

W.E.B. Du Bois as theorist of colonies and empire

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W. E. B. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, a town of 5,000 people in western Massachusetts on February 23, 1868, the year in which the 15th Amendment to the Constitution enfranchised the freed male slaves. His paternal great-grandfather was a white and descended from a French Huguenot farmer whose sons came to America “to escape religious persecution.” WEB Du Bois’ grandfather, Alexander, was the son of a plantation proprietor and slave owner in the Bahamas, who brought his sons to America where he “planned to give them the education of gentlemen,” since they were “white enough in appearance to give no inkling of their African ancestry.” But Alexander was cut off and “classed as a Negro,” married into “the colored group” and went to Haiti, where WEB Du Bois’ father Alfred was born. Du Bois’ mother’s family was descended from Dutch settlers and an African slave. The color line in Great Barrington, according to Du Bois, was “manifest and yet not absolutely drawn.” There were fewer than 50 “colored folk” in town, most of whom “had some white blood from unions several generations past.” The principal of Du Bois’ school helped him prepare for college and in 1884 he was the only African-American student to graduate from his high school. He received a scholarship from a Reverend and former Federal Indian Agent to attend Fisk University, a black school, in 1885, where, he wrote, he “was thrilled to be for the first time among so many people of my own color, or rather of such various and extraordinary colors.” Du Bois later wrote that he “merely regarded” his three years at Fisk as “a temporary change of plan,” since his real goal had been to attend Harvard. In 1888 he went to Harvard as a junior (i.e., a second year student), since Harvard had refused to recognize the equivalency of his Bachelor’s degree from Fisk. Du Bois earned a second BA degree *cum laude* from Harvard College in 1890, and went on to become the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895. At Harvard his education “centered in history and then gradually in economics and social problems”; in 1940, he wrote, this “course of study would have been called sociology.”¹ In the fall of 1892 Du Bois went to Germany to study at Berlin University for two years, where he took seminars with economists Gustav Schmoller and Richard Wagner and heard lectures by historian Heinrich von Treitschke and Max Weber and became fluent in German.²

Du Bois taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1894-1895 and at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896-1897, during which time he researched his famous study of *The*

¹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986 [1940]), pp. 630-631, 560, 564, 569-570, 582.

² Kenneth D. Barkin, « ‘Berlin Days,’ 1892-1894: W. E. B. Du Bois and German Political Economy », *boundary two* 27:3 (2000), pp. 79-101; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, pp. 586-589. Max Weber later met Du Bois during a visit to the United States, and described him during the famous race debate at the first German sociological society congress in 1910 as « the most important sociological scholar in the American south states tout court, to whom no white man can compare, is a Negro—Burckhardt Du Bois ». *Verhandlungen des ersten deutschen Soziologentages* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1911), p. 164

Philadelphia Negro.³ Du Bois' name was not mentioned in the University of Pennsylvania catalogue, however, and he "had no contact with students, and very little contact with faculty, including the sociology department."⁴ He then established the department of sociology at the historically black Atlanta University, where he taught from 1897 to 1910 and again from 1933 to 1943. Du Bois helped found the "Niagara Movement" in 1906, a civil rights organization, and in 1909 he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1910 he left his teaching post to work full time as publications director at the NAACP. For 25 years he was Editor-in-Chief of the NAACP publication *The Crisis*. Du Bois was investigated by the FBI as a possible socialist and later as a possible Communist, and he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1950 on the American Labor Party ticket in New York. In 1959, Du Bois received the Lenin Peace Prize, and in 1961, at the age of 93, he joined the American Communist Party. He was invited to Ghana in 1961 by President Kwame Nkrumah to direct the *Encyclopedia Africana*. He and his wife became citizens of Ghana in 1963, when he was refused a new U.S. passport. Du Bois' health declined and he died in Accra, Ghana on August 27, 1963, at the age of ninety-five.

In one of his semi-autobiographical texts Du Bois observed that his first years as a professor were "above all ... the era of empire," and that when he had graduated from Fisk his greatest hero was Bismarck and that he was "blithely European and imperialist in outlook." But at that time, he added, he did not yet have a "clear conception or grasp of the meaning of that industrial imperialism which was beginning to grip the world."⁵ It was under the influence of his teachers and experiences in Berlin, Du Bois later wrote, that he "began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the people of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one."⁶

In a series of articles and books published over the course of his entire career Du Bois analyzed colonial imperialism and connected it to the oppression of blacks in the United States. His earliest published comments described the Spanish American war of 1898 as having "gravely increased some of our difficulties in dealing with the Negro problems" due to a "growing indifference to human suffering, a practical surrender of the doctrine of equality, of citizenship, and a new impetus to the cold commercial aspect of racial intercourse."⁷ In his 1915 article "The African Roots of War," he began to develop an economic explanation of the system he called "industrial imperialism" as a system of extreme exploitation of colored labor that yielded "unusual returns," i.e., profits at a higher rate than could be squeezed from white labor. Imperialism, he argued, *underdeveloped* its colonies, turning them into the "slums of the world" and destroying indigenous culture.⁸ This argument was taken up by theories of dependency and underdevelopment in the 1960s. Du Bois argued in his 1915 Atlantic article—a year before Lenin wrote his famous pamphlet on imperialism in Zürich—that white workers were being

³ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania, 1899).

