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On the Color Line: The Early Ideologies and Methodologies of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois

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On February 23, 1893, while doing graduate work at the University of Berlin, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois reflected in his diary, “I take the work that the Unknown lay in my hands and work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world. These are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus raise my race.” Du Bois would follow this plan precisely throughout the early stages of his over 70-year long career. As a professor, sociologist, activist, and author, Du Bois would become what some would consider a modern day Renaissance man, his work penetrating the most central and pressing civil rights struggles of the late 19th and 20th centuries. It would be an understatement to say that America’s racial ideology at the turn of the century was both set and followed. The efforts of Du Bois’ black predecessors had proved to him that the task of dissolving the culturally and socially engrained color line would be daunting while his influential, southern white forefathers had made it perfectly clear that these types of revolutionary ideas were not welcome below the Mason-Dixon Line. The African American community had found itself in a bind, stuck between citizen and slave, having no real power or influence yet a significant stake in the American way of life. Its prominent leaders of the 19th century, people like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, would find the American power structure too corrupted with deeply rooted racist ideologies for their very much top-down approaches to equality. Du Bois, however, will byline these initial struggles by taking a more indirect, bottom-up approach to the white, political power structure. He would give rise to an unprecedented grassroots movement among the African American community. Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, in an effort to gain racial equality and civil rights for the marginalized African American community, intentionally focused more on the local issues of class and education, affectively gaining the support of the essential Southern, white power structure his forbearers had previously lacked.¹

In his manifesto at the 1900 Pan-African Conference in London, Du Bois stated, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” His plan would be simple; dissolve the color line in all aspects of American society, socially, politically, and economically, and the African American community would in turn gain full civil rights and equality. Using the same logic as most reformers of his time, Du Bois realized that no radical changes could occur in a set power structure over night. He expresses this realization best when

¹ William E.B. Du Bois, diary entry, February 25, 1893, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, Georgia State University Library.

William E.B. Du Bois, “Bound by the Color Line,” *New Masses* (1946).

describing American society's radical transformation following the emancipation of the African American community in his 1915 essay, "The Negro." "Two hundred and forty-four years of slavery could not be stopped by edict. There were legal difficulties, the whole slow problem of economic readjustment, and the subtle and far-reaching questions of future race relations." Like the painfully gradual emancipation of the black community, however long over due, the acquisition of African American civil rights would not be a speedy process. In light of this, what makes Du Bois' strategy for the progress of the African American community different from the assimilation approach of Douglass or the separatist efforts of Washington, is his militant persistence in equality coupled with his keen awareness and understanding of the unyielding ideologies of the American white community.²

As a man well educated in history and sociology, Du Bois knew the power of ideology and the rhetoric on which it was built. He recognized from the failure of programs created during the tumultuous years of Reconstruction that no matter what legislation would be passed in favor of the African American community, if this stagnant, Southern ideology of paternalism and racism was not addressed and surmounted, there would be no real solution to what was referred to as the "Negro Problem" of the South. But by acknowledging this power of rhetoric, the power of the word, Du Bois was able to deter initial opposition to his argument. In the perspective of a white southerner, the ideology of a class system was well rooted in the plantation economy of the white community. Consequently, the word 'class' seemed far less imposing than that of 'race,' something unfamiliar and deemed inferior and threatening to the white former planter class. The same was true in terms of politics. With Bourbon Democrats controlling Southern politics on the basis of white supremacy, any mention of political involvement among the African American community would immediately raise fear and resistance among the white community. Education, however, a seemingly futile trait among a society, as of 1890, composed of 57.1 percent sharecroppers and 1.1 percent of African Americans in actual professions, was the key to political involvement and influence yet did not seem to pose as serious a threat among a majority of white Southerners. By simply replacing the word "race" with "class," and the word "politics" with "education," Du Bois was able to lessen the fury of his claims without weakening the fervor. As a result, at least for public appearances' sake, Du Bois had a seemingly less radical take to the early civil rights movement, gaining both black and white followers previously weary of the radical social changes of Reconstruction. By the time Du Bois earned his Ph. D from Harvard in 1895, the first African American to do so, he had gained the attention of both the

²William E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 24.
William E.B. u Bois, *The Negro* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1915), 122-123.

