



Autobiographic Notes on Scholar Activism

Dennis RM*

Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, United States

***Corresponding author:** Rutledge M Dennis, American sociologist, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, George Mason University, United States, Email: rdenni1@gmu.edu

Perspective Article

Volume 4 Issue 2

Received Date: July 14, 2021

Published Date: August 02, 2021

DOI: 10.23880/aeoaj-16000153

Abstract

This article is a personal narrative of the making of a scholar-activist, as exemplified in the writings of both Max Weber and W.E. B. Du Bois. The author describes the issues and situations which required the dual role of the scholar-activist and the activist-scholar. The singular role of each may accomplish many objectives. However, both roles in tandem, depending on the situations, may be even more useful in solving and resolving certain issues.

Keywords: Scholar-Activist; Activist-Scholar; Black Students Union; Anti-War Alliance; Doubleness

Introduction

It was more than fifty five years ago when I decided to become a sociologist. The academics of sociology and its usefulness appealed to me largely because the two scholars chosen as mentors were not only deeply rooted in the world of academics where they had distinguished themselves, but had also made an international impact as social and political activists. The mentors, W.E.B. Du Bois and Bertrand Russell, the sociologist and the philosopher, would serve as models for the sociological and philosophical issues I raised, pondered, questioned, studied, and often wrote about. Each was a scholar-activist who reached his young adulthood during the late nineteenth century early twentieth century, in which their writings reflected the central issues of this period: race and the colour line, the internationalization of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, industrialism, the scientific revolution, modernization, and increased urbanization. The writings of Du Bois led me into the sociology of race and ethnicity, political sociology, racial politics, and the study and critique of the concepts he highlighted, such as double consciousness, the talented tenth, masking, and prejudice and discrimination. Both scholar-activists made political choices that differentiated them from mainstream academicians. Russell would become the activist socialist who opposed communism, while Du Bois became

the socialist who at first opposed communist, but who later in life would not become a committed communist, but also join the Communist Party USA. The single thread permeating their lives was a commitment to social justice, equality, and an opposition to capitalism.

My entrance into graduate school, first for one semester at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho, and later at Washington State University, corresponded to massive social and political upheavals at home and abroad. At home the Civil Rights Movement had peaked and the Black Power Movement was in the ascendancy. In addition, the Pan-Africanism Movement was becoming prominent as the 1960s witnessed the liberation of many African countries from the vestiges of Western colonialism and imperialism, while the countries not freed were waging full-scale revolutions against their European oppressors.

I entered the academic world after the assassination of Malcolm X and before the assassination of Martin Luther King. In no way did I imagine myself in the role of Malcolm X, or Dr. King. What I sought was a role for myself to advance the cause, and case, for Black America, on one hand, and the American nation, on the other hand. I viewed this dual mission as imperative for the reconstruction of both Black America and the larger American nation as the social and

racial drama was being played out in the nation and around the world. I wanted to become an academician, since this appeared to be the role I had been preparing for myself even before entering high school. As a youngster a few of my neighbours had anointed me the title, “the bookworm kid,” while others began calling me “the little professor.” Though I was no stranger to the academic and scholastic worlds, I was caught up in a world where the idea of social change was everywhere and the central question became WHO would be the central figures in executing and making these changes realities. It was during my first semester at the University of Idaho and later while at Washington State University that I made the decision to become the scholar-activist; to become both the engaged scholar-academician as well as participate in the on-going social and political drama currently being played out at Washington State University, the nation, and the larger world.

