Comparing two essays written by Du Bois at a great interval of time, “The Tenth Talented” (1903) and “The Hundredth Talented” or the “Guiding Hundredth” (1948), the author of this article intends to deal with Du Bois’s endeavor to cohere culturally and politically an answerable and duty-bound black leadership, and to acknowledge the different accents laid by the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* on culture and on politics. An accomplished essayist and journalista, a foremost militant for the cause of black emancipation, Du Bois strove to persuade both white and the black audience about the role of high culture, an idea which perfectly matched the towering ideals of Victorian culture, but ran counter to the rapid urbanization of America, and later on, to the times of the Great Depression. The utopian solving chosen by Du Bois in “The Hundredth Talented” mirrors the conflict between the political convictions of a great mind and American reality, as well as the winding course of intellectual ideas which brought black emancipation into life, only in the midst of the last century.

**Keywords**: racism, African-Americans, emancipation, black leadership, intellectuals, segregation, autobiography, essay, Victorianism, modernism

Half a century after his death, W. E. B. Du Bois’s legacy continues to stir comments and provoke reactions, not only in regard to his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, but also in connection to his racial prophecies. Beyond ideology, racial theories, avant-garde tracts or cultural constructs, the work of Du Bois reverberated as an inspirational source for a whole array of 20th century race issues in America. Cornel West comprised in his
Du Bois’s essays to the historical perspectives of African Americans in their struggle for emancipation. “The Talented Tenth” (1903) and “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” (1948), or the “Guiding Hundredth” as shall be referred to in this article, are different not only because of the great lapse of time which separates them, but primarily because indicative of a radical change in the author’s reflections and arguments. Seen against the background of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the two essays (the latter in particular), require further attention, pointing to a distinct understanding of culture, political affairs and international events, and forecasting an alternative future for the American blacks, seen as a community totally separated from that of the whites. Clearly written with the purpose of creating and orienting the necessary forthcoming leadership of the blacks, the two essays acknowledge the obstacles hindering the emancipation of the blacks in the United States, principally linked with the issues of race and education, as well as with other aspects of American modernity, such as democratic citizenship. In the above mentioned essays, Du Bois insists on foregrounding racial emancipation as a precondition for attaining political equality, a goal which clearly appears in “The Talented Tenth.”

Racial emancipation was thought to assert the cohesion of the black community, or rather the existence of elements of cohesion conducive, in the author’s view, to a long awaited unity. Thus reinforcing the cultural bonds among blacks, especially those emerging from the past, racial emancipation manifested itself in the artistry of the 20th century black
The existence of an already definite expression of cultural autonomy determined Du Bois to envisage the birth of an efficient black leadership. In this regard, the political expression of the black community was for Du Bois the ultimate expression of black culture.

With the second essay, published at the end of the 1940s, the “Guiding Hundredth,” racial emancipation was rendered as the unavoidable separation between blacks and whites, a cultural unsurpassable frontier, fomenting the ethos of the universal black. *The Souls of Black Folk* was rightly regarded as a cornerstone in the representation of the African American conscience in a moment of a deep crisis, when the major issue in the United States was identified in the “color line problem,” in the racial chasm. Du Bois’s masterpiece marked a historical threshold, persuading African-Americans about their distinctiveness as a race, influencing black radicals such as Malcolm X, or enkindling literary exceptional representations of the black, such as featuring in the novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison. Since the start of the last century, Du Bois foresaw an irreversible course of events heading to a complete racial rupture between whites and blacks in the United States, seen as an untapped source for voicing racial pride, at the same time, a historical opportunity to fulfill the ideal of political autonomy of the blacks.

