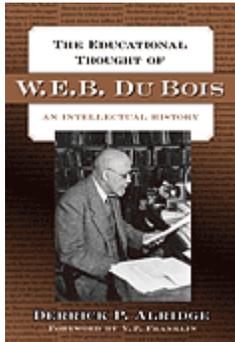


Professional Book Review

Alridge, D. P. (2008). *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History*. New York: Teachers College Press. 208 pp., ISBN: 978-0807748374 (hc) \$58.00.

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Alridge gracefully depicts a chronological history of how the experiences of W. E. B. Du Bois' life contributed to his educational thought and ideologies that are still written about today. Du Bois' work has influenced thinking and research in the field of African American history. Because of Du Bois' scholarship on Black experiences and the movement to help empower African Americans, Du Bois is considered by some to be the founder of present-day Black Studies. In his book, *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History*, Alridge examines the educational thought of Du Bois from 1895 to 1963. Alridge takes the reader from the early days of Du Bois as a child enjoying his days overlooking the hills of Great Barrington to his college days at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin. Alridge does an exceptional job in detailing the history of Du Bois' educational experiences and how those experiences played an active role in developing his intellectual thought and its relationship to the African American race. He provides extensive detail of how each era of Du Bois' life contributed to his intellect.

Beginning with Du Bois' early childhood years, Alridge explains how specific events began to shape Du Bois' educational thought. He then takes us into the college years of Du Bois and explains how those experiences and relationships helped to further Du Bois' ideology. Particularly in the Progressive Era, we begin to see Du Bois' scholarly work develop a theme that advocates for African Americans to achieve greater levels of success and become exceptional leaders in their own communities. Du Bois' primary thought during this time was that African Americans should focus their goals on obtaining a liberal arts education. This education would provide them with the skills needed to negotiate and change civilizations filled with prejudice and hate. It should be noted that during this era Du Bois was not alone in his quest to uplift the African American race. As Alridge notes, Du Bois was joined by other educators such as Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, and Anna Julia Cooper. Each of these scholars articulated somewhat similar racial and educational philosophies in that they all promoted the advancement of the African American race. However, each in his own right had different methods to achieve these goals, as often seen in the commentary regarding the debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Alridge further shares Du Bois' quest to educate classes of race in the South, believing that economic growth would only stem from an educated citizenry. Eventually, this theme of educating and advancing African Americans was coined the "Negro

Problem,” which was used to describe factors contributing to the social conditions of African Americans during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Du Bois’ thought on the “Negro Problem” was that, although tensions in race relations contributed significantly to the plight of African Americans, African Americans were not to use this as the sole cause of their social conditions. Rather they should be engaged in social activism, racial solidarity, and verbal persuasion to bring attention to the needs of equity and fairness for all races.

In the next few decades, Du Bois’ scholarly interest moved from the “Negro Problem” to the New Negro Movement (1920-1940). According to Alridge, this was a time of change and movement for African Americans, which unfortunately was intertwined with negative and positive tensions. On the one hand, the Harlem Renaissance was flourishing with entertainers, artists, and intellectuals such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carter G. Woodson (p. 72). On the other hand, the United States had declared war on Germany. Most troubling were the hardships that occurred during the Great Depression. Even through these times, Du Bois continued to advocate for equity and advancement for African Americans. However, his scholarly interest began to change in that he shifted his views to building a greater cohesiveness among African Americans. He also advocated for African Americans to have control of their public education and a voice in the curriculum. At this time, his belief was that education should extend beyond vocational training.

The next two decades, 1940-1963, did not bring about much change for African Americans. Racial tensions increased, causing African Americans to take direct action to obtain some of their basic rights to liberty and justice. In this era brought on by the Civil Rights Movement, Alridge paints a vivid picture of Du Bois advocating against Jim Crow laws and encouraging African American youth to become activists against these laws. During this period, Alridge also makes a note of Du Bois’ skepticism about the *Brown* case. According to Alridge, Du Bois was not against integrating schools. Rather, he believed that “racially mixed schools would not address the social and academic needs of African American children. In such cases, he argued, separate schools were better” (p. 82).

By providing a detailed chronology of Du Bois’ experiences from his college years, Alridge helps the reader to understand how those experiences, in connection with Du Bois’ role on issues that affected the social conditions of African Americans, helped to strengthen Du Bois’ educational thought. This historical context shows the shift in Du Bois’ ideology on what types of educational strategies would be needed for African Americans to achieve success and become leaders. Even in the twentieth century, Du Bois found the world to be still divided and filled with racial tensions. Therefore, Du Bois reasoned that African Americans must develop their own economic plan if they were to succeed. This included educating African Americans and empowering them by attending Black colleges and universities. According to Alridge, Du Bois no longer argued that a liberal arts curriculum was the sole means of educating and empowering African Americans. Rather, he began to embrace some of the ideas from Booker T. Washington, agreeing that the curriculum should indeed focus on vocational education, but not exclusively. To Du Bois, the best approach was a

combination of vocational and liberal arts needed to provide a broader education for African Americans to advance and become leaders within their own communities.

By the 1960s Du Bois was depicted as an educational scholar and embraced as a world citizen by many countries, except by the U.S. government. Because of his skepticism during the Civil Rights movement and his outspoken views on political activism, Du Bois was seen as a rebel and as such was attacked by U.S. officials. Even so, his views on the liberation of Blacks did not change. Rather, he continued the pursuit to advance African Americans through his scholarly activities until his death.

Alridge notes that at the end of his life, Du Bois called his wife Shirley to his bedside to say that his journey was now ending. His work had been done, yet there was still much to accomplish. Du Bois would have been elated to know that on the day after his death, such well-renowned leaders as Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed to millions of people who had descended on Washington to address the problems of racism and discrimination that Blacks were still not free. However, the works of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois could be used as a solid foundation to further the mission to liberate all African Americans.

Alridge concludes *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* with an analysis of how Du Bois' work may influence African American education. He makes reference to how Du Bois' work contributed to the development of Black Studies as a field of scholarly research. For any student engaged in the study of ethnic diversity, I would recommend that Alridge's book be included in the class readings. His book provides excellent insight into the scholarly work of Du Bois and how his research was used to impact social change. Throughout the book, Alridge vividly describes the life experiences of Du Bois during his college years and his role in advocating for the advancement of African Americans. He effectively uses these analogies not only to provide a historical context for Du Bois' life, but also to show how these experiences were used to address the factors that contributed to the social conditions of African Americans.

Although social conditions of African Americans in the twenty-first century may be drastically different from that of the period in which Du Bois lived, such scholarly work from notable African Americans is worthy, in that it provides a framework to understand the value of an education for African Americans and the need for people of color to be leaders within their own communities. While written in a historical context, Alridge's book provides a more comprehensive view of the issues effecting change for not only African Americans, but all Americans. As Du Bois (1903) stated, "It is the trained, living human soul, cultivated and strengthened by long study and thought, that breathes the real breath of life into boys and girls and makes them human, whether they be black or white, Greek, Russian or American." Alridge's book effectively captivates this sentiment in *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* by stressing the clarity and need for continued work on equity and fairness in a society of diverse ethnicities. It is hoped that such scholarly work will motivate and inspire all Americans to work towards this common goal.

Reference

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). The talented tenth. Retrieved June 25, 2009, from <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=174>