

Book Review

Political Theory

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A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois, edited by Nick Bromell. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2018, 376 pp.

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W.E.B. Du Bois is a singular figure of the twentieth century. Nick Bromell's *A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois* introduces readers to the breadth and complexity of his political thought. Faithful to Du Bois's own interdisciplinary methodology, the volume includes philosophers, social scientists, and literary scholars. Although its quality is uneven, on the whole, it offers original essays—those authored by Charles Mills, Lewis Gordon, Melvin Rogers, and Alexander Livingston especially stand out—that not only provide a plausible reconstruction of the normative framework of Du Bois's political philosophy, but also discuss how his democratic politics addresses the historical legacy of racial injustice, as well as the ethical significance of racial belonging and aesthetic production. Understandably, some essays only gesture toward Du Bois's challenge to dominant paradigms of political philosophy and theory. The volume nonetheless offers fertile ground for future scholarship.

In the first section, “Du Bois and Political Philosophy,” Mills and Gordon argue that Du Bois is a modern political philosopher who theorizes the central themes of modernity, including the nature of free and equal citizenship and the obstacles to the institutional recognition of black moral equality. They situate Du Bois in the tradition of Afro-modern political thought and Africana philosophy. Drawing on his larger project of developing an immanent critique of liberalism, Mills argues that for Du Bois racism is a defining, rather than an anomalous, feature of modern liberal societies, yet Du Bois enlists universal liberal principles to dismantle racial caste and to “undertake a deracializing reconstruction of liberalism” (33). Mills asserts that Du Bois is a “black radical liberal . . . centrally focused on *nonideal theory*—that is, 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” (34–35). In presenting Du Bois as a nonideal theory liberal, he offers fresh and interesting insights. For example, he provides a framework for reconciling Du Bois’s liberalism with his black nationalist, Pan-Africanist, and Marxian commitments (31–33); and he offers a compelling Du Boisian account of exploitation in racial capitalism (41–46). However, I have misgivings about his application of the nonideal-theory label to Du Bois. Given Mills’s definition, nonideal theory can characterize just about any historical figure in Afro-modern political thought, since a defining feature of the tradition is to theorize modern freedom in the light of the historical legacy of antiblack racism. Thinkers as disparate as Douglass, Wells-Barnett, and Baldwin appear to qualify as nonideal-theory liberals. I appreciate the critical significance of making the case that Du Bois addresses the nonideal circumstances of racial caste for “white-stream” liberals who ignore racial matters (and never read Du Bois). But, for Du Bois scholars and theorists already invested in doing this work, Mills’s essay does not offer a fine-grained analysis of Du Bois’s original contributions to rethinking the concepts of freedom, economic equality, and citizenship.¹ Although it does not articulate what these revisions concretely entail, Mills’s essay is a powerful call to future work on the topic, a project whose urgency and necessity he successfully defends.

Du Bois’s emphasis on the legacy of antiblack racism and the black historical experience compels Gordon to stress his relation not to liberalism but to Africana philosophy. On Gordon’s view, Du Bois offers a philosophical anthropology that employs a phenomenological approach to race. Du Bois’s phenomenological anthropology guides the development of the social sciences, which, with Du Bois, turns for the first time to understanding the living conditions of black Americans (58–64). This descriptive method presupposes the innate value of black humanity and the moral power of black historical agency, charting the ties of black political solidarity during Reconstruction and Jim Crow. The advantage of Gordon’s approach is that it highlights black purposive agency that Du Bois cites as “evidence” for the revision of received histories and inaccurate representations of racialized social reality. But a phenomenological anthropology locates purposive agency at the macro-sociohistorical level. While the approach is highly instructive for presenting Du Bois’s original philosophy of social science and history, it neglects his key contribution to political philosophy: how the color-line impacts democratic politics and its development. Gordon’s interpretation inadvertently attenuates the first-person black experience in democratic politics, to which Du Bois appeals for constructing a political morality based on “an intersubjective understanding of a shared social world” (72).

