

# **W. E. B. Du Bois: Education, Race and Economics from 1903-1961**

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*By the beginning of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the preeminent public intellectuals in the world. Although he is best known for his work concerning the color line, he also cautioned against bourgeois indulgencies, rallied for an education to service the less fortunate, and maintained a program of Pan-Africanism. Thus, this essay explores the context of Du Bois as an advocate for global justice and world peace, a clear thinker on the nexus of issues concerning race and class, and his attempt to explicate the emerging global capitalist system.*

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois was one of America's preeminent public intellectuals. From his role as co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and editor of *The Crisis* to his leadership in organizing five Pan-African conferences, from his position as a professor and sociologist to his active membership in the Peace Information Center, his writings and speeches shaped progressive opinions and policies in America and abroad.

During the many stages of his life, Du Bois set out to address contemporary problems with the keen insight of a top rank sociologist and the contextual depth of a seasoned historian. And, while he was a "race man" who was deeply knowledgeable and fiercely proud of his African and African American heritage, his analyses were seldom provincial; rather, they often incorporated an international perspective, focusing on how and where African descended people in particular and oppressed populations in general might fit into a world characterized by social justice and brotherhood, rather than by conflict and inequality.

As an unrelenting advocate for global justice and world peace, Du Bois often critically addressed: the power of education in creating a better world, the question of the color line, how African descended people would be incorporated equally into the United States and the world (the "Negro Question"), and the unnecessary and irrational inequality of world wealth distribution, and how it propelled propensity toward selfish and materialistic habits.

Education as the chief means of ameliorating problems of race and class held sway with Du Bois his entire life. As a sort of response to "The Negro Question", Du Bois advocated planned education that would cultivate the intellect as well as direct the actions of students for the purpose of improving the life chances of African Americans in specific and the condition of all people in general. In chapter six of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes... *to stimulate wildly weak and untrained minds is to play with mighty fires; to flout their striving idly is to welcome a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethargy in our very laps. The guiding of thought and the deft coordination of deed is at once the path of honor and humanity* (1969:123). Du Bois (1969) notes that effective education will develop training that will best use the labor of all men without enslaving or brutalizing, and that such training will, *...encourage the prejudices that bulwark society, and stamp out those that in sheer barbarity deafen us to the wail of prisoned souls within the* Veil (123-4).

Du Bois' concerns about Negro colleges were, in 1930, combined with a concern for students and their connections to the economic environment surrounding African Americans. Specifically, he worried that Historically Black Colleges and Universities lacked an over-arching curriculum that would equip students with the intellectual tools necessary to negotiate the modern world while simultaneously applying their particular learned skills to a well thought out and explicit program of racial uplift. In a speech given at Howard University, Du Bois notes, *...there cannot be the slightest doubt but that the Negro college, its teachers, students, and graduates have not yet comprehended the age in which they live: the tremendous organization of industry, commerce, capital, and credit which today forms a super-organization dominating and ruling the universe, subordinating to its ends government, democracy, religion, education, and social philosophy; and for the purpose of forcing into the places of power in this organization American black men either to guide or help reform it, either to increase its efficiency or make it a machine to improve our well-being, rather than the merciless mechanism which enslaves us; for this the Negro college has today neither program nor intelligent comprehension* (1973:66).

He continues... *moreover, and perhaps for this very reason, the ideals of colored college-bred men have not in the last thirty years been raised an iota. Rather in the main, they have been lowered. The average Negro undergraduate has swallowed hook, line, and sinker, the dead bait of the white undergraduate, who, born in an industrial machine, does not have to think, and does not think. Our college man today is, on the average, a man untouched by real culture. He deliberately surrenders to selfish and even silly ideals, swarming into semiprofessional athletics and Greek letter societies, and affecting to despise scholarship and the hard grind of study and research. The greatest meeting of the Negro college year like those of the white college year has become vulgar exhibitions of liquor, extravagance, and fur coats. We have in our colleges a growing mass of stupidity and indifference* (1973:67).