This paper is a reflection on more than fifty five years of scholastic activism. It is intended to serve as example to young academics of possible options and choices for them, as I re-chart my intellectual journey from my early graduate student days to my activities as a professor of sociology and coordinator of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

The Graduate Student

After a brief stint as a counsellor with the Job Corps in Heber, Arizona, I applied to several graduate programs. A fellow counsellor had attended the University of Idaho and praised its sociology department. I had obtained a social science degree with a concentration in sociology, so I applied to the graduate program in sociology at Idaho and the graduate program in history at Duke. I was accepted by both, however, only Idaho offered a stipend. I was off to Moscow, Idaho, in August, 1966, a source of much ribbing from friends when they received a call from Moscow. During my first semester at Idaho I met Evelyn Montague, a social work professor and wife of Joel Montague, a neo-Marxist and professor of sociology at Washington State University (WSU). Evelyn connected me to Joel who informed me of WSU's recent massive national campaign, directed by sociologist, now dean of the school of social sciences, T. H. Kennedy, and Walter Beasley, sociology department chair, to recruit black sociology graduate students. I applied, took the GRE again, and was accepted into the program. Like other students without the MA, I had to first acquire it before moving on to the Ph.D. I was a part of the second wave of black sociology graduate students. The first wave consisted of many who had become well-known in the profession: Gordon Morgan, James Blackwell, Edgar Epps, Anna Grant, James Conyers, and William Julius Wilson.

My spring 1967 entrance at WSU corresponded to the emergence of three social movement organizations on campus: The Black Students Union (BSU), The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Anti-War Alliance. I was a member of each movement. David Covin, a graduate student in political science, and I helped to organize the BSU and became its junior co-advisors. The senior advisor was Johnetta Cole, anthropology professor, who would later become the first Director of the Black Studies Program, which was later elevated to departmental status. The BSU would be instrumental in leading the charge that resulted in departmental status for the program. SDS campus chapters were free to develop programs and activities around local campus issues and concerns. Members had no obligations to the national office. Our yearly membership gave members a year's subscription to *The New Left Notes*. We read Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, but none of us became, or wanted to be doctrinaire Marxist. We simply saw Marxian sociological logic and method as possible alternatives to those of Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel. We met monthly to discuss the state of the campus, the nation, and the world. There was no organizational chart, since the organizational format we followed was one of participatory democracy, which discouraged top-down leadership. But we did have a chief coordinator, Russell Hansen, who later upon acquiring his Ph.D., became a lawyer. I was the only black graduate student to claim membership in the three campus groups. The other black graduate students, if they chose to join any of the three groups, always chose the BSU. An additional factor worth noting is that attendees at our monthly SDS meetings were always overwhelmingly graduate sociology students. The campus anti-war alliance, however, was different in that it had a higher percentage of undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of academic disciplines.

The late 1960s represented a period of great organizational cooperation between the three social movement groups, though not always on every issue. For example, membership of The Committee to End The War in Viet Nam, SDS, and the BSU worked cooperatively to rally and demonstrate on campus to hire more minority faculty and to create a Black Studies Program. However, the BSU was absent in November of 1967 when SDS and Committee to End the War in Viet Nam members blocked the entrance to the WSU Placement Office to prevent a CIA interviewer from speaking. In addition, when both groups rented buses to enable their members to participate in anti-war demonstrations in Spokane, Washington, eighty miles north of Pullman, no black students participated.

Looking back and reflecting on my graduate students days, a part of my decision toward social activism, and this may have been much larger than I think, might have been

influenced by the fact that I believed that so much of what was occurring had great consequences for us, blacks, and I believed we should speak for ourselves and not have whites do so. I must also admit that a part of me resented the fact that I was in the forefront of relaying aspects of black life as it was being affected by social and political events while most of my fellow black students were busy hitting the books and preparing for their post-graduate professional life. This was not Du Bois's direct lamentation, or his dilemma, but he did note a reality for him which I did not wish for myself. In almost all of his books in which he presented brief autobiographical sketches, he noted how his activism so overwhelmed his academic-scholastic life that he was virtually forced to give up, or renounce the latter. I was always mindful of this Du Boisian Paradox and sought to avoid it. That is why becoming, and remaining, the scholar-activist was paramount for me, both as student and as scholar-academician.