Cultivating black racial unity was for Du Bois the most urgent demand for the whole period of the first half of the last century. The two essays illustrate the confidence of the writer in the concept of culture as the most suited weapon to condemn the racial faulting line in America, but also to take advantage from it in order to shelter black culture and grant African Americans the opportunity to substantiate their self-awareness under a united leadership. For Du Bois, the politics of race responded to the imperatives of black culture, reverberating its “voices” onto social and political reality. Besides rendering the dramatic realism of the silenced suffering of the black community, *The Souls of Black Folk* contains a prophecy of change. It speaks of the necessity of forging African-American identity into the symbol of the self-liberated race in America (Levering 277). This is a vision informed by Romantic ideology,
one envisioning culture as ascertaining freedom.

Given the unusually long career of Du Bois during which the founder of the concept of African-American culture wrote and campaigned publicly for the recognition of black American community’s rights, one finds oneself confronting different levels of apprehending the writer’s legacy. These range from triumphant eulogizing to sheer detraction, or simply, intentional ignoring (Gates, Jr. & West 23-24). The author’s evolution in itself is indicative of these extreme positions. At the beginning of his career Du Bois relied on a romantic concept of culture and race, only to then approach socialist and communist radicalism ever more distinctly hence the relevance of his eclecticism and revisionism. Between the quasi-Victorian stature of the only African American member of the founding committee of the NAACP, editor of the “Crisis” and the Marxian activist of the 1950s and after, there is thus a profound rift accountable for the writer’s and the intellectual’s ideological tribulations and confusions. Du Bois’s inadequacies can in part at least be viewed as the expression of the author’s unflinching dedication to the flame of emancipation, and as a passionate form of understanding emancipation in terms of a social and political revolt. Even a shallow comparison between The Souls of Black Folk and of the two essays reveals the dilemma of the modernist intellectual, that of either confidently relying on the message of one’s work, or of adding to it a supplementary voice, that of the political or social militant, who could do better in order transpose progressivist ideas into immediate life.

For Du Bois the choice to address the masses was assumed since his debut. The example of Frederick Douglass commanded continuity in the struggle for the distinctiveness of the blacks as human beings and citizens, as well as for their advancement on the scale of moral progress. Du Bois had not chosen to defend the cause of his community, he had been “chosen,” as he proudly indicated. The task of both illuminating and advocating the cause of his community was to bring to the fore the black ethos in all its suffering and humiliation, dwelling side by side with a kind of messianic optimism professed for a necessary, historical change, one attainable only under a cohesive leadership. The denouncing of the abhorrent consequences of slavery and the actual conditions of racial
segregation arrested the writer’s vision of the future, paradoxically fixing it into the tragedy of the past, determining the writer’s discourse to leave gradually considerable room for the activist’s vocabulary. It is therefore not at all difficult to see the reasons why Du Bois, editor of the “Crisis,” socialist sympathizer, member of the NAACP board, pan-African thinker, felt compelled to rethink his priorities, and adapt his vision and style to militant journalism and political activism.

“The Talented Tenth” and “The Guiding Hundredth” express the author’s belief that addressing a constantly larger black audience would eventually need a clear blueprint for political action. In this view, the idea of the black concept was construed by Du Bois in such a manner as to match the height of the deep social and political transformations of the century. Du Bois’s case was not a singular one in an era when the role of the intellectual was associated with the writer’s or the artist’s involvement in public life. His time was one when Julien Benda condemned the “treason of the clerks,” denouncing the militancy of intellectuals, but also the time when Emile Zola had castigated intellectuals as public persons for their political neutrality, casting suspicion on their silence, considering it to be a manipulative guile.

