

W.E.B. DU BOIS AND SOCIAL THEORY

This is a course in advanced social theory, devoted to the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). Du Bois was one of the greatest intellectuals of the twentieth century. As a scholar his writings included the founding of urban sociology, the innovative examination of race, and the reconstruction of US history from the stand point of African Americans. He was educated at Fisk University, then Harvard, spending time at the University of Berlin. He was the first African American to receive a PhD degree from Harvard. He twice held a position as sociology professor at Atlanta University. He was also a poet, novelist and dramatist. As an activist he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the editor of NAACP's monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, for 24 years, pioneer of Pan-Africanist Movement, inveterate campaigner for world peace after World War Two, joining the Communist Party in the last years of his life, and emigrating to the newly independent West African country of Ghana.

To reduce him to being a sociologist, is to belittle his extraordinary accomplishments. Still, this is a course in social theory. We shall compare him with the theorists we studied in 101 and 102, especially Marx, Gramsci, Fanon, Durkheim, and Weber. In studying feminism, we noted that the contribution was not simply the addition of gender, but the repudiation of the conventional way of seeing theory – as an account of the world from the outside. The theorist is part of the world he or she studies. We shall take this approach to Du Bois. This means examining how is “theory” changes in tandem with his engagement with that world. Like Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, Du Bois contributed to the transformation of the world within which he participated. Just as Beauvoir laid the foundation for the second wave feminist movement, just as Frantz Fanon was a prophet of anti-colonial struggles, so Du Bois laid the foundation for anti-racist movements. Dying on August 27, 1963, the day before Martin Luther King's “I have a Dream Speech”, Du Bois prefigured the burgeoning civil rights movement as well as anti-colonial struggles in Africa.

Du Bois is not a theorist in the conventional sense of the word. He does not develop a deductive theory even if in the end his anti-racism, his Pan-Africanism and his socialism do amount to a grand conception of the world. His works are literary, historical, political in short empirical or artistic and not explicitly theoretical. Therefore, we will try hard to infer a more systematic social theory from Du Bois' writings and ask how they compel us to transform the very meaning of social theory. We are going to have rely on a lot of history, especially of the US, to understand how history shaped him and how he shaped history. In what way did his “theory” advance according to the intellectual field which he inhabited and to what extent was it influenced by the very history he was trying to comprehend.

There are many biographies of Du Bois, and a library can be filled with commentary on his work. The canonical biography is the magisterial (exhaustive and exhausting) two volume masterpiece by David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a race, 1868-1919* and

W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963. I'll put them on reserve in Moffitt.

There's a lot to read. Du Bois wrote about 20 full-length books, hundreds of articles for magazines and academic journals. I have had to select from his most better-known writings, spanning his long intellectual career. We will proceed chronologically through his life. I will assign from 50 to 100 pages as required reading each week. A memo of no more than 250 words in response to my prompts will be due every Wednesday at 9p.m. The final will be a short 10-page paper.

Grades will be assigned additively as follows:

- Participation in the seminar each week gets you a C
- In addition, on time completion of 12 memos gets you a B (B-, B, or B+)
- In addition, submission of a satisfactory paper will get you an A (A-, A, A+)

Since I've never taught a course on Du Bois before, I reserve the right to change the weekly readings, but always at least a week ahead and within the range of 50 to 100 pages. The readings will all be made available on bcourses. If you prefer to buy the books then try to get the same edition as the one we will use in the course. I will put them all on reserve in Moffitt. My office hours are 5-7p.m. on Thursdays in Barrows 454.

August 23: INTRODUCTION.

Film: *W.E.B. Du Bois A Biography in Four Voices*

August 30: BETWEEN BIRTH AND DEATH

Du Bois wrote three auto-biographies: *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* in 1918-1919, when he was 50; *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* in 1938-39 when he was 70; and *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois; A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last decade of its First Century* in 1958-59 when he was 90 years old. We begin with selections from each of these books to underline just how his life and his perspectives change.

- *Darkwater*
 - Postscript (p.ix)
 - Credo, The Shadow of Years (pp.1-13)
- *Dusk of Dawn,*
 - Apology (pp.xxxiii),
 - The Plot (pp.1-3)
 - A New England Boy and Reconstruction (pp.4-12)
 - Education in the Last decades of the 19th Century (pp.13-25)
- *Autobiography*
 - Communism (pp.57-8)
 - I Go South (pp.101-131)
 - Postlude (pp.409-23)

Sept. 6: THE PHILADELPHIA NEGRO (1899)

After his first teaching position at the all-black Wilberforce College (1897), Du Bois is offered a position as “assistant in sociology,” at the University of Pennsylvania. It is a marginal position, symbolic of the racial discrimination he faced. He was hired to undertake a study of the African American in Philadelphia. The result of the solo research, *The Philadelphia Negro*, launched urban sociology in the US, though he was never given the recognition received by the Chicago urban sociologists. *The Philadelphia Negro* was a comprehensive social study, combining historiography, survey research and ethnography. We can only read a small proportion of the book but you will get a flavor for the enormous accomplishment. We should think about the ways the book connects to the writings of theorists from last year, in particular Durkheim.

