBois, ed., *Atlanta University Publications*, Atlanta, 1898-1910.

1890," 314; Harvard College, Class of 1890, *Secretary's Report No. 1*, Cambridge, 1891, 26.

<sup>52</sup> Hart spoke of DuBois's "distinct ability" in a scribbled undated note recommending him as a "good candidate" for a scholarship. Harvard archives.

<sup>53</sup> "Records of the Graduate Department, 1888," 237.

<sup>54</sup> DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870 (Harvard Historical Series, 1)*, New York, 1896.

<sup>55</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, New York, 1947, 379. DuBois later spoke of his Slater Fund application as a "stiff fight for recognition of my academic work." "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom" 40.

<sup>56</sup> DuBois to Daniel Coit Gilman, c. October 1892, DuBois papers.