



The “Talented Tenth” and the “Common Man”: Connecting Black Elites to the Masses in the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

Le “Talented Tenth” et le “Common Man”: Connecter les élites noires aux masses dans le mouvement des droits civiques aux États-Unis.

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Abstract: Many civil rights leaders developed various strategies to advance the Black struggle for equality. W.E.B. Du Bois and Asa Philip Randolph designed their approaches to fighting for equality and social justice. While Du Bois believed that the best way to equality and social justice was to put the black intelligentsia at the forefront of the struggle, Randolph, on the other hand, considered that the path toward full emancipation required focusing on the black masses. Admittedly, there was then an apparent antagonism between Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” and Randolph’s “Common Man” due to the nature of their respective approaches. This article wants to show the complementarity and influence of both strategies in the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Drawing on Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers’s historical comparative approach, which focuses on differences between cases and the uniqueness of each case, this article goes beyond this opposition to examine the strengths and limits of both strategies and to show their complementary implementation in the Black Freedom Movement. The analysis of the dynamics of the Black Freedom Movement in the 1950s and 1960s shows that its success resulted not only from the involvement of some key Black leaders such as Thurgood Marshall, Diane Nash, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis to name just a few but also from the mass mobilization such as the March on Washington and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Keywords: Black elites, masses, Talented Tenth, Common Man, civil rights.

Résumé : La lutte des Noirs pour l’égalité aux États-Unis d’Amérique a donné lieu à l’élaboration de nombreuses stratégies. W.E.B. Du Bois et Asa Philip Randolph ont chacun conçu leur propre approche pour lutter en faveur de l’émancipation des Noirs. Si, pour Du Bois, donner la clé de la lutte pour l’égalité à la minorité intellectuelle, ou à l’intelligentsia noire, était la condition sine qua non pour gagner cette bataille, Randolph, lui, considérait qu’il fallait nécessairement confier le destin du peuple noir à la majorité, ou aux masses populaires. Il y avait donc clairement un antagonisme entre ces deux stratégies de lutte, eu égard à leur public cible différent. Cet article vise à mettre en lumière la complémentarité et l’influence de ces deux stratégies au sein du mouvement des droits civiques dans les années 1950 et 1960. En s’appuyant sur l’approche historique comparée de Theda Skocpol et Margaret Somers (1980), qui met l’accent sur les similitudes et les différences, cet article va au-delà de cet antagonisme naturel pour mettre en lumière les forces et les faiblesses de ces deux stratégies, avant d’élucider leur application complémentaire et simultanée dans les années 1950 et 1960. L’analyse de la dynamique du mouvement des droits civiques au cours de ces années montre que son succès a été bâti à la fois sur un vivier important de leaders Noirs comme Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Diane Nash, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, John Lewis et bien d’autres mais aussi grâce aux mobilisations populaires comme celles de la Marche sur Washington et le boycott des bus de Montgomery pour ne citer que celles-ci.

Mots-clés : élites noires, masses, Talented Tenth, Common Man, droits civiques.

Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement (CRM hereafter) generated diverse strategies, ideals, and leaders. Civil rights leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Asa Philip Randolph developed strategies to lead African Americans in the fight for equality and social justice. Some of their ideologies, when considered individually, contained the seeds of opposition, as seen in the cases of Du Bois and Randolph. For instance, regarding the leadership of the fight against racism, Du Bois and Randolph considered different categories of the black community. While Du Bois considered the “Talented Tenth,” the black elites, as the ideal group to lead the fight for civil rights, Randolph, conversely, considered the “Common Man,” the black masses, as the most important category to focus on in the CRM. The implementation of these two approaches together would define the outcomes of the events of the 1950s and 1960s.

Even though both strategies received individual attention from researchers, a comprehensive comparative approach that treats them as two sides of the same coin has yet to be undertaken. Each group of researchers aligned with either Du Bois or Randolph, highlighting an apparent antagonism rather than complementarity between the two. For instance, Dennis (1977), Harding (2016), and Dufour-Lauzon (2015), among others, clearly supported Du Bois’s elitist approach to the Black Freedom Movement by emphasizing only the black elite. These authors gave paramount importance to the black elites at the expense of the black masses in the African American battle for equality and social justice. By considering the black elites as the solution to pushing for equality and social justice, these authors were excluding the great majority of the black community, which needed to be taken into account in the resistance against racism and discrimination. Following the above-mentioned authors, Rustin (1976) and Bynum (2010) have equally expressed their preferences to the “Common Man” regarding the leadership of the Black Freedom Movement. For them, it was Randolph’s popular approach that could uplift the black community from the conundrum of segregation and racism. Both Rustin and Bynum advocated only the “Common Man” as the pivotal strategy for the fight against racism and discrimination.

