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## **W.E.B. Du Bois**

### **Chapter Guide**

This chapter introduces W.E.B. Du Bois’s original political thought and his strategies for political advocacy. It is limited to explaining the pressure he puts on the liberal social contract tradition, which prioritizes the public values of freedom and equality for establishing fair and inclusive terms of political membership. However, unlike most liberal theorists, Du Bois’s political thought concentrates on the politics of race, colonialism, gender, and labor, among other themes, in order to redefine how political theorists and activists should build a democratic polity that is truly free and equal for all. Additionally, this chapter defines some key concepts Du Bois developed to scrutinize a white-controlled world that does not welcome black and brown persons as moral equals. These trailblazing concepts include: the doctrine of racialism, double consciousness, and Pan-Africanism. Finally, this chapter defends Du Bois’s contributions to black feminist thought and American labor politics, which inspired major social justice movements in the twentieth century, in which he played a notable role.

### **Introduction**

W.E.B. Du Bois’s scholarship and activism span over six productive and eventful decades; and so, it is difficult to present an overview of his major writings and his formidable legacy in and outside of academia. Du Bois is recognized as an influential civil rights leader who fought against lynching and racial segregation. He was born in the town of Great Barrington in

rural western Massachusetts in 1868 and died in 1963 the night before Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, during which King gave his now famous "I have a dream speech." Along with Ida B. Wells-Barnett and others, he co-founded the political and civil rights organization The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910, and was the founding editor of its principal magazine *The Crisis* from 1910 to 1934. Trained as a historian, he was the first African American to receive a doctoral degree from Harvard University in 1895. As the influential sociologist Aldon Morris notes, Du Bois pioneered the discipline of modern sociology by refining empirical methods to study segregated black neighborhoods in the U.S., to which public policy makers and white academics paid scant attention at the time. His tour de force *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is not only a vital text in African-American arts and letters, but a classic of modern American literature, mediating on the effect of slavery and Jim Crow segregation on the American social fabric. What is more, he was a philosopher and a poet, to boot. One can say without exaggeration that he pursued every viable approach available to him in his lifetime for theorizing and fighting for racial justice.

### **1.1 Thinker box: Ida B. Wells-Barnett:**

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) was born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Wells-Barnett became a prominent civil rights leader, black suffragist, and journalist. After her close friends were lynched by a white mob, she dedicated herself to investigative journalism, covering lynchings across the U.S. and campaigning for the U.S. Congress to pass an anti-lynching bill, which it finally did in 2005. As a black suffragist, she established the National Association of Colored Women's Club and highlighted the vulnerability of black women to political disenfranchisement, sexual violence, and economic exploitation at the hands of white men from

the antebellum to the postbellum eras (Feimster 2009: 39-61). Though she often worked together with Du Bois, they also clashed. For example, Du Bois failed to acknowledge her role in the historical inception of the NAACP and, as an editor of *The Crisis*, seldom recognized her substantial contributions to investigative journalism covering racist violence against the segregated black community.

The first step for understanding Du Bois's original political thought is to consider the question of what it means for a person or a group to be a part of a larger social whole. In this case, Du Bois focused on the African-American community; and the relevant larger social whole that he had in mind was the United States. To be sure, this basic liberal framework shifts as he shifted to theorizing a black diaspora in the context of global Pan-African and de-colonial movements. Yet it is striking that in his early career, namely with the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *John Brown* (1909), and *Darkwater* (1920), he argued that African Americans must assert their public status as free and equal persons, a principle that is foundational to political liberalism. However, one must note that if the first step of Du Bois's political thought is to raise the question of what it means to be part of a larger social whole, all subsequent steps of his political thought assail why and how the larger social whole acts and thinks like an irrational, often violent, white supremacist mob.

The question of how a part, namely, a particular racial group, relates to the whole is fundamentally a moral question. It presses political theorists to define fair and inclusive terms of political membership in a liberal democratic state that can truly represent all persons. Du Bois therefore participated in the NAACP to safeguard the dignity of black civic equality and black Americans as free and equal rights-bearers who should, ideally, command political power in

local and federal government. His critique of American democracy often draws on the first successful slave uprising, the St. Domingue Revolution in Haiti, which ousted the French colonial slavocracy in 1804.<sup>i</sup> For many black public intellectuals, as for Du Bois, the St. Domingue Revolution was an inspirational embodiment of black self-determination in modern government. The Haitian people realized for the first time in the Americas a constitutional republic that explicitly aimed to rid itself of the scourge of slavery (Roberts 2015: 5-8). Du Bois contended that the American people must, then, follow suit to fight for black self-determination and to forge an interracial democratic polity by the American people—black and nonblack—working together to abolish slavery and reorganize major public institutions. The noted philosopher Charles W. Mills thus argues that Du Bois was a “black radical liberal [...] centrally focused on [...] the world of sociopolitical oppression and the challenge, in the United States in particular, of how to overcome illiberal white supremacy in what was supposedly a liberal democratic state” (2018: 34-5). By way of constructing an interracial democratic polity—or an “abolition democracy,” the preferred term Du Bois uses in his magnum opus *Black Reconstruction*—Du Bois prioritized protecting the black voices excluded from the democratic process (1992: 215-58).

