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REVISITING W.E.D. DU BOIS'S LEGACY IN THE HISTORIC STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL EMANCIPATION IN AMERICA OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Résumé

Cet article explore l'héritage de William Edward Burghardt Du Bois dans la lutte historique pour l'émancipation des africains américains aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique. L'étude aborde la pertinence contemporaine de l'idéologie de Du Bois dans la quête de l'équité raciale. Sa philosophie continue d'alimenter les discussions sur l'inégalité des races et la justice sociale depuis la perpétuation du racisme ainsi que les stéréotypes contre les africains américains. Ses contributions intellectuelles, son activisme, et son érudition marquent les plus dures périodes de la ségrégation et la discrimination. En effet, la lutte pour la prospérité intellectuelle des opprimés est l'une des plus efficaces alternatives de Du Bois en faveur de la lutte pour l'émancipation des Noirs. Dans ce processus, il crée le Mouvement Niagara en 1905 qui échoue tout simplement. En 1909 le mouvement Association Nationale pour le Progrès des Noirs A. N. P. N. inspirée par le précédent voit le jour. À cet égard, la présente investigation utilise la théorie postcoloniale pour analyser et interpréter ses œuvres ainsi que tous documents relatifs à l'activisme des Noirs. Comme cadre méthodologique majeur, l'approche qualitative permet de collecter les données. Enfin, les résultats de l'analyse ont montré que les idées et les convictions de Du Bois sont intemporelles en ce sens que sa philosophie a positivement impacté le paysage interracial dans la société Américaine

Mots clés : activisme, africains américains, équité, héritage, racisme.

Abstract

This article explores William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's legacy in the historical fight for African Americans' emancipation in the United States of America. The study aims to delve into the contemporary relevance of Du Bois's ideology in the quest for more racial equity and its impacts on Black people. His philosophy continues to shape discussions on race inequality and social justice since the perpetuation of racism and stereotypes against African Americans. His intellectual contributions, activism, and scholarship mark the hardest periods of racial segregation and discrimination. Actually, the struggle for the oppressed people's intellectual prosperity is Du Bois's most efficient alternatives for Blacks' emancipation. In this process, he initiates the Niagara Movement in 1905 which merely fails. In 1909, the movement of N.A.A.C.P. is founded out of the inspiration from the previous one. In this regard, the current investigation utilizes the postcolonial theory to analyze and interpret his works and any documents related to Blacks' activism. As main methodological framework, the qualitative approach allows to collect the textual data. As a result, the analysis has shown that Du Bois's thoughts and convictions are timeless in the sense that his philosophy have positively impacted the interracial landscape in the American society.

Key words : activism, african americans, equity, legacy, racism.

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Introduction

Like many oppressed people worldwide, the African Americans want more freedom. The emancipation proclaimed by President Abraham was not so effective in practice though it yielded blatant hope and optimism the former slaves. The emancipation fails to put an end to social and racial injustice against the Blacks and the former slaves, but it was a kind of beacon light of hope for the black communities in America. The decades following the American Civil War were entangled with legal acts, massive amendments, and systematic movements in the American societies. In this regard, B. V. Mullen (2016) contends : "... Du Bois was an ardent supporter of every anti-colonial struggle in his lifetime" (p.3). As a visionary, Du Bois prophesizes skin color problem after bondage era. He heralds (1903) as follows: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men...in America and the islands of the sea" (p. 5). His prophetic message comes true because there were barriers against Blacks at merely all spheres of life in the society: education, housing, transportation, healthcare, hosting in hotel, job hunting, and politics.

Du Bois sowed the seed of Black implacable struggle against discrimination, segregation, and its corollaries against the black people at the very beginning of the twentieth century. B.V. Murell (2016) writes: "In 1951, Du Bois signed his name to 'We Charge Genocide,' a petition to the United Nations drafted by the radical Civil Rights Congress charging the U.S. with the murder of more than 15 million African-Americans" (p.1). So, the battle for racial emancipation had been fully launched. The history has recorded much heroic effort from the activist associations for emancipation of Black people's in the American societies.