Collectively, these authors and works presented Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” and Randolph’s “Common Man” separately. They examined Du Bois and Randolph’s contributions to the Black Struggle for Equality in incompatible and independent ways, thereby limiting their scope to their lifetimes. By providing an answer to the question of how the Talented Tenth and the Common Man shaped together the Black Freedom Movement, this article then seeks to show the complementarity of both strategies in the Civil Rights Movement by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses and examining how they were used to advance African Americans’ equality and social justice during the 1950s and 1960s.

Through Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers’s (1980) historical comparative approach known as the contrast of contexts which focuses on the differences of these two competing yet complementary visions of leadership and the uniqueness of each strategy in the battle for emancipation, this essay uncovers Martin Luther King, Jr.’s and his team’s inclusive use of both approaches – the black elites and masses – to propel the mass movement in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. To successfully achieve this goal, we organize the article into three points. While the first point provides background on both strategies, the second point expands on their relative strengths and weaknesses. The final section shows how the events of the 1950s and 1960s resulted from the implementation of key principles of both visions.

1. Understanding the “Talented Tenth” and the “Common Man.”

Likely coined in 1896 by Henry Lyman Morehouse, the “Talented Tenth” emphasized special education for the black community, particularly for those endowed with exceptional

intellectual dispositions. This particular education was designed to help these black individuals develop the leadership potential of the elites. For him, the “Talented Tenth” refers to African Americans with special intellectual and leadership predispositions that could be honed. As such, he envisioned an education that would enable these predisposed Black individuals to develop their talents and aptitudes to uplift their community.

For Morehouse, it was then both an educative and a political vision to the “Negro Problem” in the U.S. Considering that “in all ages, the mighty impulses that have propelled a people onward in their progressive career, have proceeded from a few gifted souls, men of thoroughly disciplined minds, of sharpened perceptive faculties, trained to analyze and to generalize; men of well-balanced judgments and power of a clear and forceful statement” Morehouse (1896, p. 182), Morehouse bestowed the leadership of the Black Freedom Movement to these few men and women. The expressions such as “gifted souls,” “men of thoroughly disciplined minds, of sharpened perceptive faculties,” etc. in the above quotation were Morehouse’s definitions of the “Talented Tenth”. For him, the commitment of the minority, the elites, would bring great upheavals in the society for Blacks, as the black elites should therefore lead the whole community of African Americans to fight for equality and social justice successfully.

This elitist approach within the Black Freedom Movement gained its preeminence from the 1920s onward. It was under Du Bois that this vision gained importance by closely linking the success of the Black Freedom Movement to the commitment of the black intelligentsia. As “agent[s] of social changes or societal guidance” (Dennis, 1977, p. 389), these men and women were to be the pathfinders or role models for the black community. This leadership vision gave the primacy of the CRM to the black elites because, as gifted souls, these leaders “have a solid moral foundation, purpose, and, even more importantly, are educated and aware of the intricacies of the oppressive institutions” (Harding, 2016, p. 63). This philosophy then entrusted the destiny of millions of Black people to their elites, who were to serve as their models, guides, and defenders, calling for a leader-centered, or charismatic, leadership style in the CRM.

Conversely, the “Common Man” called forth a grassroots approach to the CRM. Rooted in a socialist vision, Randolph’s “Common Man” emphasized that the black masses should undertake “direct mass action, civil disobedience, and purposeful coalitions between black and white workers” (Bynum, 2010, p. 37). Contrary to the “Talented Tenth” elitist approach, the “Common Man” strongly advocates a group-centered or grassroots leadership style. As such, grassroots campaigns and mobilization were to be at the center of the CRM, as the masses should “pressure the agencies and representatives of the federal government to exact their rights” (Rustin, 1976, p. 17). This group-centered leadership style then invited black, white, Indian, Asian ordinary men and women, the marginalized people, to undertake the fight for their liberation as “collectively organizing and resisting oppressive institutions allowed for them [the masses] to become active, political agents. Additionally, it encouraged others who were not yet motivated to join the mobilization of the Civil Rights Movement to do so because they would not be alone in their effort” (Harding, 2016, p. 69). By going beyond race, the “Common Man” interracial vision has contributed to racial collaboration among civil rights activists and organizations across campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s and beyond.

