

The Sociopolitical Ideology of a Communist Educator: Doxey A. Wilkerson

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Introduction

The African-American experience during WWI and WWII was defined by economic exploitation, lack of educational opportunities, and a political disenfranchisement that fostered a social invisibility within a capitalistic democracy (Holloway, 2013; King, 2004). Doxey A. Wilkerson (1941) suggests, “By any criterion which values human welfare above private profit, these teeming millions of men—they, too, have the right to live” (p. 387). Wilkerson, a career educator during the mid-twentieth century, embraced a political philosophy with potential to bolster the sociopolitical plight of the African-American masses. More importantly, Wilkerson’s advocacy for a radical shift within the time’s popular political ideology would be the answer to the “Negro question” and the realization of a pragmatic utopia meant to galvanize social uplift of all oppressed peoples and destroy the existence of elite caste systems (Dawson, 2013; Lewis, 2009).

Wilkerson’s (1944) career spans over 57 years in an assortment of roles in higher education institutions. His research left fingerprints, for example, on foundational studies such as Gunnar Myrdal’s “American Dilemma,” and on 1938 research on the status of the Negro for President Roosevelt. His political advocacy arose from involvement on such projects, and he proved an unfamiliar voice within the liberty-denying harmony of the U.S. Essentially, Wilkerson (1944) believed Communists better understood the need for Negro/white unity than any other group in society. He insisted upon top-down reinstatement of political and social ideologies promoting an inclusive democracy for all within U.S. confines. In this paper we align Wilkerson’s political advocacy with his educational practice and detail a life narrative that left a deep impression on the Black intelligentsia’s radical philosophies of the post-war U.S. In order so to do, we focus on Wilkerson’s most visible period of political activism during his membership within the United States’ Communist Party.

U.S. social history remains incomplete without reimagining the twentieth century's racial and political violence that reigned with terror African-Americans' lives. And white supremacy and an oppressive racial order have long worked to deny a truly tangible citizenship for millions of U.S. African-Americans. Dismissed as "the past" are ceremonial lynchings coinciding with Black disenfranchisement in the Jim Crow South. Forgotten and unresolved is the burning, in 1921, of Tulsa, Oklahoma's Black community affectionately known as the "Black Wall Street." Muted are the voices of those executed in the East St. Louis riots of 1919.

The realization of citizenship for African Americans during the mid-twentieth century meant the destruction of social and cultural hegemony inherently woven into the U.S.' democratic practice. "White Americans at the time objected to [B]lack economic, social, and political enfranchisement because they argued explicitly that it undermined their standing as citizens" (Dawson, 2013, p. 23). A complete "social reconstruction" of society would demand a total redistribution of wealth and resources that ultimately would link education with political ideology (Watkins, 2005). Examination of Wilkerson's sociopolitical activism illuminates a social reconstructionist paradigm intent upon seeking the attainment of a progressive society. Citizenship and the development of democratic ideology are critical since citizenship assumes the recognition of humanity. The evolution of the African American from an object of exploitation to a citizen relied upon a sociopolitical platform that could blur the lines formerly predetermined by race and class. Wilkerson believed utopian possibility could be established through a political vehicle that acknowledged the existence of citizenship within the very spirit of the African American. His career—and life—were spent seeking this possibility.

Doxey A. Wilkerson was born in 1905 near Kansas City, Missouri in Excelsior Springs. During his childhood years, Wilkerson was regarded as a bright child who "became an avid reader and maintained a newspaper route to supplement the income of his family" (Daily & Washington, 1985, p. 102). His affinity for reading was bolstered by engaging the political rhetoric of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and gaining a foundational understanding of "the implications of U.S. bigotry through the eloquent and acerbic expressions of Afro-American writers opposed to segregation and Jim Crow laws" (p. 102). Consequently, his bright nature led him to an above-average academic career at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Missouri (Daily & Washington, 1985).

