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Herbert Aptheker

University of California, Berkeley

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W.E.B. Du Bois: Struggle Not Despair*

Herbert Aptheker
University of California, Berkeley

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to convey the essence of the life and work of Du Bois; it is an appreciation by one who knew him for some decades and loved him.

Deep in the Berkshires, in New England's heart, three years after Lincoln was murdered, was born this brown child, a son of poor people, and great-great-grandson of a veteran of the Revolutionary War.

When he was twenty-five years old, on his birthday—while studying at the University of Berlin—in the diary that he kept for his own eyes, he dedicated himself to the search for Truth. He swore to himself that he would carve out a name in literature and in science and that, come what may, he would fight for his people. He would, he wrote in this secret place, be “a man worthy of my race and my fathers.”

Du Bois never really grew old, except towards the last months of his life. When he was sixty and had been invited back to head the sociology department at Atlanta University, he customarily ran up the stone steps that brought one to the campus grounds; he ran up because, reaching the top, one was rewarded with a view of flowers and he could not wait to bathe his eyes in the vision. When he was eighty and away on a lecture tour, he wrote his wife that to his keen regret an engagement made it impossible for him to visit the circus. When he

*This paper is based on a lecture delivered at the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University on December 8, 1988.

was near ninety, I remember him sitting on a piano bench with a seven-year-old girl, singing lustily, and well, about Old MacDonald and his farm.

I recall when we were at the New York airport, in 1961, seeing him and his wife off to Ghana, where he was to take charge of the projected *Encyclopedia Africana*, that a reporter asked the Doctor, then in his ninety-second year, how many volumes he projected and how long the task would take. "Ten volumes, I think," he replied and then added, with the barest suggestion of a smile, "and about ten years per volume."

* * *

In Georgia, over eighty years ago, Du Bois gave voice to the Black people's resistance against the conquest of the South and their own subjugation by monopoly capitalism. He led the struggle against Big Business' "philanthropic" effort to miseducate his people and to corrupt their leaders. He recognized what appeared to him to be the irresistible logic of socialism about eighty years ago.

Du Bois was the main organizer (together with William Monroe Trotter) of the Niagara Movement, in 1905, and, speaking out for his people, he declared:

We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a free-born American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America.

It was this Niagara Movement, and Du Bois personally, that were vital to the launching, in 1909, of what became known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Du Bois is the person who wrote, in 1900, that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," and who added, ten years later: "The cause of labor is the cause of black men, and the black man's cause is labor's own." Surely, in these two prophecies lie much of the history of the United States, and of the world, for the century that now approaches its termination. Naturally, with these kinds of insights, it was Du Bois who, more clearly than any other person, saw over sixty years ago the anti-imperialist potential in a world-unity of African and African-derived peoples and therefore founded the Pan-African Movement.

The essence of his life, as writer, educator, and organizer, has been the call for Peace—peace within nations and among nations; for dignified, secure, fraternal living-together by a creative humanity. "I believe that War is Murder," he wrote in his influential "Credo" of 1904; "I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations white and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength."

Increasingly, as time passed, Du Bois came to believe that the good things of life, based, as they must be, on peace so that they might be created, shared and enjoyed, could be obtained only by struggle. Increasingly, he came to believe that the leadership and the main role in such struggle must fall—if it were to be a principled and an effective one—to the working class and its allies. As he put it: “Naturally, out of the mass of the working classes, who know life and its bitter struggles, will continually rise the real, unselfish, and clear-sighted leadership.”

Du Bois insisted that imperialism was evil; racism, vile; poverty, conquerable; and that world war was not inevitable. Leading the Peace Information Center, that did monumental work in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Dr. Du Bois and four associates, were indicted and tried some thirty-five years ago as “un-registered foreign agents” under the provisions of the McCormick Act. That act—unlike the later McCarran Act—required substantive proof of the actual guilt of the defendant personally; the United States government offered Du Bois a “deal,” telling him that if he pleaded no-defense, it would let him off without a jail sentence. Steeped in racism and reflecting the ethics of imperialism, the government officials did not know with whom they were dealing. Du Bois told his attorney that, “before I would enter such a plea I would rot in jail.”

Of course, the defendants were not guilty. To think of Dr. Du Bois as a “foreign agent” is like thinking of Thomas Jefferson or Frederick Douglass as a “foreign agent” (of which both were accused in their time!). And since under the McCormick Act one does not have a legislative Bill of Attainder, such as the McCarran Act, a defendant had a chance, given due process of law. Dr. Du Bois was acquitted.