My first speech as an engaged graduate student occurred at the University of Idaho, April 16, 1967. It was a given at an anti-war program. As I had been in the U.S. Army, and honorably discharged, I neither hated the army, nor the American society, though some might say that spending my formative years in South Carolina might be enough to hate the South. My speech focused on the class and racial composition of those fighting in the current war, and the accuracy of the then prevalent "Domino Theory." I knew that as a speaker I lacked the charisma of King, Malcolm X, Carmichael, or Rap Brown. I am an academic speaker in the mold of my two mentors, Du Bois and Russell, both having the reputation of being well-informed but "dry" speakers. However, I, like them, believed I had a story to tell and a message to deliver. In reality, I viewed my increasing desire to be an activist as a social mission, comparable, and perhaps more important than a religious mission. If true be told, I then viewed my life as the fulfillment of the Du Boisian Talented Tenth, with all the responsibilities enunciated by Du Bois in his famous address to the Negro National Academy. A few weeks later I was invited to present a speech on "Social Values and American Democracy" at the Borah Symposium at the University of Idaho. One of the most noteworthy issue from the symposium was the inability to silence Saul Alinsky, who insisted on answering questions directed to others, even after the questions had been answered. I eventually summed it up as the behavior of a know it all Chicago operative bent on educating educators from the wheat fields of Idaho.

The Pullman, Washington Women's Book Club called the sociology department at WSU and requested a guest speaker at their April 20, 1967 meeting. The secretary contacted me and asked if I would be interested. I said yes. I spoke on "Working for a New America," in which I summarized some of the ideas and Dr. King and W.E.B. Du Bois as crucial for this new America. Ideas from Dr. King's "Where do we Go From

Here," Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, and the importance of understanding the meaning of "Black Power" as viewed by Dr. King and others in the Civil rights and Black Power Movement.

The next presentation has special meanings for me. On February 8, 1968, black students attending South Carolina State College participated in a peaceful march and picketed a downtown segregated bowling alley in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I am very familiar with the situation and the locale, because while a student at S.C. State, I also engaged in demonstrations against the bowling alley and picketed it. The student demonstrators were forced back on campus by the police, during which time the police fired at the unarmed students who were running toward the entrance of the college to escape being beaten by the clubs. Thirty three students were wounded, three fatally shot in the back. After a series of meetings by members of the BSU, SDS, and other student organizations, we agreed to have a Student Forum on the Orangeburg Massacre on February 12, 1968. Representatives from the BSU and SDS spoke. I spoke on "The Orangeburg Massacre and American Democracy." This was yet another blight on the American dream and American reality. One of many reminders that the nation must continue to chip away, nay, perhaps use dynamite the blow away the vestiges of white supremacy. The BSU and SDS would later collaborate in a massive march and demonstration against the Jackson State killings in May 1970, and in the same year collaborated, along with non-SDS sociology graduate students and the anti-war coalition, in organizing the campus Student Strike.

During the next year or two I had to focus on selecting a topic for my M.A. and completing it, since the university and the department had imposed time frames in which to complete the M.A. in order to proceed towards the Ph.D. In addition, serving as junior co-advisor was more time-consuming than I initially thought, plus I had gotten married and needed to spend more marital time with my wife. On top of these obligations I was asked to, and I accepted, to be a member of the Black Studies Planning Coordinating Committee and plan a sociology course for the future Black Studies Program. When viewed in its totality, the varied obligations and duties seemed like a unified whole with divergent parts. The more I read the works of Du Bois, especially his autobiographical sketches, the more I viewed the varied parts of my commitment as a variegated whole, even if it appeared to an outsider that I was juggling those separate pieces and simply pretending that the juggling process made the disparate parts a coordinated and seamless whole.