African American and white communities. With his audience now established, he was ready to put his methods into action.³

With concern to the white power structure, Du Bois would attempt to change the paternalistic ideology of whites by giving them the perception of a white controlled, gradual change, while simultaneously manipulating and empowering the victimized African American ideology, all under a common theme of progress. In doing this, Du Bois' strategy would be refined and simple: first, unite the African American community under one common, progressive identity; next, deter white opposition by making well educated and professional blacks indispensable to the Southern economy; and lastly achieve more political influence and equality through merit and aptitude. As plainly stated in his acclaimed *The Souls of Black Folk*, the achievements Du Bois expected for the African American community were as follows, "The right to vote, civic equality, and the education of youth according to ability." Du Bois will narrow these three goals down into the fields of education, industry, and politics. If these three fields were perfected within the African American community, the patriarchal color line that both economically and socially hindered the nation, particularly the South, would ultimately give way to ideas of capitalism, progress, and eventually, reform.⁴

The ingenious of Du Bois starts with his ability to play in both the black and white worlds. Although he grew up in the majority white town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts and received most of his elementary and advanced level education in the North, the African American scholar was quite familiar with the plight of the South and that of the African American community. Both of Du Bois' parents were the descendents of slaves, his mother being the illegitimate child of her owner and his father a slave, himself. At the age of two, Du Bois' father left the family leaving Du Bois and his biracial mother living somewhere in between opportunity and the discrimination and segregation of mainstream, American society. He encountered the same prejudices and injustices that his Southern counterparts had faced while attending Fisk University in Tennessee and knew all too well the sting of being what he calls "a problem." Du Bois describes his first memory of being different as "a certain suddenness that I was different from the others...shut out from their world by a vast veil." This "veil" would prompt Du Bois' first thoughts on race relations, an idea he would call "double consciousness." He describes this concept as, "always looking at one's self

³ W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic Monthly* 80 (August 1897): 1.

William E.B. Du Bois, "1900 Paris World's Fair.

⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 32.

through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." According to Du Bois, this "double consciousness" along with the disenfranchisement and perpetuated ignorance of the African American community, was a major contributor to the "sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand people."⁵

By the time Du Bois began his graduate program at the University of Berlin in 1892, the American South was still in the shadows of slavery and still run by the old planter class of the antebellum period. Du Bois expresses his frustration in an 1897 essay, "[Thirty years have passed]...thirty years of renewal and development and yet the swarthy ghost of Banquo sits in its old place at the national feast. In vain does the nation cry to its vastest problem." While legally free, the African American community had hit a stalemate in its progress while the southern white community simply discounted the struggles and wrong doings done to their darker counterparts. Despite his frustration, Du Bois was ever careful about placing blame on one community or the other. In a strategic attempt to keep powerful allies on both sides of the color line Du Bois almost always avoids ostracizing one group over another throughout his early scholarship. An example of this is clear in his analysis of failed federal efforts such as the Freedman's Bureau and the National Freedman's Relief Association in the immediate years following the Civil War. Du Bois writes, "When to the inherent difficulties of so delicate and nice a social operation were added the spite and hate of conflict...the work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure." While very careful not to put the blame of the failures of Reconstruction on the federal government, at risk of ostracizing and losing his potentially powerful allies, Du Bois also realizes that if anything were going to solve the problems of the African American community, the community, its self, would have to be stabilized first.⁶

No other region of the African American community was in more need of stabilization in the early 20th century than the American South. The South, by far, had the firmest set racist and paternalistic ideologies engrained in both the black and white communities, having developed them with the birth of the plantation economy in the early colonial years. Furthermore, according to Du Bois' 1911 research, 75 percent of the African Americans in the United States lived in the South. He comments on the fragility of the Southern situation stating that "on the part of the white South, their economic condition was pitiable, their fear of Negro

⁵ William E.B. Du Bois, *An Autobiography*.

Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1-3.

Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People."

⁶ Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People."

Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 17.

freedom genuine.” These economic and social fears of the southern white community were also very prevalent in the southern black communities, creating a region of tension and scramble for control. With both the black and white communities skeptical of radical reform or change, Du Bois would have to be the most cautious and mindful of his choice of words and methods used in this fragile yet significant region. The persuasion and influence of both sides of the Southern color line would prove to be pivotal to the disintegration of the color line, itself, prompting Du Bois to pay close attention to his reputation and public opinion in the South.⁷

This reputation, however, would not go unchallenged. From failed land redistribution to fragile educational reforms, and eventually, disenfranchisement, the African American community was in all aspects of the word, behind the rest of American society. In his sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, the first study of its kind, it is found that in 1870, 22 percent of the African American population was illiterate only to drop to 18 percent by 1890. Du Bois confronts these staggering statistics and calls for action in his address to the National Negro Conference in 1909, “The ‘method’ to achieve [civil rights and liberties] is by the recognition of the fact that the culture of every nation is measured by its slums and that its knowledge is measured by the amount of ignorance abroad in the land.” In other words, Du Bois argued that American society, as a whole was only as strong as its weakest link. The progress and improvement of the white community directly coincided with the progress and improvement of the Southern black community. With their fates intertwined, neither community could ignore the “Negro problem” any longer.⁸

