

Notes for a Discussion of W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*

Session I

General Topic of Discussion: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, I-III

Outline of Discussion

1. Two-ness and Racially Alienated Consciousness
2. Du Bois and Marx on Self-Estrangement
3. Du Bois and Mill on Progressive Liberty
4. Du Bois and Nietzsche on Ascetic Ideals
5. Du Bois and Tocqueville on Education and the Tyranny of Thought
6. Moving from Criticism to Positive Steps Forward

Flow of Discussion

- We got off to a roaring start with a passage from the end of p. 38: “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.”
- This passage gives us a perspicuous view into Du Bois’ notion of two-ness, that doubling of consciousness that afflicts the American of African descent. Recalling the language and logic of alienation and estrangement, we then wondered whether Du Bois’ twoness can be seen as akin to alienated consciousness as it’s described by Marx. In some ways, Du Bois’ argument feels reminiscent of texts like “Of the Jewish Question.” We wondered, though, whether Du Bois is rooting his analysis on economic ground as clearly as Marx does.
- From there we connected Du Bois to another author from earlier in the quarter—John Stuart Mill. Like Mill, Du Bois makes the case that we don’t really know what people are capable of until we give them a chance to freely pursue their own self-cultivation. What Mill applied to the plight of women, Du Bois applies to the situation of black Americans. This connection also allowed us to pose the question of whether or not the question of race could be properly described as a ‘progressive’ issue in Du Bois.
- We continued our stroll down memory lane by next juxtaposing Du Bois to Nietzsche. ‘Could Du Bois’ critique of Booker T. Washington be interpreted as akin to a critique of the ascetic priest?’ we asked. The criticism of Washington does seem to be that, by preaching certain values, he is in fact keeping the black underclass in a place of subservience, rather than actually doing anything to help improve the situation. Unlike Nietzsche, though, Du Bois actually does care about the plight of that underclass.

- Finally, we made our way all the way back to Tocqueville. Perhaps tyranny of thought and of ideas is what Du Bois is really after, we posited. What he is fighting is not just the political and civil tyranny of Jim Crow, but also the intellectual tyranny plaguing the project of black education and self-improvement. Tocqueville, too, we recalled, emphasized the importance of education to a balanced democratic society.
- After summarizing much of Du Bois' critical comments, we concluding by asking about the positive steps he might take to improve the dire situation of racial inequality in America. We looked to his treatment of the Freedmen's Bureau, which was able to attain meaningful successes that all too often led to new problems and fresh failures. That remained a historical issue, however, and so, as we turned towards the next few essays in Du Bois' work, we resolved to keep our eyes open for more contemporaneous steps forward.

Session II

General Topic of Discussion: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, IV-VIII

Outline of Discussion

7. Housing Inequality as a Window into Debt as the Key to the Race Problem
8. Education as the Solution—but What Kind of Education?
9. The Talented Tenth as Leading to General Equality
10. What the Veil Really Means...

Flow of Discussion

- P. got us started with a quotation from p. 120: “There are four chief causes of these wretched homes: First, long custom born of slavery has assigned such homes to Negroes; white laborers would be offered better accommodations, and might, for that and similar reasons, give better work. Secondly, the Negroes, used to such accommodations, do not as a rule demand better; they do not know what better houses mean. Thirdly, the landlords as a class have not yet come to realize that it is a good business investment to raise the standard of living among labor by slow and judicious methods; that a Negro laborer who demands three rooms and fifty cents a day would give more efficient work and leave a larger profit than a discouraged toiler herding his family in one room and working for thirty cents. Lastly, among such conditions of life there are few incentives to make the laborer become a better farmer. If he is ambitious, he moves to town or tries other labor; as a tenant-farmer his outlook is almost hopeless, and following it as a makeshift, he takes the house that is given him without protest.”
- In this discussion of a specific issue—housing problems—we can find a representation of the larger civil and labor issues that Du Bois aimed to address. Though we can divide up the four causes Du Bois gives us here in any number of ways, it’s clear that they are all related to both black and white agency—the former limited by custom and lowered expectations, the latter by greed and a shortsighted view of economic development. In all cases, debt is the key factor structuring socioeconomic relations in the South.
- This dominance of debt and the resultant lack of material prosperity both affect the Southern black population’s self-experience. They expect less because they are surrounded by less and worse goods than their white counterparts.
- The solution, as usual, would seem to be education. But Du Bois does not just want to limit this to learning a trade. Instead, he’s after mind-broadening cultivation in the liberal arts. The point is not to make a brick-mason or a psychologist, but rather to cultivate a human being. For Du Bois, education cannot be reduced to some economic function. More than economic advancement will be needed in order to transcend the Color Line.
- Education, as Du Bois frames it, should allow us to reflect on our position more critically. It is the “organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life,” he says. (p. 87-88) Education is a way to rend and so see through what Du Bois calls the ‘Veil.’
- Does Du Bois think this kind of education is for everyone? Probably not. Here we thought of his notion of a Talented Tenth, a minority primed to serve as educated leaders

for the rest of their race. But, we asked, who gets to be Talented? Are there real tiers of capability involved here, or is this some kind of Socratic Noble Lie?