While for Du Bois, the black intellectuals or intelligentsia “may guide the mass [as development is] from the top downward” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 6), Randolph saw the situation differently. He considered the black masses as the principal force that could push for social justice because, for him, “power and pressure do not reside in the few, an intelligentsia [the Talented Tenth]. They lie in and flow from the masses [the Common Man]” (Rustin, 1976, p. 16). Neither Du Bois nor Randolph had thought of a combination or a complementarity between the black masses and their elites. Their strategies were adopted independently, though

not mutually exclusive, and sowed the seeds of opposition and misunderstanding between the black elites and their masses. This polarization regarding the leadership of the CRM has created tensions and rivalries among the different components of the black community. The black masses would not understand how the minority elites could pretend to speak for all African Americans, and the elites could not bear the fact that the “pöbel” – a German word to designate a crowd or people considered disreputable or worthless – instead of following their directives could consider themselves worthy of something. Du Bois and Randolph were then preparing their respective categories to oppose the leadership of the other group in the fight for an equal and fair society for African Americans.

2. The Strengths and Weaknesses of the “Talented Tenth” and the “Common Man.”

Both visions were deeply rooted in the long history of African American opposition to racist practices. Either a grassroots approach or an intellectualist perspective on CRM shares core elements that contributed to their successful implementation in the twentieth century.

The “Talented Tenth” contributed to the redefinition of black culture and the restoration of black identity. During the pre-CRM era, many movements and individuals epitomized the principles of the “Talented Tenth,” as their pioneering actions and leadership roles paved the way for equality and social justice. The Harlem Renaissance, for example, encapsulated the decisive roles of the black intelligentsia in the rewriting and remobilization of African Americans to join the nascent movement for equality. Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson, the proponents of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, stood as “leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 20). By emphasizing a renewed interest in black culture, particularly in drama, music, painting, and sculpture, they helped infuse a new, more accurate image of African Americans.

By generating renewed interest in African American culture and their successful leadership, the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance boosted their contemporaries' pride. With the advent of this cultural and political revival, the white community witnessed a change in the behavior of Blacks as they “were no more obedient and fearful. They were now ready to undertake any possible measures in response to any aggression” (Franklin, 1984, p. 425). Through the Harlem Renaissance, the black intelligentsia recreated dignity and redefined new ideals for African Americans. It was no longer an individual struggle but a group struggle. More than a literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance repositioned black heritage at the heart of the revolt against racism. Thanks to the elites of the 1920s and 1930s, “there is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart” (Locke, 1925, p. 16).

The “Talented Tenth” equally provided leadership structures for the Black Freedom Movement. Throughout the creation of diverse civil rights organizations, the elites led the early movements against racism and discrimination in the U.S. The creation of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) in 1896, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in 1925 and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935, for instance, were attempts to provide a strong leadership structure to the movement before the boom in 1950s and 1960s. Randolph, Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Margaret Murray Washington, Harriet Tubman, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Thurgood Marshall, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Bayard Rustin, and several others provided leadership to the movement as a whole. Through these organizations, they brilliantly led Black people to decisive victories in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Through them, these leaders successfully guided the black masses in their quest for equality and social justice.

By standing up for their community and their race, these leaders – the “Talented Tenth” – also served as role models for their community and the marginalized people. Entrusting the

destiny of the whole black community to the few gifted souls created a feeling of self-identification and a motivating factor for Black Americans in their long-lasting fight to gain equality and social justice, as “they [the elites] stood as living examples of the possibilities of the Negro race. It has equally implanted hopes and aspirations, noble thoughts, and sublime purposes in the hearts of both races,” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 4). African American elites showed that Blacks were capable of uplifting their race out of the darkness into places of racial equality and social justice. In the Black Freedom Movement, African American intellectuals showed the U.S. their capacity to understand, defend and promote not only the beauty of their country in all its diversity but also the worthiness of Blacks in the global history of the U.S. Their decisive roles in uplifting their community, the tenth of the African American community “placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 12).

For example, both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were exemplars of the role of black elites in the twentieth-century fight against discrimination and racism. In the oppressive and dehumanizing practices of the enslavers and owners, Tubman genuinely conceived a way out of slavery. The Underground Railroad became popular among enslaved people. “The Black Moses”, as she was called, defeated the surveillance of the slave-owners and liberated many enslaved people from slavery. Douglass, a self-trained man, was a key figure in the abolitionist movement. In so doing, these two set examples for the black community. These two figures were icons of courage and freedom for African Americans. This was equally true of pioneers such as Du Bois, Randolph, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Dorothy I. Height, Wells, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Septima Poinsette Clark, and several others who set examples for the generation of the 1950s and 1960s. Their courage, dedication, and cleverness inspired many who joined the movement against discrimination and racism.

