

W.E.B. Du Bois

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Revolutionary Across the Color Line

Bill V. Mullen



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Introduction

Revolutionary Lives Matter— Reclaiming W.E.B. Du Bois for Our Time

Revolution is not a test of capacity; it is always a loss and a lowering of ideals. But if it is a true revolution it repays all losses and results in the uplift of the human race.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, 1962

It is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a Communist. Our irrational obsessive anti-communism had led us into too many quagmires to be retrained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

In 1951, W.E.B. Du Bois signed his name to “We Charge Genocide,” a petition to the United Nations drafted by the radical Civil Rights Congress charging the U.S. with the murder of more than 15 million African-Americans. Subtitled “The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of The United States Government Against the Negro People,” the petition was inspired by the U.N.’s Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide after the horrors of Nazi Germany’s holocaust against Jewish people. The petition’s evidence of black genocide included “killings by police . . . killings always on the basis of ‘race.’”¹

“Once the classic method of lynching was the rope,” the petition said. “Now it is the policeman’s bullet. To many an American the police are the government, certainly its most visible representative. We submit that the evidence suggests that the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expression of government policy.” “We Charge Genocide” also linked state violence against African-Americans to

U.S. imperialism: “White supremacy at home makes for colored massacres abroad. Both reveal contempt for human life in a colored skin. Jellied gasoline in Korea and the lynchers’ faggot at home are connected in more ways than that both result in death by fire. The lyncher and the atom bomber are related.”²

Some 60 years later, in 2011, after the American vigilante George Zimmerman murdered the 17-year-old African-American Trayvon Martin, a newly created U.S. activist group named itself “We Charge Genocide” in honor of the 1951 U.N. petition. The Chicago activists documented an epidemic of shootings of African-Americans by police and delivered its evidence to the United Nations Committee Against Torture in Geneva, Switzerland. The group’s name, “We Charge Genocide,” signified that nothing short of a total transformation of the state’s relationship to the people beneath it would suffice. As the Geneva delegation put it, “We see the system as not just broken but fundamentally racist. The problems we see are not things that can be fixed or solved from within that system.”³

In the world today, too often the public legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois is narrowed to polite advocate of “racial uplift,” scholar of African-American history, culture and psychology, or misguided civil rights activist who succumbed in later years to a deformed version of Communism called Stalinism. Rarely remembered is W.E.B. Du Bois the fluid, creative and inspiring revolutionary thinker and activist for global emancipation. In 1919, outraged by the human costs of World War I, but inspired by the Soviet revolution of 1917, Du Bois wrote:

The one new Idea of the World War—the one which may well stand in future years as the one thing that made the slaughter worthwhile—is an Idea which we are like to fail to know because it is today hidden under the maledictions hurled at Bolshevism. It is not the murder, the anarchy, the hate which for years under Czar and Revolution have drenched this weary land (Russia), but it is the vision of great dreams that only those who work shall vote and rule.⁴

In 1926, upon return from his first visit to the Soviet Union, Du Bois declared, “If what I have seen with my eyes and heard with my ears is

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Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik.”⁵ A father of Pan-Africanism, one of the twentieth century’s most sustained—and successful—global crusades for freedom, Du Bois was an ardent supporter of every anti-colonial struggle in his lifetime. He declared August 15, 1947, the day of Indian independence, the “greatest historical date of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”⁶ and hailed China’s Communist revolution as one that could help bring about both Asian and African freedom. Along the way, Du Bois pronounced his support for women’s social and economic equality, nuclear disarmament, universal public health care, and an end to wars everywhere.

Reasons for the erasure from public view of many of these parts of Du Bois’s life and thinking are multiple. He was an early victim of McCarthyism in the U.S., the widespread anti-Communist panic that overtook the United States during the Cold War. In 1951 he was indicted by the U.S. federal government as agent of a foreign state for his work with the Peace Information Center, an anti-nuclear weapons group, and had his passport revoked. During the Cold War, Du Bois’s reputation in the capitalist West was stained by his 1961 decision to join the Communist Party of the United States, despite later appeals for tolerance and sympathy of prominent leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. Du Bois also made errors in political judgment. His support for tyrannical leaders Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung, and his reticence to publically criticize disasters of Stalinism like the famines it produced and its repression of workers in the name of Communism, have caused many scholars to ignore, shun or caricature Du Bois’s lifelong interest in socialism, Marxism, and revolutionary theory and practice.