Hence, concludes that... *acquiring as we do in college no guidance to a broad economic comprehension and a sure industrial foundation, and simultaneously a tendency to live beyond our means, and spend for show, we are graduating young men and women with an intense and overwhelming appetite for wealth and no reasonable way of gratifying it, no philosophy for counteracting it* (1973:67). Clearly, Du Bois realizes that the goal of training a cadre of well educated African Americans who would put their skills to use for racial uplift is at odds with the aspirations of many of the "Talented Tenth".

Naturally, Du Bois recognized that critique without meaningful proposals for solutions rang hollow, and in 1946 outlined a program of study that would connect the non-college trained to their better educated counterparts in an effort to positively impact American society.

He proposed that... *the college should be closely integrated with its surrounding social setting. One of the great limitations of the older Negro college was that they came up with the idea of detachment from the town, city and state where they were. In part this was forced upon them by slavery and its consequences but it afterward became a habit; so that an intellectual class was trained which had no organic connection with the community around. In the small college which I have in mind this should no longer be true. The college should be an integral part of the community, of the colored community, of course, first; but also and just as needfully of the white community, so that in all its work and thinking, its government and art expression the community and college should be one and inseparable and at the same time the college could retain its leading function because of its independence and its clear ideals* (1973:148).

In this way Du Bois was trying to ensure some measure of unity between the better educated and more financially secure African Americans and their less educated and poorer counterparts, thereby guarding against the bifurcations that might result from such educational and economic differences.

Next, when writing *Souls* Du Bois asks *...the real question, how does it feel to be a problem?* (1969:44). To answer this question Du Bois expresses what being African in America means and the unique challenges this poses stating, *...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 world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder* (1969:45).

Moreover, toward the end of *Souls* Du Bois forecasts that many African Americans would find themselves in noting that... *they must perpetually discuss the "Negro Problem,"--must live, move and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness. With this come, too, peculiar problems of their inner life, --of the status of women, the maintenance of Home, the training of children, the accumulation of wealth, and the prevention of crime. All this must mean a time of intense ethical ferment, of religious heart-searching and intellectual unrest. From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth century, --from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism* (1969:221-22).

Congruently, as *Souls* would outline the turmoil caused by living under the burden of the Color Bar, Du Bois would, in subsequent books, speeches and essays, urge African Americans to choose the path of revolt and radicalism.

In the same way that he had put his finger on the pulse of the "Negro Problem" early, by the 1940s Du Bois was evaluating his life's work and constructing programs of action intended to reduce, and eventually eliminate color prejudice. In his essay from Rayford Logan's edited volume *What the Negro Wants*, Du Bois reflects upon over forty years of his own work and thought, a span of time that included two World Wars and a global economic depression, and attempts to explicate the position of African Americans at mid-century. He begins by writing about his Harvard classmates... *I was exceptional among them, in my ideas on voluntary race segregation; they for the most part saw salvation only in integration at the earliest moment and on almost any terms in white culture; I was firm in my criticism of white folk and in my more or less complete dream of a Negro self-sufficient culture even in America* (2001:40). He goes on to note that while teaching at Atlanta University from 1897-1910, he hoped his program of study on the "Negro" would lead to the lessening of color discrimination. He states... *my faith in its success was based on the firm belief that race prejudice was based on widespread ignorance. My long-term remedy was Truth: carefully gathered scientific proof that neither color nor race determined the limits of a man's capacity or desert* (2001:49). It is with a sincere optimism then, that Du Bois would return from the 1911 Races Congress in London noting... *I returned to America with a broad tolerance of race and a determination to work for the International, which I saw forming; it was, I conceived, not the ideal of the American Negroes to become simply American; but the ideal of America to build an interracial culture, broader and more catholic than ours* (2001:58).

However, the onset of the first World War would cast a long shadow on his optimism and he would write... *for now there was no doubt in my mind: Western European civilization had nearly caused the death of modern culture in jealous effort to control the wealth and work of colored people* (2001:59).