In his remarkable studies on the so-called “reckless intellectual” of the 20th century, Mark Lilla evokes the aftermath of the intellectual’s involvement in political affairs, noting that in the last century (today as well, one might add), intellectuals fell easy prey to the tentacles of power, due to their so-called “love of the tyrant,” a love-hate relationship whose beginnings go back to the times of Plato (Lilla 220). Du Bois’s vehement contestation of American democracy narrowed down the angle of his cultural criticism, directing it mostly to the constant unmasking of the past which, far from sunk in oblivion or destined to a condescending treatment, impeded the debate on the possibility of realistic political solutions. In this respect, the notion of the “soul” is employed as a sort of transcendent reality of the blacks, being replaced in the two essays by “character,” “talent,” “exceptional men,” “leadership.” This makes the transition from the holistic expression of black identity to an immanent one, indicating the author’s preference for the ethical, political and social representations of the “essence” of “blackness.” It is noteworthy that the writer’s great
suggestive power dwindled into the moralist’s or activist’s plead for the
nenecessity of an active leadership, ready to command the destiny of the
community, undermining the author’s style and thus, his credibility
(Gates, Jr. & West 67). Du Bois attempted to denounce and combat racial
inequality by debunking the consequences of American exceptionalism,
seen as the main agent of the traumatic memory of African Americans.
Out of the depth of “sorrows,” there sprang the pride of being black, a
powerful sense of rivalry which challenged the superiority of the white
man, ascending the ladder of time, challenging legendary Prometheus:

Back beyond the world and swept by these wild, white faces of the awful
dead, why will this Soul of the White Folk --, this modern Prometheus, --
hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past? I hear his
mighty cry reverberating through the world, ‘I am white!’ Well and good,
O Prometheus, divine thief! Is not the world wide enough for two colors,
for many little shinings of the sun? Why, then, devour your own vitals if I
answer even as proudly, ‘I am black!’ (Du Bois 1987: 938)

One need only compare the fragment above with the following one,
to grasp the clearly minded militant, ready to organize the rising of the
black Promotheus against his white oppressor:

For the accomplishment of these ends we need race organizations: Negro
colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school
of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these
products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy. Not
only is all this necessary for positive advance, it is absolutely imperative
for negative defense. (Du Bois 1987: 821-822)

The notion of “soul” that Du Bois uses calls for a closer inspection
as it is through its appealing representation that the powerful echo of
“Black Folk” made the long suppressed voices of African Americans be
heard publicly thus rescuing them from oblivion. The author relies on the
suggestive force of the metaphor of “the soul” in order to indicate the
presence of those who succeeded in finding their ways of expressing
themselves in songs, combining the sincerity and anonymity of folk
creations with the evocation of human suffering. Framing human suffering
within musical bars, Du Bois elevated the slave songs to the symbol of a
cultural act seen in its everydayness. At the same time he pointed to the
transformation of the harsh toil of the everyday into the ethereal, innocent form of the song. Soul and song are now intertwined, expressing everyday life. The whole experience of a race was hidden in the fragile, perishable form of the song, conveying an indelible impression of life.

The collective soul of the black community was imagined by Du Bois not only as endowed with the power to celebrate life, but also as able to herald imminent death. In the extraordinary metaphor of the “veil,” death becomes the moment of salvation. The collective soul is viewed as an enormous, sensitive receptacle, capable of converting suffering into symbol, yet lacking the force of defending itself. If the song is seen as a natural expression of talent, the “conscience” of suffering does not emerge with the anonymous artistic form of the song. “Soul” and “conscience” are not only different in their expressing existence, they are also separate, signifying independent forms of self-awareness.

For Du Bois, soul and conscience ought to be fused in a distinctive racial identity. A mass of individuals, together with their elites, African Americans represented the organic cohesion of a newly born community. The emphasis placed on the soul calls for contextualization in relation to the elevated overtones the term soul enjoys in German culture. Du Bois had gained familiarity with this by virtue of his studies, and while there is little evidence suggesting that Du Bois was conversant with the works of Spengler, and later, with that of Leo Frobenius, von Keyserling and Gyorgy Lukács, he was certain to know his Max Weber and was accustomed to Weber’s somber dictum about the end of civilization, which pointed to the absence of the soul: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber 2005: 124).

