

A black and white close-up portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois, showing his face from the nose up, with a mustache and a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

**DEMOCRACY'S
RECONSTRUCTION**

THINKING POLITICALLY WITH W.E.B. DU BOIS

LAWRIE BALFOUR

Democracy's Reconstruction

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Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois

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Reconstruction

*Thinking Politically with
W. E. B. Du Bois*

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For my parents

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CONTENTS

Preface ix

List of Abbreviations of Books by

W. E. B. Du Bois xiii

- ONE Politics in the Present-Past 1
- TWO Unreconstructed Democracy and the Claim
of Reparations 23
- THREE Resurrecting John Brown 47
- FOUR Practicing Critical Race Autobiography 71
- FIVE Representative Women: Slavery and the
Gendered Ground of Citizenship 97
- SIX Black World, White Nation: Remapping
Political Theory 115

Acknowledgments 141

Notes 143

Index of Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois 189

Index 191

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PREFACE

WHEN THE MOMENT CAME FOR Martin Luther King, Jr., to memorialize W. E. B. Du Bois at a ceremony at Carnegie Hall in February 1968, he sketched a portrait of a scholar, organizer, and radical advocate of black power who embraced “humanity in all its hues.”¹ Recalling the events and causes that gave shape to Du Bois’s life, King likened U.S. support for a repressive regime in Vietnam to the compromise that ended the “monumental achievement” of Reconstruction in 1876; he railed against the pernicious effects of an anticommunist campaign that distorted Du Bois’s memory and perverted American politics; and he reminded white Americans of the depth of their debt to a man who committed himself to undoing their ignorance of their own history. Together with King’s ambitious outline for a march on Washington that he would not live to see, these observations reflect a pivotal and perilous moment in the civil rights leader’s biography and reveal as much about King in his final weeks as they do about the man he came to honor.

Yet King’s words also reach beyond that context in two interrelated ways. First, he insisted that Du Bois be remembered as a teacher: “He would have wanted his life to teach us something about our tasks of emancipation.”² Chief among these lessons, King observed, was that “the keystone in the arch of oppression was the myth of inferiority.”³ Contending against degraded popular images of African Americans and a historical profession that represented slavery as a benign institution and black citizenship as a mistake, Du Bois pursued the truth about black women and men as a lifelong vocation. Second, King concluded his remarks by announcing that Du Bois’s “greatest virtue was his committed empathy with all the oppressed and his divine

dissatisfaction with all forms of injustice.”⁴ Committed empathy and divine dissatisfaction: King’s emphasis on these democratic virtues indicates how we might honor *his* memory, but it also suggests why Du Bois’s voice remains so vital in an era hailed by many as “postracial.”

King’s words resonate now, because they indicate why the particular combination of Du Bois’s historical gifts with his attunement to all forms of injustice is urgently needed, even after the legal edifice of Jim Crow has been dismantled. By training his audience’s attention on the political significance of Du Bois’s rewriting of history and joining it to contemporary forms of subjugation, King countered the impulse to construe the passage of the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s as a signal that the quest for racial equality was finally over. Notwithstanding the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, King contrasted the uncertainty of “the date of full emancipation” with a promise that “the struggle for it will endure.”⁵ King’s caution reminds us who bears the costs of premature declarations of a postracial or post-civil rights era. It upends the assumptions that give rise to smug statements that African Americans now have “no more excuses” and requires more searching consideration of the behavior of the privileged and unjust institutional structures that have been too readily excused.

Maybe the connection seems strained. In contrast to the tumultuous moment of King’s address, the dominant images of recent years include Barack Obama’s acceptance of the Democratic nomination for the presidency on the forty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington and the scene of Americans’ first African American president greeting jubilant well-wishers in front of the Capitol on January 21, 2009. Such images support the view that slavery, Jim Crow, and their legacies have lost their grip on American public life. Even if the initial wonder of the election has since given way to a more complicated reality, demanding renewed attention to racial injustice may seem ill-timed or misdirected. Not only have African Americans realized aspirations unthinkable in Du Bois’s time—or King’s—but preoccupation with the unfinished “tasks of emancipation” may be divisive and distracting in a time marked by violent conflict, environmental devastation, and economic crisis. Why focus now on the historical injuries of a relatively small portion of a populace in which suffering is both immediate and widespread? King’s memorial address offers an answer. In his celebration of Du Bois’s “priceless dedication to his people,” King links that dedication to unmet challenges of poverty, exploitation, illiteracy, and imperial war that cross color lines and exceed national borders. Du Bois’s particular commitments, in this light, are revealed as universal, not parochial.⁶ His passion to renarrate stories of the slaves and their descendents sustains a form of democratic thinking that