For these reasons a full accounting of the significance of Du Bois’s life for understanding revolution and revolutionary thought in the twentieth century and in our time has eluded us. It is to correct this oversight that this biography exists. *W.E.B. Du Bois: Revolutionary Across the Color Line* examines Du Bois’s relationship to key questions of the revolutionary left in the twentieth century: reform versus revolution; socialism and Communism as theories and state practices; the relationship of Communism to anti-colonial movements; the fight against global racism; nationalism and Stalinism; the Cold War and its legacy. To assess these questions, this book situates

Du Bois's life in a new framework, placing him among an international cohort of figures on the global left who advanced the cause of what the Communist International (Comintern) called world revolution—the aspiration to build socialist-inspired revolutions across the globe. These include well-known figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, C.L.R. James, Vladimir Lenin, and George Padmore, and lesser knowns, many of them revolutionary women, like Du Bois's second wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, who played an influential role in drawing Du Bois to revolutionary politics. One key assertion of this book, downplayed by other Du Bois biographers, is the centrality of radical internationalism to his life and thought. While Du Bois is famous for helping to instigate major U.S. civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and domestic publications like *The Crisis*, his travels to and support for revolution and anti-colonial movements in Russia, Japan, China, and Africa have been marginalized or subordinated to focus on his development as a critic of U.S. race relations. This has served both to domesticate his political perspective and to bleach it of its most radical elements.

W.E.B. Du Bois: Revolutionary Across the Color Line will propose instead that strengths and weaknesses in Du Bois's development of a theory of revolution and revolutionary practice must pay attention to what scholars now call the transnational aspects of his thinking. It argues that Du Bois's sympathies for Stalinism and his idiosyncratic interpretations of Comintern Marxism, for example, were related to efforts to develop revolutionary paradigms to apply to the lives of African-Americans. For example, Du Bois's majestic study of the Civil War and the end of slavery, *Black Reconstruction*, applied Du Bois's enthusiasm for national liberation struggles and national self-determination onto African-American efforts at self-emancipation during and after formal emancipation. The book also overturned nearly 100 years of racist writing and scholarship on slavery and the Civil War, and offered one of the first interpretations of the role of American capitalism and slavery in the formation of U.S. imperialism and Western colonialism. It remains to this day a classic in the history of Marxist scholarship. Or to take another example, Du Bois's attempts in the 1930s to develop a theory and practice of black

economic cooperatives in the U.S. were inspired by examples from Russia, Israel, and Japan, among other places.

This book will thus examine both Du Bois's creative additions to the theory and practice of revolution in the twentieth century and to Marxist theory. It recognizes Du Bois's analysis of twentieth-century revolutions as both precursors and cautionary tales for our own times. In addition to his groundbreaking work against state violence cited above, Du Bois's writing remain relevant to our assessment of ongoing struggles in the former colonial world (like Egypt and India), and to analysis of the horrors of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism Du Bois's own work magnificently foretold. This book will also more thoroughly explore the later years of Du Bois's official Communist turn both to illuminate the effects of the Cold War on his career and to make explicit Du Bois's wrongheaded, if ambivalent, dedication to Stalinized revolutions in Russia and China especially.

In addition, the book will explore contradictions in Du Bois's political thought that were part of his evolution from reformist and bourgeois democrat to radical Socialist. Du Bois began his life and career under the influence of Pan-Africanists, social democrats and race liberals who tried first to use parliamentary and democratic means to achieve progress on matters of racism and economic reform. He was early on very skeptical of the revolutionary potential of the working class. Thus missing from Du Bois's early life and thought was a dedication to a view of the working class as an agent of its own emancipation. His early elitism also caused him to look for top-down solutions to political problems. This led Du Bois into political misjudgments, like his support for Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 U.S. presidential election, and later to support for Joseph Stalin.

Finally, the book will make central the importance of political revolution, and world revolution, in Du Bois's thought, aspects made ever more critical to our understanding in the wake of triumphant—and failed—recent popular revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, of recent waves of worker uprisings in Spain and Greece, and ongoing liberation movements in Syria and Palestine. Especially towards the end of his life, the period least examined by scholars and biographers, Du Bois developed an emancipatory vision of revolution descended from Marx but cast in a quasi-utopian—or messianic—framework

reminiscent of the writings of the German Marxist Walter Benjamin.⁷ Like Benjamin, Du Bois struggled with the catastrophes of world wars, anti-semitic purges, imperialism and genocide as challenges to Western narratives of historical progress. It was in search of a resolution to what he called in *Black Reconstruction* “counter-revolutions” of history that Du Bois himself landed on the idea of world revolution itself as a plan to support. In the end, Du Bois chose socialism, declaring, “I seek a world where the ideals of communism will triumph—to each according to his need, from each according to his ability.”⁸ In his own biography of Du Bois, David Levering Lewis suggests that Du Bois’s revolutionary aspirations for the twentieth century bear special promise, instruction and weight for our own in the twenty-first. He writes, “while the historically specific state socialist project through which Du Bois hoped his reconstruction of democracy would happen founders on the ruins of the Soviet Union and on Russia’s and China’s free markets and imperialist adventures in the present, the project of transforming the state to better promote economic and racial justice remains a necessity.”⁹