As for Du Bois’s considerations on pan-Africanism, which do not form the scope of my enquiry here, it is however worth noticing that Du Bois lived in a time when Leo Frobenius’s book on the cultural discovery of Africa was published, and, given its pioneering view on the ancientness of culture in Africa, this work on African culture may have been a serious incentive and a challenge, for him (Frobenius 6-16).

The soul was rendered by Du Bois as an entity subjective and objective at one and the same time, corresponding to the deepest recesses
of history and experience, in touch with both everyday life and with the transcendental, and as such providing the individual and the community with distinguishing traits of identity. The soul was not only more ancient than the “conscience,” but it could be “read,” thus displaying objective dimensions, yielding to simple, unadulterated knowability. The soul is thus imagined by Du Bois as a lively and creative entity. Accessible to all members of the same community, the soul shelters and divulges suffering, while at the same time expressing hope. It safeguards the memory of the individual, promissory of a better world, one seen as an unaccomplished potentiality. In romantic tradition, the soul is always shown as vulnerable, “weak,” prone to ruin or extinction. The quality of the soul to be “impressed” by the wrongs of the world render its sensibility, refinement, withdrawal from the spectacle of cruelty, and speak for its yearning for transcendence. The soul, the romantic image of a living and lively essence, appears as threatened by the increasing rationalization of life in America, which prompted Du Bois to attempt to prevent his community from wasting its most cherished cultural asset in an arduous plead for a programmatic education.

In “The Talented Tenth,” education appears as fulfilling the needs of the “soul,” talent being seen as a representation in the public sphere of the specific, original markers of the community. In the “Guiding Hundredth” the educated mass opposes the formation of the aristocratic elite thus annihilating the transcendental bounds of the soul, transforming them into an ideological conscience, or an economic awareness of the labor force. “Character,” a recurrent term employed by Du Bois in both essays, is the moral attribute of education. As such, it is disciplined by education, determining the individual to comply with the will of the people, defending the entirety of the soul of a community, in the ethics of each black individual. The bond between soul and character is viewed as forming a dialectic opposition. In the dynamic process connecting opposite pairs, Du Bois sought to express the stable unity of the race. A follower of William James’s pragmatism, Du Bois believed that African Americans had a double identity which entitled them to claim the same citizenship as white Americans, relying at the same time on a different native culture. The assertion of the creativeness of the Black soul acted as
an incentive for Du Bois to highlight the necessity of education within the African American community, emphasizing the sense of community primarily, than simply providing jobs for individuals.

The Negro is primarily an artist. The usual way of putting this is to speak disdainfully of his sensuous nature. This means that the only race which has held at bay the life destroying forces at the tropics, has gained there from in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race. (Du Bois 1987: 777)

The goal of an African-American leadership was to ascertain a far more rapid implementation of emancipation. For Du Bois, this was a constant preoccupation, reflective of a firm belief in the responsibility of black leaders in promoting and defending the freedom of the race, by relying on its own cultural and moral commandments. The emergence of a black leadership was a felt ultimacy, in light of what appeared to be the imminent disappearance of the blacks as a “nation.” Although Du Bois did not rely on historical and sociological proofs in arguing that African Americans constituted a “nation” in the already accepted concept of nations, nor that the black community was declining in number and approaching extinction, he does use the term “nation” referring to the black community, inspiriting in this way the formation of the future leadership:

The upper class Negro has almost never been nationalistic. [...] American Negroes have always feared with perfect fear their eventual expulsion from America. They have been willing to submit to caste rather than face this. The reasons have varied but today they are clear: Negroes have no Zion. (Du Bois 1987: 75)

