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# W.E.B. DuBOIS'S CHALLENGE TO SCIENTIFIC RACISM

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**In 1929 several hundred** people gathered in Chicago's North Hall to witness a debate on the question, "Should the Negro Be Encouraged to Cultural Equality?" The affirmative position was argued by W.E.B. DuBois. His opponent was Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, Harvard Ph.D. and author of dozens of popular articles and twenty-two books. During the course of the debate, Stoddard (1929: 1) summarized the conclusions to which "modern science" had led him: "To-day, as never before, we possess a clear appreciation of racial realities. . . . We know that *our* America is a *White* America. . . . And the overwhelming weight of both historical and scientific evidence shows that only so long as the American people remain white will its institutions, ideals and culture continue to fit the temperament of its inhabitants—and hence continue to endure."

Stoddard had excellent reason to celebrate the clarity of his perceptions and the self-evidence of his conclusions. Quite literally, he had it on the best authority. His concept of race as a determining factor in human affairs was supported with virtual unanimity by the leading figures in American social science. Utilizing both professional and popular channels, biologists, psychologists, and sociologists proclaimed with one voice the inherent and immutable inferiority of the black race.

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scientific racism formed a vital link in the oppression of American blacks. If established social science defined blacks as inferior beings who could naturally be expected to occupy the position in society which they in fact held, then occasional social reformers could be dismissed as romantic dreamers who had neither knowledge nor appreciation of hard scientific fact. The thesis of this article is that a direct and authoritative challenge to the scientific racism of this period was urgently necessary, and that issuing such a challenge was one of the leading rhetorical contributions of W.E.B. DuBois. Specifically, I will examine the clash between social scientists and DuBois on three issues: social Darwinism, the eugenics movement, and psychologists' measurement of intelligence.

In both ability and opportunity, DuBois was admirably equipped to confront the scientific community. After earning a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895, DuBois amassed an impressive list of scholarly and popular publications. Between 1897 and 1910 he chaired the Department of Sociology at Atlanta University, where he inaugurated studies of American blacks, establishing him as "the father of Negro sociology" (Broderick, 1969). A respected social scientist himself, DuBois was well qualified to join battle with his white counterparts.

Although DuBois engaged the enemy on a wide variety of battlegrounds, he reached his largest audience through the editorial pages of *The Crisis*. As editor of the NAACP's official organ from its inception in 1910 until his resignation in 1934, DuBois saw a peak circulation of more than 100,000. Approximately 80% of those readers were black (Kellogg, 1967). Armed with impeccable credentials and access to a massive audience, DuBois attacked the scientific underpinnings of racial discrimination.

## I.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American science enjoyed enormous prestige. The rapid advancement of scientific knowledge lent scientists a "halo." Since they had produced palpable achievements in their own fields, they

seemed worthy of imitation, and their doctrines were reapplied to other areas. Those arguments which could claim scientific sanction were not open to further attack. The scientific and the true were indistinguishable (Platt, 1967).

In no area were scientists of this period more unified, and thus more influential, than in the area of race theory. Their primary unifying agent was the Darwinian theory of evolution. Under the leadership of Herbert Spencer, Darwin's principle of natural selection was reapplied to society. If biological organisms evolved gradually by eliminating those individuals least fitted for survival, it was thought, then social organisms must evolve at the same geologic rate and by the same process of elimination. The analogy had several corollaries. No society or segment of society could be improved substantially beyond the level to which evolution had brought it. "It is at any rate a tough old world," admonished sociologist William Graham Sumner (1924: 245). "It has taken its trend and curvature and all its twists and tangles from a long course of formation. All its wry and crooked gnarls and knobs are therefore stiff and stubborn." Reformist schemes were futile and dangerous attempts to tamper with the natural and inexorable progress of evolution. A second corollary was that social conflict, such as the conflict between races, was natural and desirable. Lester Frank Ward, who has been described as the "St. Augustine of the American cult of science" (Gabriel, 1940: 204), believed that organized society had originated in the conquest of one race by another, and that subsequent racial conflict represented the continual striving of society to improve itself through competition (Hofstadter, 1955).

If evolution eliminated the unfit, then the loser in racial conflict must be, by definition, inferior. One argument frequently used in support of black inferiority was that the race was dying out. Nathaniel Shaler, dean of the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, suggested in 1884 that blacks were becoming extinct. Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896) warned that the high incidence of tuberculosis and venereal disease among blacks arose from their inherent immorality, and would eventually destroy them.