Using Du Bois as a model, it is safe to say that the world of race and color and the accompanying power inequality,

prompts the emergence of a “doubleness.” Such doubleness is central to the question, and quest, for identity. The “who am I?” question becomes a collective “who are we?” question. The identity questions were requested by several institutions which asked me to speak. One was the forum on Race, Identity and Alienation at the University of Idaho. I spoke on Racial Subordination and Social Identity. The other requested identity request was made by prison supervisors at McNeil Island Prison, State of Washington. They requested that I speak on “Culture, History, and the Quest for Identity.” I accepted both.

Until I departed WSU for my first teaching position, much had occurred. My son was born; I completed my M.A. on Kurt Lewin’s application of Field Theory on prejudice and discrimination; the Black Studies Program became the Black Studies Department, and the course I created, The Sociology of Black Americans became sociology department’s contribution to the program. One of the last speeches I gave was on “violence in America,” presented at the Washington State Social Services Agencies Conference in Seattle, Washington. I finished my Ph.D. course requirements, selected a dissertation topic, The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois, applied for, and received a Ford foundation Dissertation Grant, and received, and accepted, an offer from Virginia Commonwealth University to become its first Coordinator of African American Studies Program, while also obtaining the position of assistant professor of Sociology.

I knew there would be a great transition from being a student-scholar-activist to becoming a professor in a dual role as coordinator of a program, which required building a program structured around multiple courses from a variety of academic disciplines. However, the task was not so daunting, as I was intricately involved in the creation and structuring of courses which resulted in the creation of the Black Studies Program, later department, at Washington State University. Given the lack of an external community in Pullman, Washington, where WSU’s population exceeded that of the surrounding Pullman population, I knew that VCU sat in the middle of an urban, predominately black population in Richmond, Virginia. I knew there would not be an SDS, since by 1969, SDS had virtually disappeared as an organization. I decided that my activism would consist of speeches and discussions, both on campus, and to the organizations and institutions in the Richmond metropolitan region. I also decided that writing, like it was for Du Bois, constituted a major feature of the scholar-activist role. In 1967 Kent Smith, a communication graduate student at WSU was creating an alternative publication called S’Blood, and asked me to submit a short article on Black Power. I did so, and the article appeared in the fall 1967 issue. I enjoyed writing and having been the editor- in-chief of both my high school

(The Parvenue) and college (The Collegian) newspapers, I believed writing indeed constituted an excellent vehicle for social activism, on par with speaking.

The Academician-Scholar-Activist at Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia, Boards and Committees

When I accepted the position at VCU, I understood that a part of my responsibility would consist of involvement and outreach to the many organizations and institutions in the surrounding Richmond communities. Indeed, within weeks of moving into my office, I received phone calls requesting my membership on various boards and committees. While acknowledging my university and community responsibilities, I had to be cognizant of the fact that WSU and VCU both insisted that I finish my dissertation within six years. Despite this, over the next three to four years upon appearing on campus, I agreed to serve on the boards and committees of at least five local groups: Advisory Board, Virginia Human Relations Council; Advisory Board, Rubicon Drug Program, Inc., Cultural Center; Board of Directors, Center House (Inner City Catholic Community Center); Executive Board, Housing Opportunities Made Equal (H.O.M.E.); Commissioner, Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority. In the early 1980s I agreed to work with the Richmond Public School system on a Quality Education Committee. We might add to these my membership on the Black Broadcasting Coalition, a coalition designed to probe media policy and racial diversity.

While there was much tension in my agreement to serve on these boards and committees, build the African American Studies Program, my teaching schedule, plus spend time with my growing family, my involvement provided me with a quick introduction to the community, its possibilities, problems, individuals, and leadership. My almost instant immersion into the community, in a sense, was too much, too soon, for I began to understand that time was not eternal. It, like one’s energy, had limits, despite one’s good intentions. However, the organizational experiences gained by these varied involvements, though time consuming, were crucial in providing me with innumerable insights which were indispensable to me in my role as coordinator of African American Studies. I’d like to think that my participation and suggestions were also helpful in enabling these committees and organizational boards to accomplish their goals and objectives.

