Reviews

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

Lawrie Balfour

Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, xviii + 198pp., \$39.95/£27.50,
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In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America

Robert Gooding-Williams

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009, x + 359pp., \$18.95,
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The Problem of the Future World: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury

Eric Porter

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W.E.B. Du Bois has long been a central thinker – probably *the* central thinker – in African American studies. Political theorists, however, have largely ignored him. Then, in the 1990s, some philosophers and theorists began to read Du Bois not only as a black leader, but also as an important thinker on political categories such as race, leadership, citizenship and democracy. Breaking from the tradition of intellectual biography that dominated Du Bois scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, they developed explicitly normative interpretations of his work. They argued that his work was essential to an understanding of these categories, even when criticizing him. Texts by Joy James (1996), Adolph Reed (1997), Ange-Marie Hancock (2005) and others effectively made a case for including Du Bois in the political theory canon. Their scholarship encouraged others to read Du Bois critically. Now, three important books – by Lawrie Balfour, Robert Gooding-Williams and Eric Porter – add to the argument for granting Du Bois a place among the handful of thinkers we professional political theorists are obliged to be familiar with. And they do so, in part, by revealing that like any canonical theorist, there are multiple ways to read him.

Gooding-Williams's *In the Shadow of Du Bois* presents a powerful critique of Du Bois's dominant presence in black political thought, objecting to it for three reasons. First, Du Bois understands black politics narrowly as a process by

which elites rule over their followers, not as an agonistic contest among equals. Second, he assumes that an essentialist black 'folk' exists before politics rather than being constructed through politics. Third, Du Bois regards white supremacy as anomalous to American democracy rather than constitutive of it. According to Gooding-Williams, Du Bois responds to segregation and racial violence by calling for a black 'talented tenth' to lead the masses, who together form a 'folk' sharing a common ethos or spirit. The main political task of this folk is to struggle against African Americans' social and political exclusion from American life – and against their own cultural backwardness – for the benefit and uplift of the race.

Ever since *The Souls of Black Folk*, Gooding-Williams maintains, these themes of elite rule, 'expressive self-realization' and uplift through inclusion have set the terms 'with which countless scholars and other intellectuals have later analyzed black struggles against Jim Crow and other forms of racism' (p. 26). Yet Du Bois is wrong on all three of these points, Gooding-Williams argues, and he thus provides a faulty foundation on which to build a democratic black politics and political theory. His plan for a talented tenth to uplift the race implicitly accepts white views of the black masses as 'backward'. By regarding politics as the practice by which leaders issue directives and masses obey them, he lacks a notion of agonistic deliberation and Arendtian action. And his belief in an essential spirit of blackness fails to account for conflicts that might occur between elites and the masses. Ultimately, Gooding-Williams concludes, 'Du Bois's notion of black politics is too narrow, for it includes no conceptual space for grasping these forms of struggle as political' (p. 36).

Gooding-Williams looks to Frederick Douglass to develop an alternative foundation for black politics. He reads *My Bondage and My Freedom* as republican, agonal, grassroots, 'unruly', even revolutionary (p. 183). Douglass's 'plantation politics' comes from the grassroots rather than the talented tenth. The relationships Douglass builds with a handful of fellow slaves on the Freeland plantation created a 'band of subversive activists' who built black solidarity through agonistic struggle rather than through a presumed racial unity. This band, which was founded on relationships of equality rather than on hierarchical leader-led relations, did not aspire to 'raise up' the masses, but rather to fight alongside them. Further, Douglass regards slavery and racism as constitutive of American history rather than as anomalies to it. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Gooding-Williams argues, shows that black politics does not need an essentialist concept of black identity or a rule-based notion of politics. Rather, black solidarity can be 'a function of concerted speech, action, and mutual commitment' (p. 187). In Gooding-Williams's reading, Du Bois gives us Weber and Plato, but Douglass gives us Arendt and Wolin.

In the Shadow of Du Bois is a signal contribution to contemporary political theory. It is rich, dense and carefully argued. It provides an illuminating, paragraph-by-paragraph interpretation of 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings', the major theoretical chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as well as detailed and original interpretations of the chapters on Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington and 'Of the Coming of John'. Perhaps no one has read *Souls* more closely than Gooding-Williams. One is compelled to take his sharp critique of Du Bois – the strongest since Reed – so seriously because of it. He also uses this critique to engage many of the major scholars and debates in recent black political thought.