In addition to the “Talented Tenth,” Randolph’s “Common Man” has also been of great importance in the Black Freedom Movement. Adopting a grassroots approach to the movement was of paramount importance as it contributed to mobilizing the majority, the black masses, instead of the minority black elites, to join the revolution against racism and discrimination.

Randolph’s grassroots approach helped foster interracial collaboration among civil rights organizations and leaders. For the success of the CRM, cooperation and unity were required, as Blacks alone would not have been as successful as they wanted. By avoiding a charismatic leadership style, the “Common Man” has fostered collaboration among diverse organizations and leaders. Alternatively, as I. N. Huggins and associates (1971, p. 67) nicely put it, the “Common Man” has contributed to “surmount racial hostility, instill class consciousness, and create an interracial labor movement.” By downplaying the charismatic leadership style of some civil rights organizations, Randolph’s approach helped form a nonviolent army composed of diligent agents of social change and societal guidance who supported and sustained the CRM. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Club from Nowhere (CFN), the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), for example, exemplified the grassroots and interracial collaboration in the CRM. As the most “non-traditional, non-hierarchical, grassroots-based, less-gendered and group-centered organization” (Rooij, 2017, p. 19), these organizations gave a real opportunity for black and white men and women, young and adults, to express their leadership and contribute to the ongoing fight against discrimination and racism.

Additionally, Randolph’s grassroots approach equally empowered the movement by shifting it from a color-based to a class struggle. This, in turn, allowed the fight for equality to have more members than supporters of people with low incomes. The “Common Man”

succeeded in mobilizing more people, especially the marginalized people, to join the struggle. It also helped to attract more sympathy from the whites’ organizations, such as the Garland Fund, because it became a struggle to free the marginalized people of the U.S. from the hardships in which they were submerged. Anne McCarthy Braden, Virginia Foster Durr, Rachelle Horowitz, Viola Liuzzo, William Lewis Moore, Joan Trumppauer Mulholland, and several other white antiracist activists freely joined the movement. She powerfully propelled it to success in the 1960s. The NAACP and the NOW were also interracial civil rights organizations that powerfully contributed to the Black Freedom Movement.

However, despite the adequacy of both approaches to the CRM, the two leadership visions embedded structural weaknesses that impeded their implementation. The first weakness of Du Bois’s approach was the rivalries among the African American elites. By promoting an elitist or leader-centered style, the “Talented Tenth” contributed to rivalries among civil rights leaders. Consequently, it broke up African Americans into groups. The opposition between the elites accentuated the gap among African Americans. As a community that was suffering from racism and segregation, the best example African Americans could give, particularly their elites or intellectuals, was an image of unity against racism and discrimination. By this unity, the world would have witnessed a united community that could surpass the individual differences and preferences of its members to address the issue of segregation and racism in America with an intrepid determination. As voices of the voiceless, the nine-tenths of the group expected to see their tenth together in ideology and praxis to address the injustices they were suffering. Unfortunately, the elites did not abandon their opposition and adopt a standard position in their fight against racism and discrimination.

For example, Washington and Du Bois opposed each other in the early twentieth century. Two of the most important leaders in the early twentieth century were in total opposition to one another. As blatant epitomes of the ideology of the “Talented Tenth,” these two did not succeed in jointly leading the movement. Washington considered black intellectuals untrustworthy because they did not know what the black community’s masses wanted. Washington “accuses the educated stratum of being able to understand only theories and ideas” (Dennis, 1977, p. 392), but not the real-world situations in which Blacks were living. Washington considered that the black intellectuals “have crammed their heads full of book knowledge; in so doing they have lost contact with the real world and real people” (Dennis, 1977, p. 392). So, for Washington, entrusting the destiny of African Americans to the black intellectuals was a mistake, and he called on the African American community not to follow the calls of Du Bois and the others. It was incomprehensible that the two prominent, gifted souls could bitterly oppose each other in such irreconcilable ways. The opposition between the leaders of the African American community hindered the progress of the movement because instead of focusing on the end of racism and discrimination, they were combating one another.