The scholar-activist, despite his many activities and involvements, often has the dreadful feeling that no matter how involved he is, it’s not enough. There is that constant and gnawing feeling that he is largely “hot air.” He must

fight against the idea that sitting on committees and boards and providing information and data is not really having a place “in the struggle.” We must all get over the idea that there is only one road or route opened to the salvation of Black America. Instead, we must remind ourselves of the many roads necessary in the building of Black America. I remember all too well, the tongue-lashing Bobby Seale gave many of us who were graduate students who attended the Anti-Fascist Conference in Oakland, California in 1969. With a few expletives, he said we were wasting our time in graduate schools, and should be in the streets struggling with the people. He said we were wanted in the streets, not sitting in classes. At that point, many of us in attendance wanted to crawl under the seats. We knew then, as we know now, that there is a role for the scholar-activist, a special role with each scholar-activist defining and acting out that role based on his unique talents, character, and personality. Whereas, we greatly admire the activist, the scholar-activist also has a place and role in the struggle. Du Bois is a great example of this unique person and this role, and his lectures and speeches, many of them printed in *The Crisis*, as well as popular journals, exemplify the importance of lectures to various groups.

I was especially pleased to have been a part of the two housing boards, for both boards were crucial for minority groups. H.O.M.E. attacked racial discrimination in housing, and I was pleased, along with my VCU colleague John Moeser, to serve as testers for the organization to find out if two professors, with almost identical qualifications would be offered rental apartments in similar rental complexes. As a housing commissioner I was pleased to have been played a role in assisting Alma Barlow, a public housing resident, in establishing one of the few national tenants association, The Richmond Tenants Association. In addition, the commissioners supported the residents in their now payment of rent due to the lack of heat during cold months, and complaints by residents who were subject to removal from their dwellings if a family member brought illegal drugs, or weapons, into the household.

Lectures, Youth

The problems of black youth constituted a major issue in black communities and in the larger society. Given the high drop-out rate among youth, especially black males, one of my first lectures was given at Jamie Porter Barrett School for Girls. The lecture title was “The Importance of Education in Contemporary Society.” Other lectures on youth, culture and education were presented to the Richmond Boys Club, the Southampton Correctional Farm for Youth, the Forty-Fifth Annual Session of the Tuckahoe Baptist Association, the Center House, a Catholic Community Center for inner

city youth, and the OIC Youth Careers Conference. These appearances gave me an opportunity to speak to youth in which many were quite perspective and could articulate quite well some issues and problems from the perspective of youth. It was during these lectures and conversations following the lectures that one idea stuck with me: Many youth have a lot to say. We just don’t listen to them. This was a lesson I learned, and it helped me immensely later while engaged in field work in Black Middletown. Out of my listening to youth in that study I was able to write an “Dual Marginality and Black Middletown Youth.”

The Church

As Du Bois noted over and over in his landmark study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), the black church was, as it is today, the only major institution where blacks have complete social, cultural, and religious control. Indeed, Du Bois, like E. Franklin Frazier later, saw the black church as the “social” center of black life, and that it was both religious and socio-cultural. This is still true today, though to a lesser degree. The lack of community collaboration among churches has had a negative impact on community development and inter-faith cooperation and understanding. It was the case in Richmond, Virginia, as it would be the case when I spent a year in Muncie during the Black Middletown Study. Yet, many community churches do, and did, reach out to Black Studies and African American Studies Programs and Departments to provide speakers for various religious activities.

An invitation to speak at St. James Baptist Church’s Men’s Day Breakfast was my first church presentation. I spoke on “The Role of the Church in the Coming New Century.” Later, I would speak at the Presbyterian Leadership Faire on “Black-White Tensions in Richmond,” First Baptist Church on “The Courage to Make History,” and St. Philip’s Episcopal Church on Mother’s Day, on “The Importance of Black Mothers in Black Life.” After each of the above presentations, time was allocated for questions. What was clear to me was that many church members believed religion and the churches should be in the forefront in both promoting, understanding, and explaining past, present, and possible future realities for both the religious and secular societies. Many criticized denominationalism which often prevented cooperation between churches. At the same time, these same individuals were at a loss on ways to circumvent this denominationalism. The one issue on which there was general consensus was the churches neglect of youth and the lack of church program channeled toward youth needs. This, by the way, was the one item agreed upon by church leaders and congregants in my Black Middletown study: how to get youth back into the churches.