Du Bois’s unique take on political liberalism underscores *democratic ideals*, which he reimagined as the “new revolutionary ideals” that would challenge the political, social, and economic status quo and the moral imagination of the American people (1999: 107). To wit, he envisioned that those who are denied formal political standing as the key historical agents of progress: enslaved Africans, instigators of slave uprisings, ex-slaves, and African-American women and girls working as informal community organizers during the Jim Crow era. For him, inclusive democratic practices are the byproducts of grassroots social justice movements, often

spearheaded by the most vulnerable and disrespected groups in society. In sum, ideally, an inclusive liberal democracy functions to expand the rights, privileges, and even the formal scope of the political community, as formally excluded groups refashion the norms and values of the public sphere and lay out a new political agenda for reconstructing the polity. Recent Du Bois scholarship by Melvin Rogers, Inés Valdez, Lawrie Balfour, Derrick Darby, and Elvira Basevich, to name just a few, embrace the radical promise of Du Bois’s inclusive democratic vision, while underscoring at the same time the centrality of economic and gender justice to his analysis of the shortcomings of American democracy.

## **The Problem of Exclusion [A Heading]**

Though Du Bois upheld the democratic ideal of inclusion, he was just as keen—if not more so—on accurately and compassionately representing what it like *not* to be welcomed into a larger social whole as a person of color. There are quite formidable obstacles rooted in the history of white supremacy for building interracial political coalitions that restructure the state and the economy using democratic methods. His academic and journalistic writings center on theorizing and redressing white supremacy; his writings craft original concepts to represent the impact of white supremacy on the social order and what the people can do about it. In particular, *Souls* and *Black Reconstruction* foreground the historical legacy of slavery whose “afterlife” facilitates the rise of a “second slavery” in the postbellum republic (Du Bois 1999: 13; Du Bois 1992: 3-54; Kirkland 1993: 155-157). The concept of second slavery is meant to illustrate the continued vicious suppression of black political and economic power, and its destructive effect on the creation of interracial alliances in democratic politics and the American labor movement after the end of the Civil War in 1865. In other words, even though slavery was legally

abolished, Du Bois warned that strong social and political forces reasserted a *de facto* black servitude, undermining the emergence of a genuine “abolition democracy” that could protect the political and economic power of newly emancipated black laborers. In fact, according to Du Bois, the historical rise of Jim Crow signified a kind of “second slavery” for the black community.

Du Bois is usually considered a political theorist of the Jim Crow South, but he viewed the problem of white supremacy and the historical legacy of slavery as a *national* problem, and, in the light of the scope of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the imperialistic origins of the First World War, he claimed that white supremacy was, ultimately, a *global* problem (1999: 17-46).<sup>ii</sup> He formulated the concept of the color line to capture how nominally liberal democracies cement racial faultlines to destroy the promise of freedom and equality for all on a domestic and a global scale. Sober and thoughtful confrontation with the phenomenon of racial exclusion is therefore central for rebuilding liberal democracies and for fairly redistributing liberties, wealth, and resources. Ergo Du Bois famously writes that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (2007: 3). I take this statement to mean that the democratic de-legitimation of systematic racial exclusion has yet to be a priority on domestic or global political agendas.

In order to capture what it is like *not* to be welcomed into a larger social whole, Du Bois stressed the negative impact of systematic racist mistreatment on the wellbeing of persons of color. He is perhaps best known for his reflections on the devastating psychological impact of racial exclusion on communities of color in his original formulation of the concept of “double consciousness” (2007, 8). Double consciousness conveys the way a person of color might experience their subjective interiority: their sense of self-value. Black humanity is “veiled”

because of the prominence of anti-black values and prejudice. Members of dominant racial groups only “see” black people from the lens of a patronizing pity, disgusting stereotypes, or biases that express irrational fear, anger, disgust, and insecurity. They therefore seldom recognize black people and people of color for who they really are: dignified, striving, normal human beings. Instead they “see” black humanity from the “revelations” of a white-controlled world. Dominant habits of judgment that rest on anti-black values and prejudices produce in black people the “peculiar sensation” of “double consciousness”:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 2007, 8).

To be sure, one is always “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”—this is a normal part of socialization. We weigh how we might come across to others to help achieve our sense of self. We figure out who we are, and would like to become, by gauging the impact we have on other people. The development of self-consciousness through social interaction is a healthy part of human development. However, the influential Du Bois scholar Robert Gooding-Williams surmises that double consciousness is premised on “a racially prejudiced disclosure of Negro life that misrepresents and obscures Negro life as it is” (Robert Gooding-Williams 2009: 78). That is,

the “eyes of others” are stubbornly hostile towards you as a member of a vulnerable racial group. Gooding-Williams concludes, “The feeling of being denied the normative status of membership in American society through the betrayal of the ideal of reciprocity is a feeling of a double consciousness” (2009: 81). That is, double consciousness symbolizes that you are not welcome. Dominant exclusionary habits of judgment can, then, leave a person of color struggling to develop a “true self-consciousness” that makes them feel like they have value and integrity as a complete person. Ultimately, Du Bois cautions that prolonged and systematic racist mistreatment can severely damage a person of color’s sense of self-value in a white-controlled world.

#### **1.4 Key concept: Double Consciousness**

Imagine walking into a room and everyone stares at you. They make hurtful generalizations about you and the people with whom you share a certain random physical feature. Du Bois believed that this is what it is like when skin color assumes denigrating social significance. As a member of a vulnerable racial group, you are forced to look at yourself from the point-of-view of hostile white spectators. As a consequence, your sense of self begins to destabilize: your consciousness “doubles.” On the one hand, there’s the ‘you’ as you want to see yourself and, on the other hand, there’s the ‘you’ as the white world sees you. Think about how awkward it is to have judgmental eyes follow you around for no reason. Now imagine that those judgmental eyes *constantly* follow you around. What is more, they threaten public humiliation and violence against you. Du Bois feared that under these circumstances the self-esteem of the most psychologically healthy person would soon be crushed and that they would experience “inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals” (2007: 12).