⁴ Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, « Introduction », in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, sous la direction de Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 10.

⁵ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 577, 591.

⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 588.

⁷ Du Bois, « The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problems », in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology* (op. cit.), p. 65.

⁸ *Color and Democracy*, p. 17; « Africa, Colonialism, and Zionism », in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, sous la direction de Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1919]), p. 650.

allowed to share in the wealth generated by the superexploitation of “chinks and niggers” in order to align their interests with the middle classes and bourgeoisie.”

Du Bois traced the spread of the “doctrine of the natural inferiority of most men to the few” to this imperialist system, and argued that imperialism was further reinforced by this racism. He linked civil rights struggles in the U.S. to anticolonial impulses in Africa. In 1940 he wrote that

The history of our day may be epitomized in one word—Empire; the domination of white Europe over black Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income and ideas. The echo of this industrial imperialism in America was the expulsion of black men from American democracy, their subjection to caste control and wage slavery. This ideology was triumphant in 1910.⁹

Du Bois was aware of the long history of Euro-American racism predating the late 19th century, of course, but he believed that “liberal thought and violent revolution in eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shook the foundations of social hierarchy in Europe based on unchangeable class distinctions” and that in the “nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Color Line was drawn as at least a partial substitute for this stratification.”¹⁰ He singled out as key events in this transformation the end of post-Civil War reconstruction, the Berlin Congress, the scramble for Africa, and the rise of Japan as a “yellow” threat to Euroamerican supremacy.¹¹ Within the overseas colonies, he argued, “white prestige must be maintained at any cost.”¹² Another aspect of the modern paradigm of race-thinking was that the social sciences themselves “were deliberately used as instruments to prove the inferiority of the majority of the people of the world, who were being used as slaves for the comfort and culture of the masters.”¹³

Du Bois insisted that colonial imperialism was a primary determinant of war and violence, and in 1945 he published a five-page list of wars between 1792 and 1939 that he said stemmed from inter-imperialist rivalry and suppression of colonial revolts.

The cause of war is preparation for war; and of all that Europe has done in a century there is nothing that has equaled in energy, thought, and time her preparation for wholesale murder. The only adequate cause of this preparation was conquest and conquest, not in Europe, but primarily among the darker peoples of Asia and Africa.¹⁴

Moreover, he argued, the colonial state was itself “totalitarian,” anticipating Hannah Arendt’s (1950) thesis about the prefigurative role of European overseas colonialism for continental fascism.¹⁵

In 1971 the American Sociological Association (ASA) established the DuBois-Johnson-Frazier Award, which has traditionally been given to an African-American sociologist. In 2006, the ASA

⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn, in Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986 [1940]), pp. 623-624.

¹⁰ Du Bois, « The Realities in Africa. European Profit or Negro Development? », *Foreign Affairs* 21:1/4 (1942-1943), p. 725.

¹¹ Du Bois, *Darkwater; Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004 [1920]), p. 30.

¹² *Color and Democracy*, p. 22.

¹³ Du Bois, « Prospect of a World Without Race Conflict », *American Journal of Sociology* 49:5 (1944), p. 455.

¹⁴ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 33. Also *Dusk of Dawn*, pp. 591, 724; *Color and Democracy*, pp. 107-109; *The World and Africa*, p. 6; and « The Problem of the Twentieth Century is the Problem of the Color Line », in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology* (op. cit.), p. 289.

¹⁵ *Color and Democracy*, p. 34. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958 [1950] [GIVE FRENCH VERSION])

voted to rename its main career award for outstanding contributions and commitment to the profession of sociology the “W.E.B. DuBois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award.” This vote resulted from a petition written by two prominent sociologists who argued “If the award is named after someone whose visibility extends well beyond the profession, it allows the profession to borrow this visibility, and to project our winners to an audience well beyond the profession. For sociology, we believe that this is particularly important, since we aspire as a profession to reach an audience beyond the confines of our discipline with insights that can hopefully make a difference in social life.” They continued that “because of his singular role as public intellectual, his name would confer a more appropriate luster to the award than other, also worthy, choices.”¹⁶ Du Bois’ status has thus changed from disregard and marginalization before the 1960s, to a race-targeted reception in the 1970s, to his canonization as a symbol of American sociology in general in the present.

¹⁶ <http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/nov06/indexthree.html>