

**Eminent Problem, Prevalent Response: Applications of Du Bois' 'Unfinished Agenda' in the
Toledo Context**

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The basic freedoms that inherently exist within American society are not without certain conditions. American law has always been centered on *jus solis*, or birthright to God-given liberties. Yet, history illustrates the differential application of this legal concept to certain racial and ethnic minorities. African Americans, in particular, have seen the greatest social impact of the denial of personal liberties to life course outcomes. Specifically, Toledo history, economy and healthcare have been three areas where the greatest impact of personal liberty has disproportionately affected African Americans. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois sought to change the nature of these three institutions in order to eliminate racism and to narrow racioethnic disparities in American society. Moreover, Du Bois' "unfinished agenda" of eliminating racism and narrowing racioethnic disparities in American society with regards to these three areas is visibly seen in the local sociopolitical context of Toledo, Ohio. Drawing from personal experiences and local media, I will elaborate on the manifestations of Du Bois' unfinished agenda in Toledo, and I will illustrate resolutions for finishing the unfinished agenda with regards to the areas of history, the economy and healthcare.

In Toledo, there are movements to document local African American history, which is an extension of Du Bois' unfinished agenda. In Ghana, Du Bois began to work on *The Encyclopedia Africana*, which was a work meant to reference the transglobal contributions of Africans and people of African descent. This important endeavor failed to materialize before Du Bois' death. In Toledo, a communication specialist has created a program designed to carry out Du Bois' unfinished project in the local context. Robert Smith founded the African American Legacy Project (AALP), an initiative that provides educational outreach to African Americans. The AALP's main goal is to research and document African American history and life in Toledo and northwest Ohio. According to Smith, "We can't let people... pass away and not talk to them about their lives and memories here. So I guess there is a sense of

urgency in what we are doing.... We've lost too much history already" (Hughes 2004). Smith is creating a repository to salvage African American history in northwest Ohio, and he has solicited assistance from other African Americans in the community, including LaRouth Perry, a public school educator who has achieved regional notoriety. Other influential African Americans such as Major Jack Ford, Lucas County Common Pleas Judge Robert Franklin and Toledo Public Schools Superintendent Crystal Ellis have joined the movement to diffuse knowledge into this repository. Indeed, the focus on local African American history mirrors Du Bois' idea of *The Encyclopedia Africana*, therefore continually applying Du Bois' ideals within the local context.

In addition, Toledo locals created a grassroots movement to increase the living wage of individuals who are employed in minimum wage occupations, which is another application of Du Bois' unfinished agenda. In 1905, Du Bois met with Booker T. Washington in order to draft a covenant that outlined demands that African Americans should strive for in society. Some topics included the prohibition of legal discrimination, the end to institutionalized segregation and, perhaps most applicable, the equality of economic opportunity for Blacks in American society. Since I argue that these things have not been accomplished in American society, these ideas must fall under the aspects of the Du Bois' unfinished agenda. In March 2004, an effort in Congress to increase the minimum wage failed, partly because of the rationale that increasing the minimum wage would force business owners to cut jobs and therefore would hurt small businesses. Yet, in occupations where there are a substantial percentage of employed African Americans, there seems to be little resistance to increasing the minimum wage from payroll departments. Moreover, because African Americans are disproportionately employed in low wage jobs, an increase would be empowering for those individuals. The most interesting part of this political

struggle is that on the local level, there are many people who are in favor of the increase who are the *employers* at a place that employs low wage workers. Specifically, Paul Hubbard, the managerial supervisor at a restaurant chain, supported the idea of increasing the minimum wage. His justification for the increase was that it would increase the number of quality workers because companies can be more selective in who they hire (Hughes 2005b). Hubbard and others who are also part of the National Urban League in Toledo have joined forces with Toledo Central City Neighborhoods, an organization whose mission is to improve the quality of neighborhood life through housing and economic development. This fusion of determined African American individuals creates eminent power both for Toledo and for the entire state of Ohio. As such, their main objective is to lobby for the reopening of the minimum wage debate in the national legislature. Creating this alliance whose goal is to increase the living wage at low wage occupations for African Americans perpetuates Du Bois' unfinished agenda in the local context of Toledo.

Widespread health disparities that exist in the healthcare system in Toledo are being narrowed, which is another extension of Du Bois' unfinished agenda. In 1934, Du Bois' resigned from the National Association of the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) after arguing against integration of Blacks and Whites in American society. He visualized a self-sufficient and self-reliant African American community that would uplift itself. He wanted African Americans to start business and industries in order to create economic autonomy, and he also wanted information to be disseminated from African Americans to African Americans. For health, he wanted more African Americans to become doctors, a sentiment shared in the medical field today that surmises that an increase in the number of African American doctors would increase the amount of cultural sensitivity in treatment. African Americans in Toledo are doing both: they are increasing the dissemination of

information of health outcomes in the area and they are recruiting minority doctors in their healthcare system in order to decrease health disparities among African Americans. The Ohio Commission on Minority Health created Minority Health Month in April of 1989 in order to produce visibility of minority health issues (Hughes 2005a). Because of the demographics of Toledo, the focus has been primarily on African American health. A member of the commission, Mary Gregory stated that the special events and the meetings help the critical mass of African Americans in Toledo to understand our community's sensitive health needs and issues (Hughes 2005a). Information on diabetes, hypertension and HIV is widely disseminated to African Americans in order to increase general awareness, as well as "to address some preventative measures where someday these disparities will start to come down" (Hughes 2005a).

In addition, at the Medical College of Ohio, there is increased scouting for minorities in the college. There was a 0.5 percentage point decrease in the number of African Americans enrolled from 1990 to 1995 (Lewis 1997). Yet, the Medical College of Ohio also has the highest percentage of African Americans enrolled of all of the medical colleges in Ohio. There have been recent efforts to attract minorities in the field. The college has also been successful in increasing matriculation and retention rates of African Americans in their program. In addition, the university has created mandatory cultural sensitivity classes, in order to ascertain academic and personal skills which would increase a medical professional's understanding and appreciation of cultural differences between groups. In both of these instances, the diffusion of African American information and the creation of African American autonomy and trust in healthcare are two manifestations of Du Bois' unfinished agenda in the Toledo context.

Essentially, there I have shown how Du Bois' "unfinished agenda" has operated in Toledo, and I have illustrated resolutions for finishing the unfinished agenda with regards to the areas of history, the economy and healthcare. Regardless of the improvements, the applications and the programs that seem to derive from Du Bois' unfinished agenda, this agenda has not been met yet. While there have been major steps to eliminating racism and narrowing racioethnic disparities in Toledo, racism still exists in many facets of everyday life. The police force, the educational system and housing are three areas where racism and racioethnic disparities continue to exist. In order to finish the unfinished agenda, my community must be cognizant to racism and must be resilient to change. With cognizance and resilience, we will then revolutionize our lives and those lives of those that may feel that they cannot change their current conditions. Therefore the significance of the unfinished agenda is that it allows for and perpetuates generational hope, which is the reason why the agenda continues to be salient in our community.

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