

The Souls of Black Folk



W.E.B. DU BOIS

With a new Introduction by
Manning Marable

Foreword by
Charles Lemert

THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

❧ *100th Anniversary Edition* ❧

Great Barrington Books

Bringing the old and new together
in the spirit of W. E. B. Du Bois

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THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

BY W. E. B. DU BOIS

~ *100th Anniversary Edition* ~

with a Foreword by

Charles Lemert

an Introduction by

Manning Marable

and an Afterword by

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

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TO
BURGHARDT AND YOLANDE
THE LOST AND THE FOUND

FOREWORD

THE CULTURED SOULS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS

CHARLES LEMERT

I can recall a time, somewhere around 1990, when a new book by a then-young African-American scholar of African-American music was judged unworthy because, as one of his judges put it, referring to the most famous idea in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “This idea of double-consciousness is a little suspicious to me.” In 2003, as this centennial edition of *Souls* appears, the balance of literary power has so shifted that the scholar has gone on to a distinguished career at institutions ever more prestigious than the one that denied him tenure, while the ill-informed judge and those who fawned over the dubiousness of Du Bois’ indubitable concept have barely been heard of since.

Today the burden of proof is with those who would question the importance of W. E. B. Du Bois to the literary and intellectual history of our time. The idea that the American Negro is of two contending souls—the one American, the other Negro, at war with each other—is now well known, even by schoolchildren. A century after its publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* has become one of the English language’s classic literary works to such an extent that less and less does one think of it as a book defined by association with this or that particular genre or field of interest. It is not just that W. E. B. Du Bois’ fine literary hand turned out some of the more stirring, if Elizabethan, prose of the waning Victorian era. Nor is it that *Souls* is the source of ideas and phrases that have affected the literary sensibilities of several generations of readers. There is another reason for the prominence attained by *The Souls of Black Folk*—one not always considered. This would be a reason perfectly in keeping with the deep underlying engagement of its author with the effects of global economics on the local social realities of men and women the world over. This might be called the *sociological* importance of the book.

If there is a special purpose in this edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, it is to frame this classic work of literature with respect to its distinctively, if commonly ignored, *social* values—those that place it as a significant document in the early history of the sociology of global realities;

and those of its author, who was certainly among the first American social thinkers to have been embraced by a world broader in important respects than the narrow cultural confines of European diaspora. Though *Souls* appears as a commentary on the Veil behind which the American Negro was recused, more deeply it is also the pretext for Du Bois' later thinking as a sociologist of the divisions cutting at the world order. If double-consciousness is the book's most often cited concept, the next most frequently mentioned is that with which the book begins and in respect to which its purposes are announced:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line. (p. vii)

The territory of the century this book defined was no one nation, just as the troubling color-line then (as now) was far more global than the one drawn through the Jim Crow South of the United States. It could be said that the color-line across the American South was but a regional effect of the global one Du Bois had in mind.

This 2004 edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* celebrates the book's centenary, but no such book could celebrate well were it to ignore the ways and means by which so little a book has grown so large on the world. *Souls* is one of several great works of the previous century to have been swept along into the new century's global transformations. Du Bois would have surely hated the pseudotechnical infelicities of a word like *globalization*, but he would not have been surprised by the events to which the word refers. In particular, Du Bois was altogether alert to the vulnerability of the world's cultural elites to pressures rising from below. If double-consciousness and the color-line are the two most famous concepts to be found in *Souls*, the third (and possibly the most powerful, politically) would have to be the uplift strategy of the Talented Tenth. Du Bois fought against Booker T. Washington and others for the right of freed men and women to achieve the highest levels of cultural competence—but not because he was an elitist himself (though he was that). Rather, he understood very, very well from his own experiences within the Veil that elites the world over insist on privileges maintained by the lines excluding those who would venture, for reasons beyond mere service, into their lush clubs. He knew by experience that higher education meant power.

