Ralph Bunche: Academic Excellence and Global Responsibility

by
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The pioneering career of Ralph Johnson Bunche in political science can only be briefly summarized in this limited space. Fortunately, an increasing number of works published in the last decade are rescuing his legacy for new generations. I have chosen to focus my comments on three aspects of his career: his education, his contributions to Howard University, and his contributions to the discipline of political science. (For his contributions to the APSA, see Henry 1983.)

Bunche was born on August 7, 1903, in Detroit, the only son of Fred and Olive Bunche. Ralph's maternal grandmother, Lucy (Nana) Johnson, was the matriarch of the family and the single most important figure in Bunche's life. The Johnson/Bunche family was not part of Detroit's Black elite and generally worked in the skilled—Fred was a barber—and semi-skilled service jobs that made up roughly half of all Black male employment in the city.

Between 1914 and 1915, most of the family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico in an attempt to halt the tuberculosis that was consuming Olive and her brother, Charlie. By 1916, Fred had left the family looking for work and the following year Olive and Charlie died. Grandmother Johnson moved the remaining family to South Central Los Angeles in 1917.

It was in Los Angeles that Bunche began to bloom as a student. Attending predominantly White Thirtieth Street Intermediate School (now John Adams Junior High) and later Jefferson High School, Bunche gained the confidence to compete, especially against Whites. A high school civics class stimulated his interest in law, which led him to major in political science when he entered college. Although Bunche would later recall facing little discrimination in school, it was only the intervention of his grandmother that prevented him from being placed in vocational education rather than college preparatory classes. Despite being the valedictorian of his graduating class, Bunche was denied admission into the Ephebian Society, the citywide honor society. This sleight contributed to a well-known incident at graduation in which the high-school principal remarked to Ralph, "You know, we've never thought of you as a Negro" (Henry 1999, 16). Bunche's grandmother strongly rebuked the principal for what she perceived as a racial insult.

While he graduated at the top of his high school class, Bunche was offered only a football scholarship to the University of California, Southern Branch (UCLA). When he arrived on campus in 1922, he had no career plans although many assumed he would eventually study law. After all, there were no Black role models in the fields he would eventually pursue, African politics and international relations. C. H. Rieber, a philosopher from Berkeley and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, was Bunche's favorite professor at UCLA and helped inspire an interest in political philosophy and international relations. Winning a Harvard fellowship for graduate study in government helped seal Bunche's fate as a political scientist. Once again graduating at the top of his class, Bunche was selected as the commencement speaker. His valedictory address, "The Fourth Dimension of Personality," recalls the spirituality of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and foreshadows the first important ("trial") sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr., entitled "The Three Dimensions of Life." Bunche made his first contact with DuBois shortly after delivering his speech when he wrote to Harvard's most famous Black alumnus seeking his help in being of service to the race during his summer vacation.

Young Ralph quickly discovered Harvard's tradition of accepting Blacks academically but isolating them socially and residentially. Bunche ended up rooming off campus at Ma Clark's with two Black classmates, William Hastie, later to become the first Black federal judge, and Robert Weaver, who Lyndon Johnson would make the nation's first Black cabinet officer. Shortly after arriving at Harvard, Bunche wrote Dean Rieber at UCLA explaining his decision to study political science rather than law. He had made up his mind "to cast my lot in the realm of the scholarly rather than the purely legal, and from now on [I] will bend every effort toward the attainment of the Ph.D." (Henry 1999, 29). His decision was heavily influenced, Bunche said, from conversations he had with some of the leaders of his race as he traveled across the country from Los Angeles to Boston.