The other weakness of the “Talented Tenth” is the disunity of African Americans. The opposition of the intellectuals created mistrust among the black masses, and they calmed down their full commitment to following them in the struggle. It then resulted in a disunited community of African Americans. The black elite did not succeed in carrying out the battle under the leadership of a single organization or leader. The multitude of leaders led to a variety of visions, which in turn gave rise to a multitude of vessels and organizations to carry these strategies, thereby dividing the black community into groups. Many other organizations were emanations or branches of already established ones, focusing on specific components of the African American community, such as students, workers, and so on. Some were created in opposition to others. Whether new or old, these organizations relied on the black community for membership and sponsorship. This multitude of civil rights organizations contributed to the formation of many groups among the few million Black people, rather than a unified whole

marching toward freedom, equality, and social justice in the U.S. For example, the leadership of the NAACP resented the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and even the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as they feared these new organizations might compete with them for leadership roles in the movement for equality.

To sum up, the CRM was the business of the entire African American community. In this perspective, any initiative aiming at mobilizing Blacks to fight against discrimination and racism was welcome. However, the multitude of leaders, organizations, and strategies was cause for concern. With this multitude, it was difficult to control the different programs to make sure that their implementation did not impede the equality and social justice that Blacks were fighting for. As independent organizations, each had to decide whether to cooperate with the others or work alone, which sometimes made things difficult. When there was an initiative, it was to be discussed with the different organizations to reach an agreement before implementation. Thus, this variety of organizations, though it helped involve a large number of people and infused CRM with diverse visions and strategies, created a multi-headed movement that was difficult to seize and control. As a multi-headed movement, it was not easy to identify the voices or spokespersons of African Americans.

Like the “Talented Tenth,” the “Common Man” also had weaknesses that negatively affected its implementation in the CRM. Giving primacy to leadership in the black masses, the marginalized people presupposed their mobilization and education to understand the urgency of the times. Even though the black masses welcomed Randolph’s grassroots approach favorably, it was up to the elites, Randolph, and his companion Chandler Owen, to organize them. For the black masses to successfully be the real forces, they needed a sustained training that would empower them to have “a deeper understanding or a greater concern for the problems of the black working man” (Anderson, 1974, p. 108). This urgent task of mobilization and sensitization was the responsibility of the “Talented Tenth”. For instance, the Black Freedom Movement has gained momentum from the mid-twentieth century onward because earlier movements helped mobilize and raise the awareness of the black masses to join the revolution. For instance, to establish the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union (TSLIU) in 1937, the African American workers of the Carrington & Michaux Tobacco Stemming Company and the I.N. Vaughn & Company needed the expertise of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), specifically C. Columbus Alston and James Jackson. Through their partnership, they drafted a list of grievances, including “low wages, long working hours, and bad working conditions” (Hughes, 1987, p. 44).

The other weakness of Randolph’s “Common Man” was its incapacity to succeed in the valuable task of fundraising. Emphasizing only the black masses or the black-and-white working classes would not have been an effective way to mobilize financial support for the CRM. Their miserable living and working conditions, combined with their incapacity to clearly articulate the needs and grievances of their community, compel them to team up with the gifted souls to stand in when needed. Even though, the “Common Man” succeeded to create camaraderie among the workers and “contributed to the intellectual and social milieu that inspired the CRM where white and black activists would stand together and work under this common, collective goal of citizenship and advancement for African Americans” (Harding, 2016, p. 43), it was up to the elites to find adequate to mobilize funds for the CRM. Considering the strengths and limitations of both approaches, it is evident that the CRM's success under King Jr.'s leadership relied on both philosophies.

3. Shaping the Direction, Combining Both Approaches

Either through personal relationships or by applying their strategies, the movement's leadership in the 1950s and 1960s was marching in the footsteps of these two CRM pioneers,

Du Bois and Randolph. The success of the movement in this period relied on both the creativity and dexterity of its leaders and on the staunchness and significant mobilization or support from the masses.

The CRM in the 1950s and 1960s was undeniably a leader-centered movement. King, Jr., and his colleagues exemplified Du Bois’s elitist approach. From the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 up to his assassination in 1968, King, Jr.’s activism showed the centrality of the “Talented Tenth”, the black intelligentsia in the leadership of the movement for equality. Du Bois’s life and activism served as mirrors through which King, Jr. and his teammates evaluated the actions he took on behalf of the entire African American community. Even if Claybourne Carson considered King, Jr., as the “decisive factor” (Carson, 1987, p. 29) in the CRM, the leadership of the mid-twentieth century emulated “one of the most remarkable men of our time [as] he [Du Bois] exemplified black power in achievement and he organized black power in action” (King, 1968, p. 111). Du Bois represented “black power in achievement” because he dispelled the myth of black inferiority through his monumental intellectual contributions and open-mindedness. Du Bois also manifested “black power in action” by organizing Black people and leading them to fight effectively for equality and social justice. From the 1954 up to 1968, the CRM has revolved around the commitment and dedication of King, Jr., Randolph, Parks, Malcolm X, John Lewis, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, Stokely Carmichael, Diane Nash, Anna Boynton Robinson, Bayard Rustin, Dorothy Height, Georgia Gilmore, Jo Ann Robinson, Edgar Daniel Nixon and several others who through diverse schemes led the black community to demand the end of racist and discriminatory practices against Blacks. They acted as guiding figures, leading their community in global or local battles to resist racism.

