

Du Bois, W. E. B.



William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was a visionary, strategic organizer, and prolific writer who tirelessly advocated, and often agitated, for racial, economic, and gender equality as well as peace with social justice. Trained as a historian, Du Bois received a doctorate from Harvard University, with his thesis "The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870" published in 1896. It took Du Bois, who was born on February 23, 1868, and grew up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, some years and travel to arrive at Harvard. On Du Bois's graduation from high school, the clergy who financed his education insisted that he attend Fisk University in the South. This—following the talented-tenth mandate that black intellectual elites be educated in proximity to the black masses which they were to lead—proved to be the catalyst for Du Bois's life of struggle as the preeminent thinker and leader for racial justice of the twentieth century. Thrown into an all-black context, encircled by Jim Crow, Du Bois was baptized into the experience of "blackness": its cultural singularity, conditions of subjugation, and practices and possibilities of resistance.

Du Bois's writings include *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899); *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which discusses the struggle between black and American identities and popularizes the term *talented tenth*; *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1917); *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935); *Dusk of Dawn* (1940); *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (1945); *The World and Africa* (1947); and *In Battle for Peace* (1952). These works in addition to numerous essays, poetry, and novels (*The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 1911, and *Dark Princess*, 1928) all advocated black emancipation, as well as gender and economic rights, and delineated the cultural, economic, social, and political realities of people of African ancestry. As editor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) publication *Crisis*, from 1910 to 1934, Du Bois conveyed his political thoughts to thousands of Americans (the journal had a women's page and briefly published a children's issue). Prior to editing *Crisis*, Du Bois served as an educator, one reluctant to conform to the dictates of bourgeois academia while advocating leadership from the talented tenth. He taught at Wilberforce University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University, where he edited the latter's journal *Phylon* and the Atlanta University Publication Series, which was devoted to black life and culture. As an activist, Du Bois had an impact on a number of important antiracist organizations. In 1905 he helped to organize the Niagara Movement to challenge the accommodationist Booker T. Washington; in 1909 and 1910, responding to antiblack race riots, he was instrumental in forming the NAACP, along with such other notable leaders as the antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Du Bois was one of the chief architects of the first Pan-African Conference in 1900, and he helped shape the Pan-African congresses of later decades, which focused on the struggles of people of African descent in America, Africa, and the Caribbean against colonialism and racism. He had a profound impact on leaders such as George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah. Understanding the importance of culture, he was a strong supporter of black theater and the arts, influencing actors, playwrights, and novelists such as Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Paul Robeson, Henry Miller, and Truman Capote.

Linking racial liberation with critiques of capitalism and imperialism, Du Bois briefly joined the Socialist Party and decades later, again briefly, the Communist Party of the United States. In 1950 he became a member of the Peace Information Center, which had successfully urged two-and-a-half million Americans to sign the Stockholm Appeal, calling for a nuclear weapons ban. That year Du Bois also ran for the U.S. Senate in New

York as a candidate of the American Labor Party, receiving over two hundred thousand votes. This political recognition as a radical thinker and leader would be overshadowed by the ensuing government repression and harassment. With the emergence of the cold war and (later) McCarthyism, the Truman administration's Department of Justice declared the Peace Information Center an agent of a foreign power (the Soviet Union); and although the group disbanded in October 1950, Du Bois and others associated with the center were indicted as unregistered foreign agents early the following year. Condemned by a hostile and anticommunist press before his trial, Du Bois was acquitted in November 1951. Yet his political and literary career among liberals was ruined. Deserted by most middle-class blacks, including the NAACP, his moral and material support largely came from the black working class (which led him to reflect in a memoir that this ordeal had ultimately convinced him of the political passivity and ineffectualness of the talented-tenth elite in making fundamental and radical change).

The State Department refused to permit Du Bois to have a passport in 1952. The Supreme Court overruled this decision six years later; but when the same Court upheld the constitutionality of the McCarran Act in 1961, an action that appeared likely to allow the state to again deny him a legal right to travel, Du Bois left for Ghana. There, at the age of ninety-five, Du Bois died on August 17, 1963. The passing of this radical prophet, a visionary for peace and justice, was reported at the historic March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr., proffered his own dream.

Joy James

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