## **Du Bois's Philosophy of Resistance and Race [B Heading]**

### **Resistance [C Heading]**

Most liberal political philosophers emphasize the negative duties that a person has towards themselves and their polity as an individual agent: a person must vote, avoid harming others, assert their self-interests as a private and a political agent, and defend themselves against becoming a mere instrument of someone else's wanton gain. It is assumed that if a person asserts themselves, then they will secure their rights and get what they need. Liberal political philosophers seldom also underscore the positive duties that persons have towards *others*, such as the merit of becoming an advocate for the oppressed, building an inclusive moral community, and avoiding complicity in, or inadvertently benefiting from, the social denigration and disrespect of others. In underscoring our responsibilities towards the oppressed, Du Bois set himself apart from most liberal political philosophers, however much else he had in common with them. For he rejected the notion that individuals alone can protect their rights and self-interest without the larger social whole working on their behalf as well and playing a formidable part to support vulnerable social groups. What is more, emphasizing individual responsibilities—especially in the historical context of Jim Crow segregation—leads to toothless political strategies for organizing black political opposition to the white-controlled polity.

In fact, Du Bois rose to national prominence in the early twentieth century by protesting black “self-reliance” and the “self-help” social philosophy promoted at the time by Booker T. Washington.<sup>iii</sup> Washington asserted that black people should accept, at least in the interim, racial segregation and stop making demands on the federal government for economic or political support. He advocated thrift, personal responsibility, and hard work to build up black material wealth. Du Bois responded that Washington's approach, in effect, blamed black people for their

social ills. It placed the burden of economic hardship on black shoulders, which allowed the nation-at-large to remain complicit in narrowing the economic opportunities that were available for the segregated black community. It was unfair to ask the segregated black community to fend for itself—lifting itself by its proverbial bootstraps—as the white-controlled world looked on “in amused contempt and pity” and passed racial segregation laws (Du Bois 2007, 8). Moreover, contra Washington, Du Bois argued that Blacks should never sacrifice their public standing as free and equal citizens for the sake of building up their material wealth. Whatever material gains the black community might secure through hard work would still be precarious in a white-controlled world, in which black laborers had no political representation, legal recourse, or social support from the federal government.

## **1.2 Thinker box: Booker T. Washington**

Born into slavery in 1856, Booker T. Washington gained enormous political influence among white segregationists and the black community alike. He founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama for black vocational training for African Americans to become skilled laborers and farmers, but rejected black liberal arts colleges as too impractical for prospective Black students. As an apologist for Jim Crow segregation, he is today perhaps best known for delivering the 1895 “The Atlanta Compromise” speech, in which he affirmed that “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (Du Bois 2007: 34). He shored up popular support for the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* which legally ratified the separate but equal ideology. However, scholars have come to appreciate that Washington’s legacy is more complicated than it appears at first blush (Jagmohan 2020). He privately donated to desegregation legal case funds. Moreover, his

brutal experience of slavery may have diminished his expectations of racial justice from the white-controlled world. In addition, although Du Bois had initially strongly criticized Washington's plan of black economic self-reliance, he would later concede the merit of black economic cooperation in a historical context where free black laborers could expect little good will from white employers.<sup>iv</sup>



### **Philosophy of Race [C Heading]**

Du Bois defended the unconditional value of black humanity, as well as that of black cultural difference (Marable 2004; Jeffers 2013). He did not believe that it was racist to acknowledge the existence of racial differences. He was therefore a “realist” about race. As many critical race theorists agree today, race is “real” inasmuch as it is a sociohistorical phenomenon that profoundly impacts the structure and experience of the world. Du Bois's philosophy of race is controversial, however, because it supports the doctrine of “racialism” (1986: 817-19). To wit, he claimed that a “race ideal” conveys the “inner thought” that should represent the cultural or spiritual life of a racial group. To be sure, he did not think physical differences explained “spiritual” differences, but he argued that spiritual differences should coalesce into a distinct and unified principle for guiding racialized comportment, political action, and cultural production (Du Bois 1986: 818-20). Unsurprisingly, his philosophy of race still inspires exchanges among Du Bois scholars debating whether or not he was an essentialist about race by positing that an underlying “spiritual” ideal that can “unify” what it means to be Black (Appiah 1985; Outlaw 1992; Lott 1993; Gooding-Williams 1996; Taylor 2000; Jeffers 2013).

## **1.4 Key concept: Racialism**

The doctrine of racialism posits a racial ideal through which members of a racial group interpret the world, but racialist doctrines provide different kinds of explanations for the underlining “spiritual” unity of racial groups. For example, we can distinguish classical racialism from cultural racialism. Classical racialism was popular among extreme racists such as Social Darwinists and eugenicists. It assumed that racial biology “fixes” the human species’ moral and psychological traits. It defended a white supremacist racial hierarchy that viewed inferior intelligence and poor moral sensibility to be innate biological features of nonwhite racial groups. Du Bois’s racialism, in contrast, is cultural and egalitarian. It does not appeal to racial biology to explain cultural differences nor does it appeal to racial biology to found a racial hierarchy and defend racial chauvinism. Rather, his cultural racialism seeks to articulate the possible disparate forms of commitment that members of a vulnerable racial group might share as politically free and culturally creative agents (Jeffers 2013).

