

Elvira Basevich
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
University of Massachusetts, Lowell
Elvira_Basevich@uml.edu

W.E.B. Du Bois's Racialism and Two Liberal Approaches to Plurality

In this paper, I distinguish W.E.B. Du Bois's doctrine of racialism from two dominant approaches for conceptualizing plurality within the framework of political liberalism, broadly speaking. I consider why these two paradigmatic liberal models for conceptualizing democratic plurality fail to accommodate racial identity adequately: 1) the republican model of social group formation, as illustrated by Margaret Gilbert's view of plural subjects in jointly-committed groups and 2) Rawls's characterization of comprehensive doctrines. In my interrogation of these approaches, I aim to show that their accounts of social differentiation fail to capture the salient normative features of racial identity because the latter does not *wholly* correspond to a volitionally-constituted social group or a comprehensive doctrine to which a racial group assents. On a racialist doctrine, the normative content of racial identity is historically-accrued, prefiguring individual's personal volition. The liberal approaches above illuminate that presenting a volitional account of the normative significance of racial identity severs us from its historically-sedimented meaning, such that the memory of the past – the legacy of black slavery, sorrow, and resistance – risks falling into oblivion. For Du Bois, remembering this legacy is a way for a moral debt to be repaid. Therefore, gaining comprehension of the black historical experience is a moral responsibility of democratic citizenship, attesting to the polity's collective – although latent – capacity for justice.¹ Democratic politics is only possible if the legacy of black suffering, striving, and sacrifice does not “fall into oblivion.”²

Keywords: plurality, democratic theory, slavery, collective memory, racial identity, moral philosophy.

¹ Helpfully, John Rawls writes: “the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty.” *Political Liberalism*, p. 217.

² See Kirkland, Frank M. “Modernity and intellectual life in Black,” *Philosophical Forum* 24.1-3 (1993): 136-65.