enables us to address contemporary concerns by working *through* the historical devaluation of nonwhite lives, rather than sidestepping that history or treating it as an aberration.

This book approaches the question of democracy by reading Du Bois's work in the spirit of King's remarks. Animated by a conviction that regarding racial injustice as a bygone problem disables contemporary efforts to address a range of political challenges, I mine Du Bois's political thought as a resource. Drawing on his vast corpus of published work, I highlight those elements of his thought that enable us to interpret the present and conceive alternative futures by regarding the past anew. Du Bois, I argue, enables us to grasp ways in which racial subjugation has been constitutive, rather than anomalous, in American history and in modern experience more broadly. He sheds light on a political inheritance that encompasses both a commitment to liberty and equality, refashioned and enlarged by generations, and a tradition of violence and disregard that has also been refashioned, and even enlarged over time. He offers us tools with which to consider a self-described democracy in which a black man can be president, but incarceration has become more common than college graduation or military service among young African American men;⁷ in which an African American woman can assume the presidency of an Ivy League university, but black children are disproportionately represented in the measures of our collective failure: poor schools, unlivable housing, inadequate health care. To take Du Bois as inspiration and guide does not mean to take him unquestioningly or in all regards as an authority. The richness of his written legacy, capacious enough to contain a wealth of tensions and contradictions, invites contemporary readers to learn from and to argue with him. Through a prolonged engagement with Du Bois's thinking and his example, then, I hope to show how we might cultivate an unwillingness to accept, uncontested, a status quo in which the inheritances of slavery and segregation still matter. In other words: "Let us be dissatisfied."⁸

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OF BOOKS BY W. E. B. DU BOIS

- BR* *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., Cleveland: Meridian, 1964).
- DOD* *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; repr., New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984).
- DW* *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999).
- JB* *John Brown*, ed. John David Smith (1909; repr., Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).
- SAST* *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (1896; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1970).
- SBF* *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (1903; repr., Boston: Bedford, 1997).

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Democracy's Reconstruction

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Memory—of what has been, of acts of commission or omission, of a responsibility abdicated—affects the future conduct of power in any form. Failure to adopt some imaginative recognition of such a principle merely results in the enthronement of a political culture that appears to know no boundaries—the culture of impunity.

—Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*¹

Facing the Worst

On January 10, 2007, members of the Virginia General Assembly introduced a controversial joint resolution, atoning for Virginia's part in the enslavement of Africans and calling for racial reconciliation. The reaction was furious. In late February, the Senate and the House of Delegates unanimously passed an amended resolution that expressed regret for slavery and for the exploitation of Native Americans and, again, called for reconciliation.² During the intervening weeks, as Virginians prepared to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, they also debated the presence of the slave past. Many responded with outrage when Delegate Frank Hargrove complained that the time had come for African Americans to “get over” slavery. Others worried that the language of apology would trigger demands for reparations. Still others asked whether an apology without a commitment to material change amounted to an empty gesture. Although the passage of the resolution did little to put these conflicting concerns to rest, its broad

endorsement signaled that the aim of reconciliation had, in some respects, been served. As Delegate Donald McEachin, one of the resolution's original sponsors, noted, the measure was the first of its kind and potentially a model for others. "This session will be remembered for a lot of things," McEachin remarked, "but 20 years hence I suspect one of those things will be the fact that we came together and passed this resolution."³

McEachin is surely right. The symbolic power of an official acknowledgment of slavery issuing from the former capital of the Confederacy is undeniable, and the resolution has spurred similar measures in other states, as well as the U.S. Congress.⁴ Nevertheless, the political substance of the resolution is less clear-cut. One way to gauge that substance is to consider textual differences between the resolution that aroused resistance in January and the one that secured wide approval in February. In the eyes of many commentators, the crucial change was the replacement of a language of "apology" with one of "regret."⁵ Where the former imputed responsibility to present-day Virginians—an imputation adamantly disavowed by those who view responsibility as a matter of identifying individual wrongdoers and victims—the new language registers a sense of sorrow for bygone crimes.⁶ More significant than this change of wording, however, are other alterations that received relatively scant attention. Three issues stand out.