Moving forward, during the 1920s Du Bois would devote significant time and energy attempting to forge a Pan-African alliance with African American leadership in order to resolve the crisis of color and class. He showed how, between 1890 and 1910 it ...*was the age of triumph of Big Business, for Industry, consolidated and organized on a world-wide scale, and run by white capital with colored labor*, and how it was imperative that African people unite to struggle against such exploitation (2001:50).

In spite of his plan he notes... *from 1910 to 1920, I had followed the path of sociology as an inseparable part of social reform, and social uplift as a method of scientific social investigation; then, in practice, I had conceived an interracial culture as superseding as our goal, a purely American culture; before I had conceived a program for this path, and after throes of bitter racial strife, I had emerged with a program of Pan-Africanism as organized protection of the Negro world led by American Negroes. But American Negroes were not interested* (2001:60).

Subsequently, Du Bois propose another program to alleviate poverty and racial discrimination during and after the Great Depression, and even though he took as his foundation some of the ideas of Karl Marx, he eschewed Soviet-style Communism's rigid one-size-fits-all approach, noting that... *the program of the American Communist party was suicidal. He explains, ...I did believe that a people where the differentiation in classes because of wealth had only begun, could be so guided by intelligent leaders that they would develop into a consumer-conscious people, producing for use and not primarily for profit, and working into the surrounding industrial organization so as to reinforce the economic revolution bound to develop in the United States and all over Europe and Asia sooner or later. I believed that revolution in the production and distribution of wealth could be a slow, reasoned development and not necessarily a blood bath. I believed that 13 millions of people, increasing, albeit slowly in intelligence, could so concentrate their thought and action on the abolition of their poverty, as to work in conjunction with the most intelligent body of American thought; and that in the future as in the past, out of the mass of American Negroes would arise a far-seeing leadership in lines of economic reform* (2001:61-2).

But despite his best efforts Du Bois laments that The Great Depression and the Red Scare would put to rest any hope of enacting a "Socialist" solution to racial and economic problems, and toward the end of his life he was still entreating people to struggle toward racial equality and economic justice. However, in *Souls* his comments about racial equality were written for a mainly white readership whereas in later writings, such as his 1960 essay "Wither Now and Why", he is clearly reaching out to African American community as he writes...*what I have been fighting for and am still fighting for is the possibility of black folk and their cultural patterns existing in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality. If we take this attitude we have got to do so consciously and deliberately* (1973:150).

Du Bois concludes, *we must accept equality or die. What we must also do is to lay down a line of thought and action which will accomplish two things: The utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization* (1973:151).

Moreover, especially in his later writings, Du Bois focused on the connection between race and economics and how too often class differences divided the African Americans who needed each other for solidarity to battle racial bigotry. For example, in his final book, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, he writes that... *this dichotomy in the Negro group, this development of class structure, was to be expected, and will be more manifest in the future, as discrimination against Negroes as such decreases. There will gradually arise among American Negroes a separation according to their attitudes toward labor, wealth and work. It is still my hope that the Negro's experience in the past will, in the end, lead the majority of this intelligentsia into the ranks of those advocating social control of wealth, abolition of exploitation of labor, and equality of opportunity for all* (1968:371).

Unfortunately, just pages later he is less optimistic about the possibility of a positive outcome when he states... *the very loosening of outer racial discriminatory pressures had not, as I had once believed, left Negroes free to become a group cemented into a new cultural unity, capable of absorbing socialism, tolerance, and democracy, and helping to lead America into a new heaven and new earth. But rather, partial emancipation is freeing some of them to ape the worst of American and Anglo-Saxon chauvinism, luxury, showing-off, and 'social climbing* (1968:393).

