BOOKER T WASHINGTON’S *UP FROM SLAVERY*: ITS SOURCES OF PHILOSOPHY

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This article purports to show some of the possible sources of philosophy behind the writing of Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901). Its aim is to suggest new ways of reading this African-American classic, often reduced to a mere sociological document on black accommodation with the powers that be in the Post-bellum South.

First a few words about Booker T. Washington. Booker T. Washington was born Booker Taliaferro, a slave, in rural Virginia. As he indicated in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, he was not sure as to the exact date of his birth, which he situated around 1858 or 1859. His mother, Jane, was the plantation's cook and his father was a white man whose identity he never knew. "Of my ancestry I know almost nothing", Washington writes in his autobiography. It is with this sentence that he had begun the short paragraph that he had devoted to the history of his maternal and paternal families. If Washington's family history did not extend beyond a short paragraph, it is because he "has been unsuccessful in securing any information that would throw any accurate light upon the history of my family beyond my mother". Washington explained the dearth of genealogical information by the fact that the "slave family attracted about as much information as the purchase of a new horse or a cow" (29).

The rest of Washington's autobiography turns, therefore, around his own experiences both before and after the Civil War. During his boyhood, Washington worked as a servant in the plantation house until he was liberated by Union troops near the end of the Civil War. He recalled that a "stranger", whom he presumed to be a United States officer came to the plantation and read to the slaves "a rather long paper - the Emancipation Proclamation" and told them after the reading that they were all free.

After the war, Washington's family moved to Malden, West Virginia, where they joined Washington Ferguson, also a former slave, whom Jane had married during the war. To help support his family Washington worked first in a salt furnace, then in a coal mine, and later as a house-boy in the home of Gen. Lewis Ruffner, owner of the mines. Here he came under the influence of Viola Ruffner, the general's wife, who in spite of her severity grew to admire her for the principles of cleanliness, order, diligence in work, frankness and honesty.

It was in Malden that Washington "found (himself) at school for the first time". Washington recounted in moving terms how he overcame the opposition from his step-father by continuing to work in the mines and then at Gen.Ruffner's home while attending a school for blacks. At school he gave himself the name of Washington. In this regards, he wrote that "from the time when I could remember anything, I had been called simply "Booker". Before going to school it had never occurred to me that it was needful or appropriate to have an additional name. When I heard the school-roll called (...) By the time the occasion came for the enrolling of my name, an idea occurred to me which I thought would make me equal to the situation; and so, when the teacher asked me what my full name was, I calmly told him "Booker Washington", as I had been called by that name all my life". (47)
Washington's resolution to be an educated man was such that in 1872, he left Malden, travelling a distance of about five hundred miles on foot, sleeping under sidewalks for days, to join Virginia's Hampton Institute, a normal school for blacks. The latter opened its doors in 1868 with the financial support of Northern philanthropists and religious groups. Its first principal was Gen. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who was a son of missionaries to Hawaii and a commander of black Union troops during the Civil War. Armstrong founded the school on an educational philosophy that emphasised the cultivation of practical skills, character building, and a strong work ethic.

Washington reached Hampton Institute dirty and penniless, a state that made him suspicious in the eyes of the head teacher at that time, Mary F. Mackie, who had admitted him to a class only after he had proved his worth by sweeping the recitation room. Washington concluded his reminiscences about this episode in Hampton's Institute by telling the reader that when "she (Mary F. Mackie) was unable to find one bit of dirt on the floor, or a particle of dust on any of the furniture, she quietly remarked, "I guess you will do to enter this institution". (57) This experience also won him a position as a janitor, where he worked out the cost of his tuition. With the support of Armstrong, Washington ended securing the sponsorship of a philanthropist who paid his tuition.

When Washington had graduated in 1875, he returned to West Virginia to teach, fully steeped in Armstrong's philosophy. Three years later he attended Wayland Seminary in Washington D.C., It is during his sojourn there that he became fully convinced of the rightness of the Hampton Idea. He had had the opportunity to compare the conventional type of education based on training in liberal arts that Wayland Seminary offered with that of Hampton Institute based on industrial training. He realised that unlike the latter, the former made blacks shy away from manual labour and turn away from their kith and kin in the South.