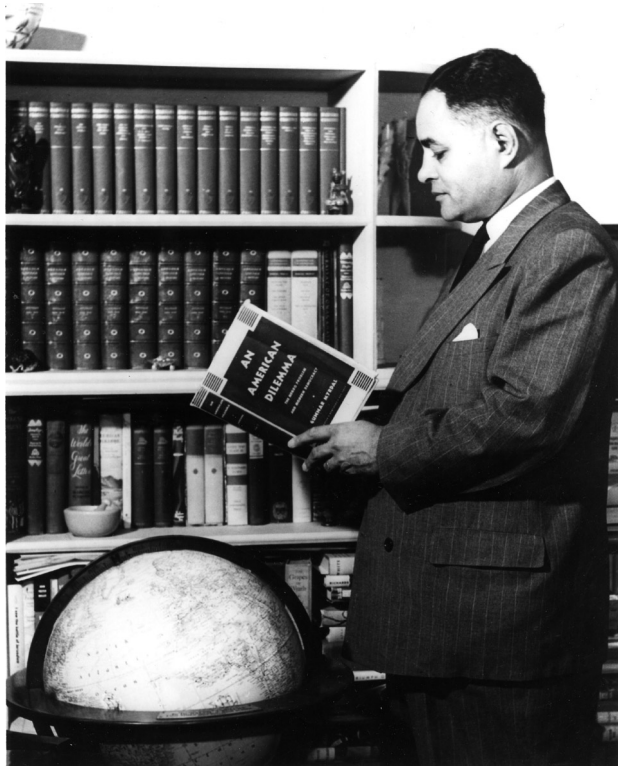
Charles Howard McIlwain, who taught political philosophy, was Bunche's favorite professor at Harvard and undoubtedly influenced his decision to write a master's thesis on "The Political Theory of Sir Robert Filmer." In addition to this examination of submission to authority, Bunche wrote two other significant papers his first year: "The Negro in Chicago Politics" and "Negro Political Philosophy." The former was accepted by the *National*

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Municipal Review and became his first publication while the latter represented a marked radicalization of Bunche's thinking.

After receiving his Master of Arts degree in July 1928, Bunche left Harvard for over a year despite winning the Thayer fellowship for graduate study. When he returned to Harvard, three professors would be central to his work. Rupert Emerson—who only began to focus on Africa after Bunche matriculated—would become a life-long friend and even persuaded Bunche to accept (in theory) a position at Harvard in 1950. John Freeman Sly, who was in public administration, was closet to Bunche. Arthur Holcombe directed Bunche's dissertation on "French Administration in Togoland and Dahomey" although his own principal expertise was in American government.

Arriving at the dissertation topic had been something of a journey. As early as December 1930, Bunche had indicated to Dean Davis at Howard that he intended to write on "The League of Nations and the Suppression of Slavery," perhaps influenced by DuBois's dissertation on the suppression of the African slave trade. Within a year he had changed the proposed topic to a comparison of racial assimilation in Brazil to continued segregation in the United States. In a letter to John Sly, who had moved to the University of West Virginia, Bunche reveals his fear that Rosenwald Fund President Edwin Embree would not approve a grant to study the Negro in Brazil. Apparently, Embree countered Bunche's proposal with one to study the Negro in West Virginia politics. The result was the funding of a comparative study of the protectorate and mandate systems in Dahomey and French Togoland suggested by Professor R. L. Buell. On its completion in 1934, Bunche was awarded the Toppan Prize for the best dissertation written at Harvard in the field of government that year. It also made Bunche the first African American in the United States with a Ph.D. in the field of political science.



Ralph Bunche. Nobel laureate, APSA president, and embodiment of academic excellence and global responsibility. Photo provided by Maurice Woodard.

Distinguished chemist Percy Julian heard of Bunche's accomplishments at Harvard and persuaded the administration at Howard University to offer him a position in 1928. Bunche interrupted his graduate education to move to Washington, D.C. and take up the challenge of establishing a political science department at the foremost historically Black university in the nation. Joining Bunche on the political science faculty by 1931 were Emmett "Sam" Dorsey, who had been a research assistant for DuBois, and R. J. Webster. Other prominent scholars on the Howard faculty during the 1930s included Alain Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, and Abram Harris—all of whom would influence Bunche's thinking. Recognizing the young political scientist's talent and energy, Howard President Mordecai Johnson appointed him as assistant to the president.

Bunche was a tireless advocate for students, frequently defending them in conflicts with the administration. Sociologist Kenneth Clark, a Howard alumnus, credits Bunche with saving him from expulsion for participating in a Capitol Hill protest against discrimination. Another student of Bunche's was Ruth Harris, who he married in 1930.

