

On B. R. Ambedkar and Black–Dalit Connections

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This is a memorandum prepared for Mangesh Dahiwalé in response to an inquiry about connections between African Americans and Dalits in the twentieth century. It is meant as a supplement to an article I wrote: “Caste or Colony?: Indianizing Race in the United States,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 275–301.

Dear Mangesh,

You asked about B. R. Ambedkar’s time in New York while he was studying at Columbia University. I have not seen any thorough historical account of that. We know with whom he studied, but there is a lot of research that remains to be done. But it seems that Ambedkar was interested in matters of African American politics and culture. I was surprised to find, upon reading *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), that Ambedkar quotes extensively from Herbert Aptheker’s *The Negro in the Civil War* (1938) in chapter 7. Herbert Aptheker may not be well known outside of the United States, but to U.S. historians he is an important figure. Robin D. G. Kelley, one of our best-known professors of black history, says this about Aptheker: “In an age when very few, if any, mainstream white historians read, cited, or reviewed African American scholarship, Aptheker devoted his life to black history and took as his mentors Woodson, Wesley, and the grand old man himself—W. E. B. Du Bois.”¹ Aptheker is generally regarded as one of the founders of black history and as a rare white historian who treated the black liberation struggle with the utmost seriousness. He worked closely with Du Bois and was the editor of Du Bois’s papers after Du Bois died. The fact that Ambedkar read and made much of Ambedkar suggests that he must have been fairly alert to important developments in black culture—it took decades for the historical profession to come around to an appreciation of Aptheker’s contributions.

Another pioneering professor of black history, C. Vann Woodward, also has a connection to Ambedkar. Whereas Aptheker was a radical and thus pushed to the margins of academia, Woodward is often regarded as one of the first mainstream U.S. historians to really grapple with the oppression of blacks, primarily through his book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1957). In Woodward’s autobiography, he says that there were two main influences that led him to write that book. The first was the burgeoning civil rights movement. The second, though, was Ambedkar. Here is what Woodward says:

A new and extraordinary foreign perspective came my way during the Second World War, while I was on duty as a naval officer in India. With a letter of introduction in hand, I sought out Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, acclaimed leader of India’s millions of untouchables and later a figure of first importance in Indian constitutional history. He received me cordially at his home in New Delhi and plied me with questions about the black ‘untouchables’ of America and how their plight compared with that of his own people. He also took the time to open to me the panorama of an ancient world of Indian segregation by caste and to show me how it appeared to its victims.²

¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *Journal of*

² C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 87–88.

Woodward said that Ambedkar's description of the oppression of untouchables encouraged Woodward to write about the oppression of blacks.

You asked about the relationship between Du Bois and Ambedkar. Du Bois was close with Lala Lajpat Rai and later took up a correspondence with Gandhi. He did not have a very good understanding of the Round Table Conference and described the Communal Award as "*the decree of the Raj that the higher caste should constitute an electorate separate from the Untouchables.*"³ In other words, he thought that it was going to somehow disenfranchise untouchables. The one black intellectual who really did seem to understand what was happening in India was George S. Schuyler. Schuyler is not much remembered now, but he was then the gadfly of the black intelligentsia. "The chief trouble with India," wrote Schuyler in his column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an important black newspaper, "is not English rule, but internal race, class and religious bigotry. If the English left India tomorrow, the Moslems and Hindus would be at each others' throats and the rich would continue to grind down the poor as they have always done."⁴ Gandhian nationalism he declared to be "mythical" and "unsound"—a scam perpetrated by the Indian elite, themselves eager to "climb on the backs of the horribly exploited Indian masses."⁵ The correct analogues to blacks, he insisted, were the Indian untouchables, who were, like blacks, segregated, denied access to education and transportation, turned away from religious temples, and economically oppressed. Nor could Gandhi and the nationalists be of any help in this regard. Only by a self-led mass movement, which Schuyler believed to be developing under Ambedkar, could untouchables end their oppression. "All persecuted minority groups," he added, "must do likewise if they are to survive and improve their condition in society."⁶ Although provocative, Schuyler's rejection of the racism-imperialism identity and invocation of the race-caste analogy was largely a private one, and went no further than the pages of his own weekly column. As historian John Henrik Clarke remembered: "I used to tell people that George got up in the morning, waited to see which way the world was turning, and then struck out in the opposite direction."⁷

By the 1940s, Du Bois had learned something of Ambedkar. In Du Bois's papers we have the following undated letter from Ambedkar to Du Bois.

Dear Prof. Dubois,

Although I have not met you personally, I know you by name as every one does who is working in the casue [sic] of securing liberty to the oppressed people. I belong to the Untouchables of India and perhaps you might have heard my name. I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writings throughout. There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.

I was very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the U.N.O. The Untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit. Will you be so good as to secure for me two or three copies of this representation by the Negroes and send them to my address. I need hardly say how very grateful I shall be for your troubles in this behalf.

Du Bois's response, dated 31 July 1946:

My dear Mr. Ambedkar,

I have your letter concerning the case of the Negroes of America and the Untouchables in India before the United Nations. As you say a small organization of American Negroes, the National Negro Congress has already made a statement which I am enclosing. I think, however, that a much

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Foreign News," *The Crisis* 39 (1932): 351.

⁴ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 September 1931.

⁵ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 September 1931.

⁶ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 October 1932. Schuyler does not mention Ambedkar by name but his exaggerated claim that untouchables "have organized, 60,00,000 strong, under well-trained and courageous leadership," written a week after Gandhi's six-day fast, could hardly refer to any other untouchable leader.

⁷ Clarke, quoted in Michael W. Peplow, *George S. Schuyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

more comprehensive statement well documented will eventually be laid before the united Nations by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. If this is done I shall be glad to send you a copy.

I have often heard of your name and work and of course have every sympathy with the Untouchables of India. I shall be glad to be of any service I can render if possible in the future.

These can both be found in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), reel 58, frames 00467–00468. There is no other correspondence between the two figures in the Du Bois papers.