

An informal memo on B. R. Ambedkar and U.S. Blacks, May 2008

by Daniel Immerwahr (not for quotation without the author's permission)

Since the nineteenth century, thinkers in the United States and in India have sought to draw connections between blacks in the United States and untouchables or Dalits in India.¹ Of particular interest in this long history of attempts to reconcile race and caste is the experience of B. R. Ambedkar. I have written elsewhere about Ambedkar's connections to the United States, but this memo provides additional information on a few topics.

The most obvious link between Ambedkar and the United States comes from the fact that he studied at Columbia. Besides Eleanor Zelliott's "The American Experience of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar" (1977) I have not seen any thorough account of Ambedkar's time in New York.² Living near Harlem, was Ambedkar aware of the exciting movements in black culture and thought that culminated in the Harlem Renaissance? There is much that we do not yet know. I was interested to find, however, upon reading *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), that Ambedkar quotes extensively from Herbert Aptheker's *The Negro in the Civil War* (1938) in chapter 7. Herbert Aptheker may not be well known outside of the United States, but to U.S. historians he is an important figure. Robin D. G. Kelley, one of our best-known professors of black history, says this about Aptheker: "In an age when very few, if any, mainstream white historians read, cited, or reviewed African American scholarship, Aptheker devoted his life to black history and took as his mentors Woodson, Wesley, and the grand old man himself—W. E. B. Du Bois."³ Aptheker is generally regarded as one of the founders of black history and as a rare and radical historian. He worked closely with Du Bois and was the editor of Du Bois's papers after Du Bois died. The fact that Ambedkar read and made much of Aptheker suggests that he must have been fairly alert to important developments in black culture—it took decades for most historians to come around to an appreciation of Aptheker's contributions.

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

A new and extraordinary foreign perspective came my way during the Second World War, while I was on duty as a naval officer in India. With a letter of introduction in hand, I sought out Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, acclaimed leader of India's millions of untouchables and later a figure of first importance in Indian constitutional history. He received me cordially at his home in New Delhi and plied me with questions about the black 'untouchables' of America and how their plight compared with that of his own people. He also took the time to open to me the panorama of an ancient world of Indian segregation by caste and to show me how it appeared to its victims.⁴

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

A historian interested in black-Dalit connections might hope to find that Ambedkar had a close relationship with W. E. B. Du Bois, the premier black intellectual of Ambedkar's time and one of the most cosmopolitan thinkers then living in the United States. And, in fact, Du Bois had a substantial interest in

¹ See Vijay Prashad, "Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!" *African Studies Review* 43 (April 2000): 189-201 and Daniel Immerwahr, "Caste or Colony? Indianizing Race in the United States," *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 275-301.

² In Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 79-85.

³ Robin D. G. Kelley, "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045-1074.

⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 87-88.

India, having written a novel, *Dark Princess*, about the daughter of an Indian maharajah and having known Indian nationalist Lala Lajpat Rai well. Du Bois also had a correspondence with Gandhi. And, in fact, the Du Bois papers preserve at least one exchange between Du Bois and Ambedkar, initiated by the following undated letter from Ambedkar:

Dear Prof. Dubois,

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

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

Du Bois's response, dated 31 July 1946:

My dear Mr. Ambedkar,

I have your letter concerning the case of the Negroes of America and the Untouchables in India before the United Nations. As you say a small organization of American Negroes, the National Negro Congress has already made a statement which I am enclosing. I think, however, that a much more comprehensive statement well documented will eventually be laid before the united Nations by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. If this is done I shall be glad to send you a copy.

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

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

Despite Du Bois's claim to be familiar with Ambedkar's work, Du Bois also displayed some embarrassing ignorance of Indian caste politics. While covering the Round Table Conference for his journal, *The Crisis*, Du Bois protested the Communal Award, which he described as "*the decree of the Raj that the higher caste should constitute an electorate separate from the Untouchables*."⁵ In other words, Du Bois mistook political protections for untouchables for some sort of disenfranchisement, suggesting that he was probably unaware of Ambedkar's side of the story.

The one black intellectual who really did seem to understand what was happening in India was George S. Schuyler. Schuyler is not much remembered now, but he was then the gadfly of the black intelligentsia. "The chief trouble with India," wrote Schuyler in his column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an important black newspaper, "is not English rule, but internal race, class and religious bigotry. If the English left India tomorrow, the Moslems and Hindus would be at each others' throats and the rich would continue to grind down the poor as they have always done."⁶ Gandhian nationalism he declared to be "mythical" and "unsound"—a scam perpetrated by the Indian elite, themselves eager to "climb on the backs of the horribly exploited Indian masses."⁷ The correct analogues to blacks, he insisted, were the Indian untouchables, who were, like blacks, segregated, denied access to education and transportation, turned away from religious temples, and economically oppressed. Nor could Gandhi and the nationalists be of any help in this regard. Only by a self-led mass movement, which Schuyler believed to be developing under Ambedkar, could

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Foreign News," *The Crisis* 39 (1932): 351.

⁶ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 September 1931.

⁷ George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 September 1931.

untouchables end their oppression. “All persecuted minority groups,” he added, “must do likewise if they are to survive and improve their condition in society.”⁸ Although provocative, Schuyler’s rejection Gandhism in favor of Ambedkar was largely a private one, and went no further than the pages of his own weekly column. As historian John Henrik Clarke remembered: “I used to tell people that George got up in the morning, waited to see which way the world was turning, and then struck out in the opposite direction.”⁹

⁸ George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 October 1932. Schuyler does not mention Ambedkar by name but his exaggerated claim that untouchables “have organized, 60,00,000 strong, under well-trained and courageous leadership,” written a week after Gandhi’s six-day fast, could hardly refer to any other untouchable leader.

⁹ Clarke, quoted in Michael W. Peplow, *George S. Schuyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).