Du Bois's various movements for racial equality in America embed his sense of patriotism for his country. The paradoxically, to quote B. V. Mullen (2016): "Rarely remembered is... Du Bois, the fluid, creative and inspiring revolutionary thinker and activist for global emancipation." (p.2). His approach is sometimes viewed with mixed feeling despite the fact that his philosophy continues to shape discussions on race inequality and social justice as Black people continue to endure racism and stereotypes in the United States. Thus, this study aims to delve into both the contemporary relevance of Du Bois's ideology in the quest for more racial equity and its impacts on Black people. So, to what extent is his philosophy timeless and impactful? In this regard, the current investigation utilizes the postcolonial theory to analyze and interpret his works and any documents related to Blacks' activism. As main methodological framework, the qualitative approach allows to collect the textual data. The analysis is divided into three parts. Part one deals with Du Bois's anti-oppressive stand. Part two examines his consciousness-raising method. The last part explores the perpetuation of his approach against White supremacy.

1-Du Bois as Anti-Oppressive Icon

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an American sociologist, socialist, historian, and Pan-Africanist civil rights activist. He completed graduate work at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin and Harvard University. He became the first African American to earn a doctorate. Du Bois rose to national prominence as a leader of the Niagara Movement, a group of black civil rights activists seeking equal rights. Du Bois brilliant educational background and career contradicts stereotypes against the Black communities viewed as intellectually inferior compared to White people.

In the history of the struggle for Blacks emancipation in America, he worked responsibly to help advance the oppressive communities. For instance, he voices his support for women's social and economic equality, nuclear disarmament, universal public health care, and an end to wars everywhere. At that time, the government of the United States disapproves of his policy. B. V. Mullen (2016) puts it: "Reasons for the erasure from public view of many of these parts of Du Bois's life and thinking are multiple. He was an early victim of McCarthyism in the U.S., the widespread anti-Communist panic that overtook the United States during the Cold War" (p.3). That is all the more evident since Du Bois and his supporters opposed the Atlanta Compromise. Instead, he insisted on full civil rights and increased political representation, which he believed would be brought about by the African-American intellectual elite. He referred to this group as the Talented tenth, a concept under the umbrella of racial uplift, and believed that African Americans needed the chances for advanced education to develop its leadership. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

Du Bois used his position in the NAACP to respond to racist incidents. After the First World War, he attended the Pan-African Congresses, embraced socialism and became a professor at Atlanta University. Once the Second World War had ended, he engaged in peace activism and was targeted by the FBI. He spent the last years of his life in Ghana and died in Accra on August 27, 1963. In that dynamic of his philosophy, Du Bois contributes to the dissemination and the consolidation of a kind of philosophy hostile to the phenomenon of segregation, discrimination, racial inequality and stereotypes. He vigorously condemns racial bias and stands against it. To cite B. V. Mullen (2016) : "In the world today, too often the public legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois is narrowed to polite advocate of "racial uplift," scholar of African-American history, culture and psychology, or misguided civil rights activist who succumbed in later years to a deformed version of Communism called Stalinism"(p.2). Actually, Du Bois was a committed activists for the future of the Black folks before and after the abolition of slavery. Divergent comes up and some Black activists are critical of his approach. R. Rabaka (2009) underscores :

In his address, Du Bois advocated the radical democratization and internationalization of black leadership and the black liberation struggle. Though he had intimated it previously, or so he thought, he now wanted to strongly stress that black leaders and the black liberation struggle must be preoccupied with more than merely the "race question" and achieving racial justice. (p.304)

In spite of misunderstanding between some Black activists they share a common inherent purpose: the betterment of the black living conditions in the American societies and the diaspora. For the better understanding of the monumental legacy of Du Bois in the tremendous

struggle of Black activists for the racial emancipation of the colored people in America, one needs to succinctly scrutinize his doctrine.