During the period of the indictment, the worldwide protest movement, and the trial, Dr. Du Bois stuck to his guns, of course; as had been true throughout his life, he said exactly what he believed and said it with clarity. “With jail in sight,” he wrote in his *In Battle for Peace* (1952), “I hammered at the proposition that the Soviet Union did not want war, while our masters did; that we in demanding peace were opposing Big Business which wanted war, and that we did this as free Americans and not as the tools of any foreign or domestic power.”

It was in the midst of this effort—and in the midst of the McCarthy period—that Langston Hughes, one of the scores of distinguished figures who, as youths, had turned to Du Bois for help and inspiration, to his everlasting credit wrote a magnificent column in the *Chicago Defender* (October 5, 1951):

. . . Du Bois is more than a man. He is all that he has stood for . . . The things that he has stood for are what millions of people of good will the world around desire, too—a world of decency, of no nation over another nation, of no color line, no more colonies, no more poverty, of education

for all, of freedom and love and friendship and peace among men. For as long as I can remember, Dr. Du Bois has been writing and speaking and working for these things. He began way before I was born to put reason above passion, tolerance above prejudice, well-being above poverty, wisdom above ignorance, cooperation above strife, equality before Jim Crow and peace above the bomb.

What made Du Bois? Monumental persistence was there; and a fantastic capacity for work. As one studies his life, he is reminded of the letter Thomas Jefferson—whose range similarly was almost incredible—wrote his daughter: “No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time, who never loses any.” And: “It is wonderful how much may be done if we are always doing.” Du Bois lived as though he had made Jefferson’s advice his motto. Repeatedly he said to others—and told himself—that there was but one reason for living: to live creatively and productively; and that there was but one answer to attack and criticism and that was effective work.

There was also present what John Hope, then president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, wrote him in 1915—after Atlanta University had felt compelled to let him go, since “philanthropists” insisted that either he moderate his militancy or they would cancel their contributions. Hope wrote, “You are able because you are honest. . . . Intellectual honesty and moral courage are your adornments.”

With Du Bois’ almost fierce honesty there went other qualities that were part of the whole: Du Bois was not vindictive, though he waged some monumental battles; he was highly self-critical and did not refrain from publicly affirming error or an important change of mind—as, for example, in his support of U.S. entry into the first world war. If he failed at times in dealing with others—and he was not the easiest-going person in the world—it was basically because he set fearfully high standards for himself and tended to apply the same standards to others.

Of course, when seeking the secret of Du Bois, one is in the presence of genius, and here biology itself has failed us so far. Certainly, an aspect of his genius was persistence, a colossal capacity for work, integrity, a fundamental love for people. And there was something else that is not understood and is called “talent.” Du Bois got to the heart of matters; he anticipated; he consciously sought to comprehend not only the past and present but also he sought to project the future; he thought big; he came to no hasty judgements; he took himself seriously—some, who did not fully understand his own stern standards, thought too seriously. And, he was not afraid to act, even to venture “recklessly,” as some thought.

In the course of my study of Du Bois, over many years, I have sought out people who knew him and have asked their memories of him. One such was Norman Thomas who knew Du Bois fairly well and who shared his reminiscences with me not long before Mr. Thomas passed away. A final remark by Norman Thomas, a sort of summing up, remains with me as eminently apt: "Du Bois," he said to me, "was a true prophet."

* * *

Du Bois' writing is characteristically clear and lyrical; it exudes honesty and passion. Zona Gale once described Du Bois as "a great teacher of Democracy in America—of a democracy which we have not yet practiced nor even visioned." Some fifty years ago, Eugene O'Neill wrote: "Ranking as one does among the foremost writers of true importance in this country, one selfishly wishes sometimes (as a writer oneself) that he could devote all his time to the accomplishment of that fine and moving prose which distinguishes his books. But at the same time one realizes, self-reproachfully, that with Dr. Du Bois it is a cause—an ideal—that overcomes the personal egoism of the artist." "The cause"—there is the heart of Du Bois. And it was his devotion to it, his identity with it, that is the ultimate source of his greatness. For over half a century this man epitomized the cause; and it was the most dramatic cause in his country and era. He experienced the crucifixion himself; but he never sought to use his great gifts to remove the thorns from his head. Many times was wealth offered him; many times were positions of great distinction dangled before his eyes—sometimes, his pre-eminence being so indubitable, they actually came to him—but neither the offers nor the momentary reality ever came near corrupting him.