Social scientists discerned further evidence of black inferiority in the actions of Southern lynch mobs. The prevalence of lynching, Ward (1914) explained, was a by-product of evolution. Whites lynched the black man because he insisted upon raping white women. The black man raped white women in response to the "unheard but imperious voice of nature commanding him at the risk of 'lynch law' to raise his race to a little higher level." Whites reacted violently because of an equally instinctive determination to protect their race from inferior strains (1914: 359-360). Although Ward demurred from the next logical step, the obvious conclusion was that a high incidence of lynching (not to mention raping) was inevitable and attempts to reduce it unnatural. Perhaps more clearly than any other issue, the rape argument illustrates the circular nature of evolutionary thought in the area of race theory. How do we know that the black man has rapist tendencies? Because he is inferior. How do we know that he is inferior? Because he has rapist tendencies.

The biological determinism suggested by the social Darwinists was further supported by the eugenicists. In 1869 the English scientist Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius*, in which he argued that individual characteristics were determined solely by heredity. Heredity dictated that "the average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own," for, as Galton (1962: 394) pointed out, "It is seldom that we hear of a white traveller meeting a black chief whom he feels to be the better man."

Under the stimulus of Galton's work, the eugenics movement flourished in the United States from the 1880s to the mid-1920s. The movement's central tenet was that such traits as genius, feeble-mindedness, criminal tendencies, and pauperism were part of the human germ plasm, and that the unfit must be limited in numbers through social application of scientific knowledge (Pickens, 1968).

For the eugenicists, the issues of heredity and race were intertwined. Madison Grant, an officer in the American Eugenics Society, announced in 1916 that "races vary intellec-

tually and morally just as they do physically,” and he scolded idealists who refused to confront biological reality:

There exists to-day a widespread and fatuous belief in the power of environment . . . to alter heredity. . . . Such beliefs have done much damage in the past and if allowed to go uncontradicted, may do even more serious damage in the future. Thus the view that the Negro slave was an unfortunate cousin of the white man, deeply tanned by the tropic sun and denied the blessings of Christianity and civilization, played no small part with the sentimentalists of the Civil War period and it has taken us fifty years to learn that speaking English, wearing good clothes and going to school and church does not transform a Negro into a white man [1918: 226].

In place of such fuzzy thinking, Grant advocated “a rigid system of selection” through sterilization of the unfit, beginning with the criminal and the insane and extending ultimately to “worthless race types” (1918: 16, 51).

In the early 1900s scientific racism gained an additional impetus from the psychologists. In 1916 Lewis Terman and his associates “perfected” the Stanford Binet intelligence tests. The I.Q. tests demonstrated that the children of college professors, bank presidents, and the like displayed superior mental ability. The results were considered conclusive proof of the value of good heredity (Boring, 1950). They provided a powerful weapon for the racists. Ability was inherited; the greatest ability was to be found in the upper classes; the upper classes included few blacks.

The response to exceptional blacks illustrated the closed nature of scientific thought. A highly intelligent black was not an argument against the race’s incurable inferiority. Science had decreed that blacks were not intelligent. Therefore, any intelligent person had some amount of white blood, regardless of how black he or she appeared to be (Fanon, 1967). To believe otherwise was logically impossible. As long as scientific sanction for racism remained a closed system, a persuasive argument for significant progress of American blacks was impossible to construct.

The mid-1920s marked the high point of racism's scientific respectability. By the early 1930s, scientific pronouncements on race were under fire from members of the scientific community. Cultural anthropologist Franz Boas denounced racist doctrines as clearly lacking in scientific proof. Moreover, the work of the anthropologists pointed up the intimate relationship between ideas and culture, and thus began to focus attention on environment rather than heredity (Gossett, 1965). In a speech before the Third International Eugenics Congress in 1932, Herbert J. Muller, pioneer geneticist, launched a fiery attack upon the eugenics movement as a mere reflection of upper-class bias (Pickens, 1968). Psychologists began to stress the importance of learning in the development of intellectual ability (Boring, 1950).

Yet race theory had become deeply embedded in the national consciousness. If the scientific definition of blacks was correct, then the justice of their position in American society was unassailable. In order to challenge the validity of social and political discrimination, it was necessary to argue that blacks were not what American science said they were.

## II.

In his editorials in *The Crisis*, DuBois developed an extensive rationale for challenging whites' definitions of blacks. As DuBois saw it, no one, including blacks themselves, was denying the current assumptions:

For now nearly twenty years we have made of ourselves mudsills for the feet of this Western world. We have echoed and applauded every shameful accusation made against 10,000,000 victims of slavery. Did they call us inferior half-beasts? We nodded our simple heads and whispered: "We is." Did they call our women prostitutes and our children bastards? We smiled and cast a stone at the bruised breasts of our wives and daughters. Did they accuse of laziness 4,000,000 sweating, struggling laborers, half paid and cheated out of much of that? We shrieked: "Ain't it so?" We laughed with them at our

color, we joked at our sad past, and we told chicken stories to get alms [May, 1914: 24].

