

DuBois the pan-Africanist and the development of African nationalism

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Abstract

While W.E.B. DuBois's importance as a political activist and writer is well-documented, a 'DuBoisian' political theory has proved illusory. I argue that the key to change and continuity in DuBois's work is his pan-Africanism, which he used to develop a broad theory of anti-colonial nationalism. This reading of his legacy emphasizes DuBois's singular role in shaping anti-colonial discourse in the postwar era, especially in Africa, as well as in theorizing African nationalism and the African diaspora. It also allows us to understand the contradiction of the early, liberal DuBois's views on race and his later preoccupation with Communism. I suggest that across both positions, DuBois's actual political arguments remained over-determined by his positionality within the colonial world, producing a set of anti-colonial arguments that while rooted in the economic exploitation of the colonies, appeal to liberal universalizing standards of progress and modernity.

Keywords: DuBois, W.E.B.; pan-Africanism; African American; African Nationalism; colonialism; race.

As an advocate for people of colour around the world, few claim greater importance than W.E.B. DuBois. His written record demonstrates a body of scholarship and political thought that warrants ranking him among the most important political philosophers in American history. Surprisingly, political theory has been slow to show an appreciation for DuBois. In 1985, Adolph Reed, Jr. noted:

W.E.B. Du Bois is by all accounts a central figure in Afro-American political activity, a major contributor to a half-century's debate over the condition of and proper goals and strategies for the black population. Yet little scholarly work has concentrated on the specifically political component of his thinking. Moreover, such

attention as has been given to DuBois's political ideas either is ancillary to some other intellectual purpose — for example, general biography — or is simply hagiographical (Reed 1985, p. 431).

Recent trends have borne this out. Scholarly biographies (Levering Lewis 1994, 2000) continue to be written, and are important contributions to those who would understand DuBois's legacy. However, systematic studies of his political thought in theoretical context are rare. The evolution of his positions on major issues of over time contributes to the sense that his thought often lacks the consistency of a great body of work, making any kind of classification of 'DuBoisian' thought both controversial and subject to periodization (i.e. the 'early' liberal DuBois vs. the 'late' Marxist DuBois). And while his classic *The Souls of Black Folk* remains the lynchpin of much thinking on African American political thought, DuBois's own work on the 'problem of race' (or on other issues) for the last half century of his life cannot be understood by reference to *Souls* and its familiar concepts alone, despite efforts to do so (Gomez 2004). DuBois's corpus is neither restricted to solely the examination of race nor is it the sole provenance of African-American political thought. The restriction of DuBois scholarship to the study of his views on race has tended to obscure his 'normative and conceptual logic,' (Reed 1985, p. 432) which retained great consistence across time and social milieu, even as publicly, DuBois became increasingly associated with Marxism and Communism.

This article uses an important, but biographically underappreciated portion of his work: his pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism, for an analysis of DuBois's political thought sympathetic to Reed's purpose of formulating a fuller view of DuBois the political theorist. DuBois's post-*Souls* political activities and writing can be understood as a coherent political theory by appealing to the literature on anti-colonial nationalism, and positioning him as not only an African-American concerned with the worldwide problem of race, but as a Western-trained intellectual attempting to construct a discourse of anti-colonial nationalism from within the same classically liberal tradition that had generated colonial ideology in the first place. While this project manifested itself in DuBois's own struggle to understand his racial identity, and race more generally, in the global context,¹ it also showed that DuBois was genuinely concerned with forming a persuasive and complete argument against colonial occupation in Asia and Africa. That this argument took the form that it, and that this form resembles that of other anti-colonial nationalisms from similarly-placed intellectuals, provides a starting point for understanding the development of DuBois's thought over time. Specifically, it draws attention to DuBois's seeming shift from liberalism to Marxism by suggesting

that across both positions, DuBois's actual political arguments remained over-determined by his positionality within the colonial world.

This is not a common approach to DuBois. Certainly, his concern with pan-Africanism created a powerful link between DuBois and Africa for his American audience (Isaacs 1971, p. 211), and his influence on the first generation of political leadership in the Africa of the 1960s has been amply demonstrated (Walden 1974, p. 260). Scholars in History and African-American Studies have frequently addressed DuBois's role in pan-Africanism; often that consideration has focused on his opposition to Marcus Garvey or his role in engineering the Pan-African Conferences of the 1910s and 20s. However, most commentators on African American political thought give short shrift to DuBois's orientation towards Africa and his pan-Africanism as it relates to his entire corpus of thought.² Any hope of reading DuBois as political theory needs to advance our understanding of his thought beyond his theories of race and race consciousness and incorporate the challenging, and sometimes contradictory approaches to the worldwide problem of colonialism he forwarded in his later, explicitly pan-African writing. Specifically, understanding DuBois as an anti-colonial nationalist trained in the liberal tradition helps us to understand the particular rhetorical strategies he would employ in arguing for the end (or improvement) of colonialism, and the place of his earlier thinking on race within these strategies.

Anti-colonial nationalism: An appropriate categorization?