The iron had entered his soul; he had seen the lynch-victim's fingers displayed in a Georgia butcher-shop; he had stared down the driver of a bus in Alabama and kept his "wrong" seat until, as he surmised, the driver decided he "wasn't really a Negro" and let him be; he had stood, shotgun in hand, defending his own home after the pogrom in Atlanta of 1906; he had sent his first-born who had died in infancy, twelve hundred miles from home to be buried where Jim Crow did not roost.

Among his thousands of letters are scores from the laborer, the aspiring adolescent, the sharecropper, the woman who scrubbed other peoples' homes. The most scorned and the most despised—the prisoner, the peon—poured their hearts out to him. You are our voice, is what they all said; speak for us. These letters were carefully answered and preserved; the answers were serious, full, helpful. The Black intelligentsia, professionals and artists looked upon Du Bois as a father as well as a mentor and he fought for them. There is no outstanding Afro-American creative figure of the twentieth century—from Countée Cullen

to E. Franklin Frazier, from Jessie Fauset to John Hope Franklin, from Richmond Barthé to Paul Robeson—who did not, at some point, draw inspiration and gather aid directly from their Dean.

From all of these, at the same time, Du Bois gained his astonishing strength. The inspiration was mutual; they held him up and he led the way.

Du Bois wrote with ease, but his manuscripts show that he did so with great care. Many are the pencilled alterations on manuscripts and on galley sheet—the latter often to the despair of publishers. He knew well what he wanted to say, he was an artist at saying it, and so he took infinite pains with the instruments of his craft.

Normal Thomas used that one word “prophet,” to sum up Du Bois; perhaps another helps and it is “poet,” assuming there is any real difference between the two. Du Bois made of his life a great poem.

* * *

Du Bois' passion was justice. Through reason, struggle, organization, would come justice and in that would be peace. It was this passion that brought Du Bois to socialism over eighty years ago. Never did he give up that compass and goal. His learning was as extensive as any man's; his friendships extended from James Weldon Johnson to Gandhi; no part of this globe did he not study with his own eyes; no significant political, social or intellectual current moved in the United States during the seventy years prior to his death without his participation. This unparalleled experience held him firm to the need for socialism and led him, in the last period, to the momentous decision of becoming a member of the Communist Party. In this connection his long-standing friendship with Black Communists—as B. J. Davis, J. W. Ford, Louis Burnham, W. L. Patterson, J. E. Jackson, Henry Winston and others, was significant. In all this there would seem to be reasons for pause on the part of those who have affirmed that Marxism or socialism is something meant only for white people—assuming it has any meaning at all. Certainly, the founder of the modern Black liberation movement and of the Pan-African Movement decided the opposite to be true.

It is a hallmark of the decay of the social order in the United States and the depravity of its ruling class that Dr. Du Bois actually was labelled a criminal, a traitor, a purchased foe of democracy! One man's criminal is another man's saint. Langston Hughes, in the essay already cited, having in mind the government's effort to send Dr. Du Bois to prison, wrote:

Somebody in Greece long ago gave Socrates the hemlock to drink. Somebody at Golgotha erected a cross and somebody drove nails into the hands of Christ. Somebody spat upon His garments. No one remembers their names.

In E. P. Thompson's splendid biography of another revolutionary, William Morris, the author writes of Morris as "beckoning us forward to the measureless bounty of life." And he concludes with this fine line: "He is one of those men whom history will never overtake." Another such was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

* * *

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, when President of Ghana, said at the grave of his teacher: "Dr. Du Bois was a phenomenon." He was—like Jefferson, Douglass, Marx, Lenin—a phenomenon.

Du Bois was rather slight, strikingly handsome, impeccably groomed and dressed, erect carriage, head held high, clear voice, eager eyes. He tended to be quiet, invariably polite, especially tender with children. Slow to anger though very sensitive. A fierce fighter but a fair one. He enjoyed life; he loved the theatre, music, painting, flowers, good wine and food. He cherished friends and glowed when there was spirited talk.

Work, he would say; work. Be about; there is so much to do. Yet, he was not all work for he was laughter too. His humor was subtle, not broad but it was delicious.

The main thing, however, was work, and how he loved his labor! That, he often told me, was the secret; love what you do or don't do it.

