# DU BOIS AND MARX, DU BOIS AND MARXISM

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**Abstract**

W. E. B. Du Bois's engagement with the thought of Karl Marx forms an important aspect of his intellectual biography, yet its contours crystallize explicitly only late in his written work, and its development prior to the 1930s remains insufficiently understood. In order to bring to light the mix of criticisms, reservations, ideals, and inspirations that shape this reception, this article explores its trajectory as exhaustively as the available documentation permits, beginning from Du Bois's early training in economics as a university student, continuing through his increasing attention to socialism in the early 1900s and his embrace of Soviet communism in the 1920s, and culminating in the 1930s in his teaching of Marx at Atlanta University and the overtly Marxian positions he adopts in *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

**Keywords:** W. E. B. Du Bois, Karl Marx, Marxism, Socialism, Communism, Political Theory, Race

Looking back in the 1930s, W. E. B. Du Bois described his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk* as "a cry at midnight thick within the veil, when none rightly knew the coming day" (2007c, p. xxxiii). This retrospective judgment—from the pages of *Dusk of Dawn* (2007c)—was expressed after his fullest embrace of Marxian historiography, Du Bois believing that he had at last found a method by which to analyze the course of human events with scientific assurance. If in 1903 'the coming day' had looked like an unknowable haze, decades later, the mechanics of social change seemed to have been well enough established to discern the shape that that day could have, and what steps might get us there. The arc thus traced in his thought between the time of *Souls*, which was marked by the nineteenth-century Historicist paradigms then current among the Prussian elite, and the distinctly twentieth-century Marxian mode of his later magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1976a), represents a crucial development in Du Bois's intellectual and political biography, yet remains insufficiently explored. When did Du Bois become a Marxist? What was his view of Marxism and of Marxists before he became one? "Du Bois's early relationship with Marxism was critical, complex, and extremely complicated," Reiland Rabaka (2008) has observed, and "many Du Bois scholars have had a tendency to quickly pass over" the complexities of that early phase "in order to get to his classic *Black Reconstruction*" (pp. 27–28, n. 1). Beginning from his university studies and ending in the 1930s, this article seeks to give due attention to those early twists and turns.[1]

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Du Bois was a septuagenarian when he wrote the words above, and any discussion of him as a Marxist must not lose sight of the fact that it was not until that point in his life that he could be described as such. He had been involved with the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party of Germany, or SPD) while a student in Berlin in the 1890s—that party welcomed the participation of foreigners such as himself, and, for his part, he saw it as a solidly progressive social force within Germany. From socialist politics in the United States, however, he cultivated a distance: insofar as it vigorously looked out for the interests of White laborers, the SPD's nominal American counterpart systematically acted against the interests of Black labor, and this fact was decisive in shaping Du Bois's relation to it. As he writes in *Dusk of Dawn*, communism as conceived in Europe "did not envisage a situation where instead of a horizontal division of classes, there was a vertical fissure, a complete separation of classes by race, cutting square across the economic layers"; in the United States, he observes, "the split between white and black workers was greater than that between white workers and capitalists" (2007c, p. 103). Although he felt, in principle, an affinity to its politics, he therefore did not join the American Socialist Party until 1911, and, in a move that seems counter-intuitive today, he chose during the 1912 presidential election to leave the party after only a year, and endorse Woodrow Wilson. It is only later in that decade, with the advent of the Russian Revolution, that Du Bois began for the first time—though with express uncertainty—to consider Marxism seriously as a political model. "When the Russian Revolution took place, I scarce knew what it meant to me and to the world," he concedes. "Was Marxian Communism possible or a wild, perverted dream?" (1982, pp. 275–276). Only after travelling to see the Soviet Union first-hand in 1926 was he ready to declare—albeit still with certain qualifications—his "astonishment and wonder" at the Soviet project: "I may be partially deceived and half-informed," he wrote in *The Crisis*. "But if what I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik" (1983, p. 452). From this point onward, his scholarly paradigms would become increasingly Marxian, and his political outlook more overtly Marxist. If we are looking for discussion of Marx or Marxism within Du Bois's published work, it is only in the 1930s that we find a consistent trail. Of course, by the seventh decade of his life, his basic scholarly methods were already long since entrenched; Marxism therefore in no way replaces the economic, historiographical, and sociological paradigms that had guided his work until then. Rather, it builds upon, melds with, and modernizes the approaches that he had carried with him since his training at Harvard and in Berlin in the 1890s.

While he was an undergraduate at Fisk in the late 1880s, it is extremely unlikely that he took serious notice of Marx at all. In a crossed-out section in the manuscript of his Fisk commencement address on Otto von Bismarck, Du Bois passingly mentions the contemporaneous German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, along with G. W. F. Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer, documenting that such theorists were certainly on his radar at that time (see Barkin, p. 445). The reference to Lassalle, however, only breezily dismisses his ideas as "vagaries," (Du Bois 1888) and it is safe to say that any student who lionizes Bismarck as rhapsodically as Du Bois does in that address cannot possibly have a meaningful sympathy with radical politics of whatever stripe. Fisk's curriculum was "proudly conventional in the best traditions of the New England faculty," writes David Levering Lewis (1993), and it certainly would not have occurred to the dean "to add the just-translated first volume of *Das Kapital* to the college's supplementary reading list" (p. 77). At Fisk he got a classical education—"I had an astonishing amount of Latin and Greek"—and only at Harvard would he be brought abreast of "modern science" (Du Bois 1960). "Fisk students were emphatically men and women of their Victorian times," Lewis notes, and at this stage, Du Bois was very much, and proudly, a product of his Fisk education (1993, p. 78).

At Harvard, Du Bois came into greater contact with various modes of social thought, but, as he later recalls, "[s]ocialism as a dream of philanthropy or as will-o-wisp of hotheads was dismissed as unimportant" (2007a, p. 84).[2] Marx himself "was mentioned only incidentally," and if mentioned, it was only as "one of the dreamers who had thought up a new system but it had never been tried" (Du Bois 1960). While Harvard's philosophy department, where Du Bois would form some of his most influential intellectual relationships, "was perhaps the best in its day, certainly in America," he notes that, in contrast, "the teaching in the social sciences was poor and as a scientific field unrecognized" (1954, p. 327). Frank Taussig, with whom Du Bois studied economics, championed "reactionary British economics" (Du Bois 2007a, p. 84), and "never mentioned Marx" (Du Bois 1954, pp. 327–328); rather, "[w]e reverenced Ricardo and wasted long hours on the 'Wages-fund'" (Du Bois 2007c, p. 20). Edward Cummings, a German-trained American who was the first to offer a sociology course at Harvard, "mentioned Marx only in passing and did not stress his significance" (Du Bois 1954, p. 328). Thus, Du Bois "came out of Harvard and the Harvard Graduate School with no consciousness of Karl Marx as being of any more importance than any other thinker, if as much" (Du Bois 1960); this being the case, he "gave little time to first hand study of his work" (Du Bois 1954, p. 328). When Du Bois submitted an essay on wage-fund theory for a prize competition at the college in 1891, he did include a brief discussion of Marx, based on the recent English translation of *Capital* (1887), but while his discussion does nominally touch upon matters of concern to Marx, his treatment of them remains politically altogether anodyne. "It was not until I was long out of college and had finished the first phase of my teaching career that I began to see clearly the connection of economics and politics," he acknowledges in *Dusk of Dawn* (2007c, pp. 20–21), and his view of wages and capital as of 1891 indeed do seem to take shape largely according to the influence of Taussig. When he writes, for example, that some aspects of wages are "so inexplicable as to defy Science and Ethics," he betrays an outlook that is clearly innocent of core methodological and ethical commitments of Marxian economics. In Du Bois's exposition, Marx is grouped together with lesser-known contemporaries such as Rodbertus, Gunton, and Mithoff, who held that "the classic doctrines were right but not carried to the logical conclusions." Du Bois acknowledges Marx as being, on the strength of *Capital*, "the great expounder and elaborator" of this system, yet he emphasizes that it "was first stated by Rodbertus." Both Marx and Rodbertus, he moreover asserts, "are now generally conceded by the Socialists themselves to have carried the Ricardean principle of Cost of Production too far"; nor are they fully original: "Whatever of truth there was in their doctrine may be found in Cairnes."[3] Only after his studies in Berlin would broader principles of both science and ethics play a role in his economic thinking, and even then, this would be more in line with the German Historical School, as represented by his teachers Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, than with Marx.