The standard view of DuBois's political ideology is that it evolved from an early egalitarian liberalism to Communism as he became disillusioned with White America's ability to be transformed in their attitudes through persuasion and evidence (Dawson 2001, pp. 15–9; 32). The black nationalist aspects of DuBois's thought are often underplayed, either by viewing them as a form of cultural nationalism, rather than a political ideology (Essien-Udom 1962, pp. 27–8), or by trying to craft a 'consistency' in DuBois's writings over time. This is commonly done by emphasizing his more familiar ideas on race, such as 'double-consciousness,' and focusing on DuBois's concern with Africa and his role in imagining the African 'diaspora' as part of an effort to resolve the 'twoness' of African-American racial identity by reclaiming African history for African-Americans (Gomez 2004, p. 177). This kind of argument seems to imply, or in some cases, explicitly argued (Mostern 1996), that DuBois's entire engagement with Africa was part of an effort to resolve DuBois's own autobiographical issues with his racial identity—that DuBois's engagement

with Africa is essentially about race as experienced by African-Americans. Rather, I hope to show that not only was DuBois's pan-Africanism equally concerned with the concrete needs of combating the racial (and economic) inequalities of colonialism, but that his thinking on these questions was driven not only by his racial experiences as an African-American, but primarily by his very engagement with the 'colonial question.'

The avoidance of DuBois's nationalism seems most pronounced when scholars are confronted with his later career, which was, by any measure, dominated by his work on pan-Africanism. Holt (1990, p. 310), for example, concludes that his extension of a racial conflict model to the colonial world, where he used it to advance arguments for colonial self-determination, was 'not a retreat to nationalism,' but an application of the race problematic internationally. I think here Holt misunderstands the difference between the 'black nationalism' that he contrasts with its alternative, 'racial integration' (in the U.S.), and an anti-colonial nationalism, rooted in two themes: an economic critique of how colonialism drove the belief in race difference and the rise of racist ideologies, and the idea that there existed a black (African) nation (or nations) deserving of self-rule. In *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), DuBois had already begun to reformulate the relation between race and colonial oppression into a nationalist framework that emphasized race as a path to engagement in the issue of global oppression, including the denial of democracy and self-rule:

... The actual ties of heritage between these individuals of this group vary with the ancestors they have in common with many others: Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly American Indians. But the physical bond is least and the badge of color is relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa (DuBois 1940, p. 117).

There have been some strides towards this view. Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992), to cite the most prominent example, treats specifically nationalist aspects of DuBois's thought within both the context of his own intellectual heritage as well as in terms of its effects on the postcolonial African leadership. But as will be discussed later, Appiah's characterization of DuBois's nationalism starts and ends with his idea of race—his efforts at imagining pan-Africanism limited by his definition of race. Rather, I suggest that the influence ran the other way — DuBois's thinking on

race, as well as on Marxism and other key issues, was influenced by the need to make persuasive arguments about the ills of colonialism.

To justify such a project, I must show that DuBois's ideology of pan-Africanism was in fact, both nationalist and anti-colonial. First, we can establish pan-Africanism's 'nationalism' in two brief steps. One of the most successful definitions of nationalism has been Benedict Anderson's (1983, p. 11), which sees nations as 'imagined communities,' which are 'limited,' 'sovereign,' and rooted in a deep sense of 'community.' DuBois's pan-Africanism, rooted in shared racial, historical, and economic bonds (limited), committed to gaining economic and political self-rule for the colonized (sovereignty), and symbolized in a worldwide union of people of colour (community), meets this criterion.³ Of course, other definitions—Hobsbawm's (1990, pp. 9–10), for example, limits 'nationalism,' to those with the particular goal of establishing a state—problematize this argument. However, another reason to accept pan-Africanism as a nationalist movement is, quite simply, because while many diasporan Africans may have advocated pan-Africanism primarily as a cultural movement, and some scholars have found its historical importance in its transnational orientation rather than its independence agenda (Cooper 2005), the political pan-Africanism DuBois participated was understood as nationalist by many of his contemporaries.

The original pan-African movement, to which DuBois attached himself around 1900, was founded as an effort to express 'the desires of Negroes everywhere to protest openly and to show great concern about the undemocratic treatment of the natives . . . by British imperial rule in Sub-Saharan Africa' (Contee 1969a, p. 49). Thomas Hodgkin (1956, pp. 21–3), a primary early scholar of African nationalism, counted 'Pan-Africa' among his categories of nationalism. Others have recognized that DuBois was personally responsible for contributing the 'terminology of self-determination and anti-imperialism' to the early African nationalist movements (Contee 1969b, p. 79). There is reason to proceed with the assumption that DuBois's pan-Africanism was, for the purposes of his contemporaries, a nationalist movement.

Viewing DuBois's thought as anti-colonial is not original either, although it has never served as an interpretive framework through which to see his later thought. Edward Said suggests the possibility in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). He argued that like other resistance cultures, DuBois's emphasis on race oppression is part of the organic anti-colonial project, which 'seems incoherent unless one recognizes that sense of beleaguered imprisonment infused with a passion for community that grounds anti-imperial resistance in cultural effort' (Said 1993, p. 214).