For instance, in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, various leaders and civil rights organizations coalesced to demand changes to Montgomery’s public transportation system. There was a need for the elites to stand up against this umpteenth act of segregation. It was an affiliated member of the local branch of the NAACP, Nixon, a former member of the BSCP and SNYC and then president of the NAACP in Montgomery, Robinson, a professor of English at Alabama State College and head of the Women’s Political Council (WPC), Rustin sent by Randolph to advise King, Jr., on nonviolent disobedience, King, Jr., and several other leaders who initiated the bus boycott (Konaté, 2015, p. 78). Nixon, Robinson, Rustin, King, Jr., Parks, in addition to the “seventy black leaders assembled in the basement meeting room of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church [to endorse and launch the Montgomery Bus Boycott]” (Garrow, 1986, p. 18), represented the ideals of the “Talented Tenth”. They relied on their potential and intelligence to engage the black population in the bus boycott. These elites were the ideological fathers and mothers of the bus boycott and, as such, responded to Du Bois’s view of the role of black elites in improving their community.

Moreover, the March on Washington evidenced a leader-centered organizing style. For the success of the March on Washington of 1963, King, Jr., and his colleagues again resolved to ask the black elite to lead their community to the nation’s capital. After two failed attempts to organize a march on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1941 and 1948, they succeeded in organizing the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28th, 1963. This March brought some leaders of the black community into the light. Among those who decided to call on the black population to march on Washington were King, Jr., Randolph, Height, Hedgeman, Lewis, Rustin, Roy Wilkins, and Cleveland Robinson (Friedman, 2008, p. 23). That was the restricted group of African Americans who organized the massive Great March on Washington to demand civil rights and equal opportunities. The fact that these leaders initiated and led the March reflected Du Bois’s ideals, which held that the elites were the only potential force to drive change. These leaders served as “agent[s] of social change or societal guidance” (Dennis,

1977, p. 389) because they initiated and mobilized the protest for equality in the mid-twentieth century.

King, Jr., and his colleagues equally emulated the “Talented Tenth” call for partnership and unity among the black elites. By creating strategic alliances between these torchbearers of their community, these elites considered that only the union of the black intellectuals could help to give a certain aura to the fight against racism and discrimination. For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott commanded the elites of the African American community in the State of Alabama and across the U.S. to undertake the boycott in close ranks. It commanded their union as the elites of their community, and this unity motivated the entire African American community in that state to boycott the public buses. Their desire for unity led to the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which would unite African Americans to boycott the buses. Even though they were from different social statuses and backgrounds, the need to end discrimination in Montgomery's transportation facilities united them. Their union helped to strengthen the determination of the whole community to challenge the application of Jim Crow laws in the State of Alabama.

Moreover, leaders in the 1950s and 1960s equally exalted unity and partnership, whether in the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or in the March on Washington. The SCLC, for example, united about 60 ministers and leaders into a coalition to sustain the movement's momentum after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King Jr. gathered leaders from diverse ideologies, backgrounds, and denominations. These leaders assembled because they did not want their differences and ideologies to prevent them from challenging discrimination and racism. King, Jr., Charles Kenzie Steele, Fred Shuttlesworth, Joseph Lowery, Ralph Abernathy, Abraham Lincoln Davis, Jr., Theodore Judson Jemison, Medgar Evers, and several others came together to form that powerful civil rights organization that contributed to mobilizing Blacks and black churches to join the movement for equality in the 1960s. The eighty-five affiliated churches and organizations, such as the MIA and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), and their leaders united to fight against discrimination and racism. Their attitude reflected Du Bois's ideal of unity among black intellectuals. This was equally true during the March on Washington, when many leaders and organizations gathered to organize this massive mobilization of black Americans to demand both civil rights and equal opportunities. In addition to King, Jr., and Randolph (BSCP), there were Daisy Bates (SCLC & SNCC), Eugene Carson Blake (Presbyterian Church), Lewis (SNCC), Walther Reuther (UAW, AFL-CIO), Floyd McKissick (CORE), Whitney Young (NUL), Mathew Ahmann (NCCIJ), Roy Wilkins (NAACP), Dorothy Height (NCNW) and several other leaders and organizations who teamed up to unleash the mammoth mobilization of August 28, 1963.