However, Washington's stay in Wayland Seminary was not a complete waste of time. It allowed him to return to Hampton as a teacher in charge of Indian students in a night-school. It also drew him closer to Armstrong, who did not hesitate to suggest his protege when he had received a "letter from some gentlemen in Alabama asking him to recommend some one to take charge of what was to be a normal school for the coloured people in the little town of Tuskegee in that state". The date was May, 1881, and Washington recognised that this date constituted a watershed in both his professional and life careers. Armstrong's decision to recommend Washington to head Tuskegee institute paved the way for Washington to position himself as one of the uncontested leaders and spokesmen of his people till his death from overwork in 1915. The prestige of the man grew in parallel with the prestige that Tuskegee Institute achieved in the America of the post-Reconstruction period. His fame grew to such an extent that he was called by some critics as the "builder of a civilisation".

*Up From Slavery*, the book in which Washington had consigned the essentials of this philosophy has achieved the status of a classic in black American literature. It has hitherto been translated into more than eighteen languages including Arabic. (Cf. Guerlac Othon,1964:10)

The Washington idea of a southern civilisation developed in *Up From Slavery* has never ceased attracting the attention of critics ever since its publication in 1901. Washington's contemporary fellow black American thinker William Edward Burghardt Du Bois remains one of the most representative critics of Washington's idea of a southern civilisation. "genius." (Du Bois, 1973: 214-15)

In *Up From Slavery*, Washington related how he found that the white community in Tuskegee was hostile to the idea of a school for blacks. He went on to explain how he reconciled it to the same idea by showing that the education that his school would offer was practical, and that
therefore it was in the interest of both the white as well as the black community. It has already been advanced above that Washington's practical aspects of Washington's philosophy of education owes much to his own conviction in the rightness of the Hampton Idea. However, it is appropriate to the point out here that it is also a question of expediency.

In *American Slavery*, Peter Colchin develops the idea that the central problem in the America of the post Civil War period is that people across the racial line had "different understandings of freedom". (1993:228) He developed a whole chapter devoted to "The End of Slavery" to show how everywhere the freedmen resisted dependent relations that reminded them of their previous bondage. For many the way out of this former bondage consisted mainly in not being ordered around, in seceding from white churches, in building separate schools staffed with black teachers, and in voting differently from the white Southern people. According to Colchin this *de facto* racial separation "presaged the Jim Crow system that would make its appearance a generation later" and that culminated at the federal level with the "separate but equal" doctrine set forth in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

*The Plessy v. Ferguson* is an 1896 United States Supreme Court case that reconciled the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment with the system of state-imposed racial segregation that had started as early as 1870 when Tennessee had enacted the first Jim Crow law forbidding intermarriage of the races. Plessy was a thirty-year old shoemaker who broke one of the Jim Crow laws by refusing to leave his seat on a New Orleans train in 1892. This transgression of racial law triggered a case that reached the Supreme Court. Its decision upheld the right of the states to establish racial segregation in public accommodations if they guaranteed equal protection to all citizens. It would take the Supreme Court more than 50 years to reverse this decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and to overturn racial segregation in public accommodations.

As the title of his book *Up from Slavery* indicates clearly, Washington did not try to escape dealing with the issue of freedom that characterised his age. Furthermore, his understanding of freedom fell in line with the "separate but equal" doctrine that he espoused publicly in his "Atlanta Address" of 1895 included in *Up From Slavery*. In this address, he affirmed in front of representatives of both races that "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress". (148) It follows that Washington's understanding of freedom did not depart from the major understanding that people of both races in the South had of it.

However, Washington's understanding of freedom poses a problem for the reader. His support of freedom actualised on "a separate but equal" doctrine of life cannot be explained away easily because Washington boasted of a very solid background of knowledge. It has to be recalled that he was the first black man to be honoured with an MA degree in his age. His adoption of a notion of freedom so close to the one that prevailed in his time could by no means be understood solely in terms of the influence of the public opinion that he had himself contributed to shape. The "enabling conditions" for his understanding of freedom have, therefore, to be sought out on the grounds of Philosophy wherein freedom stands out as the dominant theme of discussion.