However, as Appiah noted, the idea of a 'national' identity founded on sociological race is itself problematic.⁴ Here we may turn to Partha

Chatterjee, whose thought will help provide a framework for the rest of this discussion. Chatterjee, like Said, focuses on the profound difficulties in constructing anti-colonial, nationalist discourse from the colony.⁵ In the first chapter of *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986), entitled 'Nationalism as a Problem in the History of Political Ideas,' Chatterjee takes up the question of anti-colonial nationalism in the political science literature. There, he finds two operating discourses. The conservative view sees nationalism in the third world as a negative force, part of Kedourie's 'secular millenarianism.' The liberal position, influential among the first generation of Africanist political scientists, portrayed nationalism as part of modernization, the 'regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness' (Chatterjee 1986, pp. 1–10). The importance of nationalism for the modernization theorists who dominated Africanist political science in the 1950s and 1960s was as an 'organizational weapon by which the *moderns* ousted the *traditionals*, as well as the colonial power' (Lonsdale 1981, p. 148—emphasis added).⁶

Having identified this debate, Chatterjee deconstructs it. The 'liberal' view of nationalism perceives the growth of 'nationhood' in the postcolonial world as, at worst, the simple outcome of necessities driven by macro-forces (i.e. Gellner 1983), and at best, the 'fusion of three ideals: collective self-determination of the people, the expression of the national character and individuality, and finally the division of the world into unique nations each contributing its special genius to the common fund of humanity' (Smith 1971, p. 23, cited in Chatterjee 1986, p. 8). Both of these arguments, no matter how charitable to anti-colonial nationalist ideologies and actors, are situated within a 'discourse of power' in which a scientific-rational conception of knowledge, with all its concurrent assumptions about progress and modernity, dominates. Any 'nationalism' which emerges out of the Western intellectual tradition, as DuBois's pan-Africanism certainly does,⁷ and accepts the universality of modernity and rationality faces an inherent contradiction. As Chatterjee explains, '[n]ationalist thought, in agreeing to become modern, accepts the claim to universality of this 'modern' framework of knowledge. Yet it also asserts the autonomous identity of a national culture' (p. 11).

Nationalism of an anti-colonial variety, while it 'rejects' foreign domination and asserts the cultural worth of its own 'nation,' it also implicitly accepts its own inferiority and need to modernize its society. Thus, the claims made by anti-colonial nationalists often contain tension between those nationalist claims which assert the value of the indigenous culture in the face of the colonizer, and those which speak of 'modernizing' and 'civilizing' these very same cultures, often through patently Western institutions like educational systems and representative democracy. Again, Chatterjee states:

Nationalist . . . [movements] were addressed both to ‘the people’ who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned. To both, nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernize’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based (p. 30).

Compare this to DuBois’s own words, his thoughts on colonialism and his demands for African freedom, in the resolution of the Fourth Pan-African Congress in 1927:

IN GENERAL

Negroes everywhere need:

1. A voice in their own government.
2. Native rights to the land and its natural resources.
3. Modern education for all children
4. The development of Africa for the Africans and not merely for the profit of Europeans.
5. The re-organization of commerce and industry so as to make the main object of capital and labor the welfare of the many rather than the enriching of the few.
6. The treatment of civilized men as civilized despite differences of birth, race, and color (DuBois 1927, p. 672).

Or, when criticizing the Dunbarton Oaks accords:

This is not for a moment to deny the techniques and the elementary schools Belgium has given the black Congo; or the fact that The Netherlands has perhaps the most liberal colonial program of any modern empire; or that Great Britain gave the Africans freedom and education after slave trade and slavery. But it is equally true that the advance of colonial peoples has been hesitant and slow, and retarded unnecessarily because of the denial of democratic method to the natives, and because their treatment and government have had, and still have, objects and methods incompatible with their *best interests and highest progress* (DuBois 1945, p. 11—emphasis added).

The fundamental contradiction of anti-colonial nationalism is, as Chatterjee makes clear, the difficulty of reasoning ‘within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate’ (Chatterjee 1986, p. 38). DuBois, just as the Indian nationalists studied by Chatterjee, faced an intractable dilemma in his assertion of pan-Africanism. While he wanted to establish the intellectual basis for independent black nations, he was nonetheless led by his intellectual heritage to accept the ‘objective’ differentiation of the ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ people of the world. While he actively refuted, called into question, and disputed the colonial ideology, he also accepted that in order to merit their equal treatment, colonial subjects needed to meet Western standards of modernity—a fact not reduced by his increasing disillusionment with race relations in the U.S. or by his intellectual occupation with Communism, both of which should be seen in terms of his turning away from an identity as an African American, and towards a view of race that was worldwide in scope.

In this context, the seeming tension and contradiction that characterizes much of DuBois’s later thought, especially the conflict between his emerging ‘Marxism’ and his liberalism, makes far more sense. It was DuBois’s commitment to an anti-colonial nationalism (pan-Africanism) which produced much of the seemingly contradictory thought of his later work. Rather than accepting a single dimensional view of DuBois on a Liberal/Marxist continuum, evaluating him within an anti-colonial nationalist project provides a strong theoretical tool for unpacking his political thought.