Du Bois’s racialist philosophy of race defends two contentious points: 1) A race ideal should inform how members of a racial group interpret the world. His racialist philosophy of race also contends that 2) not only should the existence of racial cultural differences be acknowledged, but they should be actively cultivated and celebrated as unique cultural artefacts. He offered excellent reasons to support these two points, which suggests that his racialism is not essentialist after all. On his view, racial groups must cultivate racial differences in order to pursue political goals. His racialism is part of a philosophy of history that uses robust social bonds of black political solidarity as an instrument of progress: a racial ideal thus posits “a

distinct sphere of action and an opportunity for race development” (Du Bois 1986: 818-20). Black racial identity, then, must be “conserved” because it still has a helpful role to play in democratic politics: it can pragmatically foster black intragroup political solidarity against white supremacy (Harris 2019; Jeffers 2013; Shelby 2005). Moreover, Du Bois rejected black cultural assimilation into the white-controlled world. As he put it, black liberation should not require black “self-obliteration” (Du Bois 1986: 821). Instead he maintained that the innate cultural value of black racial difference has yet to be fully appreciated by the world-at-large. A racial ideal can therefore promote intragroup political solidarity that can lead to the political development of the state. But a black racial ideal can also inspire the cultural development of the human beings by way of promoting the cultural flourishing of black people in particular.

### **Key Points**

- Although Du Bois affirms inclusion as an essential democratic ideal, his primary focus is on how and why a nominally liberal democracy stubbornly excludes certain vulnerable racial groups.
- White supremacy—or the idea of the “color line”—determines the public standing of racial groups and who can reliably access political and economic power.
- Double consciousness captures the destructive impact of racist social values and prejudices on the psychological wellbeing of members of vulnerable racial groups.
- Du Bois opposed Washington’s social philosophy of self-help because it forced the segregated black community alone to deal with the destructive effects of Jim Crow segregation.

- Du Bois's racialist philosophy of race encourages vulnerable racial groups to strengthen their "spiritual" differences in order to cultivate intragroup political solidarity and to resist cultural assimilation into the white world.

## **Du Bois on Gender and the Black Family [A heading]**

### **Slavery and the Black Family [B heading]**

Du Bois has an uneven record as a feminist theorist. Hazel Carby criticizes the "masculine" elitism of his political thought, pointing to his "complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders" (1998: 10). His biographers D.L. Lewis and Manning Marable have revealed the often strained relationships that he had with the women in his household. He expected his first wife, Nina Gomer Du Bois, to perform the duties of a Victorian housewife and pressed that the principal objective of their only child, a daughter Yolande Du Bois, was to marry into the black intelligentsia. Yet his prodigious writings also offer incisive feminist analyses. Even with his interpersonal failings as a feminist ally to black and brown women, he both aligned himself with the women's right movements and criticized the exclusion of women of color from it. For example, he defended the role of black and brown suffragists in the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which gave American women the right to vote in 1920. He lobbied the labor movement for gender parity in income and equitable opportunities in the workplace. Moreover, he elevated the careers of young black women artists and writers, though he often faltered in treating them as his intellectual equals.

Be that as it may, Du Bois's notable contribution to black feminist thought is that, in his view, how American democracy treats black and brown women is a crucial measure of whether or not it lives up to the public values of freedom and equality for all. In asserting inclusion as a

democratic ideal, he underscores the social values and violent practices through which black women were denied—and continue to be denied—full standing as American citizens and as dignified human beings.

I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgment day: I shall forgive its slavery, [...] I shall forgive its fighting for a well-lost cause and for remembering that struggle with tender tears; I shall forgive its so-called ‘pride of race’ [...] but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust. I cannot forget that it is such Southern gentlemen [...] who insist upon withholding from my mother and wife and daughter those signs and appellations of courtesy and respect which elsewhere he withholds only from bawds and courtesans (1999: 100)

The white supremacist patriarchy that “honors” white women simultaneously withholds “signs and appellations of courtesy and respect” from women of color. In other words, in its so-called “defense” of white women, it not only locks white women into dependence on white men, but it also fosters the extreme economic and political insecurity of black women. Moreover, it treats black women as “less than” women and undeserving of gender-based expressions of courtesy and respect.

Du Bois’s critique of American democracy proceeds to foreground the “history of insult and degradation” against black women and girls on slave plantations, noting that “The crushing weight of slavery fell on black women” (1999: 98). In particular, Du Bois stressed that systematic sexual violence upheld the slavocracy and was institutionalized on slave plantations in the South. To be rather blunt, the rape and sexual brutalization of black women and girls were not only routine practices on slave plantations, but integral to the growth of the slave economy.

Du Bois illustrated that black women were reduced to mere instruments of productive labor *and* endured sexual assault by slave-masters and their associates. On his view, the federal government condoned the emergence of “breeding states” after the U.S. Congress officially withdrew from the international trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 (1992: 11). The Du Bois scholar Elvira Basevich observes that, subsequently, in the U.S. “the price of slaves exponentially increased, further bolstering slave-owners’ economic incentive to ‘breed’ and rape human beings” (2019: 177).

In the American slavocracy, enslaved black families were extremely vulnerable and routinely degraded and destroyed. For enslaved persons there was “no legal marriage, no legal family, no legal control over children” (Du Bois 1999: 98). Not only were enslaved persons often forced to stand by as witnesses to the physical and sexual brutalization of their loved ones—to wit, their partners and children—but they were routinely separated from them by slave markets. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois recounted that slaves “could be sold—actually sold as we sell cattle with no reference to calves or bulls, or recognition of family. It was a nasty business [b]ut it was a stark and bitter fact” (1992: 11). In documenting the practice of family separation, he gathered original newspaper notices from the antebellum period that offered cash rewards for the return of runaway slaves, noting in a melancholy reverie that often the runaways were children looking for their mothers or fathers trying to catch a glimpse of their wife and children on a distant plantation (1992: 12). The newspaper notices used disgusting racist depictions to characterize the desire of an enslaved Black person to reunite with their families. They considered slaves’ rudimentary desire to reestablish their family units the baseless and vile machination of mere “animals,” as if the human capacity to love also cleaved to the color line, for which the slavocracy fought so violently and cruelly.

