

W. E. B. DU BOIS AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE COMPETITIVE SOCIETY¹

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Abstract

This essay explores W. E. B. Du Bois's evolving sense of disillusionment with the liberal paradigm in an effort to stimulate critical thinking about an American political culture consumed by both the fear and purported legitimacy of private competition. Du Bois always encouraged sustained critical appraisal of an American society torn between winners and losers, the favored and the damned. As his thinking developed into the 1930s, he focused more squarely upon the logic of capital accumulation, or the structural imperative to expand power in the service of private interest, and always in response to a suspicion or fear of the other—the competitor. I suggest that Du Bois's claims about the racially biased character of the competitive society, as well as his argument, put forth in a series of speeches and writings on “Negro education,” that Black colleges ought to facilitate the critique of this society, may have some normative import today as widespread, often unreflective acquiescence to the principles of competitive liberalism seems poised to exacerbate and further legitimize racial and economic inequities.

Keywords: W. E. B. Du Bois, Liberalism, Competition, Ideology, Marxism, Democratic Theory, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

INTRODUCTION

But, bless your soul, man, we can't all always attain the heights, much less live in their rarified atmosphere. Aim at 'em—that's the point...

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* ([1940] 2007, p. 78)

Competition would seem to be an inexorable fact of the human situation. We rival, we jockey for position, we claw and scratch in efforts to get the better of one another. This is a simple but sobering observation, to be sure, and it is one that has been a cornerstone of the liberal tradition, indeed a key part of that tradition's celebrated genius. As W. E. B. Du Bois would remark in *Dusk of Dawn*, recounting the words of a White friend, “we can't all always attain the heights.” There will be winners and losers. But a good society, or at least a reasonably decent one, gives us a fighting chance, and “that's the point,” as Du Bois's friend reminds us.

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Of course these epigraphic words of Du Bois are meant to convey a degree of sarcasm. Certainly Du Bois was drawn to the liberal paradigm; his legacy could well be defined by a spirited effort to pry open the gates of opportunity, to expand the protection of individual rights and liberties, and to give the abused at least something of a fighting chance. But, like many Black critics in the modern period, Du Bois grew increasingly disillusioned with a political and economic philosophy that sought to facilitate competition among private parties. The worry was that competition would always guarantee loss and defeat for some. If divisions between the successful and the rest could be cast as perfectly natural and consistent with a liberated humanity, then a freely competitive society would seem poised to remain a rather damning place for people of color and others so easily subject to the weight of competitive disadvantage.

This was a prescient concern. A half-century after Du Bois's death, a more fully liberated America has become a more fiercely competitive place, a society somehow more freely torn between winners and losers. And as the worry would have it, women and men of color continue to bear the brunt of this apparently inexorable way of the world. In the absence today of any real public scrutiny of our competitive way of life, I want to suggest that it may be worthwhile to revisit the provocations of a Du Bois engaged in old-fashioned ideology critique. The idea, we are told, is to relish in our freedom to compete, to duke it out for that "rarefied atmosphere." But "we can't all always attain the heights," and maybe *that's* the essential point worth considering.

Du Bois always warned against any simple embrace of the ideas and values derived from what he called the "White world." As his thinking developed into the twentieth century, he cast this warning more squarely in the direction of a liberal tradition that had been forged historically in the interests of White property owners. Throughout the ensuing discussion, I take cues from Du Bois's evolving sense of *disillusionment* with liberal thinking. I borrow this term from Michael Dawson (2001), who categorizes the later, roughly post-1930 Du Bois as a "disillusioned liberal," a critic who had gradually lost hope in the American creed. To my mind, this language of disillusionment is intriguing. It signals a sense of disappointment, but it also captures a sense in which one becomes detached from an illusion—removed from a set of ideas that are somehow misleading or partial or just not adequate to our lived reality. I want to analyze what I take to be Du Bois's concern that our simple embrace of admittedly very appealing ideas about opportunity and competition may discourage more careful consideration of the ways in which these ideas benefit some individuals more than others. I will also analyze Du Bois's concern that these ideas often shift our attention away from the material relationships that sustain us. For Du Bois, this sense of disillusionment facilitates a critique of our economic structure, and a critique of an economic logic that both assumes and reinforces fiercely competitive behavior.

One might perceive a spirit of privatization, or a principled focus on our individual pursuits and on the expansion of our strength and power vis-à-vis those around us, those whom we often fear and perceive as potential threats to our individual advancements.² This sort of spirit is woven into the fabric of our economic life, built into the very institution of capital accumulation. And this spirit is thought to be necessary, even normatively attractive, in part because we have no choice but to negotiate a naturally competitive environment. But Du Bois's insistence on thinking in terms of a "White world"—in terms of a particular reality that is meant for some and not others—encourages a distinctive reconceptualization of this background environment. At times Du Bois seems to suggest that this spirit of privatization, instituted and sustained by this White world, is effectively *constitutive* of a competitive environment, and not vice versa. Ideas about competition, and the presumption of an inexorably competitive state of nature, effectively reinforce and legitimize a way of life that is

meant for some and not for others, or that promises gains for some at the expense of others. Ultimately, I suggest that Du Bois's later work encourages our consideration of the enduring political divisiveness of a liberal tradition that, nowadays especially, most of us simply take for granted.

