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BOOK REVIEW


The work of W.E.B Du Bois that appeared after DUSK OF DAWN (1940) is widely neglected in favour of his earlier stuff. There are exceptions: Gerald Horne has focused intensively on the deep and wide black/red connection in Du Bois’s late decades; and the three great biographies we now have (Lewis, Marable, Rampersad) of course consider ‘the Doctor’s’ final decades as well. Still, the general omission is striking, particularly because Du Bois lived long enough to intersect the modern civil rights movement, and indeed to appraise it critically.

Of course, the ‘earlier stuff’ remains without parallel in American letters. From the 1890s to Second World War Du Bois more or less invented the social scientific study of race. He poured forth sociological, historical and cultural studies as well as novels, poetry and plays. He transformed the field of sociology from a European quasi-philosophical pursuit of social theology to an empirically grounded and deeply pragmatist human science. He interrogated and reinterpreted socialist and Marxist theory, thoroughly dismantling the premises of European empire and debunking the humanism of the Western canon. And those were merely his intellectual accomplishments! As activist, journalist, organizer and agitator, Du Bois helped found the NAACP and a score of other organizations, edited major movement journals, organized endless conferences (notably several pan-Africanist ones), did battle with Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey for the soul of the black movement and crisscrossed the US and the world in pursuit of social justice, the downfall of colonialism, black freedom and the ideals of democracy.

So why the decline in his influence beginning roughly at the end of Second World War? What was going on for Du Bois as he marked his 80th birthday (in 1948) and after? How did he contemplate the ‘future world’, as Eric Porter labels the new era dawning after the War?

By the end of Second World War, Du Bois had passed, as always accompanying his people, through an enormous series of social transformations: vast migrations and urbanizations, the calamities of race riots, world war and depression. By then he had encountered the early heralds of the civil rights era, among them A. Philip Randolph’s threatened march on Washington (1941), FDR’s desegregation of the war industries and Truman’s desegregation (1948) of the armed forces. In the Second World War, he had seen the alliance of the US and the USSR, and had recognized the leading role of the latter in the defeat of Nazism. His affinities with the USSR and the triumph of the Chinese revolution (1949), and his horror and despair at the US rightwing upsurge represented by McCarthyism – with its combination of red- and black-baiting – led him to an intransigent oppositional stance that necessitated a full-blown commitment to communism. Always a socialist and an admirer of Marx, Du Bois had earlier earned the criticism of orthodox communists for his insistence on employing Marxist theory in a highly race-conscious way. With the US government now attacking him directly, charging him with subversion and hauling him into a federal court in handcuffs, his disagreements with communism seemed trivial indeed. Himself a victim of anticommunism, Du Bois had never acknowledged the tyranny and
murder that were central to Stalinism and Maoism. The world was locked in a new and devastating conflict, the Cold War, and the US stood against everything Du Bois valued.

As early as 1915, he had interpreted the First World War as a race war. BLACK RECONSTRUCTION too had centred on the links between racism, war and empire. The Second World War brought these connections home to him with tremendous force. Even more sanguinary and indeed genocidal, even more explicitly a conflict about race, a global exercise in racism, the War, he said, ‘... sent all my formulations awhirl. Not from the inner problems of a single social group, no matter how pressing, could the world be guided. I began to enter into a World conception of human uplift and one centering about the work and income of the working class’ (Porter, p. 164). Here and elsewhere Du Bois’s late turn towards communism is made explicit. So, as his nation repudiated him and dashed his last hopes for racial democracy and economic equality, Du Bois stood against the reactionary tide, both with great courage and with more than a little dogmatism, renouncing his US citizenship and publically joining the Communist Party not long before his death, and leaving in the end for Ghana.

Of course, he was marginalized. When, speaking at the 1963 March on Washington on 13 August 1963, NAACP Chairman Roy Wilkins acknowledged the great man’s death two days before, it was merely a small testimonial, nothing more. His influence was at its nadir. Eric Porter is highly aware that today the late Du Bois is neither deeply studied nor particularly well regarded. He agrees that the great man’s later work suffered from ‘political dogmatism’ in comparison to his vast earlier contributions (Porter, p. 155). Still, drawing on a wide reading of recent literature on Du Bois as well as on race and racism in the contemporary world, Porter argues that ‘the Doctor’s’ late work nevertheless has something to teach us today. After all, Du Bois was struggling to understand the unstable racial politics of the post-war period, the failure to achieve peace, the resurgence of imperialism under US auspices and the upsurge of repression that saw fit to prosecute him and to deprive him of his passport as an old man in his eighties.

In the contradictions of Du Bois’s last years, Porter suggests, we can perhaps explain the great upsurge of interest in Du Bois that began in the final decades of the twentieth century and continues today. By 1990 or so the ‘post-civil rights era’ had taken hold, the Cold War was coming to a close, apartheid’s demise was looming and the old empires were dead. Yet, the great goals of racial equality, peace and social justice had not been even remotely achieved. How much was this atmosphere pre-figured by Du Bois’s post-war experience, when the victory of the Second World War rapidly degenerated into redbaiting and Dixiecrat intransigence?

Porter does not dwell on Du Bois’s ambivalence about the nascent civil rights movement: his criticism of the struggle for integration as assimilationist and tantamount to advocating the ‘bleaching’ of the black soul. He does mention Du Bois’s betrayal by the NAACP, which refused to defend its founder and capitulated to McCarthyism. Understandably enough, these post-war insults and betrayals preoccupied the great man at the end. It would have been useful to consider Du Bois’s doubts about the resurgent black movement; we have some evidence of this in his last speeches and writings and in his letters, which have been meticulously edited by Herbert Aptheker. Because of his suspicions of the black bourgeoisie and the NAACP’s legalism, Du Bois was unable to perceive the movement’s radical potential. Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., the Brown decision, and the Montgomery bus boycott receive scant attention in Porter’s book.

THE PROBLEM OF THE FUTURE WORLD’s final section, however, redeems Du Bois’s last positions as pre-figurations of the present. Du Bois experienced the ‘paradox of loyalty’; he became a ‘suspect citizen’. He questioned black solidarity and pan-Africanism more seriously than ever before, for he was not well defended by the black community, neither the masses nor the elite, the ‘talented tenth’, in his hour of need. Today we see a black US President waging imperial war, maintaining his predecessors’ repressive domestic policies, avoiding his identification with the suffering black masses, women, gays, and the
'darker peoples of the world'. Is there not at least an echo in this, our current political situation, of Du Bois's despondency in his final years?