The metaphor of the necessary Zion suggested the absence within the African American community of an ideological center or figure, or of a distinctive cultural tradition which could firmly endorse blacks on their path for emancipation. Though seeming far-fetched, the comparison with the American Jewish community is not at all hazardous. Black leaders are known to have often resorted to analyzing the two communities and cultures, especially after Horace Kallen had published his study regarding the formation of the American nation, contesting the “melting pot” theory.
At the same time, the trope of the Mount of Zion is significant in relation to Du Bois’s emphasis on the necessity of cultivating the minds and sensibility of the Blacks so as not to lead them to fill in vacant jobs in the American labor free market, following Washington T. Booker’s initiatives, much criticized by Du Bois. This type of materialistic education was considered by Du Bois to not only deny the emancipation of the race, but also waste the only chance to recuperate the backwardness caused by slavery and by current forms of racial oppression. Culture meant for Du Bois a unique chance to buy time, so to say, in the irreversible competition with those who had stolen the fruits of civilization and progress, and not for the mere opportunity to simply provide blacks with the means for survival. On the other hand, the lofty scope of Du Bois may have sounded simply utopian in contrast with the disheartening material circumstances in which the majority of the Black population strove to live, acknowledging thus that Du Bois’s provisional plan for the birth of black leadership had still a long way to go before coming true.

The reference to “Zion” indicates the salutary presence of the intellectual at the heart of his community. Originally a romantic idea underlining the dualism of the two actors, the exceptional individual (writer, intellectual, seer), and the mass, the people, the community yearning for freedom, public felicity, etc., eventually achieve a harmonious interplay by relying on each others’ intervention in the process of transforming culture into a political asset. Seen as the creator of the identity the mass, the intellectual was looked upon by Du Bois as enjoying his righteous representation in finding his roots among the many, in the existence of the a race. “Zion” meant also the sacredness of the cause: the emancipation of the black. In this respect, Du Bois had a two-fold attitude: he first saw himself as anchored in the midst of the grievances and hopes of his people, but later on, he wished to be viewed as a leading intellectual of pan-Africanism, which he clearly influenced. Toward the end of his career, Du Bois fell completely into Marxist obedience, abandoning any personal commanding vision on the racial and cultural leadership of America.
The uplift of the mass cannot be left to chance. Marx and Lenin firmly believed it could be accomplished by a dictatorship. I think in the case of Russia they were right; but in our plight, I think we can free our own mass by organization and group influence exercised through a self-sacrificing leadership. (Gates, Jr. & West 1996: 172)

In order to fully grasp the implications of “emancipation” at the beginning of the 20th century in America, we turn to Reinhart Koselleck’s definition of emancipation, as not only one of the most complete, but also one in which the issues of the emancipation of African Americans are raised. Koselleck underlined the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century, “the rediscovery” of emancipation at the period when Du Bois employed the term, did not differ from the meaning ascribed to it in the previous century (Koselleck 2009: 167). Koselleck argued that emancipation referred to a historical process which enlarged its definition, turning it into a “polysemantic” concept (ibid. 168). In what he called the “limits of emancipation,” Koselleck made it clear that collective rights began to be demanded as a solution for many communities. In this respect, Keselleck argued that it was hard to tell “whether equality of rights in the case of African Americans was positively influenced, or it had been hindered by the discovery of collective identity (‘black is beautiful’)” (ibid. 172). In other words, Koselleck saw emancipation as an iterative concept, either augmenting or diminishing the “hiatus” between political action and its juridical rules (ibid. 175).

Undoubtedly, for Du Bois the concept of emancipation was under the spell of the British Victorian/ German Wilhelminian world, at least in his first celebrated book published in 1903. During this period, the concept of culture, particularly in Europe, inspired an ardent belief in the general progress of mankind, and imbued a vitalist function. It is curious that Du Bois’s preference for the intellectual type of the period should be more influenced by the patronizing figure of Mathew Arnold than by any other intellectuals. The Victorian image of the intellectual, a highly authoritative, respectworthy individual, a reputed author and a sage at one and the same time informs Du Bois’s self-mirroring autobiography. His confessed admiration for European culture of course was not a singular option for American writers and intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th
century. The figure of the “self-made” intellectual had in fact long been prefigured by Emerson’s “The American Scholar,” and the comparison between the “parrot” and “Thinking Man” was eloquent for Emerson’s appeal of non-conformism. Du Bois may have followed this advice, without having mentioned Emerson, for that reason.

