

What W.E.B. Dubois asked in 1899 remains unanswered in 1999

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hat, after all, am I?" W.E.B. DuBois asked when he arrived in Philadelphia in 1897.

"Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?" It is a tension that DuBois never resolved in his classic work, "The Philadelphia Negro," published 100 years ago, in 1899. A century later, his intellectual successors continue to struggle with the same questions.

Widely considered the foremost black intellectual of the 20th century, William Edward Burghardt DuBois was the first black to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. Excluded from teaching in white American colleges, the introverted young scholar found himself an outsider looking in.

When the University of Pennsylvania offered him an appointment in sociology in 1896, he seized the opportunity. But Penn had no intention of allowing DuBois in the classroom. It hired him to conduct an empirical investigation to prove the deeply ingrained notion among Philadelphia's white middle class that their "great, rich and famous city was going to the dogs because of the crime and venality of its Negro citizens."

Over the next 18 months, DuBois lived in and studied Philadelphia's 7th Ward, where the black population was concentrated. The product of his research was "The Philadelphia Negro," one of the very first studies to integrate urban ethnography, social history and descriptive statistics.

DuBois concluded that the poverty and crime of the 7th Ward was not the result of race, but of environment and the social conditions that confronted blacks, including the legacy of slavery, race prejudice and job competition with white immigrants.

Together with the economic depression and heated labor agitation of the 1890s, his findings made it difficult for the city's white middle class to cling to the genteel cultural standards and arrogant self-satisfied belief in progress

called "Negro problem," DuBois faulted the city's more successful blacks for their lack of leadership. He called on this "talented tenth" to serve as leaders and role models for the larger black community before it became permanently separated from the mainstream of society.

At the same time, DuBois became deeply disillusioned. As a U.S. citizen, he could not reconcile his belief in the American dream with the second-class treatment he received as a member of the black race. Eventually, in the early 1960s, he renounced his American citizenship and moved to the African nation of Ghana, where he died on August 27, 1963.

A century after the publication of "The Philadelphia Negro," DuBois' remarkable insight into the problems of black integration into American society still echoes today in the work of his intellectual successors.

In their recent book, "The Future of the Race," Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West argue that the only way to stop the black-on-black homicide, gang-related crime and unprotected sexual activity that plague the black community is to "confront the twin realities of white racism and the failures of blacks to break the cycle of poverty by seizing the initiative."

Self-imposed segregation is not the solution. It is nothing more than a "misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile," which not only "ignores the basic humanness of each of us," but also

the "common good that undergirds the national destiny of both blacks and whites."

Today, what many of DuBois' contemporaries called the "Negro problem" at the turn of the 19th century is the most pressing social concern at the turn of the 20th. But now, more than ever before, it concerns both blacks and whites.

Either we work together to achieve a common respect and understanding for each other, or we will surely destroy the promise of an American dream for our children. ■



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