Du Bois' concern for education as a tool of liberation and his zeal for struggling against racial injustice were tied closely to his critique on the emerging national and international propensity toward materialism, over-consumption and unnecessary disparities in wealth distribution. In 1903 he cautioned those who had managed some success against mistaking "golden apples" for the goal of racing rather than the incidents by the way. He writes... *Atlanta must not lead the South to dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success; already the fatal might of this idea is beginning to spread; it is replacing the finer type of Southerner with vulgar money-getters; it is burying the sweeter beauties of Southern life beneath pretense and ostentation.*

*For every social ill the panacea of Wealth has been urged, --wealth to overthrow the remains of the slave feudalism; wealth to employ the black serfs, and the prospect wealth to keep them working; wealth as the end and aim of politics, and as the legal tender for law and order; and, finally, instead of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, wealth as the ideal of the Public School (1969:112).*

Continuing, by 1945 Du Bois had linked the problem of economic inequality to the lack of democracy in the world. Intolerance of cultural and ethnic diversity, control of governance and economics by only a select elite and avarice among the rich as well as the poor are a few of the problems he examines in *Color and Democracy*. For example, explaining the situation arising from European colonies and the mandate system Du Bois indicates that... *if the Social development in these cases led to the gradual integration of mass and class, of minority groups into the dominant culture, bringing with them such cultural gifts and modifications as would enrich and vary that culture into a new national unity; if the colony gradually became the partially autonomous dependency and eventually a free and independent nation--this would be a development satisfactory in the end and calling for patience in the process. But no, the development as we see it is cock-eyed and illogical; the group antagonism leads to friction and tensions in the country, and is usually solved only by the physical elimination of some minorities or the cultural disappearance of any individual patterns which they might contribute. Americanization has never yet meant a synthesis of what Africa, Europe, and Asia had to contribute to the new and vigorous republic of the West; it meant largely the attempt to achieve a dead level of uniformity intolerant of all variation. The ideal of the poor in America is usually to become rich and ride on the necks of the poorer (1945:71-2).*

Stating plainly the direction that America and the West were headed, Du Bois would return to this theme repeatedly in an attempt to cajole, jolt and persuade people do better by each other and work for a greater good.

At the end of his life Du Bois was still a sharp critic of global conditions in need of improvement, and a solution oriented scholar who would posit alternatives to mainstream thinking. Nowhere was this feature of his intellectual thought more prominent than in his late criticisms of the developing situation now called "Globalization", and the integration of political-economies of nations into one consumer driven capitalistic system lead by the United States and buttressed by Japan, England and to a lesser extent, China, Canada and France.

In a 1960 message intended to warn Africa about borrowing capital from the West Du Bois noted... *boycott the export of big capital from the exploiting world, led by America. Refuse to by machines, skills and comforts with cocoa, coffee, palm oil and fruit sold at ridiculously low prices in exchange for imported food, liquor, refrigerators and automobiles sold at exorbitant prices. Live simply. Refuse to buy big capital from nations that cheat and overcharge. Buy of the Soviet Union and China as they grow able to sell at low prices. Save thus your own capital and drive the imperialists into bankruptcy or into Socialism* (1968:402).

Clearly Du Bois anticipated that transnational corporations (TNCs), aided by the governments of the most powerful industrial nations, would become increasingly more powerful and accelerate their drives for profit at the expense of developing nations and people.

Furthermore, Du Bois was not only aware of this emerging global system but of the position of African descended people when he writes... *we must admit that the majority of the American Negro intelligentsia, together with much of the West Indian and West African leadership, shows symptoms of following in the footsteps of Western acquisitive society, with its exploitation of labor, monopoly of land and its resources, and with private profit for the smart and unscrupulous in a world of poverty, disease, and ignorance, as the natural end of human culture. I have long noted and fought this all too evident tendency, and built my faith in its ultimate change on an inner Negro cultural ideal. I thought this ideal would be built on ancient African communism, supported and developed by memory of slavery and experience of caste, which would drive the Negro group into a spiritual unity precluding the development of economic classes and inner class struggle* (1968:392).

However, his final sentence to this thought is uncharacteristically pessimistic as he concludes... *this was once possible, but it is now improbable*, and as his most pointed criticisms often called the United States to task for failing to create a nation wherein equality and freedom were meaningful guideposts in the day-to-day lives of many Americans.