At the University of Berlin, Du Bois finally found himself amid considerable discussion of Marx's ideas, yet scholars there tended to make "a great deal of the men who had answered him," but to say little of Marx himself (Du Bois 1960). By the 1890s, his ideas were familiar enough among German social scientists to no longer require much introduction—therefore, recalls Du Bois, "we only studied the criticisms" (Du Bois 1960). An economics notebook that remains among Du Bois's papers at the University of Massachusetts does contain several mentions of Marx from his two years of study there (Du Bois undated a). In the first pages, Du Bois has jotted extensive bibliographical notes, including a chart of economic theorists organized into vertical columns according to nationality—British, French, German—and into horizontal halves that divide more mainstream theorists into the top half, and socialist theorists

into the bottom half, separated by a thick line. Among the socialists, we find Marx and Engels listed alongside such names as Owen, Saint-Simon, Blanc, and Lassalle. On another page, he has a list of recent German economic thinkers, including Knies, Rau, Schäffle, and Roscher—names largely unfamiliar today, but prominent and esteemed in the circles in which Du Bois was studying. On this list, Marx and Engels are the last two to appear. From the vantage point of the economics department of the University of Berlin, Marx and Engels seem indeed not to have enjoyed much more distinguished stature than any of these other figures. In his copy of the university's course catalogue from his second year there, Du Bois put a mark by a course on Lassalle and Marx offered by a certain Professor Oldenburg. This would seem to indicate interest in attending it; there is no evidence, though, that he did so.[4] Elsewhere in the lecture notebook, both Marx and Engels are mentioned once more, this time on a list dedicated specifically to socialist thought: here, their names are underlined, and appear alongside figures such as Wundt, Schäffle, Spencer, and Gumplowicz, as well as Schmoller himself.

A student of the German Historical School of economics, such as Du Bois wholeheartedly became at this time, would probably have felt a mixture of affinity and disaffinity to Marxism; as Kevin Repp (2000) writes, "The founders of the historical school differed strongly with Marx in their continued emphasis on national difference as a factor in the character and timing of economic development, but […] they firmly established national economics as a second strand of historical materialism that evolved alongside Marxist political economy in the 1850s and 1860s" (p. 31). The *Kathedersozialisten* ("socialists of the lectern"), as they were often called, represented, from today's perspective, a curious mix of progressive and conservative tendencies, and the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy), which gathered many of these scholars had, in fact, been founded partly in reaction to the increasing force and organization of labor movements in Germany (see Pribram, p. 216).[5] "Whereas Marx made the industrial proletariat the supreme agency of social change," writes Lewis (1993), Du Bois's teachers, "Schmoller and Wagner were elitists who expected the cream of the Prussian bureaucracy, much of it trained by them, to guide the guardian state scientifically as it intervened between the citizen and the market place" (p. 142). The variants of socialism espoused by this academic mandarin class had little sympathy for the more radical politics of the proletarian working class, and Du Bois was clearly more aligned with the former than the latter.[6]

"The prototype of the speculating scholar who works with books rather than his own observations, without understanding for either the world or of human nature, is Karl Marx," Schmoller (1949) would pronounce in his methodological writings from this time (p. 33; translation by the author). "Mathematical game playing was his favorite occupation; [these games] connect themselves, for him, with very abstract concepts and with general figures from the philosophy of history" (p. 33). Marx remains, in Schmoller's judgment, "perhaps further removed from the reliable empirical research that is demanded today than any other major national-economic thinker" (p. 33).[7] One need only recall the manner of methodologically meticulous sociological research that Du Bois would conduct upon his return to the United States—in *The Philadelphia Negro* (2014), for example, or throughout the Atlanta University Studies—and the contrast becomes clear: quantitatively sound empirical research, performed to the exacting standards taught in Berlin, was paramount for Du Bois at this time, and Marx's ideas, as he had been exposed to them, seemed to be the very antithesis of this. So long as Marxism appeared to be a matter of quixotically getting lost in books and numbers rather than directly confronting reality, it could only feel abstruse and inessential to a person of Du Bois's very concrete political ambitions. It is only when Marxism would become a matter of political *fact* rather than of theory that Du Bois finally arrived at Marx's books;

it is not the theory that led him to the politics, but the politics that would lead him to the theory.

Until the 1920s, then, any affinity between Du Bois and Marxism would remain latent at most. In an essay titled "The Afro-American," composed at the time of his studies in Berlin, he passingly glosses Black labor in the United States as an analogue to the European "proletariat" (2015, p. 37). In "The Conservation of Races," from later in the 1890s, he suggests a view of human history that seems both to be analogous to, yet also to contend with, the ideas of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx 2000a): "the history of the world," Du Bois writes, "is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history" (2015, p. 53). Thus, the world-historical role that Marx ascribes to class, Du Bois ascribes to race.[8] Such simultaneous kinship and incommensurability between their modes of thought will persist and will assert themselves more starkly decades later.

"Naturally I am attracted to the socialist movement," he writes, "but the history of the development of Marxism and of the revisionists like Lassalle, Bernstein, and Bakunin was too complicated for a student like myself to understand, who had received no real teaching along this line" (2007a, p. 106). There can be little doubt that the thicket of social ideas that were in the air in Berlin at the close of the nineteenth century would have been complicated even for the most astute newly arrived Harvard student to navigate, and a certain generality or imprecision do show themselves in some of his mentions. In the essay "The Present Condition of German Politics," (Du Bois undated b) composed during his time in Berlin, Du Bois makes a curious reference to Marx amid what is primarily a discussion of (as he terms it) the "neo-antisemitism" that was emerging in Germany in those years. He regards this bigotry as a historically anachronistic "recrudescence" in light of Germany's otherwise impressive modernity (hence the unexpected prefix "neo-," which itself certainly seems anachronistic today). True to the nature of his academic training, his explanation for the rise of antisemitism is principally economic, stressing Jews' prominence as capitalists, and the envy that their prosperity provoked among non-Jewish Germans. He thus saw antisemitism firstly as a matter of class resentment, and only secondarily was ethnicity an outwardly visible marker of it. "One can easily see," he concludes, "that on this legitimate race question, it only required a little demagoguery and credibility, to enable Socialism, cloaking itself under race antipathies, and joining hands with aristocratic and democratic suspicions, to pile on the shoulder of the Jew, all the evils ever attributed to capitalism. All that Marx, Blanc, or Bellamy ever laid at the door of capitalism, is, by the German Antisemitic party, charged upon the Jew because the Jew happens to be the great capitalist of Germany" (Du Bois undated b). There are different aspects that could be parsed in this passage, and the complexities of Du Bois's early stance on antisemitism lie beyond the scope of the present article, but one thing that is evident from the way he treats the commingling of antisemitism and socialism is that Marx's ideas were not yet seen as serious and enduring *Wissenschaft*, but rather as a manifestation of social tensions particular to the time and place.[9]

