

## **Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk***

### **1. Introduction**

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was born in Great Barrington, MA. He studied at Fisk University in Tennessee, the University of Berlin, and Harvard University, and was the first African-American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard (1895). He taught at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and then went on to become a professor of history, sociology and economics at Atlanta University. He founded the NAACP in 1909 and was the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*.

After the American Civil War, approximately four million slaves were emancipated. Efforts were made during Reconstruction (1865-1877) to set the former slaves on their feet and provide social, political, and economic rights that had been denied them. There was some progress, e.g., Freedmen's Bureau was formed, offering food, housing, medical care, and legal assistance; over time Blacks were elected to state legislatures and the U.S. Congress and both the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments were passed. The former (1868) grants "equal protection" under the law to all citizens, and the 15<sup>th</sup> (1870) grants voting rights to all men, regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." (Note that suffrage was not granted to women in the US until the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed in 1920.)

However, President Andrew Johnson, who took office after Lincoln was assassinated (1865), was committed to states' rights, and allowed the Southern States to manage reconstruction on their own. He initially vetoed the Civil Rights bills passed by Congress and eventually he was impeached (1868). Nevertheless, chaos ensued and the "radical reconstructionists" and former confederates could come to no agreement about how to rebuild the south.

During 1890-1910, a form of racial apartheid known as "Jim Crow" developed in the south. It restricted black suffrage, and segregated the races in housing, education, transportation, and virtually all public spaces. Many, including academics, saw the efforts during Reconstruction to grant rights to former slaves a "tragic mistake." (Blight and Gooding-Williams 1997, 3)

And segregation stiffened a form of economic subjugation by which white landowners and industrialists controlled southern black laborers. The United States Supreme Court sanctioned this system of apartheid when, in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), it affirmed the power of the state to separate the races on railroads, thus declaring the "separate but equal" doctrine the law of the land. (3)

*The Souls of Black Folk* was first published in 1903, and offered a "poignant but often biting dissent from the racist and nationalist ideologies animating post-Reconstructionist political culture." (1) Not only were many discouraged, but also blamed the former slaves for the chaos of Reconstruction, suggesting that it was proof that Blacks were incapable of managing their freedom. Du Bois counters this by offering a counter-narrative that emphasizes how the government failed Blacks, the valiant struggle for civil rights, and the social and cultural contributions of Blacks to American life.

In *Souls*, Du Bois draws on his idea that each race has an important contribution to make to humanity. Race is not, in his terms, a biological category, but is a sociohistorical phenomenon. He suggests that a race is:

...a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. (Du Bois, "Conservation of Races."

Some read *Souls* as an effort to articulate and illuminate the sociohistorical identity of Blacks in America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is offering a "politics of expressive self-realization." (Gooding-Williams, 19)

### **2. Double Consciousness**

One of the most important and lasting concepts Du Bois offers is that of "double consciousness." What is "double consciousness"? He starts Ch. 1 by articulating what he takes to be the question in the background of his interactions with Whites: *How does it feel to be a problem?* This problem is the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in Du Bois's words, the problem of "the color line" (in the Forethought). In paragraph 3, he begins his answer:

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

A. What is he saying in this passage?

- i) What does he mean by “second-sight”? In what sense is it a gift? What is the “other world” that is revealed?
- ii) What does he mean by “double-consciousness”? Is “double consciousness” a form of false consciousness? Or is it just an ability to gain perspective on oneself?

False consciousness in Marx is a state of mind that prevents one from understanding one's true needs, one's interests, what's truly valuable. This is created in individuals by participating in social structures that mask the ways in which they are exploitative or unjust. For example, the worker under capitalism believes he is free because he freely contracts his labor to his employer. But in fact he is unfree because he has no other means to support himself except to accept a job that exploits him, i.e., does not pay him the value of his labor. One who has false consciousness does not experience the exploitation or injustice.

- 3) What does he mean by “two-ness”? What is warring “in one dark body”?

Are they all the same: second-sight, double-consciousness, two-ness?

B. It is helpful to consider paragraph 4-5:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that his Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed or forgotten... This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people, - has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.

C. What is Du Bois's vision of emancipation for the Negro? (Gooding-Williams 2009, 83)

- To attain self-conscious manhood,
- To merge the Negro's double self into a better and truer self in which neither of the older selves is lost,
- To make it possible for a man to be both Negro and an American without being cursed or having opportunity denied him,
- To be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to use his best powers and latent genius.

Note that the possibility of “second sight” remains part of the vision – a possibility of being integrated into a community where mutual recognition and respect may be taken for granted. This power of second-sight is something that the Negro brings to the table, something that he has already achieved, though tainted with prejudice. There is a sense, then, in which the Negro is epistemically in a better position to undertake the task of creating a true America, though the Negro must refuse to see himself through the racist lens that White America offers.

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