The essay has three parts; the first two set out to unpack the foregoing. In the third section, in an effort to imagine how this rather sweeping suspicion of the competitive society might apply in more practical terms today, I revisit Du Bois's writings on "Negro education." Throughout his life Du Bois was remarkably consistent in his call for Black colleges and universities to "conserve" a distinctive perspective vis-à-vis the White world.³ He was quite consistent, I argue, in his call for such schools to facilitate the critique of the competitive society. My purpose in this third section is simply to provide an example of the kind of institution that Du Bois thought would be necessary to his critical project and to invite some consideration of how today's historically Black colleges and universities, many of which find themselves working through increasingly desperate identity crises, might affirm a distinctive and progressive mission by working to recover something of Du Bois's call.

Throughout the essay, I draw most heavily upon Du Bois's Depression-era writings, but I also highlight important continuities between Du Bois's later concerns and a critical theoretical framework that he develops very early on. To some extent, at least in an indirect way, the essay is meant to speak to Du Bois scholarship and exegesis. But the more direct aim, as I will explain, is simply to stir up our thinking about a spirit of competitiveness that seems to go relatively unchecked in our time. And I want to stress that the contributions to be considered here are perhaps best thought of as provocations, as opposed to the rudiments of an alternative vision or a more traditional philosophical argument. To my mind, this is only befitting of Du Bois. He is an elusive figure, an author of "fugitive pieces" (Du Bois [1940] 2007, p. 41), writings that run from conventional wisdom and that at times risk losing themselves in unfamiliar territory, and that do not necessarily contribute to a consistent or fully formulated theoretical narrative.⁴ Moreover, by casting Du Bois as a disillusioned liberal, as opposed to, say, some sort of cooperative socialist, I intend to capture a sense of frustration and philosophical uncertainty that I think is strangely appropriate to the contemporary moment.⁵ Finding ourselves caught rather squarely in the throes of the liberal paradigm, compelled by force of circumstance to accommodate the competitive way of life, our contemporary situation just does not seem to suggest a viable alternative, theoretical or practical. And yet, as this way of life continues to yield tragic consequences for so many, the frustration and uncertainty endure. At the very least, we might counsel the stirrings of a critic moved by discontent.

DISILLUSIONED LIBERALISM

I mentioned that Du Bois always warned against any simple embrace of the ideas and values derived from the White world. Classical liberalism was a target, of course, as was orthodox Marxism. But Du Bois's disillusionment with liberal thinking entails an intriguing variation on Marx's ([1845] 1998) claim that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," or that "the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (p. 67). Throughout his later work especially, and perhaps most notably in the Depression-era writings, Du Bois suggests that widely appealing liberal ideas may obscure the enduring political divisiveness of a liberal tradition forged historically in the interests of White property owners. This claim will occupy our attention throughout this section and into the next. I begin with some background.

Already we have begun to allude to what one might call the Black radical critique of the liberal paradigm.⁶ The focus, of course, has to do with a public philosophy that encourages private competition, and for critics such as Du Bois, the “freedom dream,” to borrow Robin D. G. Kelley’s (2002) term, does not simply entail an effort to liberate Black Americans such that they might enjoy the freedom to compete with White people. By itself, such liberation would do little more than introduce Black women and men (and people of color more generally) to a playing field that is effectively rigged in favor of the White establishment, institutionally disposed to the protection of private property and thus to generations worth of accumulated White wealth. In one early essay, Du Bois (1898) would remark: “Even if special legislation and organized relief intervene, freedmen always start life under an economic disadvantage which generations, perhaps centuries, cannot overcome” (p. 7). Moreover, such liberation would threaten to shift the burden of responsibility onto those liberated women and men; given the chance to compete—given the “right,” the “opportunity”—Black folks would be on their own, independently responsible for any failures or shortcomings that they may endure. In a peculiar, perverse way, this kind of liberation effectively liberates White Americans by absolving them of any continuing responsibility for societal inequity or really any of the hardship and suffering that competitive interaction may yield.

The gist of this critique is fairly well known. I want to try to frame the issue in a more distinct way. In an important sense, we are dealing with a set of ideas about liberation, freedom, independence, and opportunity that are tremendously appealing and that often seem *universally* appealing, but tend to serve *particular* interests. To put the issue in these terms is to invite consideration of the ideological character of liberal thinking. Of course, the language of ideology derives from the Marxist vernacular. Du Bois began to read Marx seriously in the spring of 1933, and while he would later claim conversion to the “the dictum of Karl Marx, that the economic foundation of a nation is widely decisive for its politics, its art and its culture” (Du Bois [1944] 2001, p. 61), he never developed any real theory of ideology, nor did he pursue any explicit critique of ideology in the Marxist sense.⁷ Nevertheless in his later work especially, albeit in a manner that builds upon a critical framework that he had developed very early on, Du Bois seems to counsel a rather strong suspicion, reminiscent of Marx’s reflections on ideology, that publicly embraced ideas and values often obscure real political divisiveness and work to sustain an imbalance of power—in this case a racial imbalance of power. From his earliest days as a social critic, Du Bois would scrutinize conceptions and practices of freedom handed down from European civilization, from a “people fighting to be free in order that another people should not be free,” and Du Bois always tended to frame this critical appraisal in terms of the particular and universal, “the advance of a part of the world at the expense of the whole” (Du Bois [1890] 1988, pp. 17–18). His consideration of Marx in the 1930s would seem only to build on a certain critical theoretical foundation that had always been there, but that was coupled now with a more explicit hostility toward liberalism—a hostility marked, of course, by a very public break with the NAACP, that “most effective organization of the liberal spirit” (Du Bois [1944] 2001, p. 56)—and a more robust materialism. In the 1930s, Du Bois comes to exhibit a stronger suspicion of ideas, and of the role that ideas might play in struggles to change the world. This suspicion facilitates Du Bois’s turn toward a mode of critical consciousness grounded in, as he put it, the “economic foundation.” Here the language of *disillusionment*, and the intimation of being “disenchanted” or “freed from an illusion” is especially fitting.