2-African Americans' Awareness-raising through Du Boisism

First of all, the career of Du Bois started when he graduated from Fisk University, a historical Black institution in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1888. He received a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895. His doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, was published in 1896. Du Bois originally believes that social science can provide the knowledge to solve the race problem. In the long run, he is disenchanted. He gradually comes to the conclusion that in a climate of virulent racism, expressed in such evils as lynching, peonage, disfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation laws, and race riots, social change could be accomplished only through agitation and protest. In this view, he clashed with the most influential Black leader of the period, Booker T. Washington, who, preaching a philosophy of accommodation, urged Blacks to accept discrimination for the time being and elevate themselves through hard work and economic gain, thus winning the respect of whites. In 1903, in his famous book *The Soul of Black Folk*, Du Bois charged that Washington's strategy, rather than freeing the Black man from oppression, would serve only to perpetuate it. This attack crystallized the opposition to Booker T. Washington among many Black intellectuals, polarizing the leaders of the Black community into two wings: the "conservative" supporters of Washington and his "radical" opposing critics, championed by Du Bois.

Since the very beginning of his activism, Du Bois undertakes various systems and strategies. He adopts those strategies to effectively carry out the theoretical philosophy for a more pertinent practical results in African Americans' struggle for a fair racial emancipation in the American societies. Two years later, in 1905, He takes the lead in founding the Niagara Movement, which was dedicated chiefly to attacking the platform of Booker T. Washington. The small organization, which met annually until 1909, was seriously weakened by internal squabbles and Washington's opposition. But it was significant as an ideological forerunner and direct inspiration for the interracial NAACP, founded in 1909. Du Bois played a prominent part in the creation of the NAACP and became the association's director of research and editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*.

In this role, he wields an unequalled influence among middle-class Blacks and progressive whites as the propagandist for the Black protest from 1910 until 1934. Both in the Niagara Movement and in the NAACP, Du Bois acted mainly as an integrationist. In *The Soul of Black Folk*, he (1903) expresses the characteristic dualism of Black Americans:

One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder....He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p.9)

The foregoing extract indicates that African Americans feel as "alien" in the United States. They have the feeling of being part American and part African. According to B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989) they are confronted with "Hybridization" (p.102). However, for Du Bois's that duality should not deprive the Black communities of the American citizenship. Du Bois (1903) says as follows: "... It is possible for a man to be both a Negro and

an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without the door of opportunity closed... in his face” (p. 9).

Indeed, Du Bois consciously develops a kind of concept regarding the ideology of Black’s idea of “Americanness”. This attitude yields such complexity as twoness for Black social and professional life in the American societies as we have previously mentioned. In other words, it consists of a kind of double consciousness theory which introduced the concept of dual identity in sociology. To quote B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989), Black people are the “marginal” (p.103). Consequently, they are victim of what B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989) term their “The syncretic” genotype (p.103).

The concept of dual complexity also explains the internal conflict experienced by African Americans being both American and Black, therefore, challenging established societal understanding and consideration against the black folks. That accounts for what R. Rabaka (2009) calls Du Bois’s: “revolutionary re-[Ameri]canization” (p.297). African Americans’ doubleness influences race and identity discourses in the American society.

In this connection, his nationalism takes several forms. His most influential one is his advocacy of Pan-Africanism. He believes that all people of African descents have common interests and should work together in the struggle for their freedom. As a leader of the first Pan-African Conference in London, in 1900 and the architect of four Pan-African Congresses held between 1919 and 1927, he articulates a cultural nationalism. Du Bois is the editor of *The Crisis* wherein he encourages the development of Black literature and art. He also urges his readers to see “Beauty in Black”. That ideology motivates his policy for the sponsoring of the “*Talented Tenth*”. Moreover, according to Du Bois’s Black Nationalism Black people should develop a separate “group economy” of producers’ and consumers’ cooperatives as a weapon for fighting economic discrimination and Black poverty. The ongoing influence of Du Bois on people from his period till nowadays is consequential.

3-Towards the Perpetuation of Du Bois’s Ideology

According to Oxford Languages, “Emancipation” can be defined as “the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation. The freeing of someone from slavery”. Emancipation, deriving from the verb “to emancipate” meaning to liberate, or to set free, in the American context, refers to that historical struggle which took place in America from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. It took its fundamental background from the legendary and heroic speech of President Abraham Lincoln about the emancipation proclamation in 1863. The proclamation declared “that all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious states “are, and henceforward, shall be free”. The decision makers of the United States tried to implement emancipation in the nation’s Constitution with the thirteenth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth amendments. The thirteenth amendment abolished the practice of slavery in America, the fourteenth gave the Blacks born in America or naturalized American the citizenship right, the fifteenth gave the Blacks the voting franchise.