Gooding-Williams's strongest argument regards Du Bois's elitism and the impact it has on his overall political theory. His critiques of anomaly theory and expressivism are less convincing. As Balfour shows, Du Bois saw racism as a thread woven throughout American history, and Porter demonstrates how Du Bois came to develop a socially constructed notion of race. Gooding-Williams helps us see how a ruler-centered, non-agonal notion of politics can be found in *Souls* and throughout Du Bois's substantial corpus. Yet Gooding-Williams does not discuss how Du Bois's elitism exists in tension with his radically democratic commitments. Du Bois's advocacy of a talented tenth as the means to uplift the race does linger throughout his writings, but it also sits alongside his democratic belief that the enslaved, the segregated and the colonized are 'the salvation of mankind' (Du Bois, 1995 [1940], p. 141). It was slaves, after all, who won the Civil War in *Black Reconstruction* through a 'general strike' of their labor. Ordinary freedmen governed the extraordinary experiment in 'abolition-democracy' during Reconstruction, ruling alongside but not under white reformers or black elites. And it is the black working class in *Dusk of Dawn* who are called to start building socialism in the Depression-era United States while white workers slowly scrape the racist scales from their eyes. Du Bois's contribution to *Contemporary Political Theory* lies, in part, in this tension between elite leadership and working-class democracy, but Gooding-Williams regards it only in the footnotes. Responding to claims that Du Bois's thought became more radically democratic and social constructivist over time, he insists that 'the "mature" Du Bois fails unambiguously to distinguish himself from the author of *Souls*' (p. 167). Gooding-Williams is compelled to make this claim, it seems, so that he can challenge Du Bois's place as the bedrock of black political theory.

Absent an explanation of this tension, Gooding-Williams also downplays the democratic moments in *Souls* itself. This is evident in his argument that Du Bois's famous notion of 'double consciousness' is essentially a form of false consciousness. In Gooding-Williams's reading, as black elites such as Du Bois or Alexander Crummell separate themselves from the masses, they absorb white criticisms of black backwardness. They become 'myopically

focused on the shortcomings of blacks' and lose sight of the suffering of the enslaved, who are actually at the heart of black identity (p. 108). Because they fail to remember who black people really are, the talented tenth fails to remember who *they* are, too. This is a fascinating argument, but as Thomas Holt (1990) and others have argued, double consciousness also stems from alienation caused by racial subordination. Du Bois begins *Souls* by arguing that segregation makes *all* black people a 'problem'. All must ask whether they are black or American, as the white world will not let them be both. 'Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?' is the wail of 'ten thousand thousand' black people, not just the elite (Du Bois, 1969 [1903], p. 45). Double consciousness – being 'an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals' – is a form of racial alienation that results from being black under white supremacy. Du Bois's articulation of this concept stems from his identification with ordinary black people as well as his presumed position above them.

While Gooding-Williams questions the value of continuing to use *Souls* as the 'political Bible' for black politics, Lawrie Balfour's *Democracy's Reconstruction* argues for the importance of Du Bois for contemporary political theory. Du Bois's work, Balfour argues, exposes 'suppressed dimensions of American slavery and Reconstruction' and shows how that suppression shapes democratic political thought. By placing the black experience at the center of American history rather than its margins, he helps theorists see this history differently and more democratically. Through Du Bois, she contends, we can 'craft a usable past from unspeakable loss' (p. 6).

While Du Bois's work often focused on the relationship between race and American democracy, Balfour argues that his analysis has a global reach as well, which can be of much value in theorizing beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. The 'dark world' (Africa, Asia and the diaspora) is not a racial 'minority' with grievances specific to its members, but a core element of humanity that might provide the foundation for an 'alternative universalism', as Balfour terms it. Du Bois thus enables us to view transnational politics from new perspectives. Du Bois is so valuable a thinker, she argues, because he helps us 'not only see further but see differently' (p. 11).