Upon completion of B.A. and M.A. degrees at the University of Kansas, Wilkerson progressed to a career in higher education. From

1927–1935, Wilkerson (1944) served at Virginia State College as an Associate Professor of Education. With the aid of northern philanthropy and through its political sensitivity to Negro education, Virginia State College became one of the few major higher learning institutions serving African Americans (Daily & Washington, 1985). Historian James Anderson (1988) asserts, “Significantly, the great shortage of [B]lack teachers existed at a moment in history when the philanthropists, white school reformers, and [B]lack leaders were locked in a struggle to shape the ideological content of schooling for the [B]lack masses” (p. 111). Wilkerson’s teaching appointment to Virginia State was symbolic of the wave of Black intelligentsia inserting themselves into the ideological argument for formal education of the Black masses. The popular belief system on manual and industrial education for Blacks suggested Black education should lie within the control of Black educators. Wilkerson (1934), among others, advocated for the formal education of the oppressed to embrace not only facets of industry, but also a quality education predicated on survival coupled with an escape from the prevailing opinion of the Negro being “inferior” (p. 453).

The Great Depression’s economic implications prompted a serious inquiry into the state of quality education for U.S. African-Americans. Black educators and scholars such as Wilkerson now had an obligatory mission to bridge the gap of quality education for the faithful, and properly to frame the political and economic implications of a societal meltdown resulting from post-WWI economics and racial ignorance (Wilkerson, 1941). Political scientist Ira Katznelson (2006) contends, “During the Great Depression, [B]lacks...experienced sharp downward mobility, losing the economic gains hundreds of thousands had secured by moving northward during the First World War” (p. 13). Quality education and fair labor treatment would increasingly become the mantra Wilkerson advocated through scholarship and research. Wilkerson (1944) suggests, “the freedom goals of the Negro and the survival goals of the nation have become inseparably merged. ... Both must now move forward together” (p. 8).

He was increasingly recognized as one of few African-American scholars chosen for the foundational Gunnar Myrdal study. Wilkerson, one of the newly emerging members of the Du Boisian “Talented Tenth,” was considered the most valued project staff before becoming one of its most severe critics (Lewis, 2009). Lewis claims, “In Myrdal’s eloquent formulation, racism was an imperfection in the social order, an incompatible substance the body politic fights to expel” (p. 623). Wilkerson vehemently disagreed, believing “the government could reverse this process and become an instrument in positive educational changes that would correct the basic inequalities within society” (Daily & Washington, 1985, p. 105). His thinking illuminates the Socialist

precepts that later define his political advocacy, for the gradual deconstruction of racism and sociopolitical inequity were not assumed by Wilkerson. Emerging discord across Socialist ideologies led Wilkerson back to Virginia to continue his research agenda for African-American students' educational equity (Daily & Washington, 1985).

Is it possible for educational reform gradually to deconstruct the generalized assumptions of Black inferiority and African Americans' intellectual incapability? Politically defined systems of educational reform acknowledge the assumed disadvantages of African-American students. The practicality of these systems perpetuates the generalized assumptions of inferiority of African-American students as if the culture were monolithic. To address properly the historical disadvantage of African-American students is to understand how the political, economic, and social systems have been designed not to reflect a humanist/universalist paradigm (King, 2004). Wilkerson understood African-American oppression as situated in four categories of human relationships: economic, social, political, and civic. Essentially, he argues, to redefine these relations for African Americans called for a societal embrace of a Marxist framework (Dawson, 2004).

From 1935–1942, Wilkerson worked as an Associate Professor of Education at Howard University. While working in Washington, he accepted several tangential but related roles with the federal government. Most notable was his role as Research Associate on President Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Education. During his term, Wilkerson published a scholarly work entitled "Special Problems of Negro Education," and was named the Education Specialist of the Office of Price Administration (Wilkerson, 1955). In 1943, Wilkerson resigned from Howard University and his government appointments, and announced he planned to join the Communist party. In this role, Wilkerson would work within the CPUSA's educational programs in Washington, D.C. (Wilkerson, 1955). Soon to be formally recognized as a "political radical" (Lewis, 2009, p. 681), Wilkerson would utilize his party membership to advocate Socialist ideals as a means to realize the enfranchisement and social uplift of the oppressed.