## **Motherhood and the Freedom to Love [B heading]**

The attack on the black family on slave plantations prompted Du Bois to defend what he calls the “freedom to love,” which requires protecting black familial bonds against external encroachment and public disrespect (2007: 11). In articulating the idea of the “freedom to love,” he again centered the historical experiences of black women and girls, positioning them as central agents in the historical development of American democracy after the end of the Civil War and with the legal abolition of slavery in the U.S. In the postbellum republic, he argued that black women were vital in redefining the ideals of American democratic life and in charting their own destinies as free ex-slaves.

One might wonder why Du Bois regarded the idea of the “freedom to love” as essential to representing accurately the historical struggle of emancipated black women in the postbellum republic. In order to understand why this idea is so central for Du Bois’s political critique, we must appreciate that the freedom to love has two dimensions for him: a formal legal dimension and a moral dimension, both of which his analysis connects to the right to “motherhood” (Du Bois 1999: 95-108). The formal legal protection of the right to motherhood included the newfound legal rights of black women as parents with *custodial rights*. Custodial rights established black mothers as the principal authorities in the lives of their children, rather than that of the state or whites, as had been the case in the South during the antebellum era. Relatedly, the extension of formal legal protection also included the legal recognition of their romantic partnerships in which a marriage contract became *legally binding*. A legal marriage contract, for Du Bois, indicated a germ of public acknowledgement that black people should be free to choose who to love and to stay in partnered relationships with their beloved without the white-controlled

world intervening in their personal affairs. Custodial rights and the marriage contract were thus long overdue basic legal protections for the black family. Black women were denied these basic legal protections since the antebellum, whereas white women took such protections for granted and overlooked their cruel suppression in the lives of their sisters of color. In any case, according to Du Bois, in the historical context of a republic just emerging from the shadow of slavery, black women asserting the legal right to raise their own children and to forge their own familial bonds against external encroachment established an unprecedented newfound freedom for the black community.

Du Bois's contribution to black feminist thought thus intimates a crucial, but often overlooked, difference in the racialized experience of the fragility of familial bounds, a difference of experience that would later impact the structure of the American women's rights movement in the twentieth century. To wit, white women fought to *exit* their family units and to *enter* the labor force. They sought to dethrone themselves from the pedestal that cemented their patriarchal dependence on white male breadwinners. In contrast, women of color and black women in particular were always forced to labor outside their homes—with zero to very little compensation for their productive labor. Du Bois underscored the centrality of fair compensation for black women's labor to safeguard the satisfaction of their material needs, as well as that of their children. Moreover, in contrast to white women's political agenda, women of color have fought and continue to fight for the chance to *enter* their own families and to reconstitute their family unit on their own terms. Not only were black women always forced to work outside of their own homes, but they were often forced into domestic and care-oriented labor to look after white children from the antebellum to the postbellum period. For them to have the chance to be with their own families and to administer to the needs of their own children remains difficult.

This is partly why the call for publicly-subsidized daycare continues to remain essential for black women's struggle for economic and racial justice for themselves and their children (Basevich 2020: 164-180).

Additionally, Du Bois defended the moral—in addition to the formal legal—dimension of the right to motherhood. For him, informal social practices often devalued black persons as loving parents and partners. That is, even as they win formidable legal rights and constitutional protections as free and equal U.S. citizens, they continue to be disrespected and denigrated in interpersonal relations with whites in a white-controlled world. Du Bois therefore maintained that formal legal recognition is necessary but insufficient for advancing a radical black feminist politics. For once the federal government granted legal rights to ex-slaves, the American people continued to adopt the anti-black social values and practices of the antebellum social system that rendered black women and girls especially vulnerable to sustained abuse and disrespect.

When it was still controversial to discuss women's sexuality publicly—much less that of women of color—Du Bois argued that black women should have the freedom to make their own decisions about bearing children and pursuing intimate relationships. Moreover, that freedom should be publicly respected. That is, he insisted on black women's "freedom to love" during the Jim Crow era. The political theorist Lawrie Balfour points out that "he defended the importance of sexual freedom for any meaningful conception of women as free citizens" (2011: 104). He asserted the intrinsic value of black women's physical bodies and to cultivate public respect for their decisions regarding their gendered embodied. However, while he advocated the right to motherhood, he was careful not to invoke traditional gender conventions that imposed the ideal of domesticity onto black women, writing "we cannot imprison women again in a home or require them on pain of death to be nurses and housekeepers" (Du Bois 1999: 103). Rather he

defended black women as free agents whose desire to pursue sexual relations and to bear children—even outside of wedlock—should be publicly respected inasmuch as it is their free choice to do whatever they want as free persons. He continued: “I have more respect for the colored servant who yields to her frank longing for motherhood than for her white sister who offers up her children for clothes” (Du Bois 1999: 107). He thus refused to confine black women to the nuclear family in order to restrict the exercise of their free sexual agency by dominant social mores.

### **Key Points**

- Du Bois often failed to make his personal relationships with women conform to his inclusive political vision of gender equality.
- Du Bois’s critique of American democracy centers the historical fact that black women and girls endured systematic sexual violence and abuse on slave plantations.
- After the abolition of slavery and with the rise of Jim Crow, black women fought to assert their dignity as free sexual agents and as loving parents and romantic partners.
- Du Bois believed that the formal legal recognition of black custodial rights and the marriage contract was an important gain for black American women and households in the postbellum period.
- Du Bois also viewed that informal social recognition that respects black women—and their moral right to have children outside of wedlock, if they so choose—must be a necessary counterpart to any and all legal victories that formally advance black civil and political rights.