And his *Autobiography* exposes the contradictions between the ideals and the practices of American democracy indicating that... *perhaps the most extraordinary characteristic of current America is the attempt to reduce life to buying and selling. Life is not love unless love is sex and bought and sold. Life is not knowledge save knowledge of technique, of science for destruction.*

*Life is not beauty except beauty for sale. Life is not art unless its price is high and it is sold for profit. All life is production for profit, and for what is profit but for buying and selling again? Even today the contradictions of American civilization are tremendous. Freedom of political discussion is difficult; elections are not free and fair. Democracy is for us to a large extent unworkable. In business there is a tremendous amount of cheating and stealing; gambling in card games, on television and on the stock exchange is widely practiced. It is common custom for distinguished persons to sign books, articles, and speeches they did not write; for men of brains to compose and sell opinions which they do not believe. Ghost writing is a profession. The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth, and the persons who exercise the power of wealth are not necessarily its owners, but those who direct its use, and the truth about this direction is so far as possible kept a secret. We do not know who owns our vast property and resources, so that most of our argument concerning wealth and its use must be based on guesswork.*

*Those responsible for the misuse of wealth escape responsibility, and even the owners of capital often do not know for what it is being used and how. The criterion of industry and trade is the profit that it accrues, not the good which it does either its owners or the public. Present profit is valued higher than future need. We waste materials. We refuse to make repairs. We cheat and deceive in manufacturing goods. We have succumbed to an increased use of lying and misrepresentation. In the last ten years at least a thousand books have been published to prove that the fight to preserve Negro slavery in America as a great and noble cause, led by worthy men of eminence (1968:418-19).*

These words, written around 1961, aim to make readers think about just how abysmal much of American behavior had become and that perhaps it was time to join the struggle in making America live up to its ideals.

Lastly, Du Bois suggests that even though America is leading the world, doing so by building up its military will impede its ability to resolve domestic issues such as unemployment, crime and poverty. He writes... *today the United States is the leading nation in the world, which apparently believes that war is the only way to settle present disputes and difficulties. For this reason it is spending fantastic sums of money, and wasting wealth and energy on the preparation for war, which is nothing less than criminal. Yet the United States dare not stop spending money for war. If she did her whole economy, which is today based on preparation for war, might collapse.*

*Therefore, we prepare for a Third World War; we spread our soldiers and arms over the earth and we bribe every nation we can to become our allies. We are taxing our citizens into poverty, crime and unemployment, and systematically distorting the truth about socialism (1968:419).*

He concludes... *we tax ourselves into poverty and crime so as to make the rich richer and the poor poorer and more evil. We know the cause of this: it is to permit our rich business interests to stop socialism and to prevent the ideals of communism from ever triumphing on earth. The aim is impossible. Socialism progresses and will progress. All we can do is to silence and jail its promoters and make world war on communism. I believe in socialism. I seek a world when the ideals of communism will triumph--to each according to his need, from each according to his ability. For this I will work as long as I live. And I still live (1968:422).*

Although the situation looks grim toward the end of his life, Du Bois is willing and able to expend his time and energy working for a better world, one in which all people might live with the security and stability enjoyed by the world's well off.

W.E.B. Du Bois, surely one of the leading public intellectuals of the twentieth century, occupied a position at the forefront of progressive thought on nearly every issue he tackled via three topics he repeatedly addressed throughout his life, i.e.: using education as a tool for creating a more socially responsible and just society, dismantling racial inequality and redressing economic imbalances while slowly changing people's attitudes from being centered on selfishness and material prosperity to being guided by a greater sense of social altruism.

From *The Souls of Black Folk* to *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Du Bois challenged people to examine their assumptions about racial issues and economic organization, and work to build a better world, one that all people might share in equally.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the words of Du Bois ring as true one hundred years later as they did when he first penned them, saying... *it is, then, the strife of all honorable men of the twentieth century to see that in the future competition of races the survival of the fittest shall mean the triumph of the good, the beautiful, and the true; that we man be able to preserve for future civilization all that is really fine and noble and strong, and not continue to put a premium on greed and impudence and cruelty" (1969:188).*

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