While Gooding-Williams sets *The Souls of Black Folk* apart from the rest of Du Bois's corpus, Balfour reads it alongside other early works such as *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* and *John Brown*, as well as later works such as *Darkwater*, 'The Damnation of Women', *Black Reconstruction* and *Dusk of Dawn*. She does so to rethink key categories of political theory such as deliberation, intersectionality, agonism, generosity, citizenship, apologies, reparations, American exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism. For example, with Du Bois at her side, Balfour critiques feminist theories of citizenship for failing to address the legacy of slavery. While white women were historically

denied full citizenship, black women were denied full humanity, including the right to kinship, which all sides in the maternal thinking debate simply assume. This assumption shows how ‘the omission of slavery impedes feminist efforts to rethink citizenship’ (p. 113). Cosmopolitan political theory likewise errs when it does not confront the slave trade, that most awful of transnational institutions. To regard the revolutionary Atlantic as significantly constituted by the slave trade, or to consider that Enlightenment universalism may have been espoused most honestly by black folk, yields a more complex and democratic cosmopolitanism than most existing theories imagine. Further, theories that regard identity and/or difference generally rather than examining the specificities of racial identity and/or difference fail to ‘account for the asymmetries of identity and to counter the stubbornness of antiblack racism’ (p. 92). They are thus liable to reproduce racism unintentionally.

Balfour is keen to show the significance of ordinary black men and women for Du Bois, even as she critiques his elitism. The way she keeps this tension in play is particularly evident in her powerful interpretations of Du Bois’s essay ‘The Damnation of Women’ and his first book *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*. These texts are often ignored but from Balfour’s hands emerge bursting with contemporary relevance. Here and elsewhere, Balfour suggests that Du Bois is less an exception than an example. He is an elite male, given his education, masculinism and leadership position in the black community, but he is also an example of life behind the Veil. His life is an ‘autobiography of a race concept’, the subtitle of *Dusk of Dawn*. Using his extraordinary skills to depict ordinary black frustrations, ‘Du Bois puts autobiography to the service of democratic thinking’ (p. 88). Indeed, *Democracy’s Reconstruction* quietly implies that black political thought is itself more exemplary than exceptional, and therefore deserves more attention from political theorists.

Balfour writes carefully. She draws general lessons from her comparisons between Du Bois and contemporary thought, yet always notes the limits of her interpretations. She always declines to go beyond what the texts support. Sometimes it feels as if she writes too carefully, declining opportunities to stretch Du Bois in particular directions. I found myself persuaded by her critiques of contemporary political theories and was eager for her to present new articulations of old concepts and problems, but Balfour tends to suggest paths of rearticulation for them rather than elaborating on them.

Eric Porter’s *The Problem of the Future World* provides an analysis of Du Bois’s often ignored life and writings during the 1940s and early 1950s. His key insight is that this was the ‘first post-racial moment’ in a desegregating United States and a decolonizing world. Du Bois’s writings from 1940 to 1952 are so important, he argues, because Du Bois expresses a simultaneous faith that racism is being overcome and a fear that it is but assuming new forms. He bypasses Du Bois’s work after 1952 as too ideologically dogmatic. Du Bois

‘recognized how science, state reform, and liberal and left academic and activist projects made possible both racial transcendence and racial inequalities cloaked within this transcendence’ (p. 3). This contradictory sense of hope and fear in Du Bois’s ‘early late’ period, he maintains, constitutes our racial dilemma today.

The Problem of the Future World begins with a chapter on Du Bois on the science and propaganda of race in the early 1940s. Porter explains how Du Bois built on new scientific findings to dismiss biological models of race and used historical materialism to develop an alternative theory of race as a social phenomenon. He deployed his ‘scientific’ ideas in the service of anti-racist ‘propaganda’. Refusing to reduce race to class, he developed an unorthodox Marxian analysis of race as ‘a semi-autonomous social category, mutually constitutive with class, and which clearly persisted in spite of ... “the new scientific argument that there was no such thing as race”’ (p. 27). Subsequent chapters discuss Du Bois on race and imperialism during World War II and the Cold War, Africa’s place in the postwar world, and Du Bois’s ‘paradoxical loyalty’ to the United States and the USSR via his participation in the peace movement. Du Bois expressed hope that the postwar liberal democracies, fresh from defeating a racist regime, would begin dismantling segregation and colonialism, but, alarmed, he also feared that they were constructing new forms of domination. Frustrated, he increasingly looked away from the United States and toward Africa as a democratic alternative.