The low socio-economic status of the African American community up until 1897 would bring Du Bois’ strategy to its first objective, education. The education of the African American community had long been pushed aside or ignored by the federal government after Reconstruction. Du Bois makes note of this in a fiery 1931 article in the NAACP’s *Crisis*, “In Orleans Parish...the school board spent \$78 for each white pupil and \$48 for each Negro pupil...Something must be done to remedy a situation which seeks to fasten slavery permanently upon the colored people of the United States by denying their children decent education.” While the education of the African American community was

⁷ Du Bois, *The Negro*, 125.

William E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Problem” (published in *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems Communicated to the First Universal Race Congress*, University of London, July 26-29, 1911).

⁸ William E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Benjamin Blom Inc, 1899), 91.

William E.B. Du Bois, “Evolution of the Race Problem” (paper presented at the National Negro Conference, New York, 1909).

somewhat present around Du Bois' early career, this education was very limited, inconsistent and ultimately based off of varied local resources and interest. In a personal letter from Henrietta Shivery, a schoolteacher and goddaughter of Du Bois, Henrietta describes the pitiful state of her Mississippi schoolhouse, "I must say something about this school to somebody. *System* here is nothing. Principal quite backward...you can count the degrees in this school on one hand. The people here are all quite backward and dumb. Some days I feel like dying." These extreme conditions and experiences were prevalent throughout the rural South, calling into question the legitimacy and efficiency of the local, African American school. With the help of influential white Harvard classmates and colleagues like John Hope, Will W. Alexander, and Karl R. Wallace, Du Bois was able to not necessarily fix all cases of these deplorable conditions, but call attention to their existence and promote the continuation and expansion of African American education despite these obstacles.⁹

Du Bois also promotes what he calls the "Talented Tenth," the most educated, thrifty, and influential members of the black community. This group would serve as the model for Du Bois' education experiment and the initial representatives of the African American community. What Du Bois calls for in light of the "Talented Tenth" and the well-to-do middle class is a black, leading aristocracy; an influential class of African Americans that could provide better representation and influence over both the African American and white communities. He describes the purpose of this leading aristocracy in an address given to an all black audience, "...For the talented few the best higher training that suits them. And this aristocracy of learning and talent—the graduates of Spelman, Atlanta, Howard, Fisk, and Northern institutions, are not to be trained for their own sakes but to be the guides and servants of the vast unmoved masses..." His concerns over this are clearly addressed in his address to a conference of black educators in Atlanta around the turn of the century. Du Bois states, "Unless the Negro people have a cultured aristocracy whose learning is deeper than a lot of high-sounding titles and silly degrees, and broader than the ability to make speeches, it cannot survive." In contrast, Du Bois also recognizes the "submerged tenth," "the lowest class of criminals, prostitutes and loafers." This "submerged tenth" was what made up the white conception of the "Negro Problem" and fueled the paternalistic and racist justification of their oppression. Although these two extremes were the most known and influential, Du Bois also acknowledged the middle 80 percent of the African American community as "respectable, honest, with the children in some form of school." These findings of

⁹ William E.B. Du Bois, "Education," *The Crisis* 38 (October 1931): 35.

Henrietta Shivery to W.E.B. Du Bois, letter of correspondence, October 11, 1934, The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, University of Georgia Library.

the middle 80 percent of African Americans highlights the African American community's capability and aptitude at being useful members of society while even more effectively bringing to light the clearly defined limits of the black middle class as seen in the black codes and Jim Crow Laws of the South and the firmly established segregation of the North. Du Bois called for more than just the colleges of the "Talented Tenth" and the reform of the "submerged tenth," however. He wanted lifelong scholarship and questioning from all African Americans of the institution that for so long had hindered them. This was the only way to present a strong, united front. This approach is in direct opposition to Booker T. Washington's skilled labor and technical learning approach to African American education. In his separatist approach, the African American community would forever be among the lowest rungs of American society. Du Bois, however, with his more intellectual based methodology, directly penetrates the white power structure of scholars, politicians, and businessmen.¹⁰