“This is the lie which *The Crisis* is here to refute,” he announced. “It is a lie, a miserable and shameful lie, which some black men have helped . . . to spread and been well paid for their pains” 1912: 153). Whites’ assumptions about the Negro demanded refutation; W.E.B. DuBois would supply it. As DuBois saw it, scientific racism was a closed system which reached untenable conclusions by weak methodology in the hands of biased researchers.

DuBois set out to refute the social Darwinist assumption that racial conflict was a means of evolutionary progress. There were, DuBois contended, three arguments for racial antagonism, and all of them were false. First, social Darwinists hypothesized that racial antagonism represented an instinctive repulsion from something harmful and was, therefore, a condition of ultimate survival. Nonsense, DuBois snorted; white and black children played together willingly. Race hatred was learned. Second, social Darwinists argued that racial antagonism was an avoidance of poor racial traits, such as poor health and low ability. There was no evidence, DuBois replied, that whites were innately more healthy than blacks. As for low ability, the prejudice against Jews was hardly a function of their intellectual inferiority. Third, social Darwinists considered racial antagonism a method of race development. But, DuBois observed, it is hardly necessary to suppress one race in order to develop another (September, 1914: 232-233).

Acceptance of racial antagonism presumed the inferiority of one race, and DuBois attacked the presumption. A popular scientific argument for blacks’ inferiority was the belief that they were dying out. By 1918 DuBois was sufficiently certain of his facts to deny the assertion outright: “It is unfortunate that many calamity howlers follow the example of Dr. Shirley Wynne of the New York Department of Health and seek to prove, in the face of all reliable statistics, that the Negro is ‘deteriorating.’ This is flatly false. He is rapidly improving in health” (May, 1918: 11). Three years later DuBois noted that,



according to the census of 1920, "our increase in time of war and stress has been healthy and encouraging" (August, 1921: 150). The disappearance of blacks might fit the theoretic framework of social Darwinism, but it did not fit the facts.

Equally at variance with the facts was the social Darwinist pronouncement that black men were lynched because they were instinctive rapists driven by an overpowering desire for white women. Fundamentally racist, the accusation provoked DuBois's full wrath:

For a generation we black folks have been the sexual scapegoats for white American filth in literature and lynching. Every time a black man commits a crime, the story is garnished and embellished by unbelievable sadism in order to make a beast out of the criminal. It is not enough that a black man robs or kills or fights. No! In addition to that, the world must be made to believe him a wild beast of such inconceivable and abnormal appetites that he turns from red force and white anger to filthy lust. No proof is asked for such incredible lies [October, 1930: 353].

Actually, DuBois pointed out, a careful study by the NAACP in 1922 demonstrated that only 19% of blacks lynched had been accused of rape, much less convicted (February, 1922: 166). Sexual relations, DuBois scoffed, were "about the last of the social problems" which disturbed blacks. On the other hand, whites "for the most part profess to see but one problem: 'Do you want your sister to marry a nigger?'" (February, 1913: 180).

It was much more likely, DuBois retorted, that his sister would be raped by a white man. Mulattoes had resulted from the white man's lust, not the black man's: "We have not asked amalgamation; we have resisted it. It has been forced on us by brute strength, ignorance, poverty, degradation, and fraud. It is the white race, roaming the world, that has left its trail of bastards and outraged women and then raised holy hands to heaven and deplored 'race mixture'" (December, 1921: 56). The black man did not desire white women; he much preferred

that black women be left alone. Again, social Darwinists had defined the black man incorrectly.

The eugeneists were similarly unreliable in their delineation of the hereditary characteristics of the black race. DuBois was exasperated by the theory of innate characteristics, which allowed commentators to ignore observable behavior which contradicted theory: "There is always a whisper for your private ear—confidential information relating to certain innate characteristics, by which this man, though personally clean, sprang from dirty seed and to dirty seed must inevitably return; by which this man, though a gentleman of ability, must be treated like a dog on account of a temporarily hidden (but absolutely certain) dog nature" (May, 1911: 21). In short, the closed nature of race theory dictated that, when theory and facts conflicted, the facts were insignificant.