I have identified two areas of DuBois’s post-1900 thought which, in my opinion, most benefit from this kind of analysis. They are:

1. DuBois’s continued grounding in a broadly liberal tradition, despite the increasing veracity of his economic critique of Western, colonial capitalism;

and

2. His extended efforts to disseminate information on Africa’s contributions to world society and to establish Africa’s pre-colonial historicity, which often, despite his move towards class-based critiques, still retains a strong hint of *négritude*, or what Isaacs (1971) and Appiah (1992) both called ‘romantic racialism.’

In the conclusion, I shall discuss the opportunities that adopting such a research strategy to understanding DuBois’s political thought might open. In particular, I will return to the contradictions of anti-colonial nationalism, and provide some suggestions for fleshing out this idea in

DuBois's own thought in a more systematic way than the length of this article permits.

Pan-Africanism and DuBois's liberalism

As Clarence Contee noted in his vastly under-appreciated 1969 dissertation on DuBois's relationship to African Nationalism, DuBois's pan-Africanist activities fit squarely within the realm of classical liberal thought (Contee 1969b, p. 19). While this classification corresponds to the mainstream academic treatment of DuBois (Dawson 2001, pp. 15–6), such a categorization does little to explain how DuBois came to retain key parts of his liberal thought even as he departed further and further from the early African-American political thought that had influenced him and began to substantively engage European philosophy, most notably Hegel, a point to which we shall return.

DuBois was a major innovator, among the first to refigure his opinions on Africa and capitalism away from the dominant paradigms of his predecessors and towards a liberal reading of race in politics. First, at a time when most African-Americans had as dim a view of Africa as their white counterparts, (Dawson 2001, p. 7), DuBois not only rejected emigrationism, but specifically advocated self-rule, not domination by an African-American 'civilizing elite,' for Africa (Walden 1974, p. 260). Most of early black nationalism in the U.S. was no less objectifying of Africa than the discourse of the white community, sharing 'an essentially negative sense of traditional culture in Africa as archaic, unprincipled, ignorant [and] defined by the absence of all the traits of civilization as 'savage' (Appiah 1992, p. 21). Garvey, whose African colonization project devoted little attention to actual Africans, stands in this intellectual heritage (DuBois 1923, p. 339). Secondly, in the face of the heritage of both Booker T. Washington and the 'Radical Egalitarian' school, he became one of the first and most prominent African Americans to forward a radical critique of capitalism as an instrument of oppression in the U.S. and abroad (Dawson 2001, pp. 15–7).

The claim that DuBois sustained a liberal thought framework throughout his life is a contentious one. Certainly, DuBois felt he had abandoned it; by the 1930s, he was disillusioned by the fact that 'twentieth-century liberalism had stood by while corporate wealth throttled democratic government and then collapsed under its own profligacy' (Levering Lewis 2000, p. 441). As we shall discuss later, he was clearly in the process of making a move, if not to orthodox Marxism, then at least to a more economically-oriented critique of world racism and colonialism. However, as Holt (1990, p. 310) insists, DuBois's thought maintained 'a clear distinction between the analysis

of the problem, which was Marxist, and his solution, which was nationalist', and wrought with a tension between his assertion of African equality and his liberal, teleological ideas of progressive knowledge.

DuBois's views on race and their subsequent incorporation into a doctrine of pan-Africanism rests on the shoulders of two great teleologies. While DuBois's early work on race in the U.S. also displayed evidence of teleological thinking, it represented a distinctly Hegelian influence. DuBois's view in *The Souls of Black Folk* that 'there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes' (DuBois 1903, p. 370) reflects the Hegelian teleology. Much of the reason that DuBois struggled to articulate a fully sociological view of race was because of his belief that each race had a unique 'spirit,' or 'message to humanity' (Appiah 1992, p. 30). In terms of realizing the ideals of the Founders, for DuBois the African American *geist* had progressed further towards truth and self-consciousness than that of white America (Siemerling 2001, p. 327).

The second teleology that dominated DuBois's thinking was liberal, based in an ideology of modernization. While we have him, as James Monroe (1996, p. 428) notes, railing against classic American liberalism for its exclusion of African-Americans from the 'liberal consensus,' I think that for DuBois, as for Alexander Crummell, the great early pan-Africanist, DuBois's intellectual forefather, and a 'romantic racialist,' (Appiah 1992, pp. 3–27), this criticism of the exclusion of blacks from the American ideal was not a rejection of that ideal (a fact already suggested by his Hegelian tendencies). Rather, (and the second section of this essay, on DuBois's project of restoring African historicity will support this claim), pan-Africanism emphasized the glories of African history and the debt owed to it by the West, and in doing so sought to allow Africa to 're-enter' liberal history, and reap the same benefits of progress to which only white Europeans had been privy.