Thankfully, Bromell dedicates an entire section of the volume to the topic of Du Bois and democratic reasoning. The collection of essays included here examine the problem of guiding practices of judgment for a citizenry habitually unresponsive to the painful experiences of those subject to racial caste. For example, in his excellent essay, Melvin Rogers reimagines the concept of “the people” for democratic societies bifurcated by the color-line. Distinguishing between its “descriptive” and “aspirational” dimensions, he writes, “On the one hand, the people symbolize those individuals whose rights and privileges are enshrined in a constitutional structure. On the other hand, the idea of the people reflexively serves as a space for refounding the polity along more inclusive lines” (124). The approach enables Rogers to capture Du Bois’s view of democratic development, which emerges from “the space of contestation and uncertainty that the politically dispossessed have occupied” (124). The aspirational dimension of the people provides an alternative ethical ideal that may enable America to become “the land that has never been yet,” grounding citizens’ racially inclusive understanding of their own polity (124). Rogers demonstrates that Du Bois’s use of rhetoric in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) carries the embryonic design of art in the service of racial justice that Du Bois later expounds in “The Criteria of Negro Art” (1926). Rogers thus sets *Souls* “into the orbit of propaganda,” through which Du Bois aims to persuade readers to enlarge their moral imaginations (134). The rhetorical force of *Souls* evokes the sentiments of sympathy and shame in white readers and thus shapes their moral perception of racial inequality. The effective stimulus of readers’ emotions helps Du Bois convey the evil of racial injustice, which with intersubjective confirmation “invites readers to be coparticipants in arriving at shared judgments regarding the plight of African Americans” (139).

Rogers establishes Du Bois’s novel approach to theorizing democratic reasoning in the context of racial caste, but he leaves unresolved a couple of tensions. First, given Rogers’s formulation of democratic development, the alternative ethical ideal of civic community must ultimately *intervene* in and *subvert* the interpretative norms of constitutional law and juridical right. This means that the constitutional rights and privileges of citizenship are *unstable* descriptive designations—ones that are always subject to transformation as democratic action delegitimizes racist distributions of social and political power. For Du Bois, an expansive ethical vision of America revises the conditions of juridical right, spurring the development of American modernity, with black purposive agency at its center. Consequently, the descriptive and the aspirational dimensions of the people are inherently “muddled” and historically appear in unstable opposition (130). I make this observation not in the spirit of critique because I think it has some exciting implications for Du

Bois scholarship: does Du Bois's political philosophy include a philosophy of the modern state? And if it does, how does his view of the state accommodate the ongoing, progressive reconstitution of the norms of public political culture in response to assertions of black moral equality in social, economic, and political life? Although none of the essays in this section directly tackles this concern, the essays invite consideration of the possible role of the modern state in Du Bois's writings for capturing the democratic "rupture" and the "refounding" that new habits of citizenship and democratic reasoning may inspire.

Second, Rogers identifies the aspirational ideal of democratic politics as a "species of perfectionism" (150). But if Du Bois contends that this kind of democratic politics is necessary to dismantle racial caste, would it not be justified by the moral ideal that the public values of freedom and equality implicitly represent? Such democratic interventions are, then, legitimated by black Americans' assertions of moral equality in the civic community. This strikes me as an original outcome of Du Bois's treatment of the themes of modernity in the context of racial caste, one that challenges all citizens to evince civic concern for others and to execute the moral responsibility of creating a just society for its own sake. Perhaps, then, participation in a democratic process that dismantles racial caste in all its existential ramifications endorses a "perfectionist politics" only in the weak sense that Rawls describes in *A Theory of Justice*: "The collective activity of justice is the preeminent form of human flourishing."² This weaker formulation of the good of justice suffices to ground Rogers's approach to democratic politics without appealing to perfectionism. Yet, Rawlsian and most other liberal models of moral learning and social development do not stress the aspirational dimension of democratic politics—what Rogers demonstrates is the key to democratic development.