Likewise, actions were taken to repair the damages but not as successfully as willed. Blacks were suffering from multidimensional injustice in the communities. In this regard, S. Doumbia argues (2015) : “The different results Du Bois reached by fighting for a better education, an increased quality of the Black schools, school integration and so on, produced a remarkable impact on African Americans and are still producing some impacts on them more

than half century after him” (p.276). The foregoing passage implies that, nowadays, Du Bois’s ideology influences Black people in the United States. Moreover, according to S. Doumbia (2015): “Most of the achievements of the Blacks are deeply rooted in education (high or college or university education), which they all (Black leaders) targeted as the central solution to their problems.” (p. 279). To reduce the racial gap between the oppressed and the oppressors, education is paramount. It allows many Black people to be financially independent by having access to high paid positions. That is the more evident as S. Doumbia (2015) sustains: “The heritage African Americans had from the possibility received from high education, which increased in the last part of the twentieth century in America generally and particularly with African Americans is considerable” (p. 279). So, thanks to Du Bois’s approach to mitigate interracial disparities, education opens ways to some jobs and positions African Americans did not get before. Indubitably, his strong influence on the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s to the 1960s accounts for those achievements. Since the Civil Rights Movement is going on, Du Bois’s legacy can be considered impactful. That is the reason why P. L. Sinitiere (2013) argues: “The creation of Du Bois’s clubs in the 1960s is also an important element of his legacy” (p. 279). Another event about Du Bois’s legacy that lasted till recently in 2004, took place in his hometown of Great Barrington, Massachusetts where they organized contests in his memory. Besides, Du Bois’s legacy can be found in Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech “Honoring Du Bois” at a Freedom ceremony at Carnegie Hall celebrating Du Bois’s 100th birthday. Martin Luther King Jr., quoted in S. DOUMBIA (2015), states:

History cannot ignore W. E. B. Du Bois, “thundered King only three months before his assassination”, because history has to reflect the truth and Dr. Du Bois was a tireless explorer and a gifted discoverer of social truths. His singular greatness lay in his quest for truth about his own people”. King also demanded a robust reckoning with Du Bois’s politics. “. . . it is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a communist. Our irrational obsessive anticommunism has led into too many quagmires . . . Dr. Du Bois has left us but he has not died”. (p. 276)

As abovementioned, the celebration of Du Bois’s memory exemplifies the patriotic impulse he initiated in his country. That also connotes that to cite M. Alexander (2010):

[African Americans grapple with] the continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. The new system had been developed and implemented swiftly, and it was largely invisible, even to people... who spent most of their waking hours fighting for justice. The drug war is the new Jim Crow...the criminal justice system is racist in many ways...[it has] problems of racial bias... (p.2)

The above passage corroborates that Black communities experience a new form of discriminatory practices. In line with Blacks’ activism, the biggest outcome of Du Bois’s struggle happens when desegregation of education is legally adopted by the constitution. On May 17th of 1954, the decision about “Brown vs Board” of Education of Topeka, Kansas is passed by the Supreme Court under the leadership of Chief Warren Earl. From that case, Du Bois does not hesitate to criticize the doctrine of “Separate but equal” as unconstitutional. He often petitions to counterattack the government policy. B. V. Mullen (2016) relates: “‘We Charge Genocide’ also linked state violence against African-Americans to U.S. imperialism: ‘White supremacy at home makes for colored massacres abroad. Both reveal contempt for

human life in a colored skin” (pp.1-2). The battle has been a blatant success despite the hard episodes he and his fellows came across. In this connection, R. Rabaka (2009) testifies: “Du Bois charged the new Talented Tenth, his Guiding Hundredth, with the task of providing “self-sacrificing,” “unselfish, farseeing” leadership through its “honesty of character and purity of motive” (p. 162). Du Bois urges the leading stratum among the African Americans to sacrifice themselves for the entire benefit of the oppressed communities. R. Rabaka (2009) observes : “He brazenly criticized his 1903 articulation of the Talented Tenth thesis, observing that it ‘put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro Problem was [purely] personal’” (p.299).