It is evident that Du Bois always reflected on the status of the intellectual and on his/her mission. His views were to alter with the events unfolding in Russia, as well as with the development of the avant-garde. The two world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Cold War, as well as the appearance of a black middle class and of consumerism affected his position as a leading black intellectual. The rapid growth of technology introduced new avenues and communication techniques for addressing the public, which eventually created the premises for the appearance and rapid spread of popular culture. In Europe, Raymond Aron reflected on the consequences of these transformations taking place in the interwar period, noting that if the writers and philosophers stood for the classic notion of intellectuals, a new “caste” of intellectuals appeared in post-war France, comprising historians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists (Aron 2007: 267).

The American traditional lack of consideration for “intellectuals” viewed as an elitist, indeed as an undemocratic caste cannot be overlooked. In this respect, Du Bois made no exception, in comparison with other American intellectuals who complained about the same official lack of interest in cultural or educational matters. Du Bois confidently turned his eyes to Europe, blaming loudly American philistinism. He was persuaded that being recognized as an author in America and Europe, he could enjoy a special position in the emancipation of the blacks. Throughout this period, while publishing essays, Du Bois did not abandon the concept of “double consciousness” which he had coined in order to make distinct the cultural traditions of African Americans and render them as American citizens, worthy of being fully endowed with equal political rights as the other citizens belonging to the white majority.

The recurrent emphasis on the theme of African American leadership speaks of Du Bois’s trust in the righteousness of the racial cause. But, whereas in the 1903 “Talented Tenth” the author addressed
explicitly the predicament of African Americans in their struggle to get united under a common will, in 1948, in “Guiding Hundredth” Du Bois urged the black community to seek to form an international type of “alliance” with other “groups” belonging to other peoples and cultures, militating, explicitly for the assertion of the rights of the universal black. The term “groups” sounded vague and ambiguous, used as it was in the sense of dissolving the allegiance of the Black citizens to the United States government, deepening racial cleavage, and preaching segregation.

For Du Bois, the capacity to lead was encapsulated in the belief that the creativity of African Americans deserved political autonomy. After the publication of the “Talented Tenth,” culture was viewed by Du Bois as the expression of a “natural asset” creating the opportunity for an autonomous political leadership. One notes the same elitist vein in his reluctance to consider the utilitarian views and initiatives of Washington T. Booker and Marcus Garvey, seen as centrifugal ones, distorting the ideals of cultivating the “soul” of the nation, wasting the national impetus for change on materialistic chancy opportunities. Du Bois saw himself as compelled to intervene and mold the minds of the simple people, to “enlighten” the anonymous members of his community about their distinctiveness and the ways in which they can make the most of this.

Whereas Du Bois’s perception of culture underwent a major transformation in the “The Guiding Hundredth” (1948), the elitist impulse was still tarrying between the lines of the essay. Du Bois had thus become deeply convinced that the making of the African American elite would bring emancipation without delay, in a sort of natural development of the interaction between the cultural manifestation of the blacks, as in the Harlem Renaissance examples and racial and/or political independence. He could not foresee, and therefore admit, for instance, of the possibility of an existing conflict between the black leadership and the masses, nor could he venture to analyze the already existent contradictions between black writers such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and mainstream political and/or racial ideology. In this way, Du Bois, continued to idealize the role of the elite, seen mainly as the expression of an “enlightened” group who was unquestionably empowered not only to express but also to orient the mass into a certain mode on thinking and acting. For Du Bois,
the cultural horizon was still a realm for achieving harmony and for expressing the universality of man (Posnock 104). The cultural and the aesthetic attributes characteristic of the “new” black in Allan Locke’s essays endorsed Du Bois’s optimistic view regarding the necessary change, viewed as a symbiotic relationship between the elite or the “group” and black individuals.