As such, an examination of DuBois's writings from his later period suggests that, despite the growing importance of the economic, instrumentalist critique of race in his thought (the key, of course, being in 1961, when, two years before his death, he joined the Communist Party), he maintained a fundamental adherence to the liberal ideas of 'Euro-American Modernity.'⁹ As Reed noted, throughout his life, even as his criticism of European colonialism grew more radical, he retained an attraction to the 'Apollonian virtue of Euro-American civilization' (Reed 1985, p. 433). But, while Reed sees this duality as part and parcel of DuBois's 'double consciousness,' I find that argument tautological and circular—each is employed in turn to explain the other. While Gomez (2004, p. 177) rightly speaks of the

power of 'double consciousness' as a way to understand the African diaspora, 'twoness' is a far less powerful theme in DuBois's consideration of colonialism. Rather than looking for mediating factors which explain the inconsistencies, a reading of Chatterjee suggests that DuBois's attempt to reconcile his nationalism with his adherence to the 'framework of knowledge' in which he was educated would inevitably produce contradiction.¹⁰

Despite his best attempts, DuBois seems to have been guilty of holding an often essentializing view of the non-Western world. While DuBois seldom gains the credit he deserves for placing Africans, not African Americans, at the centre of his pan-Africanism—'the slogan meant that Africans in Africa would have the reality of self-determination' (Contee 1969b, p. 230), and he was able to purge the use of words like 'primitive' (DuBois 1915b, p. 649) in reference to Africa from his vocabulary, even his progressive views on emigrationism reveal the depth of his liberal influence.

DuBois evolved to what was in many ways the most liberal view of African self-determination in North America around World War I, in response to the spectacular failure of a back-to-Africa scheme which DuBois chronicled in the *Crisis*. He noted, as he would often again, that African development would not benefit from emigrationism as it was being conceived by the contemporary leadership. It would have to be technically trained African Americans in advisory positions, rather than a black American oligarchy, which would make the trip if it was to have a positive impact (Contee 1969b, p. 72–3). Rather, DuBois preached the possibility of an indigenous and diaspora intelligentsia which 'led' the colonized masses 'to education and culture' (Rutledge 1977, p. 395). However, when he claimed, as he did in 1959, that:

Once I thought of you Africans as children, whom we educated Africans would lead to liberty. I was wrong. We could not even lead ourselves, much less you. Today I see you rising under your own leadership, guided by your own brains (DuBois 1959, p. 94),

it was understood that those brains had the best educations Britain, France, and the United States had to offer, and that liberal education was the key to their future success. In this sense, DuBois's second teleology was distinctly liberal, in the tradition of Mill's *On Liberty*, with its emphasis on freedom through education—and most certainly not in the sense of *Das Kapital*.

Particularly striking are a series of three articles he authored for *Foreign Affairs* from the 1920s into the late 1930s. They suggest that while his stand on race was becoming driven by what he saw as racism's economic origins, his appeals to the powers that be retain a plea for them to live up to their own democratic ideals, and make

continued reference to how colonial oppression is inhibiting African 'progress.' His 'disillusionment' aside, he was actively engaged in shaming and indicting the hypocrisy of the colonizing governments in their positions on democracy for colonized subjects in Africa.

The first essay, 'Worlds of Color' (1925), while a damning indictment of the racism of the colonial system, also showcases DuBois's acceptance of the discourse of modernization. DuBois's rhetoric in these articles also hones in on the hypocrisy of the European democracies. 'The chief hope' for Africans, he said, 'lies in the gradual but inevitable spread of the knowledge that the denial of democracy in Asia and Africa hinders its complete realization in Europe' (p. 442). This, of course, is a fundamentally liberal position at odds with the much more trenchant economic critique. By appealing to the European world's own sense of value, he intends to argue that colonialism is contrary to Europe's liberal value system. As such, he cites as evidence the hypocrisy of the 'New European' labour movements when they failed to include people of colour (p. 441). He also finds that the French system of colonial administration, which provided educational opportunities and the possibility of advancement to Africans, to be more morally acceptable than that of Great Britain (p. 428–35).

The two later essays, 'Interracial Implications of the Ethiopian Crisis' (1935) and 'Black Africa Tomorrow,' (1938), despite their much more strident insistence on the economic origins of colonial exploitation, retained much of the liberalism — represented by the attempt to pressure the Western democracies to live up to their ideals. In 'Black Africa Tomorrow,' he devoted much of the article to a detailed analysis of how the needs of the world economy had created and sustained the colonial system — classic Marxism. However, the article ends on this note: 'The conflict [between the colonized and the colonizers] is of serious proportions and it can be met only by a steady will to think of Africans as men whose development is going to be along the line of all men' (DuBois 1938, p. 110—emphasis added).¹¹ While he fought unflinchingly against any attempt to deny the historicity or the humanity of black Africans, he accepted almost without question the distinct possibility that they may in fact be 'lag[g]ing a few hundred years behind' the European world (DuBois 1921, p. 41), and that as abominable as European colonialism may be, he found himself compelled to acknowledge the essential contribution of European education and political organization to African progress.

To sum up, a review of DuBois's later writings suggests that, despite his move towards an explicitly Marxist critique of colonialism, his understanding of the nature of race and race conflict remained relatively consistent over time. His writing of this era can be seen as consistent with Dawson's (2001, p. 17) 'disillusioned liberal' category

of black ideology, in which racism is seen as entrenched, but ‘liberal, egalitarian, democratic’ values are still prized. To explain the contradiction of his appeal on the one hand to a radical Marxist critique and on the other to a liberal ‘framework of knowledge,’ the best strategy is to understand how DuBois’s nationalism was linked implicitly with an understanding of modernization and its trajectory rooted in liberalism.