Following the affinity he felt to socialist politics—"Du Bois had always been a socialist in his bones," Lewis writes (2000, p. 308)—he did cultivate contact with the SPD, which, after being banned in Germany for a period of a dozen years, had begun to enjoy mainstream electoral success in the 1890s. "I frequently attended their meetings," he recalls, but he also adds: "my student rank hindered me from that close personal acquaintanceship with workers which I should have had for complete understanding" (2007a, p. 106). The traces of his involvement with the SPD in Berlin indeed exhibit

more of the curiosity and detachment of a social scientist than they do the ardor of a partisan:

> [W]hen I once went to Pankow to attend an advertised reunion of two hundred workingmen's singing societies, I found myself, to my astonishment, in the midst of 10,000 socialists! They were, however, scarcely the American ideal of socialists, but rather a typical Coney Island throng—perhaps a bit less independent and self-assertive, and a bit poorer, but withal the same good-natured, curious, happy, dirty, and enthusiastic crowd of everyday working life. I asked a neatly dressed and harmless-looking little maiden with whom I danced: "Are you too a socialist?" "Oh yes!" she replied; "And why?" She looked a bit puzzled and then answered half-timidly: "Because my father is." I danced with her again. (Du Bois undated b).

It is noteworthy that Du Bois speaks of student status as marking a distinct social "rank" rather than simply a stage in one's life; in nineteenth-century Europe, this was certainly true, and in the Pankow anecdote, one senses the class difference of which he was so conscious. Among the highlights of his Berlin days, he will later recall, were his interactions "with some of the lower nobility, many of the 'Gelehrten,' artists, business men, and members of the Social Democracy" (2007c, p. 24); towards the proletariat, on the other hand, he seems to have felt little affinity.

Surveying the political landscape in Europe, Du Bois admired what he describes, somewhat sententiously, as the "systematic and continuous union of individual effort to promote Justice and Freedom by means of Knowledge and Authority" (2015, p. 153); as he observed upon first arriving in Germany, "[t]he all-pervading government works about and around the new-comer, with a military precision and careful attention to trifles which is calculated to make the Bostonian uncomfortable, and take the New Yorker's breath away" (Du Bois undated b). As Du Bois became enculturated into Prussian political life, the kind of socialist governance based on "administrative rationality and meritocratic equality" (Reed 1997, p. 89) not only ceased to make him uncomfortable, but in fact became an example of the elite he hoped to see form back in the United States. In contrast to European norms of state involvement, Du Bois now began to sharply criticize the liberal "Rousseau–Smith–Ricardo school of social philosophy" prevailing in the English-speaking world, whose conception of "free competition" had had the effect, in the American South, of leaving the emancipated African American "to the mercy of his former masters" (2015, p. 37). When an American interviewer once expressed surprise that a Black American should have become involved in German politics as Du Bois did, he explained: "Well, they were interested in blacks. They assumed, of course, that any foreigner would be interested in Germany, because Germany after all was the greatest state on earth, and it had a future in the domination of the world that was undisputed. Therefore, the foreigner was quite welcome, and they wanted to teach him and tell him how things would go." In hindsight, he adds, with a touch of irony: "As to just what his relation to the German state was going to be in the future, they weren't at all certain" (Du Bois 1960). To say the very least, the political substance of future German states would turn out to offer bleakly little possibility for such cosmopolitan participation; the political map of the world would have to shift dramatically before Marx and socialism would seem to chime with the aspirations of peoples of color. Only after the end of World War I would such a shift begin.

On the strength of his extensive historical, sociological, and philosophical training, Du Bois held a conviction by the early 1900s that "the secret of social progress is wide and thorough understanding of the social forces which move and modify your age"

(2015, p. 111). Unlike the scientific socialism of Marx, though, Du Bois's view of such social forces does not nearly as systematically entail the possibility of foreseeing and actively bringing about a desired future. In the 1905 essay "Sociology Hesitant," he writes that despite the "evidence of the reign of law" in the world, there exists within the social realm "something incalculable," an ineffable admixture of "Chance" and "Law" that social science cannot methodically fathom; here "we front the humanly inexplicable" (2015, pp. 275, 277). A scholar contemplating longer sweeps of human history, he observes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007d), finds that "the meaning of progress, the meaning of 'swift' and 'slow' in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science" (p. 128). "If we would grapple intelligently with the greater problems of human development in society," he furthermore writes around the same time, "we must sit and study and learn even when the mad impulse of aimless philanthropy is striving within, and we find it easier to labor blindly, rather than to wait intelligently" (2015, p. 244). Du Bois's imperative to begin with careful study in order to understand the dynamics of social change is certainly compatible with the main lines of Marxian thought; the idea of 'waiting intelligently' for that change, however, is clearly not.

During the 1910s, Du Bois still regarded labor politics with circumspection. Observing the efforts of White European workers of the time to reform "modern industrial imperialism" in accordance with democratic principles, his response is shaped by a cagey mix of sympathy and critique.

> Whether known as Communism or Socialism or what not, these efforts are neither new nor strange nor terrible, but world-old and seeking an absolutely justifiable human ideal—the only ideal that can be sought: the direction of individual action in industry so as to secure the greatest good of all. Marxism was one method of accomplishing this, and its panacea was the doing away with private property in machines and materials. Two mighty attacks were made on this proposal. One was an attack on the fundamental democratic foundation: modern European white industry does not even theoretically seek the good of all, but simply of Europeans. This attack was virtually unanswered—indeed some Socialists openly excluded Negroes and Asiatics from their scheme. From this it was easy to drift into that form of syndicalism which asks socialism for the skilled laborer only and leaves the common laborer in his bonds (Du Bois 2007b, p. 67).

The casual "or what not" with which he shrugs off distinctions between different variants of labor politics; the playing-down of the newness of this politics; the playing-down of Marxism's preeminence within it and the easy glossing of Marxism's aims as a naïve "panacea"—all these convey the ambivalence with which he viewed such developments. Du Bois's appreciation of the nature of historical change is too subtle, and his experience of racism too extensive, to share a hope that "industrial democracy will automatically follow public ownership of machines and materials" (2007b, p. 72). But leaving aside his view of the efficacy of specific political prescriptions, Du Bois does wholeheartedly express his sympathy with the guiding spirit of the movement. "Perhaps the finest contribution of current Socialism to the world is neither its light nor its dogma, but the idea back of its one mighty word—Comrade!" (2007b, p. 76).

In the *Autobiography* (2007a), Du Bois retraces the development of his thought across the middle period of his career as follows: "From 1910 to 1920, I had followed sociology as the path to social reform and social uplift as a result of scientific investigation; then, in practice, I had conceived an interracial culture as superseding our goal of

a purely American culture. Before I had conceived a program for this path, and after the throes of bitter racial strife, I had emerged with a program of Pan-Africanism, as organized protection of the Negro world led by Negroes. But American Negroes were not interested" (p. 184). It is at that point that, inspired by the Soviet example, he began to read Marx: "Abruptly, I had a beam of new light. […] I was astounded and wondered what other areas of learning had been roped off from my mind in the days of my 'broad' education" (2007a, p. 184). From that earlier elite education he had learned that reason should be his essential weapon: "when the truth was properly presented," he writes in *Dusk of Dawn* (2007c) "the monstrous wrong of race hate must melt and melt quickly before it. All human action to me in those days was conscious and rational. There was no twilight zone" (p. 141). Gradually, he came to realize that "there must be other and stronger and more threatening forces" at work in White supremacy than could be addressed by analytic reason alone. Accordingly, he began to see it as necessary for Blacks to develop "a program which was not merely negative in the sense of calling upon white folk to desist from certain practices and give up certain beliefs; but direct in the sense that Negroes must proceed constructively in new and comprehensive plans of their own" (2007c, p. 142). And the intention of making comprehensive plans and constructive interventions into historical processes by now meant, inevitably, engaging with Marx.