- Perhaps, we thought, Du Bois is more Mill than Plato. As long as we don't hinder the development of those who are capable (so the argument would run), the capable will rise to the top. Some kind of meritocracy might produce this new class of leaders. They would in turn be the engine of progress. As Du Bois writes on p. 94: "Progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push." The Talented are not so much separated from their race as its intimate guides.
- The problem with such pure liberty, though, is that 'behind the Veil' it might be hard to determine what you really want to do, are able to do, or should do. Someone may seem like a 'natural' blacksmith, but turn out merely to be a creature of custom and historical conditioning. As Du Bois writes on p. 122: "America is not another word for Opportunity to *all* her sons."
- Here we returned to the question of what Du Bois is trying to do with this 'Veil.' To some degree, it seems to be a kind of ideology of racial difference. It's imposed, but it also becomes actualized in black consciousness itself. By having their consciousness doubled through this 'Veil,' someone like Du Bois might also gain a kind of 'seer' status. Double-sight is a curse, but also a potential blessing, a broadened point of view. The Veil, then, conceals but also discloses, if—and only if—you know you're behind the Veil that separates the races. Not everyone is so self-aware about this situation.
- Perhaps the task of the Talented Tenth, then, is to help others come to awareness about this Veil. A literary education can, according to Du Bois, be a privileged path towards transcending this Veil. By conversing with the great texts of the past and feeding off their intellectual energies, the black leader might be able to seek a truth that goes beyond all Color Lines.

Session III

General Topic of Discussion: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, IX-XIV

Outline of Discussion

11. Color Prejudices & Social Conditions Favoring Retrogression
12. Education & Suffrage: Which Solution Takes Priority?
13. Religion as Conditioning Black Consciousness
14. A Religious Ideal Between Compromise & Radicalism

Flow of Discussion

- T. got us started with a quotation from p. 147: “It is not enough for the Negroes to declare that color-prejudice is the sole cause of their social condition, nor for the white South to reply that their social condition is the main cause of prejudice. They both act as reciprocal cause and effect, and a change in neither alone will bring the desired effect. Both must change, or neither can improve to any great extent. The Negro cannot stand the present reactionary tendencies and unreasoning drawing of the color-line indefinitely without discouragement and retrogression. Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph...”
- This passage seems to get us a bit closer to the solution Du Bois is leading us towards. The problem he’s sketching out is a complex one. We can’t seem to alter color prejudices without first changing social conditions, but we can’t change social conditions until we first alter color prejudices. What’s lacking here is much mutual understanding across color lines. There seems to be even less empathy between the races than there was under slavery. Sympathy-in-hierarchy has given way to a supposed ‘equality’-without-sympathy.
- The tragedy of the age, for Du Bois, is not so much poverty or ignorance as it is our lack of knowledge of our fellow human beings. Like Nietzsche and so many of the other authors we read this year, Du Bois is urging us towards self-knowledge.
- The conditions prevailing in his time, though, tended to prod the black populace toward “discouragement and retrogression.” The reactionary movement after the Civil War, with the failure of Reconstruction and the advent of Jim Crow laws, brought a new kind of physical and psychological violence into play against the supposedly free and equal blacks. A chance for progression became a retrogression into an altered form of inequality.
- To fix this, Du Bois thinks we need both education and sympathy. Sympathy without education leads only to a benign version of social stasis, while education without sympathy leads to a disconnect with those still blinded by the Veil. Du Bois admits that perhaps a highly educated and sympathetic white ruling class might be able to benefit blacks—but he doesn’t think that’s in fact the case. As it stands, America stands under the threat of majoritarian tyranny, just as Tocqueville and Mill had warned us about.
- Suffrage would seem to be the best weapon against the oppressive tendencies of the powerful and wealthy white elites. And yet Du Bois always emphasizes education

alongside suffrage. This raises the troubling question of what kind of intellectual requirements could be legitimately imposed on suffrage. The ballot is the defense of liberty—but must we be educated if we are to defend our liberty? Perhaps it's better to grant the ballot in hopes that this will prevent oppression or even encourage more civic-mindedness and political engagement. And yet, as many of our authors have reminded us, an uneducated electorate might be all the more susceptible to voting in tyranny.

- Moving on to the topic of religion, we discussed Du Bois' claim that the black church, which in some ways preceded the black home, characterizes black consciousness even after emancipation. Here Du Bois at times risks painting a picture of black Americans as 'innately' religious or even superstitious. But what he's really after are the cultural conditions that led to a certain mode of black religious consciousness coming to dominate throughout much of the United States.
- In some respects, this religious mindset is shaped by an ethic of humility and submissiveness. This can lead to a tendency of some black Americans to make unwise compromises in order to curry white favor. On p. 157, Du Bois writes that "the price of culture is a lie." In order to rise to a higher socioeconomic tier, blacks are often forced to hide their true hopes and present themselves in a dishonest way.
- At the other end of the spectrum, however, we find the educated skepticism about religion—perhaps even bordering on atheism—found in the story of black John. He tries to get past religion in order to attain a more modern, secular brand of emancipation for his people. But they refuse to follow him away from their religious traditions and mores.
- Perhaps, we decided, the middle way between a superficially Christian submissiveness and an ineffective radicalism could be found in the account given by Du Bois of Alexander Crummell. Crummell was able to work within his inherited religious tradition, but when he was faced with the oppressive regime of his bishop, he spoke up and refused a losing compromise. His frankness kept him from succumbing to the "Lie" that was too often taken to be price of culture.
- Crummell's life might point to another aspect of black religious practices, one that Du Bois thinks can be put to use. This is the worldly outlook that allows some people to bring religious fervor to bear on the realities of this world, not the one that's supposedly to come. This might be what Du Bois is hinting at when he calls for a "new religious ideal" on p. 158. And perhaps we too can see something like this ideal playing out in the subsequent history of race relations in the United States, in which religious leaders would continue to figure prominently.