As the economic crisis of the 1930s wore on, Du Bois found himself increasingly frustrated by the public response, and especially by the racial insouciance of the New Deal. In his 1940 autobiography, Du Bois would explain how he arrived at an

understanding that any adequate explanation of the tremendous resiliency of racial divisiveness—that nagging color bar—had to start with “economic motives,” and a consideration of the long history of efforts to accumulate private wealth through the exploitation of Black labor. As he would suggest in *Dusk of Dawn* ([1940] 2007), these economic motives were fundamentally interwoven with the production of ideas, and any adequate diagnosis of the problem of the twentieth century had to include also a consideration of the “long history of reason” and of what Du Bois would call “false rationalization” (pp. 2–3). Of course overtly conservative or racist ideas would contribute to the sustenance of a racial caste system. But when Du Bois speaks of “false rationalization,” he seems to have in mind some of the reasons and rationale behind more explicitly progressive agendas. He seems to be concerned especially with the ways in which widely attractive ideas about freedom and liberation might disserve transformative objectives.

Du Bois ([1897] 1987) had long held that the White world and the modern global movement that gave us “urges to build wealth on the backs of Black slaves and colored serfs,” also gave to civilization a distinctive set of ideas, including, principally, a vision of “commercial freedom and constitutional liberty” (p. 819). And these ideas were able to take hold and flourish in the modern period at least partly because of their tremendous normative appeal. After all, most of us want the freedom to pursue our self-interests and to compete economically. Most of us want the institutional protection of life, liberty, and estate. But, as we have alluded to already, these ideas are also quite convenient for the establishment and maintenance of societal divisiveness and stratification. And certainly by the 1930s, Du Bois ([1940] 2007) came to worry that his own project, specifically his focus on “the admission of my people into the freedom of democracy” (pp. 2–3), was a project based on false rationalization.⁸ He came to worry that “what the White world was doing, its goals and ideals,” could not be made to serve the interests of an inclusive public, that the problem was not simply that “people like me and thousands of others who might have my ability and aspiration, were refused permission to be part of this world” (p. 14). He began to speculate that this White world was like a “rushing express,” and where the apparent problem, perceived from aboard the train, had to do with the relations among its passengers, the real problem was “its rate of speed and its destination” (p. 14).⁹

“To think politically,” Raymond Geuss reminds us, “is to think about agency, power, and interests, and the relations among these.” It is to ask, “who does what to whom for whose benefit?” (Geuss 2008, p. 25). In recounting, if only very cursorily, the trajectory of Du Bois’s development as a social critic, I intend simply to call attention to the way in which Du Bois comes to puzzle over this question, and thus the way in which he comes to think politically. For the later Du Bois, the worry and suspicion is that ideas born of the White world bear the trace of a divisive society meant for some and not for others. In order to appreciate fully such divisiveness, or even to consider the ways in which common sense may privilege particular interests, one needs to disillusion oneself and explore how one’s ideas may be interwoven with that “economic foundation” that Du Bois refers to. Of course there is much that could be brought into focus through such an operation, and the rich tradition of Black radical historiography—the works of Du Bois, certainly, but also C. L. R. James, Walter Rodney, Cedric Robinson, and many others—is a testament to the possibilities. In what follows, I pay specific attention to how Du Bois’s disillusionment with liberal thinking facilitates a sharp critique of a set of assumptions about competition and competitiveness, and about the logic of an economic order oriented principally toward capital accumulation.

CRITIQUE OF THE COMPETITIVE SOCIETY

Ultimately the concern has to do with the establishment and legitimation of a competitive way of life. Earlier I mentioned that one might think of the spirit of privatization as a principled focus on our individual pursuits and on the expansion of our strength and power vis-à-vis those around us, those whom we often fear and perceive as potential threats to our individual advancements. My sense is that Du Bois always thought of this spirit, this principled focus on our individual pursuits, as a product of the White world, a characteristic contribution of what he would refer to in his earlier work as the Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon civilization. This was a civilization “built upon the ‘Eternal I’” (Du Bois [1889] 1995, p. 224), he noted in one early satirical piece. “The ‘high Episcopal Nicene creed’ of the Anglo-Saxon,” he said, “is ‘to put heel on neck of man down’... not that I is above Thee but that I despises Thee” (pp. 224–225).¹⁰ Du Bois seems to suggest here that the great belief of the White world, its enduring statement of faith, is that we are individuals, and though we are not naturally higher or lower than one another, we find ourselves naturally at odds with one another. The great belief is that the nature of our worldly situation compels our self-interested behavior, and that a spirit or ethic of privatization is, as it were, conscripted by a naturally competitive environment.

These claims about European civilizational beliefs and assumptions emerge most notably and consistently in the earlier works, but Du Bois continues to wrestle with these thoughts well into the twentieth century, certainly through the Great War and into the Great Depression. This association of a White world with an ethic of privatization and a set of assumptions about a competitive environment informs Du Bois’s turn toward a more penetrating critique of the economic workings of modern society that he would come to describe as the “empire of concentrated capital” (Du Bois [1933] 1971, p. 152). It is well known that, for Du Bois, racial determinations—slavery and caste systems—were “founded and retained by capitalism” (Du Bois [1935] 1998, p. 30). And it is well known that Du Bois situates the emancipation of Black labor in the United States at the onset of a “new capitalism,” a more fully integrated world system that would prove to be more intensely competitive at every level. “Within the exploiting group of New World masters,” Du Bois ([1935] 1998) said of this post-Reconstruction model, “greed and jealousy became so fierce that they fought for trade and markets and materials and slaves all over the world until at last in 1914 the world flamed in war,” leaving “grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation, Empire and Democracy, staring at each other across World Depression” (pp. 634–635). Among the workers too, greed and jealousy became so fierce that “color castes” warred against any mutual interest, effectively foreclosing in advance even the possibility of revolutionary working class consciousness. Of course these reflections on mature capitalism are far more layered and complex than we are able to account for here. But Du Bois’s thinking would seem to indicate that the practice of capital accumulation is in many ways the characteristic material expression of a White world set in motion. And, as I will try to explain, this thought may well affect our own thinking about the universality of the competitive way of life.