His relative lack of attention to Marxism up to this point can probably best be explained by the simple lack, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, of an apparent relevance of Marx's philosophy to matters of race. His embrace of it in later years, conversely, would be due to his increasing perception of Soviet-era Marxism-Leninism as a fundamentally anti-racist and anti-imperialist paradigm. "[I]t is natural that one born in the midst of a particular social problem should tend to interpret all other problems in its light," he writes, and there is no question that racial justice is the light in which he viewed all other political questions (Du Bois 1982, p. 275). As he watched political developments in Russia, therefore, he "drew parallels between Russian peasants and American Freedmen, emancipated at nearly the same moment and both kept in slavery by denial of land." Similarly, when he "read of the pogroms against the Jews," he "likened them to our lynchings, which were ominously increasing" (1982, pp. 275–276).[10] As his writings on the Soviet Union make clear, the type of social progress that he witnessed there from the 1920s onward represented very much the sort of progress he wished also to see happen in Black America. The great political distinction of the communist regime in Moscow, in Du Bois's eyes, was that it made "the assumption, long disputed, that out of the down-trodden mass of people, ability and character, sufficient to [rule] effectively, could and would be found" (2007c, p. 142). This statement is a telling one, because it truly gets to the heart of Du Bois's social thought. The language in which he expresses it could not be stronger: "I believe this dictum passionately," he states. "It was, in fact, the foundation stone of my fight for black folk; *it explained me*" (2007c, p. 142; emphasis added). It is worth dwelling on these words for a moment. The politics he saw in the Soviet Union did not just instantiate his political principles, it substantiated them. Whereas earlier in his career, Du Bois had been groping slowly onward "thick within the veil," now there was clear light and a marked road forward. Whatever had appeared nebulously idealistic in his earlier work now had an empirical exemplar to work with. The ideals and the policies of Soviet communism offered themselves as an actually existing affirmation of Du Bois's vision for Black America.

It was an extensive trip abroad taken in 1926—including Germany and the Soviet Union—that definitively "brought change to my thought and action" (2007a, p. 184). If Du Bois had once regarded nineteenth-century Germany as an exemplary modern nation, and Berlin as the best-governed city in the world (Du Bois 1960), the Germany

he saw more than three decades later was, in jarring contrast, defeated, debilitated, and demoralized. Already prior to World War I, imperial Germany's ever more ambitious and nakedly racist colonial ambitions had put an end to his idealization of that country, and now, in light of a side-by-side, first-hand comparison against the country he was coming to regard as the leading nation of the twentieth century, a major shift occurred. Even in Berlin, Du Bois noticed that German workers, who wielded political power in a way they hadn't done thirty years earlier, were "looking across the eastern boundary continually to Russia" (Du Bois 1926). Du Bois felt which way the wind was blowing, and it would henceforth be to Moscow that he, too, would look for political inspiration.

Consider the picture he paints in the *Autobiography* (2007a): "Russia was handicapped by 90 per cent illiteracy among her peasants, and nearly as much among her working classes […]," he writes (p. 17). "The people were poor and ill-clothed; food was scarce, and long lines stood for hours to get their share. Orphan children, ragged and dirty, crawled in and out of sewers. […]. Yet, despite this, I saw a land of hope and hard work. […] Not everybody was happy, but most Russians saw a bitter past being succeeded by a great future, not swiftly, but surely" (2007a, p. 16). This last sentence succinctly captures the fascination that Du Bois had for the Soviet Union. A premise that underpins so much of his political work is that the bitter past of a people in no way precludes future greatness, and having the chance to see a hitherto underdeveloped nation in the hinterland of Europe rise to become "the most hopeful land in the modern world" offered a powerful affirmation (2007a, p. 184). Despite the hardships he witnessed there, Du Bois saw a nation imbued with a sense of purpose and possibility. "The art galleries were jammed, the theatres crowded, the schools opening in new places with new programs each day; and work was beginning to be a joy" (2007a, p. 185). "Nowhere are public questions so thoroughly and exhaustively discussed. Russians sit and listen long to talks, lectures, expositions; they read books, magazines, and newspapers, not just picture books" (2007a, p. 20). The general air of cultural ferment was convincing and compelling to him: "What I saw in the Soviet Union was more than triumph in physics; it was the growth of a nation's soul, the confidence of a great people in its plan and future" (2007a, p. 21). True to his intellectual roots, this last statement is, to be sure, at least as Herderian as it is Marxian, but that is simply a reflection of the different layers that accrued in his thinking over the decades of his life. Coming from the United States rather than from Europe—to which Marx had expressly tailored his theories—Du Bois took specific concerns of race and culture rather than dialectical materialism as his main route toward Moscow's politics, and this difference does often show itself, as it does here.

More particularly than any other aspect of what he saw, what clinched his support of Moscow's direction was its handling of the issues of poverty and race. He was "amazed and uplifted" he writes, "[…] to see a nation stoutly facing a problem which most other modern nations did not dare even to admit was real: the abolition of poverty" (2007a, p. 16). And his praise regarding the country's racial attitudes is even more unambiguous:

> The Soviet Union seems to me the only European country where people are not more or less taught and encouraged to despise and look down on some class, group, or race. I know countries where race and color prejudice show only slight manifestations, but no white country where race and color prejudice seems so absolutely absent. In Paris, I attract attention; in London I meet elaborate blankness; anywhere in America I get anything from complete ignoring to curiosity, and often insult. In Moscow, I pass unheeded. Russians quite naturally ask me information; women sit beside me confidently and unconsciously. Children are uniformly courteous (2007a, pp. 22–23).

The contrast that this forms is crucial. As he writes in the *Autobiography*, the United States "arose 200 years ago as a free-thinking democracy, with limitless land and resources," but then "sank into dependence on slave labor, transformed itself into a vast center of capital monopolized by closed corporations […]" (2007a, p. 7). At the same time that the United States, the paragon of capitalism, continued to show itself impervious to social progress, the emerging paragon of communism seemed to be making strides toward economic and social justice unlike anything he had seen anywhere else. Although, as Manning Marable (1986) observes, "Du Bois had certain intellectual and political reservations about identifying himself as a Marxist-Leninist" (p. 197), he nonetheless came more and more— in practice, if still with theoretical reservations— to align himself with the Soviet Union and, later, with its political satellites. The fact that his thought always decidedly foregrounded race over class would lead to abiding differences with any form of state socialism in Europe or elsewhere—official Soviet ideology would never be able to agree that the preeminent problem of the twentieth century was the Color Line, but it would certainly agree with him that society must be radically restructured in order to remove ingrained systemic injustices.

