

# W.E.B. Du Bois: The Lost and the Found

## **Black Lives Book Series**

by Elvira Basevich

### I. Aims and Plan

In this book, I provide an interdisciplinary and comprehensive account of the life, activism, and scholarship of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). Du Bois is widely recognized in the U.S. and around the world as an influential civil rights leader of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. He co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was the editor of the *Crisis* newspaper, the main media outlet of the NAACP and a central newspaper for the black community during the Jim Crow era. During his lifetime, he advocates liberal, Marxist, Pan-Africanist, and black nationalist approaches to racial justice. Additionally, he was an incredibly prolific, multidisciplinary scholar. Completing his doctoral degree in history, with a focus on the trans-Atlantic slave trade, he was the first African American to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard University. His spellbinding *The Souls of Black Folk* is a foundational text of African-American literature and Africana studies. In his groundbreaking book, *The Scholar Denied*, Aldon Morris demonstrates that Du Bois also pioneers empirical methodologies to study the growth of cities and thereby founds modern sociology, although he has not received credit for it. Philosophers too have been slow to recognize his contribution to the discipline. Du Bois is, arguably, the first philosopher to provide a ‘social constructivist’ explanation of racial difference. He publishes numerous poems, short stories, and novels, peopled by black characters. Just as he develops a wide range of approaches to racial justice, so too he engages different disciplines to explore black life and the lived experience of racial injustice.

Manning Marable’s biography, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (1986), is a corner stone of Du Bois scholarship, portraying with extensive detail his extraordinary life. But no book exists that presents Du Bois’s evolving views about the politics of race and explains how his thought contributes to theorizing racial justice today. In this book, I introduce three overarching themes that inform his approach to racial justice, as they are expressed in his multidisciplinary scholarship, his polemics with black public intellectuals, and his activism. These themes are sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit in his writing: (1) he advocates the civic enfranchisement of black Americans *as* American citizens, (2) he accommodates the assertion of black racial difference *in* and *through* civic belonging, and (3) he confronts—time and again—racialized social rifts, as they are manifest in racist oppression. This leads him to consider—and reconsider—black nationalist politics, and, ultimately, drives him into exile from the United States under the patronage of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (in office 1960–66).

These themes are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they provide a neat analytic lens for assessing the contemporary significance of Du Bois. For example, whether or not the black community should turn to the American federal government for justice is an issue that Du Bois often contends with in conceptualizing the civic enfranchisement for former slaves and their descendants. Some of the questions that this theme raises for us today include: What role does

the modern American state—if any—have to play in advancing justice for marginalized racial groups? Does the Trump presidency spell the decisive end of appeals to the government for justice in the U.S.? Or, on the contrary, does it prove the indisputable need for progressive forces to control state power? What role does black nationalist politics still have to play in changing the world for the better? Clearly, the issues of the value of civic enfranchisement, plurality and difference in the civic community, and recurrence of racial ruptures, are still very much with us, though I update their articulation to address our current world.

The themes above also provide an organic biographical structure for describing Du Bois's life. I use them to organize the book into three major headings, constructing an interpretative framework for how the politics of race informs his contributions to sociology, philosophy, art, and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> c. U.S. politics. The title of the book is drawn from the dedication Du Bois writes to his children in *The Souls of Black Folk*. It is also a play on the reception of Du Bois in academia and in public life.

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