In addition, DuBois’s Marxism cannot be separated from his view of the failures of the United States. While his ability to marshal critiques of colonialism within the Marxist tradition is unquestionable, and he even taught graduate seminars on Marxism at Atlanta University, his ultimate adoption of Communism stemmed, it has been suggested, not from his reliance on the use of the dialectic or historical determinism, but rather from his view of the Soviet Union as a place, in opposition to the U.S., where race oppression was not a fact of life. It was as much the failure of democracy in the U.S. and Western Europe to provide equal opportunities for minorities (not to mention, of course, the governmental persecution he faced in the U.S. during the McCarthy era) as it was his commitment to Marxism which drove his choice to join the Communist Party in 1961 (Cain 1990, pp. 304–6). For DuBois, Marxism was a descriptive theory, employed to explain inequality and racism, both in the U.S. and in the colonies. Nationalism, however, especially his vision of pan-Africanism was the praxis side of this equation.

Restoring historicity to Africa

The question of Africa’s ‘historicity’ — the acknowledgement that Africa and Africans had a history independent of the European perspective and prior to the slave trade — was a major part of DuBois’s work after 1900. DuBois’s own words, in *Dusk of Dawn*, tell the story of an early concern with refuting the scientific and anthropological racism of the turn of the century academy (DuBois 1940, p. 97–101). This project, highlighted by his major historical works on Africa, *The Negro* (1915a) and *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939), became the centerpiece of DuBois’s sociological career.

The process of ‘inventing’ a tradition or history as part of the business of nationalism, as Hobsbawm (1983) put it, is a well-worn theme. And certainly, much of the literature emphasizes the roles of intellectuals in framing history and daily experience in such a way as to promote a common understanding of ‘nationness’ (cf. Anderson 1983). However, DuBois’s nationalist historicity mission, while having much in common with Anderson’s ‘imagers,’ is shaded by the racial dynamics of his cause. While in many cases the tracing or re-asserting of a shared history by nationalist elites is designed to unite the nascent

'nation,' DuBois's historical writings on Africa have an equally important audience outside the African and African-American community—the colonizers themselves, European and American whites who denied the possibility that Africans were fit to rule themselves.¹²

The formulation of DuBois's historicity-building enterprise is familiar to the current generation of political scientists. In his now-classic analysis of African state politics, Jean-Francois Bayart (1993) begins with a discussion of Africa's historicity, the establishment of which he takes no less for granted than DuBois would have done. And despite a new set of analytic tools at his disposal (the anti-colonial writings of Fanon, postmodernism, and Said's critique of 'Orientalism'), he still begins in much the same place that we can imagine DuBois did: with Hegel. Hegel's oft-cited statement that '[Africa] is not interesting from the point of view of its own history, but because we see man in a state of barbarism and savagery which is preventing him from being an integral part of civilization,' is, as Bayart notes, paradigmatic (Hegel 1965, p. 247, cited in Bayart 1993, p. 3)—just the kind of attitude which DuBois would have not only been familiar with, but would have been actively struggling against.

Constructing historicity as a nationalist tactic can be seen as a response to what Chatterjee (1986, p. 54–5) referred to as the 'question of power' in the early intellectual stages of Indian nationalism. One of the first questions that a nationalist leader in a colony has to confront is 'Why is my country a subject nation?' The predominant European discourse of colonialism, which defined colonial peoples as the 'Other' (Said 1983, 1993), provided one answer—that the colonized were lazy, dumb, uncivilized; in short, unfit to rule themselves. The standard response by most pre-independence anti-colonial nationalists, certainly within India, as Chatterjee argues, takes two parts. On one hand, anti-colonial nationalists will often promote the implantation of 'scientific and historically progressive values of Western civilization' into their own culture, while simultaneously lauding the historical achievements of that very indigenous culture, often self-consciously comparing its accomplishments favourably with those of Europe (Chatterjee 1986, p. 80).

DuBois's efforts to restore Africa's historicity, heavily influenced by his long-term pan-Africanist goals, fit this general pattern. Most of DuBois's post-1900 writing on Africa or other colonized areas situates him as one of the earliest proponents of *négritude*—an intellectual project designed to emphasize the unique contributions of 'African' culture to the world (Contee 1969b, pp. 6–7), and in DuBois's case, representative of the Hegelian teleology's influence. By studying black history, he hoped to 'discern the outlines of the message of each race,' a message that he was sure would refute European claims about the

inherent backwardness of the 'African races' (Appiah 1992, p. 34), and establish their fitness to rule themselves. As he said:

To be sure, the darker races are today the least advanced in culture, according to European standards. This has not, however, always been the case in the past, and certainly the world's history, both ancient and modern, has given instances of non-despicable ability and capacity among the blackest races of men (DuBois 1969, p. 21).