Regarding capitalist society in general, Du Bois was not interested in any simple blanket condemnation. He would praise, for example, the expansion of productive capacities under capitalism. He would praise the “use of capital” as a kind of disciplinary technique, “the rule of sacrificing present wealth for greater wealth to come” (Du Bois [1938] 2001, p. 144). This principled orientation toward further accumulation was essential to the production of “more wealth than the wealthy could consume” (p. 144). But this approach, this “use of capital,” had broader disciplinary implications.

Du Bois was especially concerned with the ways in which an American *public* had become accustomed to the pursuit of *private* wealth accumulation. He was concerned with the ways in which the critical imagination, that “freedom dream,” had become almost entirely circumscribed by a particular mode of production. We have come to “produce primarily for the profit of owners and not for use of the mass of people,” he would say in 1938, and “we have grown to think that this is the only way in which we can produce” (Du Bois [1938] 2001, p. 145).¹¹

At issue here is a kind of societal imperative that seems to derive from the logic of capital accumulation. And this is a phenomenon with which we are all familiar. The sense is that we must stay on the offensive. We must grow, expand, and create new markets, new innovations, and new technologies. We must accumulate more capital and we must reinvest. And the explanation, the rationale, is that we *must* do this *in order to stay competitive*. For if we ever slow up, if we ever stagnate or become complacent, we risk falling behind vis-à-vis our competitors. And this idea that we pursue our private interest *because* we fear competition, this notion that the practice of capital accumulation is natural *because* it is simply a kind of instinctive response to an inexorably competitive environment, is very nearly a perfect rationale for why we have “grotesque Profits and Poverty, Plenty and Starvation” (Du Bois [1935] 1998, p. 635), a society torn between winners and losers. When we compete, as we must, there will always be losers. It is simply the nature of the beast.

But of course Du Bois encourages us to think a bit differently about the nature of this beast. He seems to want to suggest that a competitive ethos gets built onto a society oriented toward private capital accumulation. And here he would seem to be developing another line of thought indicated by Marx. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx ([1857] 1993) says that competition does not establish the laws of capital accumulation, “but is rather their executor” (p. 552). He says that, “unlimited competition is therefore not the presupposition for the truth of economic laws, but is rather the consequence” (p. 552).¹² And though Marx does not really elaborate on this remark, the idea seems to be that the drive for capital accumulation—that imperial push for more, that will-to-power essence of modern capital—effectively encourages private competition, and in such a way that competition comes to appear natural and inevitable. The idea seems to be that competition *follows from* the drive for capital accumulation, and not the other way around. And even to entertain this thought is to invite consideration of whether or not this competitive way of life, this ethic of privatization, is as natural and inexorable as we tend to presume. To translate this into the terms of Du Bois’s analysis, the critique is that the “use of capital” is in many ways *the* defining legacy of the White world. As more of us assume the freedom to participate in a society oriented principally toward capital accumulation, our aggressive pursuit of our private interest is less a willful expression of a necessary and universal way of life, and more a defensive reaction—a kind of tragic accommodation of a divisive logic set in motion by and for the particular interests of the White world. Once again, Du Bois encourages us to think politically, to reflect upon the “ideals of our twisted White American environment” (Du Bois [1933] 2011, p. 128) and to ask *for whom* this logic of limitless private accumulation is and has been intended. And he does so by encouraging us to ask about how this logic, in its presumed orientation toward competition and competitiveness, effectively reinforces the very environment that it is said to presuppose.

Throughout the discussion thus far, I have teased out a set of concerns from under the umbrella of a broader Black radical critique of the liberal paradigm, and I have also drawn significant parallels between Du Bois and Marx. Before turning to the third section of the essay, I want briefly to provide a slightly more refined situation of Du Bois

vis-à-vis these two theoretical traditions, the liberal and the Marxist. And here it will be helpful to reintroduce the theme of disillusionment.

Presumably many liberal theorists would want to push back on some of the concerns that Du Bois raises. Many would concede that competitive societies produce winners and losers, but that as long as the defeated are given their fair shot and opportunity, and are left with sufficient resources to live a dignified life, there is little basis for objection. For many in the tradition, from Adam Smith to John Stuart Mill to John Rawls, the idea has been that competition is not to be seen as an end in itself, but simply as a means to material prosperity and a mechanism for the fair distribution of scarce resources and valued positions.¹³ And to these *ideas*, presumably Du Bois himself would have little objection. But a fundamental part of Du Bois's enduring value as a theorist is that he finds himself compelled to cut through these ideas, down to the lived reality of a society that often prefers to imagine itself in terms of its better ideals. Michael Dawson (2001) has noted that "the great majority of black theorists challenge liberalism as it has been practiced within the United States, not some abstract ideal version of the ideology" (p. 13), and certainly this is true of Du Bois. Today we confront a real-world liberalism that is fiercely competitive, a society in which racial categories are routinely leveraged in the struggle for competitive advantage. And the worry that I have sought to cull from a disillusioned Du Bois is that our liberal common sense, in its tacit endorsement of private competition, threatens to naturalize and legitimize this debilitating spirit of private competitiveness. My point here is simply that Du Bois speaks less to liberal *theory* and the claims of ideal *theorists*, and more to our lived reality, and to a kind of liberal common sense that tends to reinforce persistent societal inequities.