In 1948, Du Bois revised profoundly the views expounded in the “Talented Tenth,” attempting to turn it into a manifesto for the necessary ideological conscience of the postwar African American community. This may also be interpreted as evidence of his anxiety concerning the blacks’ tardiness in attaining the maturity of a united leadership.

Some years ago I used the phrase ‘The Talented Tenth’, meaning leadership of the Negro race in America by a trained few. Since then this idea has been criticized. It has been said that I had in mind the building of an aristocracy with neglect of the masses. This criticism has seemed even more valid because of the emphasis on the meaning and power of the mass of people to which Karl Marx gave voice in the middle of the nineteenth century, and which has been growing in influence ever since. (Gates, Jr. West 1996: 159)

According to Communist ideology, the “wisdom” of collective action, did not impose any democratic solutions, as known, either in the time of the reign of the class warfare, or in the ensuing period, when the spirit of the fight against the bourgeois died away and socialism was proclaimed victorious in a large part of the world. The personality cult left an indelible mark in the order of the communist world as well as in the biography of a great score of intellectuals. Nevertheless, it did not raise any reactions on the part of Du Bois. As shown by Ortega y Gasset in the Revolt of the Masses, the twilight of the aristocracy of talent and accordingly the fascination with the role of the masses, in the sense of the dissemination of a different understanding of society and culture, as in the concepts of “mass society” and “mass culture” paved the way to another definition of education. The outmoded, humanistic, all-embracing education of the Talented Tenth made way to a “scientifically” Marxist-like laid vision, in which labor and the study of economy played the leading part.
Into this situation, came the revolutionary thought, first voiced in former ages by great moral leaders, which asked charity for the poor and sympathy for the ignorant and sick. [...] But in the suddenly expanding economy and marvelous technique of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there came prophets and reformers, but especially the voice of Karl Marx, to say that the poor need not always be with us, and that all men could and should be free from poverty. [...] Very gradually as the philosophy of Karl Marx and many of his successors seeped into my understanding, I tired to apply this doctrine with regard to Negroes. (Gates, Jr. & West 1996: 162-163)

The revolutionary changes in the former URSS and China, the two communist countries Du Bois visited in 1936 and 1937, did not persuade the writer to follow the much revered example of social egalitarianism. To him, they were not to initiate a replica in the political form of government in the United States (Du Bois 1987: 707). Du Bois did not venture to claim that there were any premises for such a radical overturning of the power of the whites, though he confessedly remained an admirer of the communist order in the former URSS (Posnock 128). Nevertheless, the consequences of his admiration for the communist system did not take long to make their presence felt, affecting the confidence in the progress of the individual, pointing to the importance of the group, or of “collectivity,” an obvious proof of the influence of Marxism-Leninism:

The question is then: Who can lead the way in this effort? Here comes a new idea for the Talented Ten: The concept of a group/leadership, nor simply educated and self-sacrificing, but with clear vision of present world conditions and dangers, and conducting American Negroes to other alliances with culture groups in Europe, America, Asia and Africa, and looking toward a new world culture. (Gates, Jr. & West 1996: 168)

Du Bois found in the great divide of the Cold War an unexpected opportunity to reorient the leadership of African-Americans under the banner of the non-aligned movement, which was created and supported by the communist camp. The incommensurable losses of the war and the reconstruction of democracy in Europe were interpreted by Du Bois as increasingly significant events pleading for social peace and advocating the adherence to a state planned economy, entailing an equal distribution
of the goods. Du Bois thought that in those circumstances, education ought to follow the path of “reconstruction,” renouncing the old liberal bourgeois humanitarian conception and the “aristocracy of the spirit,” embracing the philosophy of radical change, i.e. Marxism. In this context, Du Bois re-launched the themes of his “Talented Tenth” in a new guise. The historical moment seemed to be auspicious. As the postwar economic boom made the memory of the Great Depression years fade away and the United States become the most powerful “democracy” in the world, the opportunity to raise again the issues of racial, social and political inequities in America was certainly not to be missed.