Hence, the irony that *The Souls of Black Folk* (a book the traditional white elite would have been perfectly content to ignore) has forced itself on the high-minded in the core states of the modern world-system. But how? Give the high-minded a strong position in a social core and their thoughts will soon turn to business—how to make it work for their gain. And when profit must be sought outside the home markets, those in high places will do what is necessary. Otherwise, in the late

twentieth century, we would not have experienced the culture wars, which were conducted on the most elevated of terms, but which boiled down to the question: Why should I read that? To which the answer was, and is: you must read what must be read in order to reconsider your history of exclusions in light of future prospects for currency in the global marketplace. Which marketplace just so happens to be frequented and supplied for the most part by peoples the world over whose presumed ancestry is anything but white. Overwhelmingly, the future of the global economy depends more and more on the productive labor and consumption capacity of those whose ancestors were, in point of painful fact, colonial subjects of one or another kind—including the American kind of internal slave and reservation colonies. It is impossible to do business in such a world without some degree of cultural recognition, however awkwardly entered into, on the part of those encumbered by positions of advantage in the world economy.

Global markets are jealous gods. They do not tolerate the traditional nation-state's refinements that would exclude laborers and buyers on arbitrary grounds. International capital seeks one thing and one thing only—profit that can be had by acquiring cheap labor inputs for value-added outputs. If one must learn to speak another cultural language to acquire access to market rights, international capital will do just that. As remote as the classic European distinction between material and cultural things may make it seem, this is surely the social reason that *The Souls of Black Folk* has achieved the status of a near must-read among students at all levels and thinking people of every conceivable cultural inclination. In this day and age, even the ambitious and greedy have much they must learn from hidden meanings buried in texts written under the cover of colonial experience.

Souls is not of course the only book thus to have forced itself on the culturally reluctant. But it would be hard to name another of greater rudeness to the traditions. The genius of it (whether fully intended or not) is that the book was so well-composed, in a language Europeans of all kinds had been taught to respect, that one of the excuses for rejecting it was put out of play. That Du Bois might have known exactly what he was doing with the Elizabethan poetry of his prose in *Souls* (where it is more pronounced, I think, than in any other of his works) is suggested by the apparently innocent quotations at the beginning of each chapter. At the top of the page is a passage from European high culture. Just below is a bar of music from the Negro sorrow songs. Surely the use of this device is anything but naïve. Du Bois means by it, to be sure, to call attention to the two-souls theme. Yet, one must be a bit circumspect before taking this interpretation as the whole story.

If the Gentle Reader to whom the book is addressed can be assumed to be white (which is suggested by the allusion to “the *strange* meaning of being black”), then why no lyrics or captions under the musical scores? It would seem improbable that Du Bois was unwilling to offend

his white readers (who in 1903 could only have been from among the white cultural elite). More likely it was because he sought to keep his side of the Veil a mystery—to guard, that is, its strangeness. To stay the mystery, thus to excite the outsider, is surely one of the more effective ways to compel a reluctant and superior political and economic power. We white folks just love getting down with blacks, even when we have not a clue as to how to behave.

Du Bois was neither a cultural nor a political dope. He made his share of mistakes (of which the most embarrassing was his endorsement of Woodrow Wilson in the election of 1912, after which Wilson promptly sold him out). But, if you think of *The Souls of Black Folk* as the key text of his life's work—a kind of manifesto, as I think it was—and if also you grant that the work was never merely literary but always social and political as well, then it does not seem strange at all, however strange the other side of the Veil may remain, that he would write and compose the book so as to force it upon the dominant white world.

Our purpose in this edition is to present two seldom-discussed aspects of *The Souls of Black Folk*, in respect to which the author and this book are most directly, if haphazardly, related. The one is the field Du Bois invented, and for which *Souls* may well stand as the *locus classicus*. This, of course, is African-American Studies—or, if Du Bois himself could be given the choice among options currently available, Black Studies. The other is the field that invented him and in respect to which *Souls* still suffers an uncertain status. This is Sociology—the academic field not of his training but of his university careers.

I leave it to others better qualified than I to examine the relation of *Souls* to Black Studies, except to say that the striking thing in this association is how often literary criticism presses hard on the cultural space of Black Studies proper. The reason for this, in the United States at least, is the prominence of literary and cultural critics in the development of American and Cultural Studies—the two specialty areas that have done the most to shelter Black Studies in hard times and feed off them in better times. The interests of literary critics are well justified. There can hardly be doubt that *The Souls of Black Folk* is an exemplary work of literary nonfiction—one so exceptional as to have been singled out by Henry James, a critic than whom few were slower to praise, as among the finest of its day. Yet, without wishing in any way to question the literary and cultural values of this book, it is right to observe that the author of *Souls* would not have been in a position to put across his magnificent prose to a skeptical literary world had he not been an economic historian by training at Berlin and Harvard and a sociologist by vocation at Atlanta University.

