

W. E. B. DU BOIS ON BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

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The 1960s have been described as the “civil rights decade” in American history. Few scholar-activists have been identified as strongly with the legal, social, economic, and political changes culminating in the 1960s as has African American historian, sociologist, psychologist W. E. B. Du Bois. Inexplicably, in 2003, the 100-year anniversary of Du Bois’ classic, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), came and went with little fanfare within or outside of academia. However, in 2004, the 50-year anniversary of the initial U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) presents an opportunity for ethnic studies in general, and Black studies in particular, to acknowledge the intellectual and political contributions of Du Bois to the civil rights movement in the United States. In the post-Civil Rights Era, some authors have suggested that Du Bois opposed the initial *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling. In contrast, I observe in the present paper that Du Bois (1957) opposed the U. S. Supreme Court’s subsequent (1955) ruling that invoked the much-criticized term “with all deliberate speed,” rather than the initial (1954) ruling that rendered the “separate but equal” doctrine unconstitutional. Moreover, I contend that Du Bois’ own values and attitudes were fully consistent with his position on the (1954, 1955) decisions.

The year 2004 marks the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Around the time that *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided by the U. S. Supreme Court, a liberal white psychologist named G. W. Allport argued in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954/1979) that federal laws should be changed to ensure social equality for all persons, regardless of individuals' so-called racial group membership. However, fifty years before *The Nature of Prejudice* was published, a progressive Black sociologist named W. E. B. Du Bois similarly argued in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1969) that federal laws should be changed to ensure social equality for all persons, regardless of an individual's race.

In the present paper, I shall consider W. E. B. Du Bois' perspective on *Brown v. Board of Education*. Specifically, I shall attempt to debunk the notion (e.g., Patterson, 2001; Scott, 1997) that Du Bois took issue with the U. S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. As his (1986) own words reveal, Du Bois faulted the U. S. Supreme Court for failing to specify when states must comply with *Brown v. Board of Education* – not for deciding in favor of Brown.

From *Plessy v. Ferguson* to *Brown v. Board of Education*: The Rise and Fall of “Separate but Equal”

In order to appreciate the historical context in which the U. S. Supreme Court delivered its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, one must acknowledge the earlier U. S. Supreme Court decision that Brown overturned – namely, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). In *Plessy v. Ferguson* the U. S. Supreme Court declared that individual states could legally segregate the races, at least in public railway carriages (Hayes, 2000b). Throughout the United States individual states interpreted *Plessy v. Ferguson* as permitting state-sponsored segregation far beyond the realm of public transportation (Wright & Morrison, 2001). Especially relevant to the present paper is the legal justification that *Plessy v. Ferguson* gave individual states to segregate the races within the realm of public education (Hayes, 2000b).

At the time that the U. S. Supreme Court delivered its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), psychology was a fledgling science (see Harrell, 1999). By the time that the U. S. Supreme

Court delivered its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), psychology had matured sufficiently for the U. S. Supreme Court to use the results of psychological experiments as evidence that within the realm of public education, state-sponsored segregation was inherently harmful to the social-psychological development of members of stigmatized racial groups (Jones, 1997). Despite subsequent critiques of (1) the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision itself and (2) the psychological studies that the U. S. Supreme Court cited in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education* in changing the sociopolitical landscape of public education in the United States cannot be underestimated (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004).

Impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* on the U. S. Civil Rights Movement

Taken at face value, the scope of *Brown v. Board of Education* was limited to state-approved racial segregation in public elementary schools (Dorsey, 2001). Virtually from the outset, however, the significance of *Brown v. Board of Education* transcended the sphere of education (Wright & Morrison, 2001). According to Dittmer (2001), *Brown v. Board of Education* galvanized the modern civil rights movement in the United States.

Many social scientists view the 1960s as the “Civil Rights Decade” (Jones, 1997). At one time or another during the 1960s, every major branch of government within the United States actively promoted civil rights. For example, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965; President Lyndon Johnson signed Executive Order 11246 (Affirmative Action Order) in 1965; and the U.S. Supreme Court rendered its decision in *Loving v. Virginia* outlawing all state anti-miscegenation legislation in 1967. All of these instances of civil rights activism by the federal government owe a legal and political debt to *Brown v. Board of Education* (Dittmer, 2001).

Du Bois on Civil Rights Activism in General

In *The Souls of Black Folk* W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1969) protested segregation and racism within the United States (Hayes, 2000a). While Du Bois’ status as a scholar-activist is legendary, his tireless efforts in co-founding the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and in editing the NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, place him at the forefront of advocacy for social equality (Jones, 1997). Nowhere is Du Bois' commitment to scholar-activism more evident than in his own posthumously published writings on the role that Black intellectuals ideally should play in securing social equality for African Americans as a whole:

Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work – it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. (Du Bois, 1986, p. 861)

Although Du Bois' (1986) concept of the "Talented Tenth" might initially strike readers as elitist, it is clear in his later writings that the establishment of Black intellectual leadership should not be an end in itself but rather a primary means toward the end of wresting social equality from the blood-soaked hands of White America (Zamir, 1995). Du Bois contended that those African Americans who had attained relatively high levels of intellectual development had an obligation to fight on behalf of the entire African American race.