The Jim Crow South, where most African Americans lived and toiled, proved a central focus to Wilkerson's advocacy for a reinstatement of social and political ideals. Wilkerson's political paradigm suggests a truly democratic nation could not survive with the parasitic and oppressive activity U.S. southern states practiced between the wars. Wilkerson (1944) claims,

The people's war against fascist enslavement has stimulated and strengthened democratic liberation movements throughout the world. In the onward march of mankind, the Negro people

of the United States will rise to their full stature and dignity as citizens of the country they have done so much to build and defend. (p. 3)

During the wars, the U.S. propagandized its participation as a global partnership to liberate the oppressed regions of the world, and to employ democratic ideals in the face of fascism. Wilkerson contended this fight would be fruitless if the U.S. could not galvanize the hope of those oppressed to be recognized as “true” citizens, and, more importantly, human beings.

Communist ideals made a dramatic sociopolitical appeal to the Black intelligentsia during the mid-twentieth century. The political disenfranchisement of citizens, perennial economic exploitation of laborers, and social terrorism experienced by African Americans throughout the U.S.’ southern region compelled the oppressed to seek a political voice and representation for the democratic promise proclaimed by the *U. S. Constitution* (Dawson, 2009). The Communist appeal came from a political party that understood achievement of African-American rights as fundamental to the welfare of the nation as a whole (Wilkerson, 1944, p. 6). Additionally, The U.S. Communist Party utilized a variety of resources that officially prevented the “legal lynching” of the Scottsboro boys during the early 1930s” (Wilkerson, 1944, p. 6). In an effort to realize the “Black struggle” in the southern U.S., Communist party leaders effectively constructed political action to protect the lives of young Black men wrongly convicted of raping a white woman. Never before had the African-American community witnessed a political ploy to protect Black life in the South. The Communist Party represented not only an opportunity for African Americans to become enfranchised within a democracy, but a governmental entity that could recognize African Americans’ humanity.

Wilkerson believed the “American experience” entitled one to enjoyment of inherent rights fully guaranteed by the federal government, and social alienation of African Americans in the South contradicted the law’s spirit in a litany of ways. Wilkerson (1944) suggests, “I became convinced...the Communists offered the most fundamental and correct approach to the problems of the Negro people, and also to those broader social objectives for which I and other progressive organizations had long been fighting” (p. 21). Plainly, it was Wilkerson’s opinion a complete overhaul of governmental practice would answer the “Negro question.” Wilkerson (1944) further maintained, “Negro and white, Jew and Gentile, youth and age, man and woman, professional and worker—all are bound together by close personal and political ties which make of them genuine comrades” (p. 22). Communism presented Wilkerson with an opportunity to participate in a fully inclusionary political experience from which he and others would otherwise have been excluded on the

basis of race. His political affiliation would empower his people to incite war upon inherently racist policies and would serve as a catalyst to dismantle societal discord.

The ideological tenets of Communism reconciled the effects Jim Crow placed on labor and integrationalist ideals of quality education. Wilkerson (1955) adds, “This special oppression of the Negro people operates to strengthen economic and political reaction throughout the country, and thus to worsen the conditions of the whole population” (p. 4). Wilkerson asserts the essence of Jim Crow in the South and the inherently discriminatory practices of capitalism amplifies its negative effects. He claims discriminatory, capitalistic labor practices severely inhibit the educational progress not only of Black children, but of Southern, white children as they, too, experience educational opportunities far below the national standard (Wilkerson, 1955). Wilkerson understood that, further to promote full democratic practice for all people, specifically within education, the fight would need to begin with fair labor practice and full unification of labor unions who could raise their voices in support of full integration and quality education. Racial segregation, Wilkerson argued, was “highly profitable,” employing a “hatred for democracy” (Wilkerson. 1955, p. 8).