It is not just that the university paid his keep during his two tenures at Atlanta (though it did, and most critically in 1935, when, approaching his seventieth birthday, he left the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in disgust with no visible means of support). Though Du Bois lived well enough, his material riches were more often bestowed by others or scratched from bare bones by himself. He required a job to survive, and certainly academic sociology gave him such a one in the years before 1910, when he began his twenty-five years' employment with the NAACP, and for the decade after 1935. Yet, his arrogances and affectations aside, Du Bois was never a man to work simply for money. From the earliest days, he intended to make his life's work the hard labor of being the most talented of race men. And for this he chose to define himself as a sociologist, even while researching *The Philadelphia Negro*, when the University of Pennsylvania employed him for his field work (1896-97), while hiding him from public view as a teacher proper to its ticklish sense of its own excellence.

Du Bois' second book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, though ignored even today, was in fact the first serious work of urban ethnography by an American sociologist. Today, his close-in study of the Negro quarter of Philadelphia is a hard read, if only because it is so scrupulously empirical that the numbers, now archaic, would seem to render the work useless. Yet, on closer look, *The Philadelphia Negro* is a model of solitary field work in urban quarters, from which Du Bois drew attention to the rich variance of social life among several social classes, who, from the white outside, were thought to be a single and uninteresting social type meant for exclusion. The book appeared in 1899, well after Du Bois had published several of the more literary essays he gathered together for *The Souls of Black Folk*. In those last few years of the nineteenth century, one might suppose that he was working in two directions at once, suffering the distraction of his own two souls—as an empirical sociologist, on the one hand, and as a literary man, on the other. I think not. The two souls of Du Bois' lifework (as distinct from those of his own American Negritude) were constantly at war with each other, seeking a reconciliation not to be found.

The literary genius of W. E. B. Du Bois went hand-in-glove with his self-definition as a sociologist—so much so that it is impossible to peel the one off the other. Academic sociologists of our time find this quality, if not absurd, at least pretentious. (And because they think this way, literary people are inclined to think of us as the bulls in their china shop, which many times we are.) But for Du Bois, the literary was tightly bound to the sociology that claimed him in order that he might reclaim the sociology and social history of the African diaspora.

An unexpected advantage of working in resistance to the dominant order is that one is free to ignore the rules those on the other side feel they must obey in order to maintain their precious status. For Du Bois, defiance took the form of ignoring altogether the cultural distinction that many years later came to be known, by the grace of C.P. Snow, as the two cultures—the alienation of the literary arts from the various

sciences. Still, this arbitrary division of mental labor had already gained ground in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the new research universities in the United States founded themselves after the model of the German universities, where Du Bois had received much of his graduate training. The idea was to make the university less a seminary of cultural refinement and more a training ground in formal science. Du Bois knew quite well the dominant European culture's confidence in science, a confidence that hinged on keeping it separate from the arts, which, then as now, were viewed as more susceptible to "ideology," so-called.

Yet, from every indication, in the work as in the life, Du Bois ignored these analytic divides and devoted his quite exquisite literary sensibilities to cultivating the ground between. To say that he believed a Talented Tenth of the black population was necessary unto racial uplift in the generations after Emancipation is *not* to say that he trusted in elites for their own sake. In point of fact, in many of his dealings, especially those at the NAACP, he ran afoul of elitist types, both white and black, precisely because they were all-too-ready to turn the association into a mannered society of the racially integrated. Du Bois' Talented Tenth was no racialized upper crust but rather a vanguard of race workers who would train and lead young men and women into qualification for social positions in which their work could turn the tables of the social order.

Souls is replete with understated outrage at those, white and black, whose elite social status crushed the young and innocent—the little white girl who refused his party card; the politicians who entered into the compromise of 1876 that destroyed Reconstruction; Booker T. Washington himself, whose policy of social separation would have led generations of freedpeople into lives of economic misery worse even than what they had (and often have today); the white physicians of Atlanta whose hospitals effectively doomed his little boy to death by their refusal to treat colored people; the roly-poly white Episcopal bishop who meant to limit Alexander Crummel's ministry to black folk, and on and on. The allusions do not always drip with the sarcasm I supply, and which he would permit himself in his later writings. *Souls* is more a lament, in keeping with the Elizabethan tone of the prose. Still, Du Bois' ability to draw his own line between elites of whatever color and talented race workers can be missed only by those unwilling to read the subtext.