In addition to the paramount importance of the black elites in the CRM, King, Jr., and his colleagues emulated the “Common Man” appeal to grassroots mobilization. The introduction of Randolph's grassroots principles was made easier by both King, Jr., and the Randolph team teaming up on various occasions. In addition to his charismatic leadership, King Jr. also embraced Randolph's group-centered approach. To succeed, the “Gandhi-like campaign” promoted by Randolph, King, Jr., and his teammates embraced nonviolence as a core pattern of their activism in the movement. So, ten years before the emergence of King, Jr. as the most prominent nonviolent black figure of the CRM, Randolph had already tested the soundness of the Gandhian tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience to pressure the U.S. federal government to desegregate the Armed Forces in the two failed attempts to march on Washington before it was successful in 1963. According to L. Hughes and F. McRae (2016, p. 2), Randolph even sent Rustin, his field marshal, “to instruct Dr. King indirectly, but nonviolent social action,” an instruction that was directly responsible for the long but

successful victory over the bus companies and the city’s political and economic leadership. So, either directly or indirectly, Randolph was present during King Jr’s formative years.

King, Jr., adopted the “Common Man” grassroots organizing style. This grassroots approach commanded an ideal mobilization strategy to involve the African American masses. Minor and larger meetings and structures contributed to raising awareness of racial issues and provided proper occasions to bolster confidence in the CRM. For example, to successfully lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the MIA was established as the central committee responsible for planning all necessary elements. In addition, during the 1963 March on Washington, the initiators established a central committee under the leadership of Randolph and Rustin, along with subcommittees in different states (Garrow, 1986). These local and central committees worked in tandem to mobilize African Americans for the other civil rights actions. King, Jr., and his colleagues knew that “power is the active principle of only the organized masses, the masses united for a definite purpose” (Rustin, 1976, p. 17). This organizational style also allowed leaders to educate the masses and direct their actions toward their goals. This was why the March on Washington, despite popular mobilization, succeeded as a nonviolent demonstration.

Partnering with some local and national organizations and leaders allowed ordinary people to understand the necessity of the actions against racism and discrimination as it “enhances the common man’s political efficacy [and] empowers common people to seek social change” (Clements, 2003, p. 8). For the leader, it was the perfect way to be close to the real conditions of the ordinary people. For example, the MIA used Randolph’s grassroots approach to encourage the black community to boycott Montgomery’s public buses. King, Jr., and his teammates then engaged in direct communication with the African Americans to convince them to boycott the public buses. After the decision to boycott, they sent messengers to discuss the boycott with the black population and called for an immediate meeting after deciding to initiate it (Konaté, 2015, p. 79). The African American ministers who were also among the organizers used their pulpits to mobilize the black community.

This was also the case at the March on Washington, where King Jr. and his colleagues partnered with many organizations to mobilize the African American community to fight for an equal society. The NAACP, the National Urban League (NUL), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the SNCC, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), the National Council of Churches (NCC), and several other civil rights organizations joined hands to march on Washington (Jones, 2013, p. 16). This partnership aimed to involve the staff of these organizations so that, instead of King, Jr., trying to convince their members, the leaders of these organizations would serve as the key initiators of the March. They worked and devoted their time and money to planning the success of the March. Through this multiplicity of civil rights organizations and leaders, King, Jr., and his colleagues were confident that his message would reach many African Americans. He even knew that his call would reach places where his divergence from other leaders could have prevented it from gaining the population's adhesion. This mobilization strategy clearly drew upon the “Common Man” appeal in grassroots organizing.

The leadership of the 1950s and 1960s equally adopted the “Common Man” desire to put the black masses at the heart of the civil disobedience against racism and discrimination. King, Jr., and his colleagues understood that the success of their fight for equality necessarily depended on a massive popular mobilization that would pressure local and federal authorities to enact legal and social changes for Black people. Partnering with local organizations and leaders was the appropriate way to unite all those working toward similar goals, as it has contributed to “waging an unpretentious, democratic, militant crusade [against racism and discrimination]” (Rickford, 2016, p. 35). This partnership helped expand their outreach and create a strategic alliance. Like Randolph, King, Jr., and his colleagues also considered it

necessary to undertake the fight for social equality regardless of race because for him “in a multiracial society, no group can make it alone to succeed in a pluralistic society, and an often hostile one, the Negro needs organized strengths, but that strength will only be effective when it is consolidated through constructive alliances with the majority group [Whites]” (King, 1968, p. 52).