This approach was widely accepted by the small class of African American leaders that had developed out of Reconstruction in cities such as Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Reverend Francis J. Grimke, for example, a trustee at Howard University, wrote a personal letter to Du Bois in 1905, "God has gifted you with vision and power of statement. Your utterances are always clear, leaving no one in doubt as to your meaning, or as to the side upon which you are fighting. And that is what we need today more than anything else—the assertion of truth, never mind who it offends, or who is pleased or who is not." The same is true of the Reverend Robert Jackson Simmons of Duluth, Minnesota. He praises, "As a teacher and a journalist you have been a fearless champion of our cause politically, economically, and socially. We believe you have hit upon the sanest and most practical course for a peaceable and permanent solution to our case...work out our salvation behind the barriers of prejudice which all the efforts of previous years have failed to break down." This strong and emotionally charged audience points to the success of Du Bois' first objective of education. By educating the black race on their currently flawed social, economic, and political institutions, and presenting to both races the alternatives to such, Du Bois

¹⁰ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 311.

William E.B. Du Bois, "Postgraduate Work in Sociology in Atlanta University" (address given to school teachers in Athens, GA, 1900)

Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Compromise" (address, Cotton States and International Exposition, Atlanta, GA, September 18, 1895).

William E.B. Du Bois, "The Spirit of Modern Europe" (address given to all black audience, Louisville, Kentucky, 1900.)

not only unites the African American community but the progressive white community as well, all under the idea of progress.¹¹

On the tide of this progressive momentum, Du Bois strategically turned his attention and that of the African American community to industry and economics. Since Emancipation, the African American community had been virtually cut off from any glimpse of economic growth. Du Bois addresses this struggle stating, “The professions of law and medicine are closed to him except among his own people; the avenues of trade and transportation are rendered very difficult for a Negro and even the trade unions discriminate whenever they dare. Every step of advance which the Negro has made and is making is thus taken in the face of an unreasoning and often half-conscious prejudice which renders it doubly difficult.” With this, Du Bois’ goal was to inject the newly educated African American community into the mostly white controlled industries of the early Twentieth century on the basis of aptitude and merit, cleverly replacing the “unreasoning and half-conscious prejudice” of both races with terms of profit. With the recurring threat of unionization and the need for skilled labor in the development of the early Twentieth century’s “New South,” white industrialists all over the United States were beginning to look at the newly educated African American labor force as a potentially valuable resource. Du Bois describes William H. Baldwin, a railroad executive and “far sighted industrial statesman,” “[Baldwin] knew that Negro labor with proper training and treatment could be made effective and he and other industrialists also feared the new demands and growing organization of unionism among white craft laborers. He thought that in the South there could be built up two laboring classes who would naturally supplement each other and together make for the economic development of the New South.” This was the introduction of the African American community into mainstream American industry and Du Bois would play his cards carefully to secure African American status within this industrial realm.¹²

With an emphasis on education now in the infrastructure of the black community, however, African Americans were not bound to meager factory or agricultural jobs. A rise in professionals, Du Bois’ “leading aristocracy,” was happening. A different kind of African American ‘class’ was emerging that differed greatly from the victimized group of the 1890s and turn of the century.

¹¹ Rev. Francis J. Grimke to William E.B. Du Bois, letter, January 7, 1905, University of Georgia Library.

Rev. Robert Jackson Simmons to William E.B. Du Bois, letter, September 27, 1934, University of Georgia Library.

¹² Memorandum by W.E.B. Du Bois to Paul Hagermans, 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, University of Georgia Library.

With an unprecedented number of blacks competing with whites intellectually and economically, the aptitude and competence of the African American community was becoming hard to discount. An increase in education had subsequently caused a rise in income among the black community and like all things American, money accounted for influence. While the initial scope of this influence was rather small, by 1910, campaigns like the Niagara Movement, the National Negro Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Pan-African Movement, all partially founded by Du Bois, were now on the national stage.

Being the secular scholar that he was, Du Bois did not settle for this new African American class simply on the national agenda. Instead, in an attempt to even further this new African American sentiment of being a substantial and influential class among both the black and white communities, Du Bois ties the African American experience to that of Europe. Since his extensive travels and studies in European institutions like the University of Berlin, Du Bois had revealed in what he called the “the Good, the Beautiful, and the Truth” of modern, progressive, 20th century Europe. This administration and connection to the African American experience is apparent in an address he gave to an all black audience in Louisville, Kentucky around 1900. Du Bois proclaims, “[European] Men have begun to see that when 10, 100, or 1,000,000 individuals come to share their lives, to live together in cooperation, to constitute a village, a city or a state...the organization itself has a life and a meaning far transcending the individual lives that compose it.” By uniting the African American community under the concept of Pan-Americanism, Du Bois not only successfully ties the black community into the international story but in turn, the Anglo-American story as well.¹³

With these newly found ideals of unity and Pan-Americanism and with their foot in American industry and education, another push for suffrage manifested itself among the African American community. After the depreciation and redistribution of southern land after the Civil War, the ballot had become the ultimate sign of citizenship in the United States. The disenfranchisement of the black community shortly after the Bourbon Democrat take over in the South post Reconstruction had been a major factor in the oppression and strife of African Americans and their re-enfranchisement would be the final phase in Du Bois’ initial strategy for African Americans civil rights. The main reasoning behind the disenfranchisement of African Americans was that “the ignorant ought not vote.”