The Gentle Reader of *Souls* is a Victorian fiction, as was the superficial gentility of its author's prose. Du Bois knew very well that the vast majority of those who might read it would not read gently at all. Du Bois was made for the aggression required by life along the color-line, and he knew how to handle himself. If he took the form of the European gentleman (a form to which he was, in fact, quite attached personally), he took it often for a political and social purpose. The man

was a sociologist first and foremost, the kind of sociologist who regarded his researches as fodder for practical gains in the world as it lay before him. When, as was already happening, academic Sociology joined so many other high-minded fields in seeking the high ground of a formal science, it could do this only by cutting away its original human ties with the poetry of social life. Du Bois himself could certainly drone on with all the numbers a scientist might want, as he did in his first book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America: 1638–1870* published in 1896, in *The Philadelphia Negro* three years later, and in the annual studies of rural black towns during his first tenure at Atlanta University. But, even when he worked as the empirical sociologist, Du Bois was continuously engaged in the politics and poetry of social life. In a certain sense, biographically, *Souls* in 1903 is the literary text interlinear to the hard sociology of *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899.

But what does it mean to suggest that a book like *Souls*, with its literary finery stitched by the passionate soul of its author, is at heart a work of social theory, if not sociology outright?

To answer any questions put to Du Bois is to take an indirect path, as he intended, amid the byways of his thinking, which, though plainly expressed, was never simple. This was his genius—to take the most complex of subjects and reduce them to an ostensible clarity, of which the completely brilliant synoptic history of Reconstruction, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” chapter II, is one of the more memorable instances. In regard to this complex question of the status of his sociology amid his poetry, it is necessary to imagine the sociology of the early years of the twentieth century, when Du Bois was inventing his very distinctive brand of poetic sociology as politics.

John Edgar Wideman has astutely observed¹ that 1903 was, of course, just a few years after and before two other works that changed the century to follow—Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and Albert Einstein’s 1905 essays that led to his general theory of relativity. Wideman’s idea is that Freud, Einstein, and Du Bois, unbeknownst each to the others, were inventing new sciences that cracked the code of the apparent and superficial as they presented themselves to the naked eye.

Freud’s *unconscious*, Einstein’s *warped time*, and Du Bois’ *souls* were, in effect, each about the repressed or the unapparent of modern consciousness. Some might complain that it is too much of a stretch to include the founder of post-Newtonian physics. But the point holds up if you consider the deeper substrate that links all three of them. Each was, in effect, rethinking space and time. Einstein did this most obvi-

1. John Edgar Wideman, “Introduction,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), ix-xvi.

ously by presenting the analytic evidence that time moves at different rates according to one's place in space—thus, at the far reaches of cosmic space, time does not so much lag behind itself as turn on itself.

Freud, of course, did not even begin to engage questions of this sort, notwithstanding his own early predilection for a kind of hydraulic model of the three parts of the psyche. But he did in effect require us, in time, to rethink the time of consciousness in relation to the unconscious. If the pattern of thoughts, and their movements in respect to each other in the conscious mind, are constantly dragging along the effects of their unconscious correlates, driven by the wish that what happens in the conscious life be always more than it is, then Freud's idea of the power of dreams is that they too cause the time of conscious thought to lag, and eventually (in principle at least) to collapse toward the darkness of the unthinkable.

Then, less obvious still, *The Souls of Black Folk* triangulates the more overtly scientific theories of the other two. As Wideman suggests, though a bit incompletely, *Souls* began to define for the first time the social space of the American Negro. One might say that this process had been well underway with the slave narratives, of which Fredrick Douglass's were famous the world over, and the later writings of early black feminists like Anna Julia Cooper and of Booker T. Washington himself, among many others. What distinguishes *The Souls of Black Folk*, however, is that it is very likely the first book written out of the black experience to provide a comprehensive map of the social domain of the African diaspora in America, thus making it possible to speak, however poetically, of a color-line as a—perhaps even *the*—defining coordinate of the modern world.

Souls is nothing if not a compendium of essays describing the circumstances of black Americans and, through them (as I will show), of black people everywhere as they were and are distributed (a harsh word, I know; but which one would you use?) in the global spaces. When a writer sets out to map the *terra incognita* of a people cut off from others, he can do this in one way and one way only—by reversing the time of social history to dig down not so much to the origins but to the archaeological layers on which the exclusions were built. This means, in effect, that to get at the depths of the excluded social life it is necessary to abandon all pretense as to the linear progress of the temporal order.