Lewis poses what might be called central contradictions and aspirations guiding this book. Du Bois’s devotion to the idea of world revolution, anti-colonialism and racial and economic democracy was an ambition that came with struggles, and at times mistakes, in assessing how that revolution should best occur. His desire to see the wretched of the earth rise through self-emancipation at times blinded him to moments of political catastrophe like the Cultural Revolution and the errors and horrors of Stalinism. These characteristics put him in common with among the most important revolutionaries of the past century, the century of the global color line. Yet for the revolutionary left, Du Bois is most important because of his unwavering commitment to the elimination of social inequality, the end to racism, and the abolition of the destructiveness of imperialist wars. In this regard the legacy and inspiration of W.E.B. Du Bois, fully understood, may help us out of our current conjuncture of post-colonial inequality, hyper-capitalist exploitation, environmental destruction, global-scale xenophobia and racism, misogyny and “endless war.” This work will seek to take up these questions through offering a new interpretation of the revolutionary life of W.E.B. Du Bois.

PART I

RACIAL UPLIFT AND THE REFORM ERA

Childhood, Youth, and Education in an Age of Reform

“I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation, which began the freeing of American Negro slaves.” So begins Chapter VI, “My Birth and Family,” of W.E.B. Du Bois’s posthumously published *Autobiography*. Typically, Du Bois renders his life as a symbol of both African-American history and the wider struggle for black freedom. This was a conceit well earned from the beginning of Du Bois’s days—February 21, 1868—to their end, August 28, 1963.

Du Bois descended on his maternal side from the “black Burghardts,” Africans descended from Tom Burghardt, born in West Africa around 1730, and stolen by Dutch slave traders for transport to America. Tom grew up in the service of the white Burghardt family in the Hudson Valley area of New York state in the northeastern United States. Enlisted service in the American revolutionary army freed Tom Burghardt from slavery before his death around 1787 (It was not until 1817 that New York, a northern state, formally emancipated its slaves). The Burghardts who followed Tom worked as farmers, barbers, waiters, cooks, housemaids, and laborers. Du Bois’s mother, Mary Silvina, was born in 1831. “She gave one the impression of infinite patience, but a curious detachment was concealed in her softness” Du Bois recalled of her in *Darkwater*.² Yet over time she became, recalls Du Bois, a “silent, repressed woman, working at household duties at home, helping now and then in the neighbors’ homes.”³

When Mary was 35, Alfred Du Bois came to her small town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. First settled by American colonists, Great Barrington was known for being a leisure retreat

for the wealthy. Alfred's grandfather was Dr. James Du Bois, a white American physician who while in the Bahamas either took as his slave a concubine or married a free Negro woman. Alexander Du Bois, Alfred's father, lived in Haiti from 1821 to 1830 before settling in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1867, when Alfred arrived in Great Barrington, he was disliked by the black Burghardts. "He had apparently no property and no job" wrote Du Bois, "and they had never heard of the Du Bois family in New York." Nevertheless Mary and Alfred took up a "runaway marriage"⁴ and within a year, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born.

By the time Mary and Alfred married, the area around Great Barrington was transitioning from an agricultural to an industrial and domestic labor economy. Du Bois was born in a home owned by an ex-slave who had like many African-Americans come north after emancipation as part of that transition. Du Bois's racially mixed ancestry made him from birth a curiosity in a country obsessed since the time of slavery with racial identity. For example, slaves were defined as African-Americans with "one drop" of black blood. Thus, "I was of great interest to the whole town" Du Bois wrote. "The whites waited to see 'when my hair was going to curl.'"⁵ Despite the fact that Great Barrington's population was less than 5 percent black (census records indicate there were probably about 20 black families in Great Barrington) it was the socio-economic, not racial, conditions of his early upbringing that first stood out to the young Du Bois. "I had, as a child, almost no experience of segregation or color discrimination."⁶ Yet Du Bois noted that he and his mother lived "near the edge of poverty"⁷ a condition which Du Bois wrote put him in line with many Great Barrington villagers who were poor or lower middle class. Many of these poor were Irish and Eastern European laborers who, like African-Americans, were among the poorest of the Great Barrington community. Du Bois in fact admitted to a certain snobbery in his own attitudes towards some poor immigrants. "I did not then associate poverty or ignorance with color, but rather with lack of opportunity; or more often with lack of thrift."⁸ This early moralistic philosophy, characteristic of what Max Weber called the "Protestant ethic," was one which would be challenged by events to come.