The final section "Du Bois and the Challenge of Black Politics" includes a selection of essays on a wide range of topics, including sacrifice in democratic politics, black leadership, Reconstruction, and decolonial theory. Each essay offers an innovative argument that explores an undertheorized aspect of Du Bois's political thought and they are united in the driving question: What vision of black struggle can resist white supremacist ideology nationally and globally? In his rich essay, Livingston examines Du Bois's biography of John Brown, a white abolitionist who led an armed raid against slavery in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Livingston reflects on the implications of Du Bois's contention that "John Brown was right" to show that black citizens bear the burden of sacrifice in democratic politics because whites are reluctant to assume responsibility for the racist social world (211). He establishes that, paradoxically, Du Bois identifies selfless sacrifice with black

self-assertion (210). The paradox “shows that acknowledging sacrifice demands something more than making a virtue of loss; it demands a radical reconstruction of the ways citizens distribute the burdens of citizenship in a democratic society” (211). Livingston echoes Du Bois’s warning that the price of liberty is less than the cost of repression. The failure to democratically reconstitute habits of citizenship catalyzes—in a “prophetic” burst—violent political agitation, impelled by the moral purity of its idealism: racial caste must be destroyed.

Du Bois, however, is ambivalent about sacrifice as a model for black politics. He does not want to elevate heroic sacrificial deeds to eclipse “practices of care and security needed to survive the everyday terror of white rule” (218). The upshot, for Livingston, then, is that a sustainable anti-racist politics must synthesize the moral purity of heroic sacrifice with the basic need for a vulnerable community to survive. His essay restates in an uncanny fashion Immanuel Kant’s formulation of the problem of modern evil. The task of modern politics is to restructure the world so that it does not inflict suffering on those worthy of grace, that is, innocent people. Kant’s formulation of the problem of modern evil appears in Livingston’s essay in the form of a heated exchange between John Brown and Frederick Douglass before the fateful raid. Douglass rejects Brown’s offer to participate in the raid because he was “anxious” about its potential “catastrophic consequences” for the black community (225). It is instructive to quote Livingston at length:

Was Douglass right to refuse Brown’s call to fight? Du Bois’s question brings home the paradox of sacrifice and survival. Brown and Douglass were both right. Brown saw the evil of slavery and the need to strike out. Douglass foresaw the deadly consequences that lay in store for slaves and freedmen. He and other African Americans understood the costs of Brown’s raid in a way Brown could not: “They knew he was right, but they knew that for any failure of his project they, the black men, would probably pay the cost. And the horror of that cost none knew as they.” Du Bois’s Douglass provides another perspective on Brown’s idealism, one rooted in the practical urgencies of survival and resilience under the terror of the slave system. The “moral evil” Brown would sacrifice his life to abolish was to Douglass an “evil of this world.” This is not to say that Douglass disagreed with the validity of Brown’s prophetic indictment of slavery. To describe slavery as an evil “of this world,” rather than a metaphysical evil like sin, is still to know it as evil—one that Douglass knew all too well; *but it is an evil that must be confronted by a politics of this world, a politics that foregrounds the need to survive a long and protracted struggle rather than apocalyptic act of purging violence.* One element of such a politics is the tragic acknowledgment of how the unmasterable consequences of action can come to thwart human intentions. (225, my emphasis)

An anti-racist politics that is “of this world” should direct our attention to overlooked institutional spaces of democratic life that Livingston notes but, understandably, cannot offer a detailed discussion (220). The black-run social institutions of civil society, such as black schools and churches in nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, shored up the moral courage and resilience of an oppressed people, fostering political agitation, while mitigating black loss in the struggle to survive and flourish in the context of white supremacy.