By the 1930s, the necessity of a thorough first-hand reckoning with Marx's writings had become undeniable for him. At the same time that Du Bois was discovering his own affinity with Marxian thought, he was also beginning to discern among the younger generation of African American intellectuals something of his own younger, more bourgeois self: "They come out of college," he writes, "knowing nothing of the issues of the modern crisis, knowing nothing of the labor movement, lightly criticizing Marx, Russia, and communism" (1987, p. 152). From the American universities where they study, they "are imbibing a reactionary capitalistic way of thinking which is directly opposed to the interests of the American Negroes and the laboring class in general" (1987, p. 152). So it is that upon resuming his professorship at Atlanta University in 1933, he began, with characteristic energy and conviction, to thoroughly modernize the sociology curriculum in keeping with the changes in his own thought since the time, at the end of the 1890s, that he had first brought his Berlin-schooled empiricism to the university. "In my first teaching in the South, […] I gave practically no attention to Marx," he recalls. "I didn't know anything about Marx myself" (Du Bois 1960). But now, returning to Atlanta after two decades away, Du Bois brought Marx with him, devising a course titled "Karl Marx and the Negro Problem," that explored "the application of Marxism to the Negro problem in the United States" (Du Bois 1933a).

"It was to be Marx in months, not years," writes Lewis (2000, p. 305), and indeed Du Bois was still in the process of acquiring his Marxism as he was preparing to pass it along to his students. Tackling the task of integrating his old and new systems of thought, he sought the counsel of younger scholars from the left.[11] "I have been re-reading Marx recently as everyone must these days," he wrote in 1933 to Abram Harris of Howard University, and requested from him "a list of the four or five best books which the perfect Marxist must know" (Du Bois 1933b).[12] This request evinces two things: on the one hand, that Du Bois intended to master whatever distinguishes a 'perfect Marxist,' but, on the other hand, that his own command of that body of ideas was yet emergent. The tone and substance of Harris's reply, moreover, reinforce the sense that Du Bois, for all his economic training and political experience, is at this stage an initiate to Marxism. Harris is unsure whether Du Bois has yet read central works such as *Capital*, and some of his reading recommendations are conspicuously introductory.[13] True to his intentions, though, and despite the intense preparations involved, Du Bois brought Marx squarely into the sociology curriculum at Atlanta University: "I put the *Communist Manifesto* in the hands of each student, and we had a library on Marxism and a criticism of Marxism. It was a complete and a very, very interesting course. There was criticism about it, and

at the time I didn't have the slightest feeling of doing anything that was unusual or questionable. Here was a man that I had gradually come to learn was one of the great economic philosophers of our day, and he ought to be studied" (Du Bois 1960).

In the 1933 *Crisis* column "Karl Marx and the Negro," Du Bois unequivocally acclaims Marx as "the greatest figure in the science of modern industry"; now that "the world is so largely turning toward the Marxian philosophy," he asserts, Marx's work has become timely and relevant in ways it had not previously been (Du Bois 1983, p. 686). The main thrust of Du Bois's contribution in this column, however, does not so much concern contemporaneous world events so much as it highlights the critical position Marx had taken against slavery in the United States, most prominently in letters he penned to Abraham Lincoln. A foundational premise of Du Bois's thought was the thoroughgoing interconnection of African American life with the broader narratives of world history, and now that the world's unfoldings were not only nameable in Marxian terms, but were even being actively shaped by Marxist politics, showing such points of contact between Karl Marx himself and the abolitionist cause was of more than anecdotal importance. With regard to Marx's own involvement, he began to regret what he saw as a missed opportunity: "It was a great loss to American Negroes," he writes, "that the great mind of Marx and his extraordinary insight into industrial conditions could not have been brought to bear at first hand upon the history of the American Negro between 1876 and the World War" (Du Bois 1983, p. 689). For want of a more systematic contribution to their cause by Marx himself, Du Bois asserts that the onus is now on Black Americans, if they are to "see their way clearly in the future," to adapt Marx's ideas on European labor so as to make them bear upon the different circumstances that prevail on this side of the Atlantic (1983, p. 689). The article, though, does not so much answer, as ask what this adaptation would look like. He feels hesitant to put forth a modification of Marxian doctrine himself—"the more one studies Marx," he writes to a colleague, "the more one is astounded at his knowledge and depth of thought, and I am afraid that anything I may say might easily be modified if I knew more" (Du Bois 1933d). Rather than a programmatic statement, then, this article is intended as a first step toward provoking wider interest in Marx among Black readers.[14]

In another 1933 *Crisis* column, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," Du Bois reiterates his superlative praise of Marx's accomplishments—*Capital* stands alongside the Bible, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and *On the Origin of Species* as one of the books "every searcher for truth must know"—but he is cautious about venturing any concise formula regarding "the relation of Marxian philosophy and the American Negro problem" (Du Bois 1983, p. 695). Along the course of various observations, Du Bois feels his way forward, returning almost like a leitmotif to variations on the same question: "What now has all this to do with the Negro problem?"; "How now does the philosophy of Karl Marx apply today to colored labor?"; "What shall we say of the Marxian philosophy and of its relation to the American Negro?" (1983, pp. 697–699). Rather than arrive at a sure-footed answer, though, Du Bois concludes the essay with two assessments that seem to point in opposite directions. On the one hand, he concedes that there is not "the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution based on a united class-conscious proletariat is anywhere on the American far horizon," for in this country, entrenched racial divides would preclude any true solidarity among the working classes. At the same time, he asserts that it is in "the hearts of black laborers" that there "lie those ideals of democracy in politics and industry which may in time make the workers of the world effective dictators of civilization" (1983, p. 699). The first statement seems to point back to his long-standing reservations about American socialist politics, while the second presents a foretaste of a strategy he will deploy in his next major book, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1976a), to assert the agency of Black Americans within world

history. The deep disconnection between these two statements may be taken as an apt illustration of how contending considerations and commitments ultimately prevented Du Bois's positions on Marx from resolving into a stable theoretical stance.

*Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, is where we find the fullest expression of Du Bois's contentious hypothesis of African American laborers as "dictators of civilization," with the gambit of the book's tenth chapter—provocatively titled "The Black Proletariat in South Carolina"—demonstrating the strategic value he had come to find in Marxian concepts. Yet while it does represent the most outright incorporation of Marxist ideology into his scholarly work, the book also strikingly illustrates the fact that, as Eric Porter (2010) has observed, for Du Bois, "Marxism was valuable only to the extent that it could be made more attentive to race" (p. 26). It is thus necessary first to take a detour through quite different historical terrain before arriving at the cutting edge of his Marxian argumentation.

Reaching back to the old-guard Anglo-Saxon academic establishment through which he himself had once passed, Du Bois opens the South Carolina chapter of *Black Reconstruction* with a quotation from Columbia University professor John Burgess, the undisputed "'dean' of the historians of the Reconstruction," as John Hope Franklin once wrote (1948, p. 448), but also, as Du Bois emphasizes, an unabashed racist who believed in "Nordic supremacy" and "was frank and determined in his anti-Negro thought" (1976a, p. 718). "There is no question," Burgess proclaims in the quoted passage,

> […] that Congress did a monstrous thing, and committed a great wrong to civilization, to put the white race of the South under the domination of the Negro race. The claim that there is nothing on the color of the skin from the point of view of political ethics is a great sophism. A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason; has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind (Du Bois 1976a, p. 381).