### **Du Bois’s Socialist Politics [A heading]**

## **Du Bois Among Liberals and Labor Organizers [B heading]**

Du Bois's Marxian politics is still a rather contentious topic in Du Bois scholarship. He considered himself a socialist throughout his long life, eventually joining the Communist Party USA in 1961 at the age of 93. He wrote in his official application letter to join the party: "Capitalism cannot reform itself [...] No universal selfishness can bring universal good to all." Du Bois's labor politics has recently received renewed attention (Myers 2019; Douglas 2019). There are several unique and fascinating features of it. Here I limit my presentation to his defense of (1) interracial labor alliances and (2) democratic control of the economy and the workplace. In presenting each feature of his labor politics, I take the opportunity to give an overview of his fierce rebuke of the American labor movement and of liberal organizations, such as the NAACP, of which he was a longtime member until 1934.

### **His Critique of the American Labor Movement [C Heading]**

By way of presenting Du Bois's defense of interracial labor alliances, we must engage his incisive critique of the American labor movement. He rejected the racially exclusionary character of the U.S. labor movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Not only did it neglect to join the abolition movement and to advocate for slaves as a hyper-exploited labor force. In fact, the white-controlled labor movement often referred to *themselves* as the true "white slaves" of capitalism (Du Bois 1992: 356). After the abolition of slavery, the American labor movement remained *complicit* in the hyper-exploitation of black and brown laborers to enable the emergence of what Du Bois described as a "second slavery" for the African-American community. Namely, it barred workers of color from joining its rank and failed to represent their economic interests in the workplace. "Contrary to all labor philosophy, they [the white-

controlled labor movement] would divide labor by racial and social lines and yet continue to talk of one labor movement. Through this separate union, Negro labor would be restrained from competition and yet kept out of the white race unions where power and discussion lay” (Du Bois 1992: 356). In effect, the white-controlled labor movement fought for protections for white laborers: its moral imagination was just as segregated as was the social world. For it viewed the black and brown labor force as another competitor, rather than as a potential and indispensable ally.

Du Bois instead upheld the ideal of interracial labor solidarity as pivotal for economic justice for all American laborers. For he viewed the ideal of interracial labor solidarity to be essential for sustaining a viable labor movement that could exert pressure on white capitalists who exploited the color line to drive up their profits and to drive down wages in general, but black wages in particular. The influential philosopher Chike Jeffers thus aptly observes that “Du Bois wishes to treat marginality as opportunity” (2017: 247). According to Du Bois, the ultimate “test” of American socialism was to overcome the color line, which necessitated an ongoing political project in which black Americans were uniquely positioned to take the lead (1913: 140). Indeed, he argued that African Americans have long worked as agents of historical progress, striving to build an interracial economic democracy, when few others would aim to do so. He claimed that a slave-led general strike on slave plantations was the actual impetus for black emancipation and had resulted in victory for the Union of the North against the Confederacy. In sum, on his view, black slaves *emancipated themselves* and thereby articulated the claim for democratic control of the state *and* of the institutional conditions of labor as key to the reconstitution of the American polity towards a socialist and racially inclusive postbellum republic.

### **His Critique of Liberals [C Heading]**

Du Bois came to believe that the scope of political liberalism is too narrow for fully capturing what democratic life should be about. Even though he co-founded the NAACP, he left the organization in 1934 for its failure to redress the economic needs of the segregated black community reeling from the Great Depression, which disproportionately hurt segregated black and brown communities. After publishing *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, he began to reframe the scope of democratic ideals. Namely, he argued that a real democracy should allow the people to control the parts of their lives where they felt the most vulnerable: to wit, their subordinate relation to the free market and to their bosses in the workplace.

Du Bois was particularly sensitive to black laborers' subordination to white capitalists. Ex-slaves and their descendants still had little to no control over the institutional conditions of their labor. In fact, white employers often resented having to pay black people a wage at all—a tendency that continues to degrade the pay scale of workers of color! He radically reimagined the scope of democratic ideals in order to grant to *all* workers' democratic control over the means of production and over their workplace (Cf. Marx chapter). He surmised that democratic rights were otherwise empty. In other words, he thought mainstream liberalism made a critical mistake by defend a democratic ideal that only included seizing basic civil and politics rights. In an original move, he argued that democratic politics seldom “touches the matters of daily life which are nearest to the interests of *the people*” (Du Bois 1999: 90-91). Democratic politics should instead concentrate on “the vital, everyday interests of all,” namely that of “work and wages,” which often drop out of public view in liberal democracies (Du Bois 1999: 90-91). But matters relating to “work and wages” is the real substance of what democratic politics should be about.

However, Du Bois found himself a rather unpopular figure later in his life. Neither the American labor movement nor major civil rights associations lobbied for black economic needs. And so, he began to petition in favor of black nationalism. Reminiscent of Washington's original call for black economic self-reliance, he hoped that black consumer cooperatives can build up material wealth in segregated black communities in order to lessen their dependence on the contingencies of the free market and of resentful white employers. Unsurprisingly his new proposals did not win him many new friends among the liberal elites. Many former allies in the civil rights movement began to distance themselves from him. He became increasingly isolated with the rise of the Cold War and McCarthyism.