Would this new science of race, this new recognition that colonized countries deserved independence, and this new cold war between two new superpowers lead to racial equality, or would they merely lead to new forms of racial subordination? Would Africa be at the center of a more democratic world after the war, or would it be relegated to its margins? These are the problems that the later Du Bois faced and that Porter keenly analyzes.

Porter reads Du Bois differently from Gooding-Williams. For Porter, the early-late Du Bois regards racial identity as socially constructed, not expressive of a ‘folk’. The talented tenth has been replaced by the progressive black working class. White supremacy is constitutive of Western democracy, not anomalous. This last point is clearest in Porter’s excellent comparison of *Dusk of Dawn* to Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma*. Myrdal presumes that racism is a moral dilemma that whites face that contradicts the American Dream; Du Bois sees white racism as shaping American democracy and the dream itself. Myrdal regards African Americans as ‘object[s] of racism and moral redemption’, while Du Bois regards them as subjects of history (p. 53). Unlike Myrdal, the goal for Du Bois ‘is not assimilation into an ultimately just, national project but rather a black-led reconstruction of democracy at home and abroad’ (p. 55).

Porter is attuned to the tensions between Du Bois’s elitism and his democratic tendencies. He critiques Du Bois’s 1930s defense of imperial Japan

and Stalinist Russia, drawing out the complexities of Du Bois's thinking without apologizing for him. He also critiques the paternalism and elitism of Du Bois's Pan-Africanism, whereby Du Bois presumed that African Americans should lead Africa into the new age rather than Africans themselves. Porter's historical narrative and interpretation of texts are effective in explaining the later Du Bois's beliefs and how they were shaped by the historical context. *The Problem of the Future World* is less effective in developing lessons for today. Like Balfour, Porter wants to demonstrate the relevance of Du Bois for contemporary theory. Each chapter ends with a pronouncement of Du Bois's importance for understanding neocolonialism, the state of exception and our own 'post-racial moment'. Yet the lessons Porter draws are very general. For example, I was intrigued by his proposed connection between American exceptionalism and the state of exception (p. 66), but he does not do much with this comparison after raising it. It thus remains to be explained how Du Bois is crucial to understanding today's era of 'permanent war'. The same can be said for the significance of Du Bois in understanding 'the simultaneous marginalization and privilege of African Americans in the twenty-first century' (p. 172).

Perhaps this is the limit of the 'early late' Du Bois rather than Porter. While Du Bois's analyses of race, neocolonialism and US power in the Cold War era are incisive, his solutions no longer seem as relevant. After all, this is the Du Bois who sniffed at the civil rights movement as it blossomed under his nose. Porter explains that Du Bois saw this movement as too focused on liberal civil rights in the United States rather than on political freedom and economic equality everywhere. He was looking through the prism of his rocky relationship with the NAACP, no doubt. While Du Bois's critique of the movement's liberalism certainly had some merit, he failed to see the radicalism within this movement as well. This radical potential did not escape contemporaries such as C.L.R. James, who had a similar analysis of race and class in the United States. Du Bois misunderstood this movement, and in so doing missed an opportunity to directly connect his democratic politics with its, and thus with ours.

This brings us back to Gooding-Williams. Even though Balfour and Porter make a persuasive case that Du Bois should ultimately be read more as a radical democrat than as a middle-class elitist, Gooding-Williams's agonistic 'plantation politics' remains a more compelling theory of democracy than the early late Du Bois provides. I suspect Balfour and Porter would agree. These three authors offer us different pictures of Du Bois, which is perhaps both a just reading and a fitting tribute to the writer. Together and separately, these books on Du Bois's democratic vision and its blind spots suggest that, like Hobbes, Locke, Marx and Arendt, there is much more interpretive work to be done on this great and – with the help of Balfour, Gooding-Williams and Porter – perhaps now-canonical political theorist.

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