This passage is not an outlier. Reconstruction historiography had for years been conceived from a staunchly White supremacist standpoint, with White historians writing, as Bernhard Weisberger (1959) observes, "from a majority point of view which is sometimes confused with objectivity" (p. 437). Scholarship was "quite generally notorious for its lack of objectivity, its propaganda and its passionate partisanship," Ralph Bunche (1935) noted in his review of Du Bois's book; historical agency was placed uniquely on the part of White Americans, while African Americans were caricatured as an "unwilling pawn among the social movements and forces of the period" (p. 568). James S. Allen (1937) similarly deemed most scholarship on the period "sickening": "There are, of course, rare exceptions, some attempting impartiality, others indifferent, and a rare few rising to a spirited defense of the Reconstruction governments (like Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction*). But to offset these we have recently been deluged with dozens of volumes on the glories of the old slave South and sympathetic biographies of its leaders" (p. 91). As Du Bois writes in the polemical closing chapter of *Black Reconstruction*: "Wherever a black head rises to historic view, it is promptly slain by an adjective—'shrewd,' 'notorious,' 'cunning'—or pilloried by a sneer; or put out of view by some quite unproven charge of bad moral character. In other words, every effort has been made to treat the Negro's part in Reconstruction with silence and contempt" (1976a, p. 721).

*Black Reconstruction*'s vital place in American historiography therefore lies in its aggressive countering of the then-standard narrative. Du Bois's own scholarship had, from the beginning, had the aim of refuting and supplanting the kind of open White

supremacism exemplified by Burgess's pronouncement. But while his earlier historical and sociological work had aimed to challenge racial prejudice by force of sheer factual accuracy, now, both methodologically and politically, Marxism seemed to promise all that those approaches had offered, and more, since rigorously executed historical materialism should, in theory, leave any possibility of racial bigotry behind. Intent on creating the most powerful possible counternarrative to the prevailing "propaganda of history," as he deems it, Du Bois reaches to the canon of Marxian ideas to venture boldly revisionist claims regarding the role of African Americans in world history:

> The record of the Negro worker during Reconstruction presents an opportunity to study inductively the Marxian theory of the state. I first called this chapter "The *Dictatorship* of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina," but it has been brought to my attention that this would not be correct since universal suffrage does not lead to a real dictatorship until the workers use their votes consciously to rid themselves of the dominion of private capital. There were signs of such an object among South Carolina Negroes, but it was always coupled with the idea of that day, that the only real escape for a laborer was himself to own capital (1976a, p. 381, in footnote; emphasis added).

Cedric Robinson (2000) describes *Black Reconstruction* as "not simply a historical work, but history subjected to theory" (pp. 195–196), and in arguments such as these, the subjection of history to theory is pronounced. The aims of the enslaved South Carolinians were to gain suffrage and to own their own capital, Du Bois states. But suffrage and private capital are surely not distinctly Marxist objectives, and the passage above seems, curiously, to represent a simultaneous assertion and retraction of the thesis at hand. When Du Bois was composing the "Black Proletariat" chapter, he was already well past deadline and over budget on a project that had come to seem to him "almost impossible to finish" (Du Bois 1933c). Traces can be felt of the way revisions and substantive deliberations were proceeding in haste and under pressure. The result is a palpable and occasionally awkward internal disequilibrium within parts of the prose and the ideas.

Eric Foner (2013) has described *Black Reconstruction* as "a complex, frustrating, but indispensable book" (p. 409), and one might very aptly use these same adjectives to describe Du Bois's use of Marxism within it. In most of the book, meticulous narration and documentation of facts is what does the work of countering ideological distortions, and the overtly Marxist (or indeed Marxist-Leninist) moments are limited to a small number of brief—albeit strident and dogmatic—passages such as the ones above, interpolated into a detailed work of historiography otherwise not unlike his early style in *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1954). Du Bois sought with *Black Reconstruction* both to set the factual record straight *and* to present a potent polemic against American racism, and through most of his narrative, fact and polemic are effectively one. ("Subtract from Burgess his belief that only white people can rule," he writes, "and he is in essential agreement with me" [1976a, p. 726]). In chapter ten, though, we see a fault line emerge where his marshaling of fact and his formulation of argument begin to strain against one another. Du Bois touches, in earlier chapters, upon the immigration of European leftists to the United States during the nineteenth century, thereby bringing to the foreground the trans-Atlantic context of abolitionism and socialism. He also cites Marx's own epistolary interventions against American slavery, but this material does not very much exceed what he had already discussed in his 1933 *Crisis* articles. *Black Reconstruction* is certainly a work of historiography written by, at this juncture, a convinced Marxist, but it remains a matter of contention whether it is truly a work of Marxist historiography.

That is to say, constructing a historical narrative that carefully includes the deeds of leftists is not necessarily the same as constructing a historical materialist account of events, nor is it clear that the provocative adoption of Marxian terminology is necessarily tantamount to genuinely Marxist interpretation.

Benjamin Stolberg (1934) had cautioned Du Bois during the book's revisions that "though the term 'The Dictatorship of the Proletariat' describes in a *literary* way very much their heart's desire, as social *theory* it is bound to be mere *analogy*," and he predicted that the use of the term would get him "into critical difficulties" (emphases in original). This occurred. To the extent that *Black Reconstruction* "[exhibits] in its proper light the role played by the American Negro in the grand but ill-fated effort to set up an equalitarian democracy of black and white alike in post-Civil War America," writes Ralph Bunche (1935) in his review, Du Bois "is brilliant and impressive" (p. 569). Yet Bunche sees at the heart of Du Bois's view "a policy of racial chauvinism" that is "much too virulent a breed to permit successful crossing with Marxism," resulting in "a sort of pseudo-Marxist interpretation" (p. 569). Abram Harris (1935) presents a similar critique, noting dismissively that Du Bois's "discovery of Marxism as a critical instrument has been too recent and sudden for it to discipline his mental processes or basically to change his social philosophy" (p. 367). For Sterling Spero (1935), too, the combination of Du Bois's "old race consciousness and new Marxism" makes for a "strange intellectual marriage": "Marx's hero was the proletariat. Du Bois's hero is the Negro. Du Bois, fresh from reading Marx, makes the Negro the proletariat" (p. 108). The construction of a Marxist argument in *Black Reconstruction* is, in Spero's judgment, mainly the product of "manipulation of terms," and Du Bois's notion of Marxist measures being taken by a Black proletariat is more "fantastic" than real (p. 109).[15]

Equally controversial is Du Bois's assertion that Black Americans had carried out a strategic "general strike" during the Civil War. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson (2000) describes the events in question as follows:

> The General Strike had not been planned or consciously organized. Instead, what Du Bois termed a 'General Strike' was the total impact on the secessionist South of a series of actions circumstantially related to each other: some 200,000 Black workers, most of them slaves, had become part of the Union's military forces. These, and an even larger number of Blacks, had withdrawn their productive labor and paramilitary services from the Confederacy, transferring a substantial portion of them to the Union. In addition, tens of thousands of slaves and poor whites had emigrated from the South. The former were escaping slavery, the latter their poverty and the demands and ravages of a war in which they had no vested interest. The result was to critically weaken the secessionists. The ordering of these diverse actions was then a consequence of the social order to which they were reactions. The contradictions within southern society rather than a revolutionary vanguard knit these phenomena into a historical force (p. 230).

Can one speak, then, of a revolutionary movement in Marx's sense? "In the literature of social thought," objected Harris (1935), "the general strike has come to mean the organized stoppage of work by labor on a national scale either to force immediate economic or political concessions from employers or the government, or to capture the state itself and socialize industry." The "so-called general strike […] grew out of no such consciousness of the issues or of the significance that their 'escape to freedom' would have upon the ends of the war" (p. 367). Bunche (1935) similarly sees Du Bois's interpretation as "untenable" because "the slaves were lacking in social and class consciousness, and, finding an opportunity to escape from an onerous existence, simply

took it" (pp. 569–570). Stolberg (1934) expressed to Du Bois his "fundamental objection" to the argument: "Modern socialist conceptions did not exist in America" at that time, and the kind of political action Du Bois describes "was historically impossible in the age of pre-Marxian social politics."[16] In contemporary scholarship, the issue has scarcely been resolved. Eric Foner (2013) deems it an open question whether or not "the notion of a 'general strike' during the Civil War exaggerate[s] the degree of coordination among slaves" (p. 417). Thomas Holt (2013), meanwhile, argues that the strike Du Bois speaks of *did* happen—not "in the ideologically hackneyed ways of a Communist Party-led proletariat in some European city, […] but with the means that an enslaved people had at their disposal"; it simply betrays a "lack of imagination," he asserts, if we fail to recognize the general strike as such (pp. 423–424).