Appalled by the eugeneists' total disregard of the influence of environment, DuBois attacked the notion that blacks betrayed a genetic predisposition toward criminality. "Crime," DuBois lectured, "is a social disease; it is a complex result of poverty, ignorance and other sorts of degradation. As the peculiar victim of these things the Negro in the United States suffers more from arrest and punishment . . . than any other element" (May, 1926: 9).

If scientific assumptions about race were logically untenable and contrary to fact, they were also based on weak methodology. In 1913 DuBois commended the "deep insight and superb brain power" of Dr. Ulrich B. Phillips of the University of Michigan, who knew "all about the Negro." Phillips compared cotton production among Mississippi blacks before and after emancipation and concluded that it had declined. By contrast, he noted that during the same period cotton production among whites in Oklahoma and Texas had increased. DuBois was scathing:

We are delighted to learn all this, for in the dark days of our college economics we were taught that it was labor *and* land, together, that made a crop. . . . It seems that we were grievously

in error. This is apparently true only of *white* labor. If you wish to judge *white* labor, judge it by the results on rich Texas and Oklahoma prairies, with fertilizers and modern methods; if, on the other hand, you would judge *Negro* labor, slink into the slavery-cursed Mississippi bottoms where soil has been raped for a century. . . . Then, rolling you eyes and lifting protesting hands, point out that, whereas the slave drivers of 1860 wrung 1200 pounds of cotton from the protesting earth, the lazy blacks are able . . . to get only 700 pounds for their present white masters.

DuBois concluded that he fully expected to see the “astute” Dr. Phillips at the head of the Department of Agriculture, not because the job required intelligence, but because it did call for “adroitness in bolstering up bad cases” (March, 1913: 239-240). Scientific methodologies were often questionable.

The scientists themselves, DuBois charged, would not bear scrutiny. Specifically, they were biased. In 1925 DuBois took a delighted swipe at the psychologists:

Have you noticed, brethren, that since the afflatus of postwar “science” and the great *ex-cathedra* utterances of those mighty scientists [psychologist William] McDougall of Harvard and what-you-may-call-him [probably psychologist Carl C. Brigham] of Princeton—that since all this flareup and proof of Negro “inferiority” by “intelligence” tests, there has dropped a significant silence? . . . Well, here is one of the reasons: In Louisville, Kentucky, they have been testing school children . . . white and black. And then? Well and then, silence; Silence! [After two inquiries from DuBois, the superintendent replied that the results would not be published.] What is wrong? Why all this heavy secrecy? . . . If the truth must be known, those damned tests went and came out wrong! In other words, instead of proving white children superior, they actually proved—but no: We cannot write it; it’s too awful [October, 1925; 270-271].

DuBois was, of course, guessing. He had no evidence of the motive for withholding the results. However, the message was clear. Scientists were not objective seekers of truth, but biased whites who suppressed evidence which did not support their prejudices.

DuBois found similar evidence of bias in scientific pronouncements on blacks' insanity. In former years, DuBois noted, census reports had indicated a low incidence of insanity and suicide among blacks. Scientists had found it easy to explain the statistics: "'Naturally,' said American science, 'for Negroes have not enough brains to go insane with and are too good-natured to kill themselves.'" In more recent years, the rates had risen sharply. "But American science" DuBois reported, "is unperturbed." The mounting suicide rates simply indicated that the black man's inferior mind was unequal to the strain of civilization. "And there you are," DuBois concluded. "How can we possibly satisfy our friends?" (July, 1926: 111). DuBois's answer was, of course, that scientists could not be satisfied, and that the "scientific facts," whatever they happened to be, would be manipulated by biased investigators to demonstrate their preconceived and unshakable convictions. As scientists, DuBois suggested, Americans made good racists.

By 1929 DuBois was relieved to note that the respectability of scientific racism was declining. "It is becoming more and more difficult," he exulted, "for them [whites] to state frankly the case against the Negro. The reason for this is that the main facts upon which they have been relying are no longer plausible and the thesis [that blacks should not seek cultural equality] without them in barbarous, unscientific and unchristian" (May, 1929: 167). In other words, if the Negro was not as American science defined him, then American society's treatment of him was unconscionable. And, DuBois argued, scientific definitions were illogical and unsupported assumptions of a closed system, derived from a laughable methodology, and interpreted by biased investigators. Blacks were not what American science said they were.

According to social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark (1966: 600), W.E.B. DuBois "may well have been the most important figure in the American civil rights movement in the twentieth century." The fact that, more than any other spokesman, DuBois issued a direct and authoritative challenge to scientific racism may not determine whether he merits election as the most important figure in black protest in the twentieth century.

It may suggest, however, appropriate grounds for his nomination.

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