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# W. E. B. DU BOIS' AMBIGUOUS POLITICS OF LIBERATION: RACE, MARXISM AND PAN AFRICANISM

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## INTRODUCTION

W. E. B. Du Bois summons the restless and provocative spirit of a Pan Africanism<sup>1</sup> that, despite its association with the collapse of Kwamah Nkumah's Ghanaian revolution, has not failed as an idea. Commentators have realised, to some extent, the ambiguities of Du Bois' Pan Africanism. However, they have not shown how Du Bois' deployment of the concept opens up a more radical political thinking.<sup>2</sup> This Essay will trace the various twists

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<sup>1</sup> Although Pan Africanism refers to an understanding of African solidarity, the different ways in which the term has been used make it hard to properly define. The term Pan Africanism can be used to describe Du Bois' association of the civil liberties struggle in America with the post-colonial struggle in Africa. But Du Bois was not the only person to use the term. In the period after the end of European Empire, Pan Africanism was used to refer to solidarity amongst African nations. See Babacar M'baye, *Pan-Africanism*, in *AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS: CULTURE, POLITICS AND HISTORY* 862, 862-64 (Richard M. Juang & Noelle Morrisette eds., 2008). Pan Africanism also describes feelings experienced by Africans of the Diaspora who long for some kind of belonging to Africa. See *Introduction* to *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: ORIGINS, EXPERIENCES AND CULTURE*, VOLUME 1, at xxxi, xxxix (Carole B. Davies ed., 2008). It is precisely this plasticity that is interesting. This Essay hopes to capture the sense in which Pan Africanism is still an unfinished project. Given the activist strains to Du Bois' work, perhaps the question is: What will Pan Africanism become? What meanings will it have

<sup>2</sup> See Manning Marable, *The Pan-Africanism of W. E. B. Du Bois*, in *W. E. B. DU BOIS ON RACE AND CULTURE* 193, 193-218 (Bernard W. Bell et al. eds., 1996) [hereinafter *W. E. B. DU BOIS ON RACE AND CULTURE*]. Marable argues that there is a clear development in Du Bois' work from a reluctant appreciation of the importance of Africa to an appreciation of its central dynamic. This appreciation derived from the attempt to bring together

and turns of Du Bois' Pan Africanism as narrated in the text *Dusk of Dawn*. Pan Africanism demands a social, economic, and political revolution that goes beyond the civil liberties struggle and its focus on constitutional recognition. In leaving America for Ghana, Du Bois committed himself to a very specific understanding of the African revolution. Using the ideas of Etienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, this Essay will argue that Du Bois' Pan Africanism evoked energies of revolution that point at an unfinished, rather than failed, radical project.<sup>3</sup>

## I. DUSK OF DAWN

*Dusk of Dawn*<sup>4</sup> is subtitled: *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. This subtitle suggests that in writing his autobiography, Du Bois also provides an account of the way in which race is lived. *Dusk of Dawn* is similar in ambition to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, where the story of the protagonist is autobiographical as well as the story of every man.<sup>5</sup> Like *Finnegans Wake*, *Dusk of Dawn* is concerned with the telling and re-telling of stories. The need to re-tell is inspired by two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, the desire for completeness; on the other hand, the suspicion that a life cannot be captured in a single

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Marxism with an understanding of race for which Du Bois employed Africa as a central symbol. Whilst this counters Harold R. Isaacs' understanding of Du Bois' Pan Africanism as a "romantic racism," and Francis S. Broderick's dismissal of Pan Africanism as having achieved very little, Marable's argument does not engage with the inherently contradictory articulation of emancipatory politics.

<sup>3</sup> For information on how this relates to the conventional interpretation that Du Bois offered a cultural definition of race, see Segun Gbadegesin, *Kinship of the Dispossessed: Du Bois, Nkrumah and the Foundations of Pan-Africanism*, in W. E. B. DU BOIS ON RACE AND CULTURE, *supra* note 2, at 219, 219-42. Gbadegesin cites Molefi Asante's argument that race is a matter of "socio-cultural identity" and relates this theme to the pan humanistic aspect of Du Bois' thinking: "Pan Africanism is the clarion call of one portion of . . . disposed humanity to rise up to challenge and demonstrate the wealth of its heritage and its ability to contribute to the civilisation of the universals." *Id.* at 230-31. This Essay argues that race and Pan Africanism are artificial political constructions. Whilst they could be defined in socio-cultural terms, these explanations would not identify the peculiar structural logics through which they operate.