First, the initial resolution made direct the connections between the institution of racial slavery and contemporary racial conditions. It traced a route from the Atlantic slave trade through the decades leading up to the Civil War to the Black Codes, lynchings, disenfranchisement, and de jure segregation that followed emancipation to the present day. "In the Commonwealth, home to the first African slaves" the resolution declared, "the vestiges of slavery are ever before African American citizens," who continue to confront both "the overt racism of hate groups" and subtler obstacles in their efforts to secure decent health care, education, housing, and business opportunities. Indignities rooted in chattel slavery were thus characterized as ongoing, and "the ghosts of their collective pasts" were said to haunt both white and African American citizens.⁷ Although the resolution did not directly call for material reparations to address this haunted present, it invoked "the broken promise of '40 acres and a mule'" and tied that promise to a pattern of denial "of any responsibility for the centuries of legally sanctioned deprivation of African Americans of their endowed rights or for contemporary policies that perpetuate the status quo." None of this language remains in the final resolution.

Second, the original resolution balanced its account of crimes committed against African slaves and their descendants with an account of their efforts

to secure their own freedom. In addition to noting resistance by African captives and slaves, the resolution acknowledged black Americans' service during the Civil War. The final resolution, by contrast, offers a general expression of "acknowledgment and thanksgiving for the contributions of Native Americans and African Americans to the Commonwealth and this nation, and to the propagation of the ideals of liberty, justice, and democracy."⁸ Where it specifies these contributions, the resolution shifts the attribution of agency to the Commonwealth itself: "In recent decades, Virginia's affirmation of the founding ideals of liberty and equality have been made evident by providing some of the nation's foremost trailblazers for civil rights and electing a grandson of slaves to the Commonwealth's highest elective office." In light of such alterations, it is worth noting that two paragraphs which survive the revision process intact recall how Africans were "sold at auction as chattel, like inanimate property or animals" and specify that "the ethos of the Africans was shattered" and their families destroyed. Although these words convey the character of the violation represented by New World slavery, to present an account of thoroughgoing cultural destruction, and especially to emphasize its effect on family life, without recognizing African or African American roles in resisting and dismantling slavery, reproduces narratives of black victimhood and hints at a legacy of cultural deficiency.

Third, changes to the structure of the two resolutions indicate a dramatic shift in political intentions. "Slavery" was the first word of the original resolution. It began by situating Virginia's history within a history of enslavement stretching back to the ancient world; it then proceeded by recalling American participation in the international slave economy through much of the nineteenth century. As it moved forward to the present, furthermore, the resolution tied the expression of atonement not only to President Bush's comments at Goree Island, Senegal, but also to apologies by European and African nations for their roles in the slave trade and more broadly to a growing consciousness that historic injustice must be reckoned with "lest the world forget."⁹ The amended resolution, by contrast, enfolds the crimes perpetrated against Africans and Native Americans within a story that begins and ends in Jamestown. Indeed, slavery is not named until the fifth paragraph. The first mention of slavery now follows the observation that "despite the 'self-evident' character of these fundamental principles [articulated in the Declaration of Independence], the moral standards of liberty and equality have been transgressed during much of Virginia's and America's history, and our Commonwealth and nation are striving to fulfill the ideals proclaimed by the founders to secure the 'more perfect union' that is the aspiration of our national identity and charter." Even as the resolution describes slavery in

unflinching terms, this contrast of passive and active voice insinuates that the disregard for democratic principles was an anomaly or a departure from “the ideals that bind us together as a people.”¹⁰ Slavery is thus rendered containable, its effects bounded spatially by national borders and temporally by the end of state-sanctioned racial hierarchy sometime in the past.¹¹ If the resolution marks a departure in a society not given to reckoning with history’s underside, in other words, it stops short of allowing that that history has concrete bearing on the present. History is “both denied and heralded.”¹²