The Montgomery Bus Boycott highlighted King Jr. and his co-workers’ desire to rally the black community to the cause of equality and social justice. Thus, after deciding to boycott the Montgomery buses, the leaders of the MIA knew clearly that its success rested mainly on the shoulders of the “75 percent of the bus-riding population in Montgomery that is precisely seventeen thousand people” (Lomax, 1962, p. 51). Sermons, letters, and meetings (Friedman, 2008, p. 32) were then used to reach this bus-riding population. King, Jr., and the other leaders were aware that, even though they had designed the bus boycott, the involvement of bus users was vital. Their appeal to the black masses through public transportation and their adherence to the boycott clearly demonstrated the importance of their contribution in the meantime. By associating with the black masses, the leaders of the boycott showed the centrality of the “Common Man” in the fight against racism and discrimination in the U.S.

In addition to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington also demonstrated that King Jr. and his colleagues emphasized popular mobilization and interracial collaboration. When King, Jr., and his collaborators launched the idea of a March on Washington, “the primary task of organizing the protest fell to staff and elected officials of local civil rights organizations, unions, churches, and other groups who lived in the same working-class communities that formed the primary base of support for the movement” (Jones, 2013, p. 17) to mobilize about 100, 000 marchers. With more than 250,000 marchers that showed up on August 28, 1963, they fulfilled the dream of Randolph, who thought that the success of the struggle for equality passed necessarily through the actions of the masses of the black community, instead of the actions of the few intellectuals or the minority and leaders of their community. By associating with the black masses, King and his colleagues made these two events “inclusive, open, democratic, accessible, and collaborative with other organizations” (Ransby, 2015, p. 7). The success of the March on Washington lies in both the soundness of King Jr.’s historical speech and the other well-tuned speeches and songs, but also, and more importantly, in the interracial mobilization to demand structural changes in the U.S. For instance, during the March on Washington, Whites represented “25 percent of the marchers (about 60,000),” according to Scanlon (2016, p. 100). In so doing, King, Jr., and his colleagues subscribed to the “Common Man” principle according to which “power and pressure lie in and flow from the masses” (Rustin, 1976, p. 16).

Granted, both Du Bois and Randolph had been present throughout King, Jr.’s formative years; they coached, trained, and guided him in various situations. Instead of exclusive approaches, King, Jr. and his colleagues adopted the core principles of both the “Talented Tenth” and the “Common Man”. Even if these two philosophies focused on different segments of Blacks, they turned out to be complementary, that is, each strategy contributed to readying a very key component of the black community to join the movement against racism and discrimination adequately. Indeed, by preparing both the African American elites and their masses, these two visions greatly contributed to the great upheavals of the twentieth century. It is safe to say that both approaches were sides of the same coin in King Jr.’s years.

Conclusion

In sum, the central problem addressed here is how African American leaders navigated racism and discrimination through competing visions – Du Bois’s elite-driven “Talented Tenth” and Randolph’s mass-oriented “Common Man” – and whether their tensions could yield effective strategies for systemic change. The main results reveal that, despite inherent antagonisms, both

approaches proved viable: Du Bois’s model offered intellectual guidance, organizational structures, cultural revival, and role models to foster black pride and strategic direction, while Randolph’s empowered mass action, interracial collaboration via CORE and SNCC, and popular participation, as exemplified by the March on Washington. Their fusion drove landmark victories, including the Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), and 24th Amendment, demonstrating how elite direction amplified by mass pressure can achieve systemic reform. This analysis makes a scientific contribution by providing a comparative historical framework that highlights the synergistic potential of elite-mass dynamics in social movements, offering a nuanced lens on leadership strategies beyond singular approaches. Nevertheless, the study has limits: the “Talented Tenth” bred elite rivalries (e.g., Du Bois vs. Booker T. Washington, King vs. Malcolm X) and organizational fragmentation, while Randolph’s vision struggled with mass educational needs and fundraising amid working-class poverty; it also overlooks quantitative metrics like participation rates and economic impacts, centers male leaders at the expense of women like Rosa Parks and Diane Nash, and adopts a primarily qualitative lens. Future research could address these by quantifying elite-mass dynamics through econometric models of CRM funding or protest efficacy, and extend to post-1960s movements like Black Lives Matter’s grassroots digital activism amid decentralized leadership against police brutality.

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