Racial segregation destroys the dream of democracy. The institution of slavery and the failed promises of the Reconstruction did not dissipate the faith African Americans maintained for sociopolitical liberation. Liberty, equality, and dignity are three facets needed for reconstructing public philosophy (Bromell, 2013), and racial segregation denied a people all three of these facets, most important of the three being dignity. Dignity for African Americans meant simply to be “seen” as a part of the democratic process. To deny such dignity, such humanity, is to perpetuate an inherent hatred for democracy itself.

Wilkerson’s radicalized sociopolitical philosophy was not unlike many of his predecessors’ (Dawson 2009; Lewis, 2009). What was deemed “radical” during the mid-twentieth century was nothing more than a progressive philosophy to humanize the African American experience and provide a sense of political and social inclusion for Black U.S. citizens. Wilkerson’s advocacy within his particular, highly controversial political platform was the result of a society unwilling to transition. Wilkerson (1941) contends, “The peoples of the world are moving. Their immediate struggles are for decent standards of living, for civil liberties for national liberation and independence, and for peace” (p. 419). These desires, specifically from the African-American community, are desires defined by their enslavement less than a century removed from the wars. The vestiges of African-Americans’ enslavement permeated unjust federal policies and social treatment of the masses within the South. Wilkerson believed in the “power of the people” as a

means rapidly to realize a truly liberated democracy for all (Wilkerson, 1941, p. 419).

Wilkerson's teachings suggest African-American liberation is "human" liberation. The democratic goals of a nation must be universal. The denial of democratic rights for African-Americans suggests denial of democracy for all. Democratic realization, for the African American, was a call for solutions to the economic, social, and civil relationships denied by sociocultural hegemony inherently woven into the U.S. reality. Wilkerson, Communist educator, sought the reformulation of policy that offered a direct solution to denial of a democratic humanity.

What does Wilkerson's experience offer contemporary educational practice? His work calls educators and policymakers to *continue to imagine the possibilities of utopia*. We cannot disregard the courage to include the history of oppression and denial of polity within pedagogical discourse. Political realism allows educational practitioners a starting point to reimagine the possibility of a utopian democracy that fully acknowledges the dignity of its participants. Reconciliation discussion necessitates a psychological societal transformation. Radical thinking towards progressive change must exist outside academic think tanks and inside the classrooms and policy meetings that dictate our sociopolitical relationships.

Wilkerson serves as an ideal point of departure for contemporary educational philosophy. Although there is much more in Wilkerson's sociopolitical thought that warrants our critical attention, strategic deconstruction of inequity, implication, and application are addressed by Wilkerson's ideologies. His sociopolitical thinking proved open to African Americans' ever-changing condition. For Wilkerson, the cornerstone for radical change of our educational and societal systems meant a reformulation of the nation's political morals and values from policy to practice.

Michael Dawson (2009) asserts, "Organizations of [B]lack leftists, feminists, egalitarian liberals, and nationalists must be rebuilt or strengthened to take on issues of economic inequality, the continuing disadvantage that faces [B]lacks and especially [B]lack children, gender disadvantage, and the incarceration state" (p. 204). Wilkerson believed a Socialist/Communist approach would aid in creating a utopian society capable of reconciling the physical, social, and economic effects capitalistic enslavement produced, and which inherently racist policy and practice magnified. The Jim Crow South neither provided a welcoming embrace to African-American veterans, nor did the military an instrument for African Americans' advancement (Katznelson, 2005). The Black political left sought an opportunity to realize a dream imbued with the hope of equal opportunity.

Doxey A. Wilkerson was a sociopolitical rebel who fought to unveil the socially invisible to the world. His beliefs echoed throughout the time's Black intelligentsia and sought viable opportunity for the voiceless to be heard and recognized without bias. What Wilkerson's advocacy teaches us, as students of the human experience, is that radical change, radical thinking, and radical practice politically galvanize those with a similar belief system. Dawson (2009) claims, "Reinventing the desire for politics—the desire to stand together is critical" (p. 209).

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