In light of these alterations, the call for reconciliation is troubling. Although the measure deserves credit for enjoining the remembrance of historic injustice and aspiring to foster a sense of shared endeavor among members of a heterogeneous, and often mutually distrustful, citizenry, it raises questions that it cannot, in its present form, address. What would constitute an adequate act of coming to terms with the past? What does reconciliation require? And from whom? Does a resolution that simultaneously reopens the past and insulates present-day citizens from its effects provide the basis from which they might begin to bridge their historic divisions? Does it press beyond what William Connolly calls “the slippery language of regret without moral indictment and, more significantly, of the recognition of undeserved suffering without a plan to curtail it in the future”?¹³ And if it does not, is it far-fetched to wonder whether the call for reconciliation, no matter how sincerely expressed, will be interpreted by many Virginians as a demand that black citizens “get over it”?

By raising these concerns, I do not intend to belittle the Virginia Assembly or the expression of regret. Instead, I offer the resolution as an illustration of a paradox in contemporary political life: at the very moment when Americans appear willing, finally, to talk about slavery, claims about the ongoing challenges of racial injustice and their links to the slave past are rendered publicly unspeakable. If there is a new openness to acknowledging white supremacy, it seems, the price of acknowledgment is its banishment to a prior era. Worse, even as state legislatures and other institutions rush to express their regret for historic injustice, structures of redress that were put in place during the civil rights era are being dismantled. While historical markers and monuments give new public visibility to the slaves and their descendants, there is little enthusiasm for the work of eliminating, concretely, the imprint of the past on current social and political arrangements. The uneasy coexistence of regret and evasiveness, openness and closure, that characterizes the Virginia resolution thus provides an occasion for thinking more generally about Americans’ collective failure to grapple with the life and afterlife of slavery.

This book attempts to come to terms with one dimension of that failure: political theorists' reluctance to treat race and racial injustice as fundamental to the study of modern democratic life. Where legislators must heed the demands of constituents and make compromises for the sake of political outcomes, political theorists (particularly those with tenure) inhabit a relatively protected sphere in which to think hard about the continuing effects of the massive displacement, exploitation, and slaughter that characterized the African slave trade, New World slavery, and modern colonial conquest. Nevertheless, our inquiry into "the ideals of liberty, justice, and democracy" has rendered many of us insensible to their violation. This insensibility reflects a general reluctance by political theorists to probe the conditions of injustice as distinct from and worthy of attention equal to the concept of justice.¹⁴ But it also bespeaks a more specific evasion of questions of race and racial injustice. The nonpresence of these questions in academic conferences and colloquia, in courses on modern political thought, and in the vast production of books and journal articles is striking. It is also disabling. For our inattention to the slaves' perspectives on the promise of emancipation ("Where in our history can we hope to find visions of freedom untainted by slavery?")¹⁵ and to the deep roots of sedimented forms of inequality distorts our conception of the political world. It reinforces a view of racial hierarchy as tangential rather than fundamental to the development of our most cherished political ideals.¹⁶

By treating race as a specialty topic or an artifact of the past, we inhibit our capacity to understand many of the most difficult challenges of contemporary political life. We fail, in other words, to face the worst. "Facing the worst," observes George Kateb, "is surely one of the purposes of reading the canon, just as it is, of course, of reading anything worthwhile in the whole field of the humanities."¹⁷ Kateb's aim is to raise the question of whether the texts that typically make up graduate reading lists and that are the basis for survey courses in Western political thought are capable of assisting political theorists in comprehending "the scale of humanly inflicted suffering on human beings and the mentalities that permit the initiation and implementation of such deeds."¹⁸ It is puzzling, in this light, that generations of students of political theory have sidestepped or minimized the "scale of humanly inflicted suffering" associated with modern slavery and colonial conquest. Perhaps the puzzle is solved when we consider how many of the great modern political thinkers wrote from positions of racial privilege; if they were not themselves involved in slavery or imperial projects, they were mostly insulated from their cruelties. If the standpoint of these thinkers explains their inattention to questions of race, then expanding the canon appears to be an apt way to proceed. And I would submit that political theory will remain