- Chapter 1, The Scope of This Study (1-4)
- Chapter 2, The Problem (pp.5-9)
- Chapter 3, The Negro in Philadelphia, 1638-1820 (pp.10-24)
- Chapter 4, The Negro in Philadelphia, 1820-1896 (pp.25-45)
- Chapter 13, #37, The Negro Criminal (pp.235-40)
- Chapter 14, #43, The Causes of Crime and Poverty (pp.282-6)
- Chapter 15, #46, Social classes and amusements (pp.309-21)
- Chapter 17, Negro Suffrage (pp.368-384)
- Chapter 18, A Final Word (pp.385-97)

Sept. 13: THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK (1903)

For many years this was the book everyone associated with Du Bois, how he predicted that the problem of the Twentieth Century was the problem of the color-line. *The Souls of Black Folk* introduced the famous idea of double consciousness. All true, but in so doing we lose sight of Du Bois’ interest in the fate of African Americans after the Civil War in the period of Reconstruction (1865-1876). He was focused on the degradation of share-croppers and the compromise of Booker T. Washington. That’s what these first set of essays are about. Can one compare them to Fanon’s treatment of post-colonialism?

- The Forethought (pp.1-2)
- I. Of our Spiritual Strivings (pp.3-12)
- II. Of the Dawn of Freedom (pp.13-35)
- III. Of Booker T. Washington and Others (pp.36-50)
- IV. Of the Meaning of Progress (pp.51-62)
- V. Of the Wings of Atalanta (pp.63-73)

Sept. 20: THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK (Continued)

In these essays he continues to be concerned about the development of the South: the restricted advance of education, the economic plight of the freedmen as laborers, leading to a class analysis of African Americans, analysis of “race contact”, and of religion. He ends with more personal accounts. Throughout he’s underlining the humanity of African Americans, against the all-pervasive racism of the time.

- VI. Of the Training of Black Men (pp.74-90)
- VII. Of the Black Belt (pp.91-110)
- VIII. Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece (pp.111-132)
- IX. Of the Sons of Master and Man (pp.133-153)
- X. Of the Faith of the Fathers (pp.154-68)

Sept. 27: DARKWATER (1920)

In this famous collection of essays Du Bois moves beyond the history of Reconstruction and its consequences for African Americans to write about the roots and consequences of White Supremacy – in the South, but also in the North, in the US but also in Africa. With his founding of NAACP and his editorship of *The Crisis* he becomes an intellectual leader of African Americans and broadens his horizons.

- II. The Souls of White Folk (pp.17-29)
- III. The Hands of Ethiopia ((pp.32-42)
- IV. Of Work and Wealth (pp.47-59)

October 4: DARKWATER (Continued)

In the second half of the book he spreads his capacious wings even further, delving into the menial nature of service work, in particular the work of women. He effortlessly weaves together strands of anti-racism, feminism and Marxism in advancing the idea of radical, inclusive democracy. He is deeply influenced by the radical currents of his time.

- V. The Servant in the House (pp.63-77)
- VI. Of the Ruling of Men (pp.78-94)
- VII. The Damnation of Women (pp.95-108)
- VIII. The Immortal Child (pp.114-127)
- X. The Comet (pp.149-162)

October 11: BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA, 1860-1880 (1935)

This is Du Bois' magnum opus in which he shows how the Civil war would never have been won were it not for the brave opposition of Southern Blacks to slavery and their enlistment as soldiers on the side of the North. Furthermore, he shows that the period of Reconstruction (after the Civil War) was not the utter disaster painted by historians. Where they tried to demonstrate that African Americans were not ready for Emancipation, Du Bois argues that Reconstruction was a lost opportunity for radical democracy. The North abdicated its responsibilities, handed the South back to the defeated Planter Class who in turn reasserted slavery in a new form as well as disenfranchising African Americans. The first part of the book is devoted to a class analysis of slavery with chapters on the three classes, setting up the conditions for the Civil War. Throughout these three weeks we should be thinking Gramsci!

- Introduction by David Levering Lewis (pp.vii-xix)
- I.The Black Worker (pp.3-16)
- II.The White Worker (pp.17-31)

- III. The Planter (pp.32-54)

October 18: BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA (Continued)

Having set up the balance of class forces, he puts those classes into battle to understand the pivotal role of African Americans in the Civil War. In the one chapter he describes the response of slaves as a General Strike and in the second chapter the Emancipation is likened in the imagination of slaves as the “Coming of the Lord”.