My hypothesis here is that if Washington had acquiesced to an understanding of freedom that sanctioned the "separate but equal" doctrine it is because he had found a legitimacy for it in Philosophy. This philosophy is basically Hegelian. The rapprochement between Washington and Hegel that the hypothesis makes finds some pertinence in the following extensive note from Dudley Knowles, one of the best contemporary critics of Hegel:
Hegel espouses a doctrine of separate but equal roles. Difference need not compromise ethical standing. I use the terminology of 'separate but equal doctrine' deliberately because we have heard it before, notoriously in defence of unjust and discriminatory practices in the United States prior to the Civil Rights legislation and the reforming Supreme Court decisions of the late 1950s and 1960s. I use the terms pejoratively because at the end of the day, I judge that Hegel was not true to the demands for mutual recognition so strikingly and so eloquently in his earlier work. But this is to prejudge the issues. We still have to see what mutual recognition entails in AbstractRight. (Knowles Dudley 2002:106)(Emphasis mine)

The above quote makes it clear that Washington's philosophy might well have had one of its inspirations in Hegel's philosophy since both authors had developed notions of freedom that accommodated themselves with "separate but equal" doctrines of life.

The idea that Washington might have found in the person of Hegel a fellow philosophical spirit to solve the issue of freedom in post-Reconstruction America is not as farfetched as it might look at first sight. There are elements in the contexts wherein the two thinkers had developed their philosophies that could help explain the parallel between them. One of the elements is Colchin's comparison of the post-Reconstruction South to Post-Napoleonic Germany and Prussia. In this regard, Colchin writes that the overwhelming majority of blacks continued to work for whites as agricultural laborers, and a substantial degree of coercion continued to characterize relations between planters and laborers; indeed scholars such as Jonathan Wiener have maintained that planter dominance of society remained so great that the South should be seen as deviating from the mainstream of American development and following a distinctive "Prussian road" to capitalism instead. (Colchin Peter, 1993:224) (Emphasis mine)

The parallel drawn between Post-Napoleonic Prussia and the Post-Reconstruction South sustains the hypothesis made above because it is within similar contexts of disenfranchisement that Hegel and Washington wrote respectively The Philosophy of Right and Up From Slavery.

The comparison that Colchin has made between the South and Prussia can be strengthened further as follows. In Prussia, serfdom, i.e., slavery was abolished only after defeat by Napoleon in 1803. Similarly, slaves in the South were delivered from their bondage by Abraham Lincoln's military men with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. In both cases emancipation was imposed on recalcitrant big conservative landholders from the outside. The Napoleonic era in Prussia was similar to the Reconstruction era in the South in the sense that both had been set on the track of reform.
In both Prussia and the South ancient privileges were swept away in the service of administrative and economic efficiency. In Prussia just as in the South, new constitutions were adopted which were more respectful to the rights of the citizens. Following the retreat of the Union Army from the South in the United States in 1877 and that of Napoleon from Prussia after his final defeat in 1815, the programmes of reform engaged in both countries slowed down before the old particular interests of ancient regimes were finally re-established.

However, the most important point in the comparison of Prussia and the American South in relation to this research is the way schools in both countries were looked at. In both countries, the schools/universities were viewed as crucial sites of instability. The following words by J.K.Vardaman, a Mississippi Representative, illustrate well the reactions of the white people in the post-Reconstruction South towards the education of the black people: "What the North is sending South is not money but dynamite; this education is ruining our Negroes. They are demanding equality." (Quoted in Franklin John Hope, 1988:246)

The same view was held about education in Prussia after March 1819 when a radical student, Karl Sand, assassinated the reactionary playwright August von Kotzebue. That Sand was a student, that "Jacobin" students were organising their subversive entities in Burschenschaften (student societies in German) drew the attention of the political authorities on the universities and schools as the sources of political turmoil. There followed very swiftly the Carsbad decrees of 1819, inspired by Metternich and agreed upon by the King of Prussia, that struck directly at the universities considered as the sources of subversion. Among other things, they provided for the dismissal of teachers involved in subversive activities.

It is safe to advance the idea that faced with the same state repression Washington could only followed the lead of Hegel in toning down his statements about the relation between freedom and the state in the post-Reconstruction South. Washington and Hegel were teachers, and as such their jobs were at stake if they did not nuance their positions on the burning political issue of freedom. Whether this nuance assumes the form of ambiguous statement as in Washington's Up From Slavery or the technical jargon of philosophy as in Hegel's The Philosophy of Right, critics have made short shrift of it. Many readers of The Philosophy of Right, writes Dudley Knowles, "denounce it as a reactionary tract, serving the private ends of its author and the public policy of a reactionary". (Knowles Dudley, 2002:8-9) Up From Slavery was condemned in nearly the same terms by critics like Trotter and Dubois at the time of its publication in 1901.