Ralph soon tired of academic administration but remained active in building the social sciences at Howard. In 1935, he and John P. Davis (a former Harvard classmate and executive director of the Joint Committee on National Recovery) organized a national conference at Howard on the "Position of the Negro in the Present Economic Crisis." The conference included a remarkably broad range of participants including Communists, Socialists, government officials, workers, and scholars. A majority of participants criticized the New Deal and the inadequate response of Negro organizations to the depression and advocated unionization as a solution. The National Negro Congress grew out of this conference with Bunche and Davis as co-founders.

By 1937, Bunche was on extended research leave traveling through Africa and Asia. Shortly after his return in 1939, he was hired by Gunnar Myrdal as a core staff member for the Carnegie-Myrdal Study that became *An American Dilemma.* The following year he joined the Office of Strategic Services as an African expert and in 1943 transferred to the State Department. After only a year at State in Near Eastern and African Studies, he moved to postwar planning where he would focus on trusteeship and the formation of a world organization (i.e., the UN). When Bunche moved permanently to the United Nations as director of the Trusteeship Division in 1946, it was clear he would not return to Howard although he officially retained his faculty status until 1950. Upon winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950, Bunche was offered positions at several elite universities but ultimately stayed at the UN until his death in 1971.

Intellectually, the 1930s were a tremendously productive period for the Howard scholar. He did not publish his prize-winning dissertation because he believed the sources were too narrowly dependent on colonial records. He did draw on his dissertation research for an article, "French Educational Policy in Togoland and Dahomey" in the *Journal of Negro Education.* Another article, "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups" in the same journal in 1935, contains some of his previous attacks on Black Nationalism, economic separatism, Black Republicanism, and middle-class Black leadership. But there are also new critiques of "economic passive resistance" and civil libertarianism and a rejection of the entire framework of the moral dilemma thesis that would become so prominent in Myrdal's work. During the following year, Bunche published four articles. "Triumph? Or Fiasco?" analyzes the takeover of the National Negro Congress by the Communist Party while "Education in Black and White" focuses on the inequality in education from the perspective of public school expenditures. "French and British Imperialism in West Africa" compares and contrasts the colonial policy of the

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two powers and his seminal "A Critique of New Deal Social Planning as It Affects Negroes" charges that Roosevelt's programs only benefit the middle-class.

In that same year, Bunche agreed to write a "booklet" for Alain Locke's adult education series. The resulting *A World View of Race* is Bunche's longest and most radical published work. In it Bunche charges that the concept of race is devoid of meaning and attributes much "racial" conflict to social, political, and economic causes. Citing Africa as imperialism's greatest and most characteristic expression, he condemns the colonial policies of Britain and France but also views West Africans as culturally in a transition stage between primitivism and civilization. He concludes with an attack on DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey for emphasizing race and ignoring class analysis.

By the fall of 1936, and with the urging of the Social Science Research Council, Bunche had decided to retrain himself in anthropological field methods and took a leave to study with Melville Herskovits at Northwestern, Bronislaw Malinowski in London, and Isaac Schapera in South Africa. In a brilliant article on "The Irua Ceremony Among the Kikuyu of Kiambu District, Kenya," Bunche integrates his new training with his knowledge of political science in a discussion of the political role of circumcision rites in colonial Kenya. Bunche returned with copious notes from his fieldwork in Africa in 1939, but before he could turn them into a book he was called away to work with Myrdal on the Carnegie-Mrydal study. Despite urging from Myrdal and others, he never published any of the 3,000 pages of memoranda he contributed to what would become the most famous study of race relations in the United States.

The lack of a major book is one reason Bunche the scholar has been largely overlooked by the academic community. A new generation of scholars, however, is rediscovering the importance of Bunche's work. Historian Jonathan Holloway contends "he was an important and influential figure well before he became a household name in the 1950s." "His importance," says Holloway, "mainly rests in the fact that he became the perfect manifestation of a new intellectual type—the expert consultant" (Holloway 2002, 160). In developing a secular tradition leading to the civil rights movement, Greg Moses states: "Bunche provides a classic synthesis of thought about the problem of racism." According to Moses, *A World View of Race* reveals "that national distinctions and racial distinctions can only hamper our human quest to be free" (Moses 1997, 126). Thus, Bunche foreshadows current theories of global economics that incorporate the dimension of racism.

Throughout his life Bunche embraced the themes of democracy, anti-racism, internationalism, and the utility of applied or committed social science. He embodied "academic excellence and global responsibility."

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