Du Bois on Brown v. Board of Education in Particular

Publicly, Du Bois did not support the NAACP's legal battle in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Gaines, 2004); however I believe that his lack of public support for the NAACP's legal battle had more to do with well-documented interpersonal conflicts with fellow NAACP leaders (see Harrell, 1999) than with genuine antipathy toward the fight against racial segregation. In a posthumously published broadside against the phrase "with all

deliberate speed” that the U. S. Supreme Court used in its follow-up decision, *Brown v. Board of Education II* (1955), Du Bois (1995) suggested that the initial *Brown v. Board of Education* decision essentially would be worthless as a tool for securing black civil rights in the absence of a specific deadline for states to desegregate public schools:

From 1619 to 1957, the Negro in the United States has been the central thread of American history. In three periods in particular this thread has so entangled itself with the web of our history that the knots have threatened our very existence. They are:

The African Slave Trade, 1774-1808

Negro Slavery, 1850-1863

Negro Citizenship, 1876-1957

These crises—which involved (1) uniting 13 colonies into one nation, (2) Civil War over the powers of the Federal government and slavery, and (3) the status of Negro citizens – we have tried to solve “with deliberate speed,” arguing repeatedly that “morals” could not be advanced by legislation. Our “speed” twice became so “deliberate” that we made little or no progress and left to our children an aggravated burden of social reform. Thus our failure to abolish slavery when we tried to stop the slave trade, left the slavery problem to be solved by Civil War. When war freed the slaves, we neglected to make the freedman citizens and this task now faces us in the midst of a rising colored world. It is difficult to conceive what the problem will be if we do not face and settle today the accumulated problems of the last 338 years. (Du Bois, 1995, p. 419)

Revisionist critiques of Du Bois as opposing the NAACP’s fight for desegregation (e.g., Patterson, 2001; Scott, 2001) not only fail to acknowledge Du Bois’ lifelong pursuit of racial equality but also fail to acknowledge Du Bois’ own words in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Gaines, 2004). Ultimately, Du Bois became so disillusioned with the United States’ persistently anti-Black racism that during the final years of his life, he emigrated to Ghana. Sadly, Du Bois did not live long enough to see much of the social change in the United States that he had helped engineer; he died in Ghana in 1963 (Gaines, 1996).

Reflections on Du Bois: “Dual Consciousness” and the Multicultural Ideal Fostered by *Brown v. Board of Education*

Throughout his scholarly life, Du Bois commented on the “two souls” that characterize the psyches of African Americans (Harrell, 1999; Jones, 1997). The title, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1969), reflects Du Bois’ concern with the need for African Americans to reconcile the European and African influences on their conscious experience. According to Du Bois the dual aspects of African Americans’ consciousness are not inevitably in conflict. Rather, one of the primary social-psychological effects of racial discrimination in the United States is a forced divergence between the European and African streams of African Americans’ consciousness (Gaines & Reed, 1994, 1995). Du Bois believed that in order for African Americans to resolve apparent conflict between their “two souls,” they would need to be recognized as social equals by European Americans in a United States that respects the cultural contributions of all racial groups (Zamir, 1995).

The multicultural ideal that is evident explicitly in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1969) also is evident implicitly (if not explicitly) in the U. S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. The concept of the “jigsaw classroom” developed by Aronson and his colleagues (e.g., Aronson, Blaney, Sikes, Stephan, & Snapp, 1974; Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979) in which students from various ethnic groups engage in cooperative learning was directly inspired by the fitful efforts at desegregation that occurred within and outside the American South in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* I and II (Brown, 1986). Unfortunately psychologists rarely note the congruence between Du Bois’ multicultural ideal and post-Brown public education in the United States (for an exception, see Gaines & Reed, 1994).

Conclusion

Considering he (1995) posthumous first-hand account, I see no justification for the premise that Du Bois somehow opposed the U. S. Supreme Court’s reversal of the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The emergence of revisionist critiques regarding *Brown v. Board of Education* is by no

means limited to a set of reinterpretations of Du Bois' perspective (see Zirkel & Cantor, 2004). Nevertheless, I view revisionist critiques of Du Bois (e.g., Patterson, 2001; Scott, 2001) as especially troublesome in that his entire career as a scholar-activist was so obviously devoted to dismantling state-imposed barriers to social equality for African Americans (Harrell, 1999; Jones, 1997).

At the outset I mentioned that 2004 marks the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. We should also remember that 2003 marked the 100th anniversary of *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1903/1969). Just as scholars in ethnic studies (especially within Black studies) should reflect on the pivotal role of *Brown v. Board of Education* in ushering in an era of civil rights activism by the federal government, so too should scholars within ethnic studies (especially within Black studies) reflect on the role of Du Bois as a catalyst for *Brown v. Board of Education*..

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