The modern world, as it was still aborning in 1903, had staked its claim on the ideal of human progress. Anyone—and this must mean *anyone*—with experience on the other side of the color-line (among other lines of exclusion), knows very well that progress is a fraud, taking the form of quackery. Rub this promise of a better future on your wounds and you will feel better, *soon*—where the soon was never soon enough, certainly not a soon to come before the daybreak when the quack had already moved his cart to the next town. For Du Bois, to challenge the modern moral theory of time as progress was to redraw the map of the whole social domain, which could not thereafter be less

than a global domain. The social could no longer be a world thought to be rising in a westward direction to a higher place—"purple mountains' majesty above the fruited plains," that sort of thing. The social domain, rather, would have to be drawn as one that, whatever heights might be attainable, led the pilgrim first into the pits of social despair. Du Bois' own theoretical and practical reversal of historical time was not fully developed until *Black Reconstruction* in 1935. But one can find it clearly in *Souls* in 1903—most strikingly in the two-souls figure of the American Negro condemned to contempt, seeing himself as others see him, warring against this inner self imposed by the judgments of others, yet carrying on with the gift of second sight.

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 2)

This, the most famous of all lines in the book, set the tone for the laments that run through the book as a whole, but the lamentations are always glossed, as here, by the *gift of second-sight*—that is, the gift of a power that comes to those who, while held in contempt, exploit the shadows to see the world more deeply. The Veil, like the color-line, is a poetic figure, but it conveys a strong theoretical principle, one that is close by those of Freud and Einstein. If you reverse the naïve time of social progress, you will discover the hidden social spaces on the other side of the line. Within these spaces mysteries are held—mysteries not unique to those there relegated, but general to the whole of a world that allows, against its own professed ideals, such a space to stand as it does against the self-conscious pretense of the Good Society.

Is this sociology? Perhaps not in a strict, academic sense, but it is at least a prolegomenon to a robust sociology of modern realities—realities that were, in the first five or so years of the twentieth century, already being reconsidered with respect to the interior space of the psyche and to the far exterior space of the universe. What Du Bois did in *Souls* was to write the general theory of social relativity by interpreting the dream of the modern world—and nowhere more painfully than in the book's fourth essay, "Of the Meaning of Progress." Inasmuch as his great European sociological contemporaries, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, were doing something quite similar at about the same time, it is not the stretch it may seem to say that among them, Du Bois was the sociologist who wrote in the metaphoric language that was required to utter the harsh truths the others were aware of but could not quite believe.

As it happens, two key texts by Du Bois' European contemporaries reflected, if not quite as overtly, just the same readiness to contend with the social meanings of time in Western places. One of them was, oddly, related to *Souls*. That one was Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which, like *Souls*, was cobbled together out of essays. Weber had emerged from his long depression to write in 1904–05 a series of essays on the question of the social origins of capitalism. In this period he made his famous visit to the United States, which included a visit with Du Bois during the summer of 1904 in Atlanta. Weber offered to broker a German translation of *Souls*, which he much admired. It is said that Weber's American visit that summer sealed his conviction as to the central theme of *Protestant Ethic*—that capitalism arose first as an ethical spirit that was nowhere more apparent in that day than in the United States. Surely, Weber had seen or heard of Du Bois' studies of the hard-working blacks of the rural south, which were in fact the occasion for the summer conferences that drew Weber to Atlanta. How, if at all, those studies influenced Weber is hard to say, but certainly the disciplined work ethic he saw in Du Bois, the man, did not discourage the idea.

It is tricky business to suggest that in *Protestant Ethic* Weber was exploring the same sort of rethinking of social time as Du Bois and the others were—save for one thing. The Weber thesis makes no sense, really, if one does not see that it is about social time. The spirit of capitalism that Weber attributed to the calculating religious ethic of sixteenth-century Calvinism was, he thought, an emergent revolutionary attitude toward practical time. Where traditionalism, the ethic modernism had to overcome, was oriented, in Weber's magnificent phrase, to the "eternal yesterday," the modern spirit of the capitalist entrepreneur was future-oriented. The distinction between traditional-as-past and modern-as-future is so commonplace today that we forget what Weber did not: that the revolution that gave rise (if Weber is correct) to the modern world was a revolution in the way men and women think of social time. In a certain sense, for there to be entrepreneurs, there must be an ethic that legitimates a strictly future-oriented practical attitude in the affairs of daily life. Such an ethic had to have been invented, which is what Weber argues the Calvinists did, entirely by accident. They wanted men to attend to the eternal. What they got was this-worldly asceticism, which amounts to calculating everything according to its future value.