In sheer dimension his productivity is almost incredible; like that of a Shakespeare or Dickens or Beethoven. His poems, his pageants and plays, his books (several unpublished), his magazines—*The Moon*, *The Horizon*, *The Crisis*, *The Brownies' Book*, *Phylon*—his hundreds of newspaper columns, his thousands of lectures, his scores of thousands of letters. What work he put into *The Crisis'* poetry and essay and drama contests; and the college graduate numbers and the beautiful baby issues! And his pioneering scholarship in history with the *Suppression* book (1896) and in sociology with the study of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and in anthropology with *The Negro* (1915). Some of his poetry is excellent; his novels are good; his *John Brown* (1909) has not been surpassed for its grasp of the deepest meanings of that martyr. And it is not too early to affirm that two of his books, at least, are classics—that is, will live so long as books have any meaning—namely, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

Courage, too, is a hallmark of Du Bois. What it meant, living and working in Georgia, eighty years ago and fighting for the full equality of Black people! What it meant to organize at the turn of this century and in Atlanta scientific conferences on racism and the so-called Negro question to which figures of national and international renown came—and to do this not once but regularly for eighteen years! What it meant to organize a movement eighty years ago saying

“no” to Carnegie and Morgan and the Tuskegee Machine; to hold pilgrimages to Harpers Ferry and to issue calls for struggle in the name of Old John Brown.

Du Bois needed that courage, too, for he was an organizer of struggle; he was an agitator and a fighter. As to agitation, he wrote in the first volume of *The Crisis*, in 1910, that certain friends had urged that perhaps the agitational method was harmful rather than helpful. Not so, declared Du Bois:

Such honest critics mistake the function of agitation. Is a toothache a good thing? No. Is it therefore useless? No. It is supremely useful, for it tells the body of decay and death. Without it the body, would suffer unknowingly. It would think: All is well, when lo! the danger lurks.

Du Bois always held to the belief in human progress; and he insisted that its inevitability was not independent of but rather was dependent upon people’s activities. And basic to human progress he held (with Douglass) was the radical, the disturber, the agitator and the organizer. There are the ones, he wrote in *The Crisis* in 1914, who, seeing “the disinherited and the damned, can never sit still and silent.” On the contrary, Du Bois wrote, in the biblical language that was in his bones:

These are the men who go down in the blood and dust of battle. They say ugly things to an ugly world. They spew the lukewarm fence straddlers out of their mouths, like God of old; they cry aloud and spare not; they shout from the housetops, and they make this world so damned uncomfortable with its nasty burden of evil that it tries to get good and does get better.

* * *

Du Bois held to the vision not only of the Afro-American but also of the white people of the United States understanding and joining someday—especially the working masses among those who were white. Du Bois was always a union man—*The Crisis* carried the union button even when the typographical union was lily-white; Du Bois very early was attracted to socialism—certainly, as his papers show, by 1904; Du Bois was a friend of the Bolshevik Revolution from its birth and publicly announced this at least as early as 1919 and repeated this until his death. Du Bois studied Marx with care about 60 years ago; he gave one of the earliest (if not the earliest) graduate seminars on Marx in any U.S. university—it was given in the summer of 1933 at Atlanta University on “Karl Marx and the American Negro.”

Du Bois had serious differences with the Communist Party of the United States (and it with him) especially in the 1930s, but he never permitted himself to become a Red-baiter, though often invited to do so. And he never failed to add his belief even in the period of sharp debate, that Communists were devoted, in their own light, to the cause of human emancipation.

Du Bois saw sixty years ago that the battle for civil rights was but one element and only a beginning of the struggle for full liberation of his people. He insisted, with growing emphasis, beginning especially in the late 1920s, that economic questions—jobs, prices, food, housing, training—constituted the nub of the subject; it was fundamentally because of this and the failure of the Board of the NAACP to agree with it that he resigned from the Association in 1934. The question of so-called segregation was deliberately misconstrued by many on that Board and used as a pretext for bringing about a situation forcing Du Bois' resignation; the main point was Du Bois' increasingly radical stance on domestic issues and his growing militancy in denouncing colonialism.

By 1900 when Du Bois served as the secretary of the first Pan-African Congress and wrote its appeal to the world, he sensed the historic significance of the impending rebellion of the colored masses. This was reinforced in his experiences at the First Universal Races Congress in 1911 and took major organized form with his projection in 1918 of a Pan-African movement whose first Conference was held in Paris the next year. (This rebellion against colonialism is, of course, the theme of his second novel, *Dark Princess*, 1928.)