<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. DU BOIS, *DUSK OF DAWN: AN ESSAY TOWARD AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A RACE CONCEPT* (1940) [hereinafter *DU BOIS, DUSK OF DAWN*].

<sup>5</sup> See JAMES JOYCE, *FINNEGANS WAKE* (1999) (1939); LEE SPINKS, *JAMES JOYCE: A CRITICAL GUIDE* 135 (2009).

story. The fundamental problem: how to describe “a concept” that is part of an everyday reality, but to which we are entirely blind.

Dusk of Dawn was born in a moment of transition between “the cry at midnight thick within the veil”<sup>6</sup> that was *The Souls of Black Folk*<sup>7</sup> and a “militant challenge”<sup>8</sup> that was *Darkwater*.<sup>9</sup> The book testifies to “a sense of coming day.”<sup>10</sup> But, what comes to light? Dusk of Dawn is an illumination of the “central problem of the greatest of the world’s democracies” and the “[p]roblem of the future world.”<sup>11</sup> Du Bois develops this idea as follows:

In the folds of this European civilisation I was born and shall die, imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted and inspired. Integrally a part of it, and yet, much more significant, one of its rejected parts . . . .<sup>12</sup>

Du Bois’ understanding of the Negro as both part and not part of European civilisation—“integral” and “rejected”—is perhaps an elaboration on the doubleness that defines the souls of black folk. Du Bois is precise about the structure of the racist order:

. . . [B]ecause of the modern African slave trade a tremendous economic structure and eventually the industrial revolution had been based upon racial differences between men; and this racial difference had now been rationalised into a difference mainly of skin colour.<sup>13</sup>

*Dusk of Dawn* outlines a phenomenon that announces itself in a racism that gives symbolic meaning to the “differences between men.”<sup>14</sup> Differences that could be given any number of meanings are frozen into particular form: a set of representations that figure a world. Du Bois asserts that these meanings are not “a permanent structure but . . . a changing growth.”<sup>15</sup> We can only touch upon this theme. Du Bois wants to understand how power creates representations of the world that become the dominant

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at vii.

<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. DU BOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* (1903).

<sup>8</sup> DU BOIS, *DUSK OF DAWN*, *supra* note 4, at vii.

<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. DU BOIS, *DARKWATER* (1920).

<sup>10</sup> DU BOIS, *DUSK OF DAWN*, *supra* note 4, at vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at vii-viii.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

interpretations of ‘reality.’ In *Dusk of Dawn*, Pan Africanism is imagined as a ‘counter-power’: a force that could create a different world, a different way of thinking and living.

Du Bois writes that the first Pan African Conference occurred after the end of the First World War in 1919, and sought to bring together different “colored groups”<sup>16</sup> in order to determine the possibilities of coordinated action in “co-operation with the white rulers of the world.”<sup>17</sup> The Pan Africanists were aware that they had to address the colonial powers and make moderate demands. Additionally, the Conference was animated with the sense that the end of the First World War made a new order possible in Africa. Du Bois and the Pan Africanists imagined “[a]n Ethiopian Utopia”<sup>18</sup> or an “internationalised Africa”<sup>19</sup> carved out of the former German colonies and placed under international administration by the League of Nations. (Du Bois wrote that ‘The Chicago Tribune reported that this proposal had “less than a Chinaman’s chance of getting anywhere in the peace conference.”’)<sup>20</sup> The Conference’s idea of an Ethiopian Utopia was presented in the following terms:

The natives of Africa must have the right to participate in the Government as fast as their development permits in conformity with the principle that the Government exists for the natives, and not the natives for the Government. They shall be allowed to participate in local and tribal government according to ancient usage, and this participation shall gradually extend . . . to the end that, in time, Africa be ruled by the consent of Africans.<sup>21</sup>

This vision of government reflects a gradualism. Whether or not this is a pragmatic recognition of the cultural level of black Africans as perceived by the colonial powers, an attempt to work within the discourse of the ‘education of the savage’ is hard to say. However, the demand that an independent African nation should be under the

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<sup>16</sup> DU BOIS, *DUSK OF DAWN*, *supra* note 4, at 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> W. E. B. DU BOIS, *THE WORLD AND AFRICA: AN INQUIRY INTO THE PART WHICH AFRICA HAS PLAYED IN WORLD HISTORY* 8 (1965) [hereinafter *DU BOIS, WORLD HISTORY*].