DuBois's sociological studies of African history were more scholarly, sophisticated steps in the direction of a quickly developing nègritude within the Western-educated intellectual elite of the African anti-colonial movement. Texts like *The Negro* (1915) and 'Negroes Have an Old Culture' (1947) are historical studies of Africa's history that are directed not only at blacks who wish to know their own history, but also at the intellectual elite of Europe and the United States, to whom DuBois incessantly brings to light the advances, accomplishments, and achievements of early African culture, which he hopes to show are 'the very keystone of our modern civilization' (DuBois 1915b, p. 115). Typical of this DuBois is the following, lifted from 'The African Roots of the War' in 1915:

Always Africa is giving us something new or some metempsychosis of a world-old thing. On its black bosom arose one of the earliest, of self-protective civilizations, and grew so mightily that it still furnishes superlatives to thinking and speaking men. Out of its darker and more remote forest fatness, came, if we may credit many recent scientists, *the first welding of iron, and we know that agriculture and trade flourished there when Europe was a wilderness* (1915b, p. 707) [emphasis added].

It is this same nègritude which Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) takes up in his excellent essay on one of DuBois's fundamental early works, 'The Conservation of Races' (1897). Appiah (1992, p. 13–14; 30) sees DuBois's nègritude as 'racialism.' DuBois's doctrine that each 'sociological race' has a 'message in humanity', that is, some unique contribution to make to the world is, he finds, unequivocally rooted in the same biological conception of race he had been attempting to deconstruct. Appiah goes on to say, '[i]t is only because they are already bound together that members of a race at different times can share a history at all' (p. 32). As he sees it, this makes DuBois's edifice of pan-Africanism highly contradictory and problematic.

This argument is solidly reasoned. As highlighted earlier in this article (Appiah even quotes the same passage from *Dusk of Dawn*), DuBois's own words suggest that he has an intellectual and moral

interest in making economic and historical connections between the colonized peoples as significant a link as skin colour. His *négritude*, the ‘subtle differences from other men,’ stands in tension with the socio-historical explanation of race he otherwise advances (Appiah 1992, p. 41). Certainly, this kind of problem is endemic for Marxian accounts of race—although DuBois never seems to doubt that race (in America, at least—cf. Mostern 1996, who argues that DuBois never intended to argue that Africans and African Americans shared a common ‘race’) is a primary category of identity, but Appiah fails to fully address the significance of this problem beyond its obvious implications for DuBois’s theory of race.

Given the reading we have been making, it seems a reasonable explanation might lie in the contradictory needs of an anti-colonialist nationalist project like pan-Africanism. While DuBois finds (and rightly so—for this in no way diminishes the level of DuBois’s scholarship nor that fact that pre-colonial African civilizations of a remarkable level of achievement and complexity did exist) that there is no basis for ‘racial’ inferiority in either ‘physical or cultural causes’ (DuBois 1915, p. 142), he also finds that on a grand scale of ‘progress,’ he is forced to admit that Africans are still in most cases at a ‘primitive’ level. His arguments of past achievements are tempered by his belief that ‘proper guidance’ is necessary to bring Africans into ‘modern civilization’ (DuBois 1915, p. 140). And while these citations are from his early work, even his later work, which provides a more sophisticated economic critique of colonialism, accepts that the emerging African nations would need to adopt Western styles of government which can ‘scientifically’ eradicate poverty and promote freedom and development—that while Africans have a unique gift for mankind, that gift’s significance must be measured along a universalizing index of ‘civilization’ (DuBois 1945, pp. 123–5).

The historicity project of recent scholars regarding Africa, as indicated above, suggests something far different from the idea for which DuBois was arguing. Far from *négritude*, recent political theory focuses on the ‘banality of power’ in Africa (Mbembe 2001), and emphasizes the way in which political innovations which arrived under colonial rule were never fully accepted, but were subject to a process of ‘reappropriation and reinvention’ (Bayart 1993, p. 27). DuBois, because of his commitment to an anti-colonial nationalist project, was not able to arrive at that crucial insight. Instead, in order to reach his goals, his historicity project walked a tightrope between asserting a world clearly divided between the African and European experiences, and one in which there was a universal index of progress along which Africa was to be evaluated and developed, and a universal trajectory of modernity which Africa was ‘awakening’ to re-enter.

Conclusions

There will perhaps be a sense that in writing this, I intend to make a critique of DuBois himself—to challenge the validity of his political thought, perhaps, or to question the importance of his work. That, of course, is far from the truth. Rather, I hope that this revised reading of DuBois will provide a new lens into his thought, a tool for understanding continuity and coherence where previously he has been seen as ‘lurching’ between contradictory strategies (Holt 1990, p. 305). While scholars like Reed (1985) and Holt (1990) have variously identified sources of continuity in DuBois’s thought (Reed categorically rejected any notion of a true ‘DuBoisian’ thought that ignores contradictory statements that emerge over time [Reed 1985, p. 432]), the idea of DuBois as an anti-colonial nationalist provides a particularly powerful tool for analysis.¹³

DuBois the anti-colonial nationalist would have faced many of the same intellectual dilemmas of other leaders at other times, and as one reads Chatterjee’s narrative of the earliest nationalist movements in British India, the similarities are hard to ignore. The struggle to justify overthrowing a colonial state, despite a belief in the same Western ideas of modernity and progress also employed to justify the colonial project; the elitism, which was the only thinkable tool through which the progenitors of African nationalism could assert their equality on European terms; and the historicity project, which at the same time both asserted the uniqueness of African history but also placed it on an alien chronology of progress. These facts suggest that this way of examining DuBois’s thought provides serious traction for understanding the bases of his ideology. This approach also raises additional questions and avenues that could further enlarge our picture of DuBois the political philosopher of nationalism.