In 1903, the same year that *Souls* appeared, Emile Durkheim with his nephew Marcel Mauss published *Primitive Classifications*—the book that would grow into Durkheim's masterwork of 1912, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. The later book is deceptively named in that religion, given Durkheim's idea of it as the moral foundation of social life, is only the beginning of its story. *Elementary Forms* turned out to be, in effect, a thesis on the social foundations of time, space, and the other

categories of mental life. This thesis was already present, full-blown, in his 1903 book with Mauss. What were these primitive classifications? Precisely those mental categories of time, space, causality, and totality that, since the Greeks, have been considered essential to thinking itself. In other words, even Durkheim—and no one of that era was more the self-conscious academic sociologist—was preoccupied with questions of the importance of theories of social time and space to sociology.

It may seem odd in the extreme to suggest that *Primitive Classifications* is a book of the same order as *Protestant Ethic*, much less *Souls*, *Interpretation of Dreams*, or Einstein's early essays. But consider again. Weber and Durkheim in their books of 1903 to 1905—though dealing with quite different subjects—were contending with much the same problem, which in turn was the problem the others, including Du Bois, had also to face.

This was the dilemma facing all serious social theorists at the turn of that century. Though none of them could have known when the Great War of 1914 would come, anyone in and about Europe had to have realized that there was deep trouble brewing in the innocent world of modern progress. Weber wrote of the out-of-control effects of modern social organization, of the bureaucratic machine. Durkheim, in his earlier works, wrote of the anomic nature of modern industrial societies rife with class conflict. In a fashion both of them sought a way around or beyond Marx's critique that modern capitalist societies, far from being the harbingers of new social progress, were every bit as dehumanizing as those that came before. Alienation, or estrangement, from one's productive labor is no more than a superficially benign version of the evils of the slave and despotic modes of production.

For any serious social thinker of the time to have deciphered clues as to the dark side of the modern order, it would have been necessary to be alert to the harsh realities of modern hope. Though none of these more sociological thinkers did this as straightforwardly as Freud, all were keenly aware that *any* sort of socially responsible method for thinking about social things at the turn of that century had to account for the inscrutability of meaning. To not be willing to take empirical things at face value is, thereby, to explore new ways of examining the hidden meanings behind surface appearances, which is exactly what all the great thinkers of that day were doing.

And Du Bois in *Souls* was no exception. The first years of the twentieth century were by their very nature sociological, with a lower-case *s*. Though formal Sociology, with the capital *S*, was yet to come, all the questions of that day boiled down to some version of: How are we to get by in these times? Which question, in turn, had to treat the *times* in a perfectly serious manner, which amounted to rethinking the social basis of time and social space. *Souls* did this by mapping the social terrain of the African diaspora to America, which in turn required a suspension of faith in the smooth forward flow of historical time. In

this regard, Du Bois was no different from the other sociologists of his day, Weber and Durkheim, nor from the full company of others, from the micro-analyst Freud to the macro-physicist Einstein.

There are those who would say that this is what sociologists do—think deeply about the underlying causes of social things, including the social foundations of history, time, and space. Indeed this was what the early sociologists did in the first years of the previous century just before the crisis of the War of 1914. But, after the Great War, from 1920 on, for a good five decades until the world revolutions of 1968, academic Sociology and many practical sociologies largely (if not entirely) ignored the social skepticism of the founding generation in which Du Bois deserves to be mentioned. Strangely enough, Du Bois and writers of his inclinations were not rediscovered until such time as Sociology and related fields became sufficiently unglued from their silly notions of themselves as pure, positive sciences. It is not that this reawakening which came about in the last quarter of the century was caused by Du Bois or instigated by *Souls* and other such works. Still, *Souls* might be a symptom of the sociological tenor of those earlier times, which was lost and then found in the century that ensued.

An academic Sociologist might not read *Souls* as a source of new rules for his method. But a practical sociologist of the dilemmas of social life would certainly recognize in *Souls* the reasoning she deploys in the daily round of steps forward and backward against all the false promises. And because the latter would, the former ought to rethink the sociological wisdom of *Souls* and the methods of its author, who was willing and able to use what means could be had in order to study the time and place of a people outside the Veil on social progress.