<sup>19</sup> NETA C. CRAWFORD, *ARGUMENT AND CHANGE IN WORLD POLITICS: ETHICS, DECOLONIZATION, AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION* 258 (2000)

<sup>20</sup> DU BOIS, *WORLD HISTORY*, *supra* note 18, at 8.

<sup>21</sup> MOLEFI K. ASANTE & ABU SHARDOW ABARRY, *AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE: A BOOK OF SOURCES* 517 (1996).

auspices of an international organisation suggests that the Conference scored an important point—the colonial powers had lost the moral mandate to rule colonial territories over which they claimed jurisdiction.

The Pan African Conference of 1919 might have been cautious in its demands, but Du Bois was aware that it was inaugurating a politics that could be much more radical. The very concept of Pan Africanism pointed towards an idea of the government of Africa that would have to sweep aside colonial Empires. However, in 1919, the tentative first steps of Pan Africanism were hobbled by the kind of tensions present in emancipatory projects. The rebels had to define themselves against the old order that they desired to overthrow. It was necessary to work within the terms that the old order used to define itself and to invent the new order that would replace it. The radical potential of Pan Africanism went well beyond the request for an Ethiopian Utopia. Once the Pan Africanists committed themselves to a notion of Africa based on the rule of law, the force of their argument was such that they were compelled to affirm the need for a liberation struggle against the European Empires. This is because “it is impossible to maintain to a logical conclusion . . . the idea of a perfect civil liberty based on discrimination, privilege and inequalities of condition.”<sup>22</sup>

The radicalism of Pan Africanism came into conflict with the civil liberties struggle. Given that the struggle for full rights of citizenship had not been achieved in the United States, it is not surprising to see why there was opposition to the Pan Africanist agenda that Du Bois had hoped would inspire his allies in the NAACP. The NAACP tended to associate Pan Africanism with Marcus Garvey's proposals for repatriations of former slaves. In particular, Garvey had called for and was taking steps to implement “the Negro domination of Africa.”<sup>23</sup> Garvey's ‘returnism’ appeared to the NAACP as a distraction from the struggle in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Du Bois' insistence that the work of the Conference was quite distinct from Garvey's project did not rally many to his cause. Indeed, disagreement over strategy and the direction of the movement ran through the Second Conference in 1921 and was so intense that the Third Convention nearly failed to meet.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> ETIENNE BALIBAR, *POLITICS AND THE OTHER SCENE* 3 (2002).

<sup>23</sup> DU BOIS, *DUSK OF DAWN*, *supra* note 4, at 277.

<sup>24</sup> *See id.* at 275-78.

<sup>25</sup> *See id.* at 276-78.

When the Convention eventually convened, Du Bois was instrumental in moving Pan Africanism beyond the notion of an Ethiopian Utopia and towards Marxism. Du Bois “emphasised the importance of labor solidarity between white and black labor in England, America and elsewhere.”<sup>26</sup> Pan Africanism was now informed by a Marxian socialism that asserted the “organization of commerce and industry” on the basis of provision for “the welfare of the many rather than the enriching of the few.”<sup>27</sup> The Fifth conference, which met in Manchester in 1945, marked Du Bois’ complete adherence to Marxism. He saw Pan Africanism as an alliance between “trade unions, co-operative and other progressive organizations in the West Indies, West Africa, South and East Africa.”<sup>28</sup> In short, the struggle of the African was the worker’s struggle.