Certainly many of these concerns resonate with the Marxist critique, as I have indicated throughout. And in terms of Du Bois's situation vis-à-vis Marxist theory, once again it is important to keep in mind the theme of disillusionment. It is important to recall that Marxism is an optimistic philosophy born of a set of assumptions about the sources and prospects of revolutionary consciousness, and that significantly for our purposes, the later Du Bois simply does not share this optimism. As Cedric Robinson (2000) has noted, Du Bois never really employed the Marxist theory of the "contradiction between the mode of production and the relations of production," but instead focused on "the ideologies of racism and, to a lesser extent, individualism" (p. 229). For Du Bois, as we have seen, the competitive society compels us to fabricate all sorts of meaningful distinctions between our selves and others, our presumed competitors. And this deep-seated divisiveness, reinforced by the legitimation of a competitive ethos, greatly diminishes the prospects of concerted political intervention and any practical reconciliation of bourgeois society's purported internal contradictions.¹⁴ But while Du Bois's analysis, in its insistence on the characteristic practices and ideologies of a White world, may not stir up revolutionary enthusiasm, it certainly encourages further inquiry into the challenges that inhibit structural change. I want to round out the present inquiry by considering briefly Du Bois's vision for the Black college, an institution that he suggests is poised to counsel the critique of the competitive society.

THE BLACK COLLEGE AS A LOCUS OF CRITIQUE

In many ways, the turn to a discussion of education is to be expected. One of the more resounding refrains of the competitive society is that we must invest in education, in our so-called human capital, as to ensure that future generations stand a fighting chance in an increasingly cutthroat global marketplace. And if we lack a commitment

to education at the public level, as the terms of the competitive society would seem implicitly to indicate, then certainly as private individuals we are prepared today to claw and scratch (often to the point of bankruptcy) to see that our loved ones receive the competitive advantage that an elite education is thought to afford. This standard politician's refrain and this common example of the ethic of privatization are, according to the terms of our analysis, simply further evidence of a divisive society set up for winners and losers.

What I have identified thus far as an ethic or spirit of privatization is reflective of a kind of democratic obeisance to the liberal paradigm, an abdication of public responsibility in favor of the pursuit of private freedom. In terms of how we govern our society, this preoccupation with our private affairs signals our widespread dependence upon both the technical expertise of public administrators and, before that, a broader liberal framework that, as I have indicated, seems to be set up to facilitate private competition. For Du Bois ([1933] 1971), the dependency and powerlessness that we so often experience as ordinary citizens is, as he would put it in 1933, an expression of "the despair and debacle of *laissez-faire*," a reflection of the fact that our society "has no *intelligent* democracy upon which it can depend" (p. 159). And for Du Bois, much of this stems from "the failure of education," "the stupidity and ignorance of the average voter," and the fact that "we have lied [for] so long about money and business, [that] we do know where the truth is" (pp. 159–160). The point here, perhaps germane to any liberal society caught in the throes of economic crisis, is that we tend to raise our citizens to compete as private individuals, to accommodate the practices and ideologies of the competitive society, and without much "honest and earnest criticism" of the public consequences.¹⁵ In other words, our schools do very little to encourage critical consideration of the inequity, the divisiveness and the privatization that competitive interactions yield. This "failure of education" has a profound impact upon the prospects of a responsible and competent democratic public.

The concern about a "failure of education" provides a useful backdrop for our consideration of Du Bois's thinking about the Black college. Hatched at the onset of that postbellum "new capitalism" and plainly integrated into the industrial, financial, and commercial workings of modern society, the Black college, as a *Black* institution, nevertheless remained for Du Bois uniquely situated to cultivate and promote at least something of a transcendent message vis-à-vis that of the White world. As early as 1897, in the famous "Conservation of the Races" speech, Du Bois ([1897] 1987) argued that the "Negro race" had to "develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that 'one far-off divine event'" (p. 819). He noted there that "the full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race had not yet been given to the world" (p. 820), and that Black women and men had to "conserve" the lessons of their shared life experiences as to cultivate a distinctive critical perspective. This critical perspective could ensure that a genuinely transcendent future, a kind of redemptive modernity, was indeed yet to come. In many ways, the Black college was for Du Bois a principal organ through which this strangely progressive conservationism could potentially manifest itself.

Du Bois was of course an academic, twice a professor at the historically Black Atlanta University. In addition, he was a popular speaker at various Black schools, including Hampton, Howard, and his alma mater, Fisk University. He would reflect often on the theme of "Negro education," and over time, he would sketch in a fairly clear portrait of a series of values or ideals that he thought were appropriate to the mission of the Black college. Among these were hard work, sacrifice, and notably for our purposes, an "ideal of poverty," which, he noted in 1930, is very nearly the "direct

antithesis” to the acquisitive logic of the White world (Du Bois [1930] 2001, p. 106).¹⁶ By itself, this ideal of poverty and restraint in the pursuit of private wealth accumulation was conceived by Du Bois to be a necessary legacy of a Black college education that could serve as a basis for a principled critique of the competitive society. But I want to suggest that Du Bois casts a broader vision for how the Black college might facilitate the development of that “full, complete Negro message.” It seems to me that, especially in his later work, Du Bois conceives of the Black college as a kind of counsel of universality, an institution uniquely attendant to the struggle for a more sustainable and publicly oriented society distinctively situated to expose the particularity of the White world.