During this dark period in American history, many prominent intellectuals and activists chose to rebuff their associations with progressive politics, but in his advanced age, Du Bois chose to align himself ever more closely with a Marxian radical labor politics. Shunned by the liberal political establishment, and narrowly escaping imprisonment for his progressive political activism, in 1961—the same year he officially joined the Communist Party USA—he accepted an invitation from the socialist revolutionary and pan-African leader Kwame Nkrumah to resettle in Ghana. Nkrumah was the first President of Ghana after its colonial emancipation from England. He was also a public intellectual who supported Pan-African philosophy of which Du Bois was a strong exponent by this point in Du Bois's life. At the end of his life, Du Bois went into exile and gave up his American citizenship and died in Ghana. The next day Nkrumah organized a state funeral attended by thousands.

**Key Concepts: Pan-Africanism**

Pan-Africanism was a political philosophy and global political strategy for forging regional and global political alliances in the black diaspora. To be sure, it often also cultivated international relations with former European colonies in South America and Asia. As a political strategy, it encompassed an international federation of states, with newly independent Ghana playing a major role in creating an international Pan-African alliance that still exists today. As a philosophy, Pan-Africanism aimed to secure the substantive economic independence of former European colonies from Europe. It also sought to define the intellectual and historical identity of African and Afro-descendent peoples on their own terms. Du Bois was deeply connected to the Pan-African movement and organized several Pan-African Congresses before relocating to Ghana. He believed that a Pan-African global justice movement can help advance domestic justice in stubbornly racist polities such as the U.S.

### **Key Points**

- Du Bois had a unique blend of labor politics that both criticized and incorporated elements of political liberalism and progressive labor politics.
- Du Bois advocated interracial political solidarity in the American labor movement, which often failed to represent the economic interests of the black and brown labor force.
- Du Bois also supported rethinking the scope of democratic ideals: he sought to extend workers' democratic control of the production process and of the institutional conditions of their labor.
- Sadly, Du Bois was persecuted during the Cold War and McCarthyism in the U.S. and went into exile in Ghana, where he died in 1963.

## **Conclusion**

W.E.B. Du Bois is a unique, creative, and, unfortunately, a rather neglected political theorist. He accomplished in his lifetime what it takes most people several lifetimes to even come close to accomplishing, as a political theorist, activist, journalist, and poet. He was not without his flaws, however, particularly with respect to his interpersonal relations with women. Yet his political thought puts pressure on the liberal principle of freedom and equality for all. In order to better understand how to deliver this principle to the American people, his writings foreground the politics of race, gender, and labor in its analysis of the promise—and limits—of American democracy. The neglect of Du Bois by mainstream liberal political philosophy and theory is striking because he shared so many liberal values, however much he also challenged liberal assumptions.

## **Study Questions**

1. How should racial identity factor into how political philosophers theorize and defend the ideal of political inclusion in modern democratic states?
2. Can you think of some examples that capture how a “color line” works in your country? Your neighborhood? Your classroom?
3. What effect do you think the experience of double consciousness might have on a person of color’s motivation to join a social justice movement?
4. Is there any way to avoid experiencing some of the more devastating psychological consequences of double consciousness? Offer some concrete examples for how one might mitigate the negative effects of double consciousness.

5. Why did Du Bois believe that Washington's social philosophy of self-help was so dangerous for the segregated black community to adopt?
6. Why was it vital for Du Bois to center the history of sexual violence on slave plantations against black women and girls in his critique of American democracy?
7. Du Bois believed that racial identity should be "conserved" by racial groups; his primary theoretical concern is building a strong black domestic and global community. But do you think that white people should also cultivate their so-called "racial" difference? Isn't this just version of white nationalism or is it possible to think about racial whiteness another way using Du Boisian insights?
8. Du Bois theorized many original concepts for thinking about racial injustice: how might they work—or not—to capture the experience of other forms of social injustice, as it relates to gender, sexuality, or religion? Or do his original concepts only apply to thinking about race?
9. Why do you think Du Bois chose to go into exile and give up his American citizenship at the end of his life?
10. Do you think Du Bois's radical liberalism is really that radical? Can it do all the work that he hopes to accomplish, i.e., promote interracial political solidarity, interracial labor alliances, as well as gender and economic justice?

## **Further Reading:**

### **Primary reading:**

The 2007 Oxford Series of Du Bois's complete works is the best and most comprehensive representation of Du Bois's monographs; each work is introduced by a key contemporary figure in Africana/African-American/Black studies.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (2015) *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Nahum Dimitri Chandler (New York: Fordham University Press).

Collects in one volume Du Bois's essential early essays from 1894-1906.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1995) *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt and Company).

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1982) *Writings by Du Bois in Non-Periodical Literature Edited by Others*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Millwood: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited).

Collects in one volume Du Bois's essential essays published in pamphlets, volumes, and magazines edited by others.

### **Secondary reading:**

Balfour, Lawrie (2011) *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Original monograph that interrogates how Du Bois reimagines the nature of the U.S. political community, particularly with respect to the history of anti-black racial injustice.

Basevich, Elvira (2020) *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Lost and the Found* (Cambridge: Polity).

A comprehensive and rigorous introduction to Du Bois's life, thought, and activism; it primarily unpacks the promise of his black radical liberalism.

(ed) Nick Bromell (2018) *A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press).

Interdisciplinary collection of essays on Du Bois's democratic theory.

(eds.) Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum (2007) *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W. E. B. Du Bois* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

Singular comprehensive collection of essays on Du Bois, gender, and sexuality.

Gooding-Williams, Robert (2009) *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

An influential tour de force monograph about Du Bois's political philosophy and philosophy of race. It covers his intellectual background and political milieu.

Hooker, Juliet (2017) *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Establishes Du Bois's intellectual and political legacy in relation to Latinx political thought in continental South America.

