

Wells-Barnett and several of her African American female suffragist colleagues waited in the crowd, and then marched out into the middle of the designated “whites only” part of the parade, where they remained for the duration of the event. In part because of the dramatic theatrics, violent protests, and sustained hunger strikes of militant suffragists during the 1910s, female suffrage was finally granted when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed on August 26, 1920.

Although the Nineteenth Amendment made the enfranchisement of all American women the law of the land, much like the Fifteenth Amendment before it, for many decades, the Nineteenth Amendment did not truly benefit African Americans. In the decades after 1920, African American women and men who sought to exercise their voting rights, especially in the South, were barred from casting their ballots by a brutal, systematic campaign of violence and intimidation waged by white supremacists. One of the central goals of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was to make the promises of the Fifteenth Amendment and the Nineteenth Amendment a reality for African Americans across the United States. Female civil rights activists such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ann Moody fearlessly denounced the bigotry and violence of whites who forcibly sought to prevent African Americans from voting, and, in the face of sustained, violent attacks, they went to the South to register new African American voters. Although America’s contemporary political scene is far from ideal, with voters of color (particularly economically disadvantaged voters of color) facing significant obstacles to the full exercise of the franchise, the tireless efforts and courageous sacrifices of generations of African American suffragists has nonetheless helped to move American government and society closer to realizing their promise of being truly free, democratic, and representative.

See also: Cary, Mary Ann Shadd; Cooper, Anna Julia; Douglass, Frederick; Fifteenth Amendment; Liberty Party; National Association of Colored Women; Smith, Gerrit; Terrell, Mary Church; Truth, Sojourner; Wells-Barnett, Ida

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Talented Tenth

The term “talented tenth” was coined in 1896 by the Reverend Henry L. Morehouse, who envisioned a class of erudite and upright African Americans emerging as a vanguard for the black community. But it was W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) who gave this theory prominence. In 1903, Du Bois published his classic manifesto, “The Talented Tenth.” The theory was simple yet profound: Cultivate the talents of the best and brightest African Americans and they will advance the interests of all black Americans. Du Bois proposed: “Men of America . . . 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 the Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men” (156–57). These remarkable men held promise. But would they fulfill it? Du Bois reflected on this question for 45 years before he substantially modified his theory.

His theory was the product of his own experience. In 1900, Du Bois was struck by the plight of his people: “American Negroes were an inferior caste, were frequently lynched and robbed, widely disfranchised, and usually segregated in the main areas of life.” Then came his vision: “I looked upon them and saw salvation through intelligent leadership; as I said, through a Talented Tenth. And for this intelligence I argued we needed college-trained men” (“The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address”). As part of this process of mutual, social “salvation,” Du Bois was the talented tenth’s living exemplar, embodying all of its ideals. As a strategy for racial advancement, a critical mass of highly educated blacks could theoretically produce a sea change in the collective destiny of all African Americans. At the other end of the social spectrum was the “submerged tenth,” an underclass of “criminals, prostitutes and loafers” (*The Philadelphia Negro*, p. 311).

Critics tasked Du Bois for placing too great an emphasis on the educated elite—those who today are occasionally

nicknamed “blackademics.” Pilloried by black radical Hubert Harrison as the “Subsidized Sixth,” the talented tenth theory was supported in principle by no less than Alain Locke—W. E. B. Du Bois’s intellectual equal and sometimes rival—who later became the first African American president of the American Association for Adult Education in 1945. This is a prime instance of a member of the talented tenth effecting a change in the fortunes of African Americans. In this case, Locke touched the lives of all Americans receiving adult education under the institutional auspices of the American Association for Adult Education.

Speaking of the talented tenth, Du Bois wrote: “Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character?... There can be but one answer: the best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 139–40). This implied some opposition to Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on industrial training for racial economic independence and his policy of quiescent accommodation as well. Eschewing “industrialism drunk with its vision of success” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 149), Du Bois was careful to say that “these two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 236).

Later in life, Du Bois refined his theory. In August 1948, Du Bois delivered his “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” at Wilberforce University to an audience of distinguished African Americans (representing the talented tenth), to whom he said: “My Talented Tenth must be more than talented, and work not simply as individuals. Its passport to leadership... would be its willingness to sacrifice and plan for such economic revolution in industry and just distribution of wealth, as would make the rise of our group possible” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 163). Then, transcending this Marxist agenda, Du Bois spoke of the “Guiding Hundredth” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 177), which was his “new idea for a Talented Tenth” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 168).

The “guiding hundredth” was to be a “group-leadership, not simply educated and self-sacrificing, but with a clear vision of present world conditions and dangers, and conducting American Negroes to alliance with culture groups in Europe, America, Asia and Africa, and looking toward a new world culture” (*The Autobiography of W. E. B.*

Du Bois, p. 168). The “guiding hundredth” would be open-ended, capable of forming alliances with other groups and races, including whites. This doctrine democratizes and internationalizes Du Bois’s strategy for racial advancement by placing it in a global context. Numerically narrower yet strategically broader, the “guiding hundredth” represents the evolution of Du Bois’s original theory of the “talented tenth.” In 1996, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West reflected on the significance of Du Bois’s theory of the talented tenth in *The Future of the Race*.

See also: Du Bois, W. E. B.; Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Locke, Alain; Washington, Booker T.

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Terrell, Mary Church

Mary Church Terrell (1863–1954) was a social and political activist and a champion of the women’s suffrage movement. Born Mary Eliza Church on September 23, 1863, in Memphis, Tennessee, Terrell was the product of formerly enslaved parents. Her father, Robert Reed Church, was the son of a Mississippi planter and one of his female servants. Terrell’s mother, Louisa Ayres, was a bondswoman who gained literacy while in the clutches of slavery. Once legally emancipated, Ayres opened a store specializing in hair