This conception is conveyed most plainly in a 1933 address at Fisk University. There Du Bois ([1933] 2001) expressed concern about the traditional White university, the “kind of university [with which] we are most familiar,” an institution of higher education that provides “culture for the cultured” (p. 114), training and knowledge for an elite class and its particular interests despite its advertisements to the contrary. Du Bois told a story of this institution’s history. He noted that, “instead of the university growing down and seeking to comprehend in its curriculum the life and experience, the thought and expression of lower classes, it almost invariably tended to grow up and narrow itself to a sublimated elite of mankind” (p. 114). In this way, “the university cut off from its natural roots and from the mass of men” (p. 115) became “a university of the air” (p. 115), a kind of echo chamber of ideological consciousness.

It is significant that Du Bois puts this story into historical perspective. He is describing the only kind of college or university that most of us know, and yet, he says, this model is degenerate, a spoiled version of its original self. In what must have been an expression of tremendous heresy, Du Bois said that the “university, if it is to be firm, must hark back to the original idea of the [West African] bush school” (p. 117), which, in its orientation toward the welfare and sustainability of the whole community, was a more “perfect system of education” (p. 112). Though Du Bois did not really elaborate on this assertion, his objective was clear enough. In urging his predominately Black audience to return in spirit to its African past, an admittedly romanticized image of this past, he sought to indicate that the *Black* college or university could set out to redeem a lost sense of universality, and by affirming its distinctive identity in and through persistent exposure of the false universality of the White world. Du Bois told his audience that its charge was precisely to “build the sort of Negro university which [would] emancipate not simply the Black folk of the United States, but those White folk who in their effort to suppress Negroes have killed their own culture—men who in their desperate effort to replace equality with caste and to build inordinate wealth on a foundation of abject poverty have succeeded in killing democracy” (p. 129).¹⁷

The point here is that the Black college is an example of an institution that might facilitate the development of a certain way of thinking politically. Du Bois suggests that the idea is to awaken rudiments of the Black radical tradition, to draw upon lived experiences of racialization, felt legacies of the slavery and caste systems, in order to expose and reflect upon the *particular* character of the White world, the *for whom* of our larger society’s governing ideas and practices. And the Black college provides for Du Bois ([1940] 2007) a kind of platform on which to “listen to the complaint of those human beings today who are suffering most from White attitudes, from White habits, from the conscious and unconscious wrongs which White folks are today inflicting on their victims,” and to coordinate and project the voice of “the colored world... whose insistent cry may yet become the warning which awakens the [broader] world to its truer self and its wider destiny” (p. 87).¹⁸ To be sure, these reflections reinforce Du Bois’s later reconsideration of the character and role of a college-educated Black

elite, his later rethinking of his earlier claims for the Talented Tenth (Du Bois [1940] 1999, [1948] 1995; James 1996). Though it would push beyond the scope of this essay, these reflections could be said to reinforce recent scholarly emphasis on Du Bois's account of educated leaders who are themselves led by the concerns and interests of a democratic public (Gooding-Williams 2009, 2011; Rabaka 2009).¹⁹ In any case, for our immediate purposes the point here is simply that the later Du Bois's vision for the Black college is quite plainly a vision of an institution that nurtures the critique of the competitive society.

CONCLUSION

In an address in 1933, Du Bois insisted that “we must rid ourselves of the persistent idea that the advance of mankind consists of the scaling off of layers who become incorporated with the world's upper and ruling classes, leaving always dead and inert below the ignorant and unenlightened mass of men” (p. 156). This persistent idea had given way, he said, to a “mud-still theory of society that civilization not only permitted but must have the poor, the diseased, the wretched, the criminal upon which to be built its temples of light” (Du Bois [1940] 2007, p. 86). As I have tried to suggest in this essay, Du Bois urges us to see this persistent idea, which remains widespread in our time and which lends tremendous legitimacy to a fiercely competitive way of life, as a kind of “false rationalization,” a *particular* idea that reinforces a *particular* world—indeed a *partial* world bent on success for some and defeat for others.

This is no easy sell. Earlier I cited a remark in which a young Du Bois identified the “high Episcopal Nicene creed” of the White world—its enduring statement of faith that we are by nature competitive individuals, and we are not naturally higher or lower than one another, just naturally at odds with one another. “We can't all always attain the heights,” but we can “aim at 'em,” says Du Bois's White friend, and a most reasonable public philosophy would seem to be one that facilitates precisely this kind of private competition. Now of course there would seem to be nothing inherently biased about this belief. As Du Bois frames it, this perspective of the White world is perfectly consistent with a progressive liberalism that dispels the slavery and caste systems as woefully regrettable anomalies, and that welcomes women and men of color into the “freedom of democracy” by protecting their right to compete as private individuals. But the worry is that this belief about an inexorably competitive state of nature is, for lack of a better term, ideological. For Du Bois, it is not so much that we aim at the heights because “we can't all always... live in their rarified atmosphere” (Du Bois [1940] 2007, p. 78). The problem is that we aim at these heights in the first place, that we lust after a detached life in that rarified air. Or rather the problem is that this acquisitive urge, this imperialist drive for a kind of privileged status, for Du Bois the *modus operandi* of the White world, has been constitutive of a capitalist modernity that we now all inherit. And this world, artificially constructed so magnificently that it seems natural, effectively compels us to acclimate to its competitive logic and thus to seek out ways to leverage our competitive advantage over one another, far too often through practices of racialization.