The Manchester meeting is central to the history of Pan Africanism because Du Bois met and forged a strong friendship with Kwamah Nkrumah at the conference. After Nkrumah’s successful revolution in Ghana, Du Bois took Ghanaian citizenship.<sup>29</sup> At the All African Conference in Accra in 1958 (the Sixth Pan African Conference), Du Bois’ African socialism provided the theoretical underpinnings for the transformation of Pan Africanism into revolutionary nationalism. Du Bois’ advice was for African nations to “borrow” from “Communist countries” and to preserve their own economic and social capital.<sup>30</sup>

## II. THE PART THAT IS NOT PART

Du Bois’ Pan Africanism inaugurates a radical political discourse. Following the works of Jacques Rancière and Etienne Balibar, prominent Marxist philosophers, one can suggest that liberation expresses itself as the revolt of ‘the part that is not part.’<sup>31</sup> This argument is based on a reframing of the idea of the citizen.

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 279.

<sup>27</sup> CRAWFORD, *supra* note 19, at 303.

<sup>28</sup> DU BOIS, *WORLD HISTORY*, *supra* note 18, at 244.

<sup>29</sup> DAVID L. LEWIS, W. E. B. DU BOIS: THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY AND THE AMERICAN CENTURY, 1919-1963, at 687 n.569 (2000).

<sup>30</sup> See ZHANG JUGUO, W. E. B. DU BOIS: THE QUEST FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE COLOR LINE 161 (2001).

<sup>31</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Ten Theses on Politics*, 5 THEORY & EVENT at Thesis Four (2001), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v005/5.3ranci%C3%A9re.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranci%C3%A9re.html) (no page numbers appear in original published version online).

Rancière quotes Aristotle, writing that the citizen is “he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled.”<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the civil liberties struggle pushed for the inclusion of a previously excluded group, “the Negro,” and insisted that the Negro should become a democratic political subject who partakes in “ruling and being ruled.”<sup>33</sup> The radical structure of this claim breaks apart all the conditions for rule on the basis of knowledge, power, wealth, or birth and counters the argument which justified a democratic slave-owning republic where the natural constitution of the “Negro” demanded that she or he accepted the rule of the white man.

Consequently, the civil liberties struggle ruptured the old order that had claimed legitimacy. Pan Africanism aimed to achieve a similar rupture at an international level by interrupting the international law and politics that defined Africa as a territory held by colonial powers. There were profound tensions between the national and international struggles against these different orders of racism. Nevertheless, Pan Africanism—by virtue of its internationalism—inaugurates a radical set of possibilities.

Rancière’s essential point is that democracy ruptures the arche—the principle of rule—and is distinct from orders that define legitimacy through birth and filiation or through some notion of a “natural” order. Politics is the definition of an artificial condition where the supplemental part is made to count. Thus, the artificial order of democratic politics does not depend on the identification of the ‘the people’ with race or a social disadvantage. To make the supplemental part count requires a power that can press into existence political meanings. Thus:

The clash between the “rich” and the “poor,” for instance, is the struggle over the very possibility of these words being coupled, of their being able to institute categories for another (ac)counting of the community. There are two ways of counting the parts of the community: The first only counts empirical parts—actual groups defined by differences in birth, by different functions, locations, and interests that constitute the social body. The second counts “‘in addition’ a part of the no-part.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at Thesis One (quoting ARISTOTLE, THE POLITICS, BOOK III).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at Thesis Three.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at Thesis Six.

In this fundamental sense, politics defines the community in which people are to be counted. Political power brings people to light and makes them visible or defines them as political subjects. What counts is thus an artificial construction of social being and a power that can create an association between a people and a set of ideological meanings that structure their belonging together in a community. Du Bois' Pan Africanism can be understood in these terms. Du Bois realised that the Ghanaian revolution had the potential to create a new order. An order based on making race count, a political order that coordinates race and citizenship in an independent African nation. Nkrumah's revolution brought together citizenship and race and it gave expression to the part that was not part by making it integral to the nation.

### III. CONCLUSION

The Ghanaian revolution had the strength to provide an exemplification of Pan Africanism mandate. However, the radical charge of Pan Africanism is such that one does not have to accept this historical determination as terminal. Pan Africanism is not compromised by the degeneration of the Ghanaian revolution and Nkrumah's turn to dictatorship. Framing Pan Africanism through a radical understanding of politics points towards forms of organisation and democratic politics that have yet to be brought into being. Pan Africanism is the provocation for a dawn yet to come.

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