It is unknown whether or not DuBois was consciously aware of the trap of nationalist thought articulated by Chatterjee. Given the language he used to forward socialism as a part of pan-Africanism, it seems safe to say he was not. Equally strong as evidence is the amazing naiveté he displayed towards the Soviet Union and China. We are reminded by Crawford Young (2004) that in the 1950s and 60s, the communist economies were growing at an enormous rate, and the repression of the Stalinist era was not widely known, nor were the human costs of China’s ‘Great Leap Forward,’ (30). There has been, to my knowledge, little systematic study of his views on the communist world in a context removed from the rhetoric of the Cold War. Perhaps this lens would raise new light on this retrospectively troubling portion of his thought.

In any case, I invite scholars to see this for what it is—not a *post hoc* deconstruction of DuBois, but rather a reconstruction, one which

provides a trajectory towards a clearer sense of the origins of some of his most powerful work. I hope that this provides a starting point for looking at connections between the development of pan-Africanist thought and the contradictions of liberal anti-colonial nationalism — a linkage that DuBois scholars have not yet fully developed, and one that is key to reconstructing the postcolonial successes and failures of the pan-Africanist and African nationalist movements over which he cast such an enormous shadow.

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Notes

1. Cf. Mostern 1996, who reads DuBois's encounter with Africa as recounted in *Dusk of Dawn*, as not about Africans at all, but rather about DuBois's 'psychic imagination' of Africa from a black American perspective, and what he is able to learn about his own identity — namely, pride in his cultural heritage (41).
2. Cf. Monteiro 2000 for an exception. He persuasively argues that Africa held a privileged place in DuBois's thought even prior to his pan-Africanism, especially in his early sociological work on African-American communities.
3. M'Bayo (2004, pp. 33–4), citing Mbutou (1983) points out that at the 1919 and 1927 Pan-African Congresses, DuBois focused his energy not on demands for outright independence for the colonies, but for reform in the colonial system and the "civilization" of Africans. M'Bayo regards that as a product of DuBois's elitist, "middle-class" mentality—a sort of 'African-American imperialism' (for which there is textual support from DuBois as late as 1948 [DuBois 1948])—my framework suggests that this is rather a product of the DuBoisian battle between his acceptance of liberal standards of progress and civilization and his racial solidarity with Africa, a conclusion that DuBois seems to have ultimately arrived at (cf. DuBois 1959).
4. A focus on DuBois's transition from a biological to sociological view of race is itself interesting. But from either perspective, it does not necessarily change the fact of his nationalism — in both cases, DuBois justifies his nationalism by an appeal to the unique 'message' (which one is tempted, given DuBois's training in Hegel, to read as *geist*) of each race. This message is derived from each race's 'common ancestry,' a phrase, which Appiah rightly points out, is conceptually a mishmash of biological and sociological race.
5. cf. Bracey *et al.* (1970, lvi-lx) for an argument that the African-American 'nation' has a colonial relationship to 'White America.' Bracey also refers to pan-Africanism as a 'bourgeois nationalism', a point which I dispute. While his nationalism was from an African-American perspective more bourgeois than that of Marcus Garvey, on the world stage and in the hands of blacks outside the United States, there was little bourgeoisie about it.
6. For the paradigmatic studies applying modernization theory in post colonial Africa, see David Apter (1961), *The Political Kingdom in Uganda* and (1965) *The Politics of*

Modernization. For arguably the most influential use of modernization theory in political science, see Daniel Lerner (1958), *The Passing of Traditional Society*.

7. cf. Nantambu 1998, p. 561, who asserts that the entire edifice of pan-Africanism is essentially Eurocentric.

8. For DuBois's relationship to Hegel, especially concerning the degree to which he subscribed to an idealist teleology, see Shamooin Zamir (1995), *Dark Voices: W.E.B. DuBois and American Thought, 1888–1903*, and Winifried Siemerling (2001), 'W.E.B. DuBois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity', *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 325–33.

9. On DuBois's status as a Marxist, see William E. Cain (1990), 'W. E. B. DuBois's Autobiography and the Politics of Literature,' *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 299–313.

10. Reed does acknowledge DuBois's adherence to an essentially teleological view of temporal progress (445). Reed, however, interprets it as part and parcel of his socialism, developed as a response to industrial capitalism. I prefer to view DuBois as responding most specifically not to capitalism, but to colonialism I believe the evidence bears me out.

11. The same sentiment is expressed in almost the exact same phrasing in *The Negro* (1915a), p. 138.

12. The words 'invention' or 'imagine' here do not imply that the history written by nationalists, or DuBois specifically, is false (although in some instances of nationalist writings, that is the case). Rather, what is being 'invented,' 'imagined,' or constructed is a sense of community or solidarity among those who are included within the bounds of that history, and the bounds themselves.

13. Holt (1990) makes reference in his ff. 8 to three authors, Lester, Marable, and Rampersand, who have also contended in their scholarly work that DuBois's thought was in fact, more coherent than commonly assumed.

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