In Du Bois' vision of Pan-Africanism there was no sense of exclusion; on the contrary, always he insisted that it was part of the general social and class phenomenon of the destruction of imperialism and the victory of socialism. In racism and colonialism (and, more and more as the years passed, in the structure of monopoly capitalism, in imperialism) Du Bois saw the heart of the war danger. One of the central features of his work and writing was the struggle against war; he died, as his last message makes clear, firm in the conviction that the peace would be won. In combining these visions and working effectively for their realization, Du Bois' pioneering was of world-wide historical significance.

Du Bois was exceptional in his attitude towards women. In the fall of 1885, he entered Fisk University and at once became an editor of the student paper, the *Fisk Herald*. In its issue of December, 1885, Du Bois called attention to the paper called the *College Message* published by women at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was gotten up, he thought, "in a bewitching style"; its column "on woman's work" was especially good, he thought, and overall represented "a first rate woman's rights argument." Exactly two years later, in the same publication, Du Bois called attention to a meeting of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in Nashville and remarked, "the Age of Woman

is surely dawning”—as noteworthy a prophecy as his better known remark, in 1900, that the color line would be a central question of the twentieth century.

To the end of his days, Du Bois was a fervent supporter of women’s liberation, seeing it also as basic to the humanization of the male. Beginning with his close relationship with his mother (who died as Du Bois graduated from high school), he had warm friendships with women and consistently argued—in print and lectures—for their full equality in every aspect of life.

* * *

Nothing can erase the fact that Dr. Du Bois, in his ninety-second year, and with the McCarran Act being activated, announced his decision to join the Communist Party of the United States. He saw it as embodying the best in the radical and egalitarian traditions of this country. In this sense and as a direct continuation and logical culmination of his own superb life, joining that Party symbolized his convictions as to what was true and what was necessary.

Many are the glories and many are the shames of the United States. Du Bois’ accomplishments reflect the glories; his harassments, the shame. The latter culminated, in the time of McCarthyism and brinkmanship, in the arrest and fingerprinting and trying of Du Bois for being a “foreign agent,” and finally—a scholar abroad laboring on the monumental project of an *Encyclopedia Africana* (something he had projected in 1909)—making him a man without a passport, a man unwelcome in his own country. Then—and only then—did he turn to the citizenship of Ghana, and there did he die and lies buried, thousands of miles from the green of the Berkshires and the graves of his children—and fifty yards from the shore whence his ancestors were carried in shackles to make rich the New World. America’s pariah was Africa’s glory. The eradication of racism will begin the erasing of the shame of the hounding of Dr. Du Bois. Then, cities and states will vie with each other in naming their loveliest parks and best schools for Du Bois.

Difficult were the heart-breaking setbacks; awful were the arrogance and cruelty of the dominating classes. At times, the pain was so great that it squeezed doubt from his heart—as after the Atlanta pogrom of 1906, with these lines in his great “Litany:” *“Whither? North is greed and South is blood; within, the coward, and without the liar. Whither? To Death?”* But the times of doubt were rare and were overcome; his life is a hymn not to doubt but to confidence, not to despair but to struggle.

The quarter of a million who marched in Washington the day he died, heard his name called and knew that he had carried the banner at their head for over half a century. He died, his widow told me, without pain, fully lucid to the last, and after the sun had set and the darkness had gathered.

Characteristically he had written what he labelled his Last Message, in preparation for the final rest. It was dated June 26, 1957 and was given to the keeping of his wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois. It was read at his funeral:

It is much more difficult in theory than actually to say the last good-bye to one's loved ones and friends and to all familiar things of this life. I am going to take a long, deep and endless sleep. This is not a punishment but a privilege to which I looked forward for years.

I have loved my work, I have loved people and my play, but always I have been uplifted by the thought that what I have done well will live long and justify my life; that what I have done ill or never finished can now be handed on to others for endless days to be finished, perhaps better than I could have done.

And that peace will be my applause.

One thing alone I charge you. As you live, believe in life. Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader and fuller life.

The only possible death is to lose belief in this truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long.

Good-bye.

Of a friend who died in Georgia in 1915—breaking his heart in the fight against oppression—Du Bois then wrote: "All the long years the voices of little black children shall make his silence sweet." Surely, so it is with him.

But though now Du Bois is silent, we hear him; all who seek the Good Life will hear him forever. The Beacon dims, but the Dawn rises. We thank you, dear Dr. Du Bois.