¹³ Du Bois, “The Spirit of Modern Europe,” *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, 63.

To this claim's credit, with high illiteracy rates and only limited knowledge of the actual system in which they were voting, early African American ballots, for the majority of southern blacks at least, were often misleading or manipulated by threats of violence and death. Yet Du Bois' response to this reasoning of the "ignorant" was published in his book, *Darkwater* in 1920. He says, "No civilized state should have citizens too ignorant to participate in government...no state is civilized which has citizens too ignorant to help rule it." This statement reinforces Du Bois' fundamental beliefs in education that "education is not a prerequisite to political control but that political control is the cause of popular education." This argument will be the strongest and most affective in the flight for the African American vote.¹⁴

Up to 1934, Du Bois' plan had been executed almost precisely. Understanding that he would have to take a gradualist approach to the deeply rooted racial problems of American society, he had stirred up radical thought and reform within about a forty-year period. The most brilliant aspect of Du Bois' plan was that he implemented it without substantial opposition from the historically unyielding white power structure of some of the nation's most prominent politicians, scholars, and religious leaders. With an emphasis on class and education, Du Bois initiated a shift in power in American society. This power was not necessarily simply taken away from the white community and given to the black. Du Bois was ultimately successful because he convinced both sides of the color line that shared power would result in social progress and economic profit, two key aspects in the Progressive Era in which Du Bois proposed these ideas. His choice of rhetoric along with his intellectual and logical approach to the struggles of the African American community had been essential in his campaign for progress and equality.

This campaign would ultimately be tested with the social and economic disruption of World War I. The United States' entry into the Great War had caused political and intellectual upheaval. Progressivism was replaced with activism and the intellectual climate of both the nation and the world had taken a radical turn. Now more aware and subject to national and international circumstance and debate, the problem of the African American community was no longer *if* they could penetrate mainstream America, but *how* they would survive now that they were in it. With this Du Bois began to deviate from the social and educational undertones he helped establish in the NAACP, focusing the majority of his attention on the economic plight of the African American community. With significant connections to the intellectual realm of Europe,

¹⁴ William E.B. Du Bois, "Of the Ruling Men," in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* 139.

especially Germany, Du Bois' reaction to World War I often coincides with some of the most prominent European thinkers of the time. By the end of the war in 1918, Du Bois' original theories on class structure, something he initially saw as a meritocracy, took a more Marxist tone. Whether it was frustration from the slow and steady progress of the African American community or the natural development and refinement of an intellectual's ideals, Du Bois became a man of his times. He unadvisedly supported the Bolsheviks and economic revolution in Russia, eventually developing his own separatist views of African Americans in the national economy. In an article he wrote for the *Crisis* entitled, "Business as Public Service," Du Bois states, "The reason for much of this [economic] muddle is plainly because the energy of the leading men of the world is diverted from seeking directly to serve mankind toward an endeavor to increase their incomes and garner the consequent tremendous social power to a degree which far surpasses their knowledge or ability to use it."¹⁵

These radical ideas led Du Bois into conflict with his own prided "black elite" prompting his resignation from the NAACP in 1934. Despite his descent from public approval, Du Bois kept to his progressive ideology. The status and progress of the African American community was changing and so were Du Bois' ideas and methods. Perhaps with every milestone that was surpassed, Du Bois felt it less necessary to byline certain radical ideas and actions for the sake of approval and effectiveness. With the deeply rooted ideologies of paternalism almost obsolete and economic and political opportunity knocking on the black community's door, Du Bois found it necessary to further push the limits of the already pressed white community. While racism still prevailed, Du Bois had called attention to the benefits of mutual cooperation in the economic, political, and intellectual realms of society. Nevertheless, between the years 1897 and 1934, during the beginning and prime of his long career, Du Bois' initial thoughts and carefully constructed methods had firmly established the foundation upon which African American civil rights and equality would be built.

¹⁵ William E.B. Du Bois, "Business as Public Service," *The Crisis* 36, (November 1929) 374.