The Souls of Black Folk as sociology? In a time when so many still think of sociology as an academic exercise of a rather arcane sort, one must wonder. But, it is a strange idea only if one limits sociology to its narrower academic applications, not if one allows in the many variants of the sociologies with which all persons deal with the uncertainties of social life.

Anyone alert to the daily round necessarily has a sociology. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, said in *The Home*, which appeared the same year as *Souls*, that “home-cooking means nothing but that the stomach adapts itself to what it has to live on—unless it is too poisonous.” We get by and, when we can, adapt to what is put before us because we are able to cook up sufferable recipes for the social events that come down on us. These are our practical sociologies, which we must have even if they are bad ones, as in: “I’m alone because I’m ugly,” or, “I failed because I’m stupid.” Or even occasionally good ones like: “Home cooking is usually bad because it is cooked at home by persons of no particular culinary qualification.”

In this sense, the sociology of *Souls* is of general interest not just because it makes sense, which it does, but because in 1903 it was easily

among the most successful experiments at social theory unbound by over-determined academic rules. There had already been quite a good many experiments in social theory of all kinds, beginning with those to whom Du Bois has already been compared: Freud, Weber, and Durkheim. It was an experimental time because the times demanded fresh thinking. But, though Du Bois was on the same innovative track as were these others, in one important respect his method went well beyond them.

If, in the social and human sciences in the decades just before the centenary of *The Souls of Black Folk*, there was one method that touched more areas of social thought and provoked a greater number of methodological innovations, it was the one that would be virtually impossible to call by a single name. Still, we know it by its fruits, namely, any and all methods that seek to provide a general account of social subjects *without* resorting to a crude objectivism—that is, without insisting on the claim that knowledge of social things depends, as does knowledge of natural things, on strict and formal protocols assuring a pure and positive science of objects, where “objects” are taken as free-standing members of a naturally occurring field of events susceptible to empirical capture. This is a mouth-filling way of saying, not positivism but scientism—an unqualified professional regard for the *possibility* of scientific knowledge in all things.

From about 1965 or so (roughly, since the years just after the death of Du Bois), there arose—gradually at first, then in the 1980s with a quickened pace—a series of controversies over the question of science as it may or may not apply to the study of human and social things. Though the stakes in these controversies varied wildly, they all more or less boiled down to a serious questioning of the limits of science in the study of social realities. One provocation of these wars came into play, not surprisingly, in France, where Pierre Bourdieu and many others, notably Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, put in doubt the value of treating social realities as if they were organized according to big and small values, subjective and objective modes of apprehension. Though differences, even among the French, were considerable, that movement (which is best understood without a given name) gave rise to the idea that scientific knowledge, when applied to social things, serves, more often than not, to oppress or, one might even say, dehumanize.

Somewhat later, though with no apparent reference to the French, in Anglophone theoretical circles there came into play an equally bewildering number of new feminist theories. Writers like Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins took up the idea that a feminist theory of social things ought look into the benefits of a woman’s experience. Standpoint feminism meant not so much basing social theory exclusively on women’s experience, but rather asking the methodological question: What happens to so-called objective scientific knowledge if the standpoint of women is brought directly into the research—not as if it were an excluded topic,

but as if it were an independent and authentic way of knowing? Put this way, the method had obvious implications for the whole of social theory. To raise the question of women's experience as a self-conscious and proper tool for knowledge brought experience itself back into empirical research—and not just the experience of women.

The trouble with *experience* (the original and proper meaning of *empirical*) is that it cannot be easily *controlled* (the foundation protocol of pure and formal sciences). Hence the surd of empirical work turned absurd in the social sciences. Empirical work is experience-based. But science is the work of controlling variables in order to measure their independent values. An empirical science of social experience is thus very difficult to control, strictly speaking. Otherwise put, experience is a can of worms. Open it up, and who knows what will jump out at you.