Between the canon of orthodox social theory appealed to by Du Bois's earlier critics —which indeed had been molded primarily around the European proletariat—and a more capacious conception of Marxism that would allow, as Holt suggests, for the recognition of analogous events in different historical settings, there lies much open space—Gerald Horne (1986) has in fact described *Black Reconstruction* as "an outline, leaving plenty of room for other scholars to fill in the blanks" (p. 144). The work of a Black radical intellectual such as Du Bois, Anthony Bogues (2003) has similarly asserted, has the nature that it "clears spaces" that had not existed in the intellectual discourse of the status quo; it thereby takes on the form of "*heresy*," and the "categories deployed oftentimes are stretched to the limit" (p. 70–72; emphasis in original). With his application of Marxian concepts, Du Bois thus "critically engaged Marxist theory" in a way that "destabilized the intellectual practices of Marxists at the time" (Bogues 2003, pp. 84, 89).[17] If a bifurcation between history and theory does open up in *Black Reconstruction*, it is this kind of complexity that makes the book so frustrating, but also indispensable; to charge that Du Bois disrupts conventions of Marxian analysis may or may not entirely stand as criticism, in so far as disruption was actually the intention . His motivations at this juncture are not only historiographical or theoretical, but also decidedly polemical; in addition to cold facts and philosophical systems, Du Bois is grappling determinedly with entrenched social attitudes, and the conflicts at issue in *Black Reconstruction* are not only those from the time of Reconstruction, but also those of his own time. The immediate juxtaposition of reactionary words such as Burgess's with some of Du Bois's own most boldly radical assertions is strategic; he adduces an exemplary piece of complacent White-supremacist dogma in order for it to be broadsided by his own most uncompromising and intellectually up-to-date counternarrative. Even though Du Bois fully anticipates that "orthodox Marxians" will disagree with the strategy he deploys, he feels that what he is doing "changes, if not indeed revolutionizes, our attitude toward Reconstruction as part of democratic development in the United States" (Du Bois 1934). This, ultimately, is what is at stake for him.

Interestingly, though, when he turns from his scholarly work in historiography back to concrete considerations of present and future political action, he proves to still hold to the more measured and cautious ideological stance that he had hitherto maintained.[18] In documents from only shortly after the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, we find statements on Marx and Marxism that strike a very different tone, and offer subtler analytical nuance. For example, in a 1935 letter to George Streator, he writes:

> I believe in Karl Marx. I am an out and out opponent of modern capitalistic labor exploitation. I believe in the ultimate triumph of socialism in a reasonable time, and I mean by socialism, the ownership of capital and machines by the state, and equality of income. But I do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Marxian scriptures.

> First of all, I do not believe that Marx ever meant to say that under all circumstances and at all times, a violent revolution is necessary to overthrowing the power of capitalists. Even if he did say this, I do not believe that it is true, and I am not interested in working out a perfect dogmatic system on the basis of the Marxism brand of Hegelianism. What I want is a realistic and practical approach to a democratic state in which the exploitation of labor is stopped, and the political power is in the hands of the workers (Du Bois 1976b, pp. 91–92).

Similarly, in the 1936 essay "The Negro and Social Reconstruction"—which remained unpublished at the time—Du Bois expresses a by now familiar mixture of affirmation and reserve:

> There can be no doubt of the great contribution which Karl Marx has made to civilization; of his indefatigable industry, his broad knowledge and insight into the ills of the economic world. But along with this went his transformation of Hegelian philosophy into a complete system of economic determinism, and an integral part of this system as laid down by the celebrated *Communist Manifesto* was that the breaking up of the capitalistic system must come by inevitable revolution through which the exploited proletariat would violently take complete charge of the state and conduct it in its own interests (1987, pp. 141–142).

Anything that smacks of scripture or of Hegelian absolute idealism will, for the political realist Du Bois, be intellectually suspect. While he acknowledges the gradual world-wide advance of socialism as reflecting "the essential truth of the Marxian philosophy," he is compelled to pose a question—"as must every American Negro"—that tempers the revolutionary edge of this conviction: "Is there any automatic power in socialism to override and suppress race prejudice?" (1987, p. 141). Neither in the United States nor in the Soviet Union, he points out, can we find any evidence for this. Socialism may well be conducive to racial justice to the extent that it means to address systemic mechanisms of oppression, but at the same time, Du Bois does not believe in *any* form of "automatic power" in politics, and therefore does not believe that force can lead to lasting change. "In any real social revolution," he writes, "every step that saves violence is to the glory of the great end. We should not forget that revolution is not the objective of socialism or communism rightly conceived; the real objective is social justice, and if haply the world can find that justice without blood, the world is the infinite gainer." Any determined aspiration to violent revolution would therefore be a "silly program for white men," he concludes; "For American colored men, it is suicidal" (1987, p. 142). While certainly affirming his ongoing engagement with Marx's ideas ("I not only dabbled in Marx in the past, I still dabble in Marx," he writes), he above all expresses his concern about the way "radical reform in the United States is letting itself be hypnotized into extreme communism" (Du Bois 1976b, p. 87). The problem, again, lies in the matter of mediating between race-centered and class-centered political paradigms: because its philosophy was not originally conceived to contend systematically with the reality of the Color Line, Du Bois believes that "imported Russian Communism" ultimately loses much of its emancipatory potential for African Americans—it "emphasized that all racial thought and racial segregation must go and that Negroes must put themselves blindly under the dictatorship of the Communist Party" (2007c, p. 103). Autonomy for Black Americans was too central an aim of Du Bois's politics for him to accept any such passive position, and his use of the word "blindly" in reference to

following communist orthodoxy makes clear why his complete embrace of it was still many years away.

After about 1940, the textual trail we have been following begins to thin out; having now grappled with Marx's thought, Du Bois largely turns his attention away from the books and back to *Realpolitik*.[19] *Dusk of Dawn*, which was published in 1940, contains some of his most sustained discussion of his relation to Marxism, but these parts of the book have the nature of autobiographical reflections on the recent past more than they are documents of ongoing theoretical engagement.[20] Hereafter, the story of his Marxism (or socialism, or communism) will become a matter of his actual interactions with the governments of, say, the Soviet Union, China, East Germany, etc. This aspect of his life and thought has been written on elsewhere, most extensively in Gerald Horne's (1986) *Black and Red*.

