

CARTON 122

WRITINGS

"THE BLACK SCHOLAR, THINKER, SCIENTIST, INTELLECTUAL  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE"

1971

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*Thinker, Scientist*  
THE BLACK SCHOLAR/INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The other day I happened to run across an article by a very eminent white sociologist, and in this article there was a discussion of the role of the scholar. Now this interested me a great deal because I was trying *and I thought this man, whose profession is the study of how our society works, would have* to develop my thoughts for what I would say this morning. So I read the article very carefully. *Like black students in school today I was wondering how study & scholarship could help our people* *something instructive to say*

But as I read along I found myself becoming more and more disturbed by what this ~~man~~, ~~this white~~ social scientist, was saying. Essentially what he said was ~~that~~ that the scholar must place himself "outside the political realm," outside the arena of human activity, and from this remote position he can comment about or attempt to interpret and explain human behaviour. However, ~~and this is the catch to it,~~ *then* the article went on to warn that the scholar should never attempt to involve himself in ~~human~~ the human activity he has been describing because then he runs the risk of *invalidating his work, that is he runs risk* finding out that all his fancy theories and ideas might not be true at all!

In other words it seems to me that this eminent white professor was *saying it is* all right for scholars and ~~intellectuals~~ *teachers* to philosophize and fantasize about the real world, but they shouldn't ever try to test out their ideas in practice because then they might be proven to be ~~liars~~ *ignorant* -- and that would be embarrassing. As someone (Goethe) once said: "There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action" -- and that is precisely what this eminent professor *was* ~~is~~ afraid will happen to him and his ideas, *that he might turn out just to be ignorance in action.* Consequently, his advice *was* ~~is~~ that scholars should withdraw into ivory towers and divorce themselves from the masses of struggling people. That way the scholar can contemplate the world without ever having to take any responsibility for what happens in the world.

Well, when I finished that article I felt that, yes, indeed, it had



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helped me because this professor was giving a ~~good~~<sup>good</sup> argument for exactly the opposite of what I think is the role of the scholar. I think the good professor was way off course. <sup>I think</sup> It is not possible for a scholar or intellectual to isolate himself or herself in an ivory tower and still be able to speak the truth. You cannot separate truth from action.

Let me explain what I mean. How is it that we can say we know anything to be a fact? How is that we can say we know the truth about something? Fundamentally, we gain knowledge as a result of our day-to-day practical experience. They say experience is the best teacher, and I agree with that. It is also possible to gain knowledge <sup>indirectly</sup> by studying the experiences that other people have had. But in either case, at the root of <sup>all</sup> knowledge is concrete human experience. If we locked ourselves in a room, or in an ivory tower, and never had any experiences, we would never know anything. <sup>for certain,</sup> and we would probably believe a lot of things that were not true.

Big debates over this.

Give example of flat world theories in ancient times. Was disproved when someone sailed around the world and showed that it must be round.

Now it seems to me that what this example illustrates is that the only way to discover whether our ideas are true or not is to test them out in practice; in other words to gain some experience. This is what I ~~mean~~ mean when I say you cannot separate truth from action; if you try to separate them you're liable to wind up thinking the world is flat or <sup>something equally</sup> foolish.

What does all this mean for black scholars and teachers<sup>??</sup>, or anyone who is trying to gain knowledge?? I think there are two conclusions we can draw. In the first place, it means that ideas are not just something hanging out in space waiting for us to grab hold of them; ideas come as a result of <sup>individual</sup> studying our <sup>own</sup> experiences, studying the experiences of our people, and studying the experiences of other people <sup>and</sup> around the world. Secondly -- and this is equally important -- the truth of our ideas can only be discovered by trying to put them into practice and test them out.



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If your car broke down and you took it to a <sup>young</sup> mechanic to have it fixed, and the mechanic came back and said he thought he had fixed the car, you wouldn't stand there and debate with him about whether or not he had actually repaired the car. <sup>or only imagined that he repaired it</sup> No, you would go turn on the motor and test the car to see if it was fixed. ~~Exact~~ The words we say and the ideas we have are true not because we say they are but because they work out in practice.

So it seems to me that the black scholar must first of all study and understand the experiences of black people, <sup>and other people</sup> and secondly the black scholar must test out this knowledge by getting involved in the peoples activities and struggles and putting these ideas to the test of practice. Only in this way can the black scholar know whether what he says is true or false. Only in this way can he make a real contribution to our advancement.


I think the greatest example of what I am talking about is to be found in the life of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois. Dr. Du Bois was ~~probably the~~ one of the greatest black scholars that ever lived. Dr. Du Bois was trained at Harvard University and he could have easily spent his life sitting in a library doing research. But Dr. Du Bois recognized that all his research and all his theories were of no value unless he tried to test them out in practice. So he involved himself in the activities and struggles of black people. <sup>Esp. in the work of the NAACP, then militant. my</sup> He took

<sup>No Ivory tower. He was not afraid of having his own ignorance exposed</sup> the ideas that he had ~~gained~~ gained from long, hard study and research, and he put them to the test of practice. <sup>In my opinion, this example must be followed. first</sup> He found out that some of his ideas were wrong and had to be changed, while others had great truth. And in this process Dr. Du Bois made a tremendous contribution to the black struggle for freedom and justice. <sup>^</sup> This is what black scholars must do: <sup>^</sup> to learn ~~from~~ from the people, and then to take what has been learned back to the people so that it may be beneficial. ~~Theory and practice must go hand in hand.~~

~~Or~~ as Dr. Du Bois wrote in his autobiography, it is impossible for a black scholar to be a clam, cool and detached scientist when black people are being lynched, murdered and starved. The scholar must serve the people in both his studies and his actions. this is the role of the black scholar.

<sup>proved this in educational philosophy of Community Learning Center</sup>



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Melome

654-0248

Friday

dinner party

Gumbo + Watermelon