Similarly interested in developing a politics that foregrounds protracted struggle, Arash Davari reinterprets Du Bois’s contentious model of leadership. His aim is to consider its merits for redirecting the organizational tactics of contemporary political struggles. Davari observes that the preference for leaderless and decentralized tactics in social movements dovetails with the neoliberal consolidation of power inasmuch as it facilitates the “dissolution” of the people “into a gathered mass of individuals” ineffectual in resisting racial capitalism (242). He does not call for a return to traditional models of charismatic leadership by (male) elites. Rather, he advances Du Bois’s model of leadership as part of a model of “radical democracy” that champions “the constant movement of individuals and perspectives in and out of positions of authority on the basis of differences in lived experience” (243). Responding to the ebb and flow of the democratic redistribution of power, democracy should consist of a productive exchange between the leaders and the led—this he takes to be the non-elitist promise of Du Bois’s model of leadership (259). Yet his solution does not meet the challenge that his essay so elegantly and forcefully raises: what kind of organizational tactics can withstand the neoliberal cooption and fragmentation that fetishize individual autonomy in a self-indulgent “radical” politics. Davari analogizes leadership to a wide variety of positions: leaders of social movements, teachers, Du Bois’s authorial persona in *Souls* and *The Philadelphia Negro*, and finally, the reading public when it gets to the concluding chapter of *Souls* and is inculcated with the civic virtue necessary to carry “the empty signifier for the movement of the masses to positions of leadership” (253). Stretching the notion of leadership so thin also drains the normative structure from democratic politics, as it becomes detached from major institutions of social and political power, appearing largely as a private matter in civil society—such as an individual quietly reading a book in the public library. It seems that the solution risks returning to the problem of a leaderless politics, except that everyone is projected as the potential leader of a “fugitive” “radical democracy” (258–59). This is another reason to seriously consider whether Du Bois’s conception of governance encompasses a philosophy of the modern state.

The volume includes a section, “Du Bois, Politics, and Poetry,” that considers a widely overlooked topic: Du Bois’s use of poetry in *Souls* and *Black Reconstruction*. The interpenetration of form and content is a striking feature of Du Bois’s writing. Discussion about his creative writing—especially his philosophy of poetry—as an integral element of his political thought should be warmly welcomed. As Bromell notes in his introduction: “the essays [in this section] by Reed and Ford take us further than any other work into the philosophical import of Du Bois’s lifelong interest in poetry and its powers” (14). Unfortunately, Reed’s and Ford’s essays are often so subtle that they defy comprehension. Perhaps this is an inevitable challenge of multidisciplinary volumes, as disciplines have widely different conventions for academic writing. Ford’s more lucid essay considers the poetry fragments with which Du Bois concludes each chapter of *Black Reconstruction*. Ford calls these fragments “paracritical hinges,” which function as “door[s that] permit flow between disparate modes of articulation” (102). He argues that “those disparate modes consist on the one hand of Du Bois’s explicit political thinking about the nation-state’s relation to the global and, on the other, of his implicit thinking about the relationship between black radical politics and aesthetics” (102). I find it hard to believe that poetry fragments can carry such a weighty charge without dissolving into what they are not: theory. A general explanation of Du Bois’s view of the role of aesthetics in black radical politics would have been helpful to motivate and narrow the concerns of the essay.

In closing, I must comment that the volume consists of 11 essays, an introduction, and a series forward, but no women are included in it. While Bromell acknowledges this exclusion in his introduction, it is nonetheless deeply disappointing and should have been addressed by the editors of the series or at the press. What is more, the quality of the scholarship suffers. The volume includes scant discussion of black feminist philosophy, intersectionality, the gendered politics of reproduction, sexual identity, and the family. These neglected aspects of Du Bois’s thought merit consideration. In anticipating future companions to W.E.B. Du Bois’s political thought, I hope that a more inclusive volume might be forthcoming soon.

Notes

1. Mills’s latest excellent book *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* elaborates on these themes, but it is not centrally focused on Du Bois’s political philosophy.
2. Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 463.