In his later years, as Marable (1986) notes, Du Bois would deem himself "too old" to fully become a Marxist: "'Most of my books were written before I read deeply of Marxism,' Du Bois informed Black Communist leader James E. Jackson. 'I would have to rework, or append afterthoughts to each of them. I couldn't possibly live so long. No. They will have to judge me with the contemporaries of my generation against the then dominant philosophy—bourgeois democracy'" (Marable 1986, p. 197). Du Bois did, in fact, go on to append such 'afterthoughts' to some of his older 'bourgeois democratic' works—for example, the "Apologia" added to the 1954 edition of *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, in which he expresses his regret that he hadn't picked up on Freud and Marx already in his student days. Jackson (1970) quotes him, though, as declaring yet later, "I think I've written enough new things and added new explanatory prefaces to a number of old works to take the title of communist in good conscience now" (p. 19). By the time he writes the *Autobiography* in the last years of his life, he no longer hedges: "I now state my conclusion frankly and clearly: I believe in communism" (2007a, p. 35). Joining the Communist Party of the United States in 1961, he acknowledges to chairman Gus Hall that he has "been long and slow in coming to this conclusion," but he is clear about his conviction: "In the end Communism will triumph. I want to help to bring that day" (Du Bois 1961). The trajectory from his first involvement with the German SPD to his membership in the CPUSA thus took almost seven decades. With time, then, he embraced Marxism in the form in which the politics of his time offered it to him; he did so—to borrow the words he once used to describe the pace of progress in the Soviet Union—"not swiftly, but surely."

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## NOTES

1. Unpublished archival materials held in the Du Bois Papers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, are digitally accessible at https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/collection/mums312.
2. Du Bois recalls in *Dusk of Dawn* that the university was "rich but reactionary," and its attitude "toward labor was on the whole contemptuous and condemnatory" (2007c, p. 20).
3. The unpublished essay "A Constructive Critique of Wage Theory: An Essay on the Present State of Economic Theory in Regards to Wages" (Du Bois 1893) is held in the Harvard University Archives, and was consulted on microfilm at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. The section of the essay dedicated to Marx reads as follows: "Value is measured by labor and by labor alone. All capital is absolutely unproductive of value. The original value of all capital was the labor on the materials etc. and this is carried forward into the product and preserved there, by labor and labor alone. Therefore interest on capital is wrong, since capital is unproductive. Value in exchange is the ratio in which one thing exchanges against another. This does not depend on utility, because wants are not commensurable. Commodities have but one thing in common and that is the labor necessary to produce them. Value then is quantity of abstract labor; quantity may be reduced to length. The unit of value then is a day's labor. Since then all value depends on labor, labor is the real owner of all return. If anything is abstracted from this as interest and the like, it is merely robbery."
4. See Verzeichniss der Vorlesungen, welche auf der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin im Sommer-Semester vom 16. April 1894 bis 15. August 1894 gehalten werden. In W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
5. For a useful overview of the German Historical School, see Jurgen Herbst (1965).
6. For the classic account of the German academic elite of Du Bois's time, see Fritz K. Ringer (1969).
7. As Bertram Schefold (2017) writes, "there is an inclination to consider historicism as an 'anti-theoretical' movement," and it is true that Schmoller "rejected what he called 'isolating abstraction,' by which he meant the construction of abstract theories on the basis of empirically questionable axioms which have lost all contact with the reality of economic life" (p. 273).
8. Cf. Du Bois's note in "The Afro-American" that Europeans grow up viewing "the various social grades and walks of life" around them "as so many strange and unknown planets," with class constituting those differences. African Americans, meanwhile, are "born into a universe which, in addition to all horizontal boundaries, is separated by a straight perpendicular fissure into a white and a black hemisphere" (2015, p. 35; punctuation standardized). The difference in social practice described here gives rise, in turn, to a methodological difference in social theory.
9. The implied relationship between Jews and capitalism has consonances with ideas expressed by Marx (2000a) himself in "On the Jewish Question," but it is unlikely that Du Bois would have been familiar with this text already in the 1890s. Regarding the ambiguities of Du Bois's attitudes toward Jews and antisemitism around this time, see George Bornstein (2006).
10. This perspective also becomes a device he uses to frame his remarkably uncritical view of Joseph Stalin, whom he speaks of as a "son of a slave in Georgia" who created "the first modern state which outlawed race discrimination"—thereby implicitly allowing the chance homonymy of the Soviet republic of Georgia and the Georgia of the American South to hint at an affinity of sorts between Soviet and American politics (Du Bois 1992, p. 183).
11. See Jonathan Scott Holloway (2003) and Charisse Burden-Stelly (2018).
12. A year later, in 1934, while working on *Black Reconstruction*, he similarly asks Benjamin Stolberg for "references to Marx or Lenin or anyone else, for or against my position," adding: "I have a fair library of Marx, but only one or two of Lenin's works" (Du Bois 1934). In 1938, he sends inquiries to John Hope, Jr. and Rayford W. Logan, asking them for "the best book on elementary economics published since the war" that is "well balanced," gives Marx "his due," and is "not reactionary" (Du Bois 1938a,b).

13. See Harris's letter to Du Bois from January 7, 1933 (Harris 1933). Harris points Du Bois first to three "standard works on economic doctrine and the history of political thought": Charles Gide and Charles Rist's *A History of Economic Doctrines from the Time of the Physiocrats to the Present Day* (1915); Élie Halévy's *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (1928); and William Archibald Dunning's *Political Thought from Rousseau to Spencer* (1920). He then recommends Marx's "The Gotha Program," "Wage Labor and Capital," "Value, Price, and Profit," and "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"; Marx and Engels's *Critique of Political Economy* and "Revolution and Counterrevolution"; and Engels's *Feuerbach: The Roots of Socialist Philosophy*, *Socialism from Utopia to Science*, and *Landmarks of Scientific Socialism*. David Levering Lewis (2000) speculates that Du Bois may at this time also have been reading Sidney Hook's *Toward the Understanding of Karl Marx*, which appeared at the time Du Bois was preparing his 1933 *Crisis* articles on Marx (p. 307).
14. See Du Bois's March 9, 1933, letter to Will Herberg (Du Bois 1933d), which discusses this column: "I am going to try and ask what modifications in the Marx doctrine must be made to suit the peculiar situation of the Negro in America." Herberg writes that despite the fact that Du Bois's "views on Marxism and the Negro […] are naturally provisional and tentative" at that point (1933b), "the article will do a great deal of good in arousing an interest in Marx and Marxism among the readers of the *Crisis*" (1933a).
15. On the problematic relation of Du Bois's Marxism to his pan-Africanist thought, see Patrick Anderson (2017).
16. Stolberg, Harris, and Du Bois's research assistant Emmett Dorsey all advised him against going forward with the Marxist strategies he uses in *Black Reconstruction*. See Du Bois (1934).
17. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2014) also cites Du Bois's abstention from "ready-made Marxism" (p. 13).
18. Cf. his cautious stance in 1931, only a few years before the final work on *Black Reconstruction*: When Will Herberg challenged him to include communist viewpoints in *The Crisis*, he indicated willingness to do so insofar as they were expressed "temperately"; he accepted Herberg's work because he deemed it "harmless in itself" (Herberg 1931 and Du Bois 1931).
19. The only work by Marx that seems to have remained in Du Bois's personal library toward the end of his life were his desk copies of the three volumes of *Capital* that he used in Atlanta (currently in the collection of the Du Bois Centre in Accra, Ghana), though of course it is possible that he owned further books by Marx that were kept elsewhere. In addition to *Capital*, Du Bois's personal library in his later years also included works such as M. A. Lifshits's *Karl Marx und die Ästhetik* (*Karl Marx and Aesthetics*); a 1918 collection of speeches by Karl Liebknecht; a 1920 biography of Marx by Franz Mehring; and a collection of *Letters to Americans* by Marx and Engels, which he had once reviewed for the *Daily Worker*. See also "Library of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, As listed by Lorenz B. Graham, New York, 1952," in W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
20. See especially the chapter "Revolution" (Du Bois 2007c).

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