Beginning in the 1970s, second-wave feminisms were more than happy to let the worms wiggle all over the classic ideal of social science as pure, objective, and well-controlled truth. No one opened the can with more common sense than the sociologist Dorothy Smith:

When I speak of *experience* I do not use the term as a synonym for *perspective*. Nor in proposing a sociology grounded in the sociologist's actual experience am I recommending the self-indulgence of inner exploration or any other enterprise with self as sole focus and object.²

This was 1974, near (if not precisely at) the beginning of a feminist rejection of feminism as the controlled study of the gender variable. When experience re-enters empirical work, everything is up for grabs—not only objectivist social science, but also its mirror image, subjectivism, and thereby social science itself as well as all humanizing and all-too-sensitive variants thereof. The move made by the early standpoint theorists was one that called the social theorist out of the tower from which he looked down on the world to demand that he, or she, work from the ground of social experience itself. Among the troubling worms was the one that opened up even standpoint feminism to an interior uncertainty, thus leading in due course to such concepts as *situated knowledge*, the *instability of analytic categories*, and, most troubling of all, *fractured identities* and *gender trouble*.³ To begin with experience is to invite doubt even as to the categories with which one begins the look—thus even *woman* came into question as the experiences of black

2. Dorothy Smith, "Women's Experience as Radical Critique of Sociology," in *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990 [1974]), 24.

3. Among other sources, see Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. (Boston: Unwin & Hyman, 1990).

women and others of various colors, not to mention other-than-heterosexual women, pressed in on the debate.

Hence, many of the early works of post-1960s feminist social theory, like those of the French thinkers of a slightly earlier time, were quick to point out that the crude objectivizing methods of the sciences of social things were as often oppressing as enlightening. Of this point of view, Sandra Harding's title captures the spirit: *The Science Question in Feminism*.⁴ It was only after another of the French thinkers, Jacques Lacan, became available to English-only readers, that the two separate traditions began to fuse. Still, though they converged on the criticism of controlled science in the study of human subjects, they remained somewhat at odds with each other—save for their common interest in rescuing human experience from the stultifying effects of naïve objectivism.⁵

W. E. B. Du Bois was not, of course, a poststructuralist before the fact. Nor was he a self-conscious harbinger of standpoint feminism. But he was a thinker who refused to squeeze his facts into dichotomizing straightjackets. More important, he was entirely willing to rely without shame on experience, including his own. And this, exactly, is where his own two methodological souls joined in their creative struggle. His literary methods were, for the most part, best applied in his literary nonfiction—those stories based on fact and experience that serve a larger figurative, even poetic, value. It was precisely his literary soul that lent his sociological soul its unique tone and evocative force. And nowhere, in all his writings, is this more evident than in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

From the first, Du Bois wrote *Souls*, as he promised in "The Forethought," "to show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (p. vii). These meanings were strange, even a century later, precisely because they could be conveyed, for the most part, only by the authority of experience—"being black here," that is, in this time and place.

Souls then launches immediately into the experience. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," the first and most famous chapter containing the double-consciousness idea, begins with an experience so universal that even the Gentle White Readers will be brought up short:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the diffi-

4. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

5. One of curiosities of these movements of the late 1960s and after was that the originator of the critique of pure science's interest in controlling human interests, Jürgen Habermas, stopped far short of sharing in the doubts as to the classic dichotomy. See Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

culty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town ... (p. 1).

Could there be a more clever way to put the Reader in his position? Whether white or not, hardly anywhere in racially divided experience (which is virtually everywhere in the world as it was then, is now, and will be for time to come) is brought up short. The gentle author to the Gentle Reader is playing honest with the experience that all have heard of or had.

"How does it feel to be a problem?" The unasked question seals the method (if I may use the word, a bit too soon). The problem must be the problem of the twentieth century—the problem of the color-line. Du Bois, thus, begins with a simple little story of an experience his Reader surely has had. It is offered as his personal experience, but Du Bois himself is little more than the token of the trope. The color-line trope, delicately applied to protect the sensibilities of the Reader, saves the allusion from the ruin of *mere* subjective experience. This is the method of the standpoint—not personal but social in its embrace; not local but global in its reach.

"Of Our Spiritual Strivings" then turns to his childhood and the injury inflicted (but denied) by the little white girl who refused his party card "peremptorily, with a glance." In this one gesture the force of the Veil of race reality comes into view. "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (p. 2). After which comes the memorable passage of the "twoness" theme: "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (p. 2). The weight of the two-souls theme is on the American Negro, but the volume of it is the global history of the races. The rest of the book flows from this, in a more systematic way than might be expected for a collection of essays.

The reader, gentle or not, would do well to think of the first four chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk* as a manifesto of Du Bois' thinking, including his method. As the first chapter establishes the sociology of the two-souled American Negro, the second, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," picks up the trope of the color-line to tell the story of the rise and fall of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South. This would be the theme to which Du Bois would return more than thirty years later in *Black Reconstruction*, which, after *The Philadelphia Negro*, is his most explicit work of Sociology (in the more familiar academic sense), and