- IV. The General strike (pp.55-83)
- V. The Coming of the Lord (pp.84-127)

October 25: BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA (Continued)

The last part of the book is devoted to the re-imposition of slave-like conditions, disenfranchisement, racial segregation, but Du Bois shows how African Americans do astonishingly well in making the best of a terrible situation, for example in advancing their education through the Freedmen’s Bureau. He holds out what could have been, were it not for the Northern abandonment of the South to the Planter Class. He ends with an extraordinary account of the racist distortions in the conventional history of Reconstruction. Du Bois developed his radical revisionist view of the South decades long before it was widely adopted by historians, itself a statement of the racism that pervades the academic world.

- VI. Back Toward Slavery (pp.670-711)
- VII. The Propaganda of History (pp.711-730)

November 1: DUSK OF DAWN (1940)

This is Du Bois second autobiography, but like the first it situates his own life in the broader themes of history. We will focus on his account of the class and political division within the African American Community, and how this gave rise to three projects: the return to Africa movement (Garveyism), the demand for integration (NAACP) and Du Bois’ strategy of black collective self-organization. He reflects on the development of Pan Africanism to which he was very committed – a commitment that led to his break with the NAACP in 1934 at which point he returns to Atlanta University.

- 7. The Colored World Within (pp.88-110)
- 8. Propaganda and World War (pp.111-133)
- 9. Revolution (pp.134-162)

November 8: PAN-AFRICANISM

As early as 1900, when Du Bois addressed the first Pan-African Congress in London, he was already prophet of the unity of people of color across the globe. He was resolute in demonstrating the rich heritage of Africa, long before this became conventional. He saw the First World War as a struggle for control of Africa and the colonies, much in the same way as Lenin and Luxemburg would also write. He continued to be a dominant figure in Pan-African Congresses and eventually he would end his life in newly independent Ghana. We draw on essays

on Pan-Africanism from David Levering Lewis' edited collection, *W.E.B. Du Bois – a Reader*

- To the Nations of the World (pp.639-641)
- The African Roots of the War (pp.642-651)
- The Negro's Fatherland (pp.652-654)
- "What is Africa to Me?" (pp.655-59)
- Africa for the Africans (pp.660-661)
- A Second Journey to Pan-Africa (pp.662-667)
- Little portraits of Africa (pp.668-669)
- The Pan-African Congresses: The Story of a Growing Movement (pp.670-76)
- On Britain and Africa (pp.683-684)
- Whites in Africa After Negro Autonomy (pp.685-696)

November 15: SOCIALISM

Du Bois' interest in socialism was present early on in his writings, he was after all part of the NAACP world, many of whom were socialist. So much of his writing had a strong Marxist flavor: his account of Africa as the terrain of imperial struggles, his account of the class struggles after World War I with Black migration to the North led to conflagration with whites. *Black Reconstruction* is a class analysis of race and a racial analysis of class that would have delighted Gramsci. He was very impressed by the accomplishments of the Soviet Union and then Communist China. He was a member of the socialist party and he ran for the US Senate as a candidate for the American Labor Party, which was a front for the Communist Party. He even joined the Communist Party before he left for Ghana. Yet there was always an ambivalence about his commitment to socialism and Marxism. Like the feminists, such as McKinnon, who were suspicious of Marxism because it sidelines gender; so Du Bois was suspicious of Marxism and Marxists for side-lining race. Was there more to it? Again, we draw on essays from David Levering Lewis' edited collection, *W.E.B. Du Bois – a Reader*

- Socialism and the Negro Problem (pp.577-580)
- Russia, 1926 (pp.581-582)
- The Negro and Communism (pp.583-593)
- The Black worker (pp.594-607)
- Lifting from the Bottom (pp.608-609)
- My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom (pp.610-618)
- "There Must Come a Vast Social Change in the US" (pp.619-621)
- Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism in the US (pp.622-625)
- The Vast Miracle of china Today (pp.626-630)
- Application for the membership of the CPUSA (pp.631-633)

November 29: DU BOIS vs. THE US STATE

Du Bois' sympathy for the Soviet Union and China, and his Pan-African critique of imperialism led him to participate in the leftist movement for world peace, incurring the wrath of the US state in the period of McCarthyism. In 1951 he was

indicted as an “unregistered foreign agent”. Although he was eventually acquitted, the accumulated scars of racism and xenophobia were deep. He continued his political activism for peace; he was finally allowed to travel abroad in 1958, and eventually settled in Ghana where he died. Slowly but surely his extraordinary achievements as a scholar and activist came to be known in ever wider circles within and beyond academia. We end with the last chapters of his final autobiography, written when he was 90 years old.

- XX. Work for Peace (pp.343-360)
- XXI: An Indicted Criminal (pp.361-379)
- XXII. The Trial (pp.380-395)
- XXIII. My Tenth Decade (pp.396-408)

December 6: RECAP AND DISCUSSION

December 13: FINAL PAPER DUE