In his review of the spread of Hegelianism in the nineteenth century, Knowles writes that "Neither empiricist Britain nor robust, pragmatist America have been immune to the tides of Hegelianism". (Ibid., 21). It has been suggested above that Washington could not have remained immune to the tides of Hegelianism because of their similar concerns with freedom. However, Washington was open to more than one influence because while the Hegelian tides were washing over the American Atlantic shores, there occurred the high tides of social Darwinism. Indeed, the latter were so high that, according to Hofstadter, the United States "during the last three decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century was the Darwinian country". (Hofstadter Richard, 1992: 4-5)(Emphasis mine) Hofstadter's qualification of the America of the second half of the nineteenth and the opening years of the twentieth century as the land wherein Darwinism reigned supreme finds confirmation in Henry Adams's autobiography The Education of Henry Adams.(1918)

Adams, in a chapter of the above mentioned autobiography, entitled "Darwinism (1867-1868), wrote that "For the young men whose lives were cast in the generation between 1867 and
1900, Law should be Evolution from lower to higher, aggregation of the atom in the mass, concentration of multiplicity in unity, compulsion of anarchy in order; and he would force himself to follow where it led..." (Adams Henry, 1918: 232). It has to be remarked that Adams was Washington's contemporary and that even though his autobiography was published posthumously in 1918, he had finished writing it in 1901, i.e., the year Washington published his *Up From Slavery*. It follows that Adams's statement that "Law should be Evolution" could well have been written by Washington himself.

However, according to John T. McCartney, Washington did not seem to have resisted the pull of the Darwinian high tides that had swept over the America of his time. He writes that Washington's "educational philosophy, his social and political thought has social Darwinist Roots". (McCartney John T. 1992:60) Even though McCartney's insight into Washington's social and political thought is valid in the light of what has already been said about the centrality of social Darwinism in the American thought of the period. Yet, like all critics of Washington, McCartney has not pushed further his analysis of the Darwinian dimension of Washington's thought. Less than one page is devoted to it because as usual with critics of Washington he has let the shadow of DuBois to fall over the object of his study *Up From Slavery*. It is one of the purposes of this research to develop further McCartney's insight about the Darwinian dimension of Washington's work.

Hitherto two thinkers have been suggested as sources of Washington's thought: Hegel and Darwin. Two others can be added to the list: Thomas Hughes and Samuel Smiles. If Smiles and Hughes are considered as possible sources of Washington thought it is because it is one of the common consents in Washington's criticism that *Up from Slavery* is a success story defending the idea of self-help. For example, John Hope Franklin wrote in his introduction to *The Three Negro Classics* that "it (*Up From Slavery*) is a great success story, the kind that appealed to millions of Americans. The fact that its subject was a Negro increased its appeal, and his almost unbecoming modesty won Washington and Tuskegee many new friends"/ (Franklin John Hope, 1965:XVIII)

That Smiles and Hughes are among the possible inspirations of *Up From Slavery* can be explained by the fact that the former, just like Washington, is one of the major proponents of the philosophy of self-help. He was the author of a book bearing the name of this philosophy. As concerns Hughes, he was the famous writer of *Tom Brown's School Days*, which like Washington's autobiography recounts the success of a school boy in his studies. The similarity between these two success stories rests on other evidence like the importance that each of the authors accord to their mentors: Gen. Armstrong for Washington and Arnold for Hughes. In both works, education is associated with the building of Christian, gentlemanly character.

Moreover this extensive quote from Asa Briggs' Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851-67 brings extra-textual evidence as a possible literary and intellectual kinship between Washington and Hughes. Briggs writes

The passing of the Reform Bill of 1867 had created a new world in which Hughes had a minor part to play. (...)And so he turned back from the greater community to the smaller, and pitched his hopes in a pioneer community in the great new world overseas. He planned a settlement in Tennessee, where grown-up Tom Browns could prove that they were no anachronisms and could work with their hands to create a new society. (Briggs Asa, 1990: 173-74)
It is assumed here that Washington could not have remained ignorant of neither Hughes's book nor of his project of establishing a community based on manual labour. All in all, then, it can be surmised that Washington is like a swimmer on the high tides of Hegelianism and social Darwinism that hit the America of the late nineteenth century and of the early twentieth century, buoyed up by the philosophy of Smiles's self-help and Hughes's philosophy of education.

**Cited works**