Our consideration of Du Bois has yielded a rather broad critique of modern society, and this rather brief presentation amounts only to a kind of précis for what I anticipate will become a larger study. Still, in an effort to draw this inquiry to a close, I want to revisit once again our overarching theme of disillusionment. As is well known, Du Bois comes to counsel a sense of disappointment with the liberal paradigm. But he also encourages our detachment from what he might regard as a set of *illusions*,

a set of ideas that are somehow misleading or partial or just not adequate to our lived reality. For Du Bois this includes principally our detachment from the idea that our world requires our self-interested behavior and that we have simply no choice but to cultivate a spirit or ethic of privatization. Yet our detachment from this idea is not to be understood as a kind of *ethical* resistance. As I have tried to indicate, Du Bois's disillusionment with the ruling ideas corresponds to a consideration of the root structures of liberal society, and it facilitates a certain way of thinking *politically*, of asking, in broadly historical terms (borrowing again Raymond Geuss's formulation), "Who does what to whom for whose benefit?" This distinction between the ethical and the political is crucial. Geuss (2010) says elsewhere, "ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future" (p. 42).²⁰ It could well be Du Bois's own formulation for how a set of ideas about competition and competitiveness, how an ethic of privatization, has grown up in the White world as an expression of a society oriented principally toward capital accumulation. Though ultimately Du Bois may sour on the prospects for concerted political intervention in the modern age, his critique of the competitive society makes clear that our objective is not merely to reflect on how better to live the established structures of this society. Rather, the objective is to expose and contest those structures, which Du Bois might say have become the basis for a falsely universal way of life.

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NOTES

1. This essay, which is part of a larger study in progress, has grown out of a series of tremendously enriching discussions at Morehouse College. I owe a very special debt of gratitude to the participants and fellow organizers of the Series on Political Philosophy in Atlanta (SOPHIA) and to my students, who are always so eager to discuss the works of Du Bois. I owe special thanks also to Lawrie Balfour, Juliet Hooker, Kipton Jensen, Preston King, Neil Roberts, Justin Rose, Greta Snyder, and two anonymous reviewers.
2. The term *privatization*, a term not current during Du Bois's lifetime, is of course a technical term of art, reflective of an economic strategy that has gained tremendous currency in the contemporary neoliberal moment. I use the term in a broader sense, as to reflect a classical liberal emphasis on the enterprising activities of private individuals, an emphasis that often works to the detriment of any conscious or concerted interest in the public welfare. This *spirit* or *ethic* of privatization, as I refer to it, is quite plainly a subject of Du Bois's critical concern, and it is certainly part of the ethos of our contemporary neoliberal moment.
3. This term derives from Du Bois's ([1897] 1987) essay, "The Conservation of the Races." I will try to explain that my sense is that the core of the thesis expounded in this essay stays with Du Bois throughout his later work.
4. Regarding Du Bois's elusiveness, consider the testimony of one critic who describes Du Bois as "preeminently a dialectician," a writer who "frequently championed apparently opposing positions, sometimes within the scope of this single paragraph. Thus, he could be a spirited advocate of pan-Africanism, while insisting that African people were members of the world community centered in universal values. He could defend African Americans' institutional separatism, while crusading relentlessly for their citizenship rights. He could propose an open and inclusive American society, and still oppose the radical integrationism of Walter White and Thurgood Marshall, who argued that segregation inherently implied inequality... there was a warfare between [Du Bois's] loyalties as social democrat and racial romantic, another battle between his impulses as traditionalist and iconoclast. There was a tension between his austerity and his enthusiasm, another between his elitism and his

- folkishness, and yet another between his blatant Prussianism and his latent Bohemianism” (Moses 1998, pp. 136, 149). To my mind, this inconsistency has something to do with Du Bois’s struggle to combine an idealist’s longing with an activist’s pragmatism. Gerald Horne (1985) states that while “his passion for socialism, peace, and equality remained immutable throughout” his life, “Du Bois was not one to cling to a point of view if he felt that changing times had undermined it” (pp. 7–8). For a discussion of Du Bois ([1940] 2007) as an author of “fugitive pieces” (p. 41), as he once characterized the essays that comprise *The Souls of Black Folk*, see Balfour (2011, pp. 17–19).
5. We should be mindful of Adolph Reed’s (1997) observation that, while Du Bois exhibited something of a “collectivist orientation” (p. 20) throughout his life, the “socialist” label, given the baggage that term now carries, can be anachronistic and misleading. See also Van Wienen and Kraft (2007).
 6. For a more detailed account, including discussion of Du Bois’s contributions, see Robinson (2000), Kelley (2002), and Bogues (2010). To my mind, C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* ([1938] 1989) remains the classic account of the Black radical critique of European liberalism. For more on the racist underpinnings of the liberal tradition, see Mehta (1999), Sala-Molins (2006), and Losurdo (2014), as well as the work of Charles W. Mills, including, recently, “Racial Liberalism” (2008).
 7. In “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” Du Bois ([1944] 2001) associates the turn to Marx with his “post-1928 strategy” (p. 69). Elsewhere he indicates that a real shift in his thinking occurs in the wake of a 1933 address at Fisk University (which we will consider later in the essay): “to me it [the address at Fisk] was the beginning of a new line of thought... from that day I began to read and study Karl Marx. I began to understand my recent visit to Russia. I became interested in the New Deal and I wanted to supplement the liberalism of Charles Sumner with the new economic contribution of the 20th century” ([1933] 2001), p. 133). That summer, in 1933, Du Bois returned to Atlanta University to lead a graduate seminar on “Karl Marx and the Negro”—“it was to be Marx in months, not years,” notes David Levering Lewis (2009, p. 549)—and while it is not known for certain which of Marx’s texts Du Bois may have been working with, *The German Ideology* was not published until 1932 and was not translated into English until 1938. It is safe to assume that Du Bois was never really a conscious practitioner of what has come to be known, largely in the wake of the early Frankfurt School, as *Ideologiekritik*. And for our purposes, this may be a good thing; in recent decades the coherence of a more comprehensive theory of ideology has been subject to some compelling scrutiny (Geuss 1981; Rosen 1996, 2000).
 8. It is this concern that would allow Du Bois ([1938] 2001) to say, in an important address in 1938 at Fisk University, that, “Democracy does not and cannot mean freedom. On the contrary it means coercion. It means submission of the individual will to the general will and it is justified in this compulsion only if the will is general and not the will of special privilege” (p. 155).
 9. Underscoring both a sense of disillusionment with liberal political objectives and a subsequent turn toward a focus on the economic workings of twentieth-century society, Du Bois ([1940] 2007) would go on to say that “a continued agitation which had for its object simply free entrance into the present economy of the world, that looked at political rights as an end in itself rather than as a method of reorganizing the state, and that expected through civil rights and legal judgments to re-establish freedom on a broader and firmer basis, was not so much wrong as short-sighted; that the democracy which we had been asking for in political life must sooner or later replace the tyranny which now dominated industrial life” (p. 144).
 10. Shamoan Zamir (1995) notes that this text, from 1889, when Du Bois was still a graduate student at Harvard, was “an extensive critique and satire of Teutonism (*Anglo-Saxon* and *Teuton* are interchangeable terms for Du Bois), and this at a time when theories about the Teutonic origins of the United States still had widespread currency” (p. 49).
 11. This was a common refrain of Du Bois’s writings from the 1930s. “It is extraordinary,” he would say in one notable address, “how the patterns of the present setup of business have completely captured our imaginations” (Du Bois [1933] 1971, p. 159).