Jeffers, Chike (2013) "The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races'," *Ethics* 123: 403–426.

An important recent essay defending Du Bois's philosophy of race as part of a "cultural theory of race." It includes a brief survey of critical philosophy of race today and an overview of an

important debate in Du Bois scholarship about whether or not Du Bois is an “essentialist” about race.

Lewis, David Levering (1993) *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt).

Part I of Pulitzer-winning essential biography of Du Bois.

Lewis, David Levering (2000) *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt).

Part II of Pulitzer-winning essential biography of Du Bois.

Marable, Manning (2004) *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (New York: Routledge).

Indispensable intellectual biography of Du Bois as a radical democratic socialist.

Rabaka, Reiland (2007) *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An Essay on Africana Critical Theory* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

Presents Du Bois’s influence in critical race theory, emphasizing postcolonialism, Black Marxism, and black feminist philosophy.

Taylor, Paul C (2004) “What’s the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?” *Metaphilosophy* 32.1-2: 99-114.

Develops a line of thought that begins with work of Cornell West situating Du Bois in the American pragmatist philosophical tradition.

Valdez, Inés (2019) *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Presents Du Bois's cosmopolitan theories of global justice in relation to his involvement in decolonial and the Pan-African movements in the twentieth century, as well as challenging contemporary debates in Kant scholarship about race and colonialism.

West, Cornell (1989) *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (New York: Palgrave).

A classic covering black thought in the development of American pragmatism.

### **Online Resources:**

Gooding-Williams, Robert, "W.E.B. Du Bois", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/dubois/>

A collection of primary sources in the public domain written by W.E.B. Du Bois:

<http://www.webdubois.org/wdb-sources.html>

"W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, 1803-1999 (bulk 1877-1963)" A comprehensive online collection of correspondences, speeches, and articles written by W.E.B. Du Bois.

<https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/collection/mums312>

“African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition.” It includes hundreds of portraits and drawings of African-Americans and of racial segregation, a stunning exhibit curated by W.E.B. Du Bois, archived at the Library of Congress, and available online:

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/anedub/>

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Basevich, Elvira (2019) “W.E.B. Du Bois’s critique of Radical Reconstruction (1865–77): A Hegelian approach to American modernity,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45(2): 168-185.

Carby, Hazel (1998) *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Darby, Derrick (Forthcoming) “Du Bois’s Defense of Democracy,” *Nomos*.

Douglas, Andrew J. (2019) *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Critique of the Competitive Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press).

Du Bois, W.E.B. (2007) *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1999) *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover).

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1992) *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Free Press).

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1986) "On the Conservation of Races," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: The Library of America), pp. 817-19.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1913) "Socialism and the Negro Problem," *New Review* 1.5: 138-41.

Feimster, Crystal (2009) *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Gooding-Williams, Robert (1996) "Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races,'" in *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*, ed. Bernard W. Bell, Emily R. Grosholz, and James B. Stewart (New York: Routledge), 39-56.

Harris, Kimberly Ann (2019) "W.E.B. Du Bois's 'Conservation of Races': A Metaphilosophical Text," *Metaphilosophy* 50.5: 670-87.

Jagmohan, Desmond (2020) "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Deception," (eds.) in Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner. *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

Jeffers, Chike (2017) "W.E.B. Du Bois's 'Whither Now and Why,'" (ed.) in Eric Schliesser, *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 222-255.

Kirkland, Frank M. (1993) "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," *The Philosophical Forum* 24.1-3: 136-165.

Lott, Tommy L. (1993) "Du Bois on the Invention of Race," *The Philosophical Forum* 24: 166–87.

Mills, Charles W. (2019) "Race and Global Justice," (ed.) Duncan Bell *Empire, Race, and Global Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 94-119.

Mills, Charles W. (2018) "W. E. B. Du Bois: black radical liberal," (ed.) Nick Bromell *A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), pp. 19-56.

Morris, Aldon (2015) *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland: University of California Press).

Myers, Ella (2019) "Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on White Domination," *Political Theory* 47.1: 1-18.

Outlaw, Lucius (1992) "Against the Grain of Modernity: The Politics of Difference and the Conservation of 'Race,'" *Man and World* (25): 443-68.

Roberts, Neil (2015) *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

Rogers, Melvin L. (2012) “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106.1: 188-203.

Shelby, Tommie (2005) *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Taylor, Paul C. (2000) “Appiah’s Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race,” *Social Theory and Practice* (26): 103-28.

- i A “slavocracy” is a political regime in which slaveowners monopolize political power.
- ii On a related note, Charles Mills helpfully notes that the racial contract is also a *global* racial contract shaped by European colonial domination and white-controlled global free markets (2019).
- iii It was important to Du Bois to demonstrate that disparate black voices exist and that disagreement is essential for the thriving of the public sphere. He resisted representing black Americans as a monolithic community with a hive mind. Moreover, no single person should become its sole de facto leader. For a long time, Du Bois was best known for challenging Washington. To the extent that Du Bois was taught in college classrooms, typically instructors would assign Chapter 3 of *The Souls of Black Folk* in which Du Bois challenges Washington.
- iv From 1934 onwards, Du Bois publicly defended black self-segregation in *The Crisis*—a move that led to his expulsion from the NAACP. The NAACP complained that his defense of black self-segregation meant that he consented to Jim Crow law. Though Du Bois continued to affirm liberal views, he came to believe that it was foolhardy for the black community to expect change from the white-controlled world any time soon. Instead he advocated for the segregated black community to close rank in order to shore up material resources and to mitigate its exposure to anti-black violence.