University Students

Becoming an academician-scholar-activist meant, while a professor, a focus on assisting students to become both better students and better citizens. My first month on the VCU campus, I was asked to become the advisor for the black student organization, Students for an African American Philosophy. I remained the advisor for four years while the group changed its name to The Black Student Alliance. Later I was asked to, and did agree, to be the advisor to Theta Rho Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, the fraternity to which I pledged in 1958. In all of which I have stated while coming to VCU, it must be understood that there were very few black faculty when I came onboard in 1971. It meant that the few of us there had double duties. My white colleagues did not feel compelled to be more professionally committed to white students, whereas, black students looked to the few black faculty and administrators for advice and a sense of collective racial security. They looked to the few black faculty for models of whom they might become, since many of our black students had grown up, as I did, in a completely black segregated world, especially in education and religion. Though this was 1971, segregated schools throughout the South were the norm. Plus, it should not be forgotten that Virginia, under Senator Byrd led the massive resistance movement after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Decision. And Virginia was the only southern state to actually close one of its county school systems, Prince Edwards County School System, for four years to avoid school integration.

The few existing black faculty and staff saw the challenge and met the challenge by creating an organization to both assist faculty and staff and students. This was the Black Education Association, created in 1971. The organization provided scholarship funds for students, faculty and staff developed an extensive tutoring service for students, and members were available to assist students during personal or family crises. Over the course of seven to eight years I lectured to student organizations conferences on a variety of topics, such as the following: "The Black Experience," "Education and the Contemporary World," "How to Become a Successful Student," "Being A Long-Distance Runner and Becoming a Successful Student," "The importance of Educational Planning," and "The Problems Students Encounter in the Academic World."

Conclusions

This essay was written to illustrate the dual world of the scholar-activist, or the academician-activist. I began with my graduate student days, because it was the period when I saw the value of the scholar-activist and envisioned the success of such a dual entity. Similar to one face representing both tragedy and comedy, the dual face of the scholar-activist represents two separate features of one face. The information culled from the scholar aids the activist, and the information gained from the activist enriches the scholar and academician. In the classroom a valid academic claim can be made for classroom activism by the textbooks chosen, the classroom activities and assignments given, suggested research and term paper ideas and topics assignments, and continued efforts to enrich the world of academe with the rich and complex outside world, just as in our involvements in the complex urban world outside of academia, we continue to make it possible for each to fertilize the other.

The world of the scholar-activist would define me as I wished to be define, because that dual role first envisioned in graduate school, then followed through as I became a university professor. Essentially, my chief objective was that of social engagement and social commitment in order to make a difference in the world, first for Black America, then for the larger American society. These priorities are defined in that order, because first I am a Black American, born in, and raised in the segregated south, particularly in Charleston, South Carolina. I've seen the sufferings resulting from prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, a larger percentage about which I've written during the past fifty or more years have analyzed and critique race, racism, prejudice, and discrimination. So the battle has not been won, though there have been remarkable, and significant gains in many areas. As scholar-activists, this and future generations must infuse our classrooms with critical and probing ideas, questions, and solutions. We must not simply focus on the past, though understanding history is important to an understanding of the present. We must together craft utopian-like visions of the society we wish to create, though the visions and realities will be flawed, as every reality will eventually become, since no society will ever be flawless, or perfect. I believe scholar-activists, if they are fully engaged, will assist in moving us closer to the goal of a society not riveted by invidious race, class, and gender inequality.