12. For a helpful discussion of this particular passage, see Harvey (2010, pp. 166–168, 2011, pp. 43–47).
13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for these formulations and for urging me to address them.
14. “There is not at present,” Du Bois would say in 1933, “the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution based on a united class-conscious proletariat is anywhere on the American far horizon. Rather race antagonism and labor group rivalry are still undisturbed by world catastrophe” ([1933] 1995, pp. 543–544).
15. See Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1999), where he says that “honest and earnest criticism” is the “soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society” (p. 37).
16. “The ideal of poverty is the direct antithesis of the present American ideal of wealth. We cannot all be wealthy. Should not all be wealthy. In an ideal industrial organization, no person should have an income which he does not personally need; nor wield a power solely for his own whim. If civilization is to turn out millionaires, it will also turn out beggars and prostitutes, either at home or among the lesser breeds without law. A simple healthy life on limited income is the only responsible ideal of civilized folk” (Du Bois [1930] 2001, p. 106). Consider also another passage, from 1933: “The average man must give up the idea that the chief end of an American is to be a millionaire. Now this is a tremendous change. Only the other day a friend of mine was talking to a younger banker. The banker said: ‘my opinion is that now is the time when the foundations of the great fortunes of the future are going to be laid.’ In other words, in a day when we are suffering all the disaster that has come from this founding of great private fortunes, with its war and waste, its cheating and lying, its murder of men and women and children and death of ambition and beauty, the idea of this young man was that just as soon as we get over this crisis, we were going right back to doing the same thing again and yet again, and indeed unless we suffer a spiritual revolution by which men are going to envisage small incomes and limited resources and endless work for the larger goals of life, unless we have this, nothing can save civilization either for White people or Black” (Du Bois [1933] 1971, pp. 153–154).
17. Echoing many of the points that we have sought to emphasize, Du Bois would go on to say that “only a universal system of learning, rooted in the will and condition of the masses and blossoming from that manure up toward the stars is worth the name. Once builded it can only grow as it brings down sunlight and starshine and impregnates the mud. The chief obstacle in this rich land endowed with every natural resource and with the abilities of 100 different peoples—the chief and only obstacle to the coming of that kingdom of economic equality which is the only logical end of work, is the determination of the White world to keep the Black world poor and make themselves rich. The disaster which this selfish and shortsighted policy has brought lies at the bottom of this present depression, and too, its cure lies beside it. Your clear vision of a world without wealth, of capital without profit, of income based on work alone, is the path out not only for you but for all men” (Du Bois [1933] 2001, pp. 29–30). For a discussion of Du Bois’s romanticization of West African societal values and practices, see Moses (1998, pp. 153–155).
18. It is important to emphasize that for Du Bois, the Black college is an example of the kind of institution that might counsel the critique of the competitive society, which is not to say that what are referred to today as the “predominately White institutions” cannot also contribute to the kind of educational program that Du Bois envisions. One might argue, returning again to the theme of disillusionment, that Du Bois’s later reflections on indigenous Black institutions, perhaps the Black college in particular, bespeak something of a departure from his earlier optimism regarding the role that White institutions might play in advancing the “study of the Negro problems” (Du Bois 1898, [1899] 1996).
19. I might add that one of the driving claims of Robert Gooding-Williams’s recent book (2009), which focuses exclusively on Du Bois’s “early political thought,” is that the young Du Bois does not always take adequate critical appraisal of the “civilizational norms” of modern society. But “it is well worth noting,” Gooding-Williams says at one point, that Du Bois “retrospectively criticized his early thought, precisely for failing to question the generally accepted norms and ideals in view of which he understood the Negro problem”

(p. 161), and certainly my argument, which focuses more exclusively on Du Bois's later critical theory, would reinforce this point.

20. See also Geuss's (2005, 2008) critical commentaries on the ethical turn and its deleterious impact on our appreciation of "real politics."

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