In addition, the desegregation of school and the historical non-violent demonstrations advocated by Martin Luther King Jr. are Du Bois’s legacy. Indeed, the latter is an anti-war activist and his opposition to war and violence against humanity became more conspicuous after World War II. In 1949, he makes a speech at the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace in New York. D. L. Lewis (1993) echoes a passage of his speech as follows:

I tell you, people of America, the dark world is on the move! It wants and will have Freedom, Autonomy and Equality. It will not be diverted in these fundamental rights by dialectical splitting of political hairs ... Whites may, if they will, arm themselves for suicide. But the vast majority of the world’s peoples will march on over them to freedom!” (p.685)

In trying to link the historical and legendary struggle for racial emancipation in America with the ongoing patriotic and anti-imperialistic fights, one can succinctly scrutinize the semantic and pragmatic weight of the idea of emancipation and its corollaries. The term “emancipation” implies the notion of liberation, freedom, advancement and independence.

By considering what African Americans endure in the twenty-first century in the United States of America, Du Bois’s ideology against racism can serve the oppressed people. The rampant racial injustice and other related stereotypes are catalysts which urge Black people to refer to their predecessors’ activism. To cite B. V. Mullen (2016):

“Once the classic method of lynching was the rope,” the petition said. “Now it is the policeman’s bullet. To many an American the police are the government, certainly its most visible representative. We submit that the evidence suggests that the killing of Negroes has become police policy in the United States and that police policy is the most practical expression of government policy. (p.1)

As indicated in the excerpt, police brutalities against African Americans equate to lynching. Today, Black people also resort to petitions as strategy to curb race-based violence targeting Black communities. Without exaggerating, that connotes that Black people endure unfathomable neo-colonialistic and imperialistic policies. The terms neo-colonialism and imperialism are concepts that imply domination, subjugation, paternalism and condescendence. In that way, there is an idea of constant dependence and Master and Slave relationship. In this respect, R. Rabaka (2009) asserts: “[Americans are still] marginalized and ostracized” (p.297). That means that the oppressor keeps on reigning over the oppressed since some achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. The subjugated people experience R. Rabaka (2009): “The diabolical dialectic of white intellectual superiority and black intellectual inferiority” (p.298). Racial profiling claims a lot of lives among African Americans. In spite of the breakthrough of some African American leaders in the political arena like Barack Obama,

Nancy Pelosi, Kamala Harris, to name but a few, many Black people feel “unhomed”, H. K. Bhabha (1994) observes (p.9).

Recent riots against police brutalities are testimonies of Whites’ contempt towards Black communities. As consequence, Black people demonstrate to denounce such practices which undermine their existence. Even though the perpetrators of those killings are taken to court, lots of trials are far from being fair. The oppressed People exercise sacrifice and patriotism by being inspired by their predecessors, notably Du Bois as B. V. Mullen writes: “Some 60 years later, in 2011, after the American vigilante George Zimmerman murdered the 17-year-old African-American Trayvon Martin, a newly created U.S. activist group named itself ‘We Charge Genocide’ in honor of the 1951 U.N. petition” (p.2). The African Americans stand firm against racism because of their constant commitment to overcome the challenges. They are imbued with such golden values and characters as solidarity and resilience.

Conclusion

This study has examined Du Bois’s activism and philosophy for more racial equity in the American society. The aim of the reflection was to show the relevancy of his legacy upon the new -generation African Americans confronted with White supremacists’ neo-colonialism. One notes that the emancipation of African Americans has not only been effective, but also constantly perennial for the desegregation of the Black communities. At last, the findings of the analysis have revealed that to face the ongoing challenges hindering their local social, political, economic prosperity the African Americans are inspired by Du Bois’s ideology. Spanning years his philosophy has become timeless, for it advocates universal values such as emancipation, freedom, and socioeconomic equity.

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