Seen from the Victorian perspectives of “The Talented Tenth,” education was aimed at ascertaining “the strengthening of the character” (Gates, Jr. & West 1996: 147), an essentialist creed no longer suitable with the far-going changes of the American society of consumption of the 1950s. In “The Guiding Hundredth,” Du Bois attempted in vain to maintain the lofty ideal of education, viewed as opening vistas of universality, a remnant trace of the old-fashioned bourgeois humanism, and to relate it to the economic and political limitations of an ideologically based elite.

In a subchapter of the above-mentioned essay entitled “Negro culture,” Du Bois moved from the preservation of the American black culture, to a universal black culture, speaking, “not simply for the social movements of America, but for the greater world of human culture” (165). Du Bois could not refrain from noticing with bitterness that black Americans had attempted, wrongly, to be more “American” than Americans, which may have been the consequence of the absence of a well chosen leadership. Due to the lack of guidance, Blacks were in the position to be part of the worst reputed nations in the world, a clear assertion of Du Bois’s blatant anti-Americanism: “We do not realize, that today the United States is probably the most thoroughly hated and despised nation on earth, especially among the really cultured and civilized” (166).

The passage from a romantic conception to a Marxist one points not only to the transformations of the concept of culture in the age of the avant-gardes, but also to Du Bois’s idealism, consisting mainly in his
repeated assertions about the role of culture seen as a reservoir of social and political solutions to be implemented and perfected into real life. Du Bois did not cease to seek transcendence at a time when the transcendent wings of culture, so to say, were hardened into political or ideological immanent policies. From this perspective, his attempt to rewrite the future of American Blacks led by own leadership, as shown in “The Talented Tenth,” was one of the last attempts to underscore the mission of the elite. Initially embracing a romantic Victorian view on the role of culture, similar to the old Goethean adagio construing culture as the pathway to freedom, Du Bois then followed in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessor Frederick Douglas, concentrating on the attributes of culture which should lead to self-emancipation, the individual, according to the romantic liberal sensibility, being the driving force of emancipation. Du Bois dealt with the overlapping of emancipation and self-emancipation in “The Talented Tenth,” observing this at work within the formative role of and the individual’s natural right to culture. Emancipation and self-emancipation come out as two different processes in the second essay, “The Guiding Hundredth,” which tackles the mediation of ideology, and consequently, the restrained sphere of culture, in the new, postwar circumstances in which the concept of culture is secondary to the pre-eminence of ideology.

“The Guiding Hundredth” is a reconstruction of “The Talented Tenth,” bringing together culture and economy, political ideology and race within an ideological project of the black leadership. Breaking free from the rigid confines of Victorian culture, one would have expected “The Guiding Hundredth” to employ more democratic concepts in the organisation of black leadership, since it had overthrown the aristocratic pretense of submitting the black community to the will of the few. Yet, “the group” as Du Bois called euphemistically the centralization of leadership according to Leninist practices, accentuated the elitism in the actual making of the leadership. The difference consisted in the cultural ambiguous quality of the “avant-garde” of the Blacks, to use a Leninist term employed with reference to the organizing of the proletariat.

Du Bois’s perception of the “color problem” at the beginning of the last century was wholly accurate. After almost half a century his theses
sounded hollow, due to the writer’s Marxist allegiance. In “The Guiding Hundredth” he attempted to safeguard the aura of the intellectual from the pressure of politics, proving still confident in the unquestioned ability of the intellectual to lead the way in a period when intellectuals were replaced by ideologues. The two versions of the black leadership in America stand for an important testimonial to the genealogy of race, collective rights and of the mission of the intellectual in modernism. They testify as well to the unsurpassable conflict between the sphere of the ideals and the trends of political action, the intellectuals’ painstaking struggle to keep their heads above the dark waters of their moral accountability.

Works Cited