

17.037/17.038 American Political Thought
Spring 2004

Reading/Discussion Questions for Week 11. The Death of Freedom?

The following statement from *The Souls of Black Folk* is probably the most widely known and most frequently cited statement of any in DuBois's entire corpus:

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. 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 two-ness,--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. (8-9)

What do you think this idea of "double consciousness" is meant to capture? What are the social conditions that have created it? Is it something that can be overcome?

Political scientist Adolph Reed has written of DuBois:

DuBois saw the dynamics of race and culture as at the same time pluralistic and evolutionist...Contribution to world civilization was for DuBois the standard for assessing the worth and significance of various social groups—classes, races, nations. Unlike ideologues of Western supremacy, however, he called for recognizing the value and contributions of 'primitive' cultures. However, his own notion of the barometer of civilization was, despite his insistence on construing it as universal and transcendent, very much defined by Western modernity. Not only was his acknowledgement of the virtues of the 'primitive' usually betrayed by a rhetoric of condescension; he also never cut himself loose from seeing the world as consisting of 'backward' and 'advanced' peoples.

--W.E.B. DuBois and *American Political Thought*, p. 78

What evidence do you find for this view in your reading of *Souls of Black Folk*?

In chapter 2, DuBois discusses the creation and work of the Freedmen's Bureau. What was the Bureau's aim? Who were its administrators? What did the Bureau accomplish, and where did it fail? What were the main obstacles standing in the way of the Bureau's work?

DuBois discusses Booker T. Washington's "programme" for blacks in chapter 3. What was Washington's programme, and why, according to DuBois, was it flawed? What alternative did DuBois advocate instead?

In chapter 5 and 6, DuBois criticizes the rising tendency in American society, among both whites and blacks, of "interpreting the world in dollars." He notes that the "old leaders of Negro opinion," including the preacher and the teacher, are being replaced by "the farmers and gardeners, the well-paid porters and artisans, the businessman—all those with property and money" (62). He asks, "Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?" (72) He sees higher education as a way of addressing the narrow focus on breadwinning. What, in his view, is the aim of a university education? Who should have access to it?

In discussing black families in chapter 8, DuBois states that the “greatest moral danger” for blacks is “easy marriage and easy separation” (105). Where does he think the source of this danger lies, and how does he think it should be addressed?

In chapter 8, DuBois discusses the life of black laborers in the “Cotton Kingdom.” He distinguishes among different classes of black labor: croppers, metayers or tenant farmers, semi-metayers or wage-laborers, money-renters, and landowners. How does he characterize each of these classes? In what ways did their economic situation make a mockery of freedom?

In chapter 9, DuBois considers relations between whites and blacks in the South along different dimensions: physical proximity, economic relations, political relations, and “social contact in everyday life” (120). In discussing economic relations, DuBois remarks that black laborers need “careful personal guidance...to train them to foresight, carefulness, and honesty” (122); who is to provide this guidance (consider his discussion of the “Talented Tenth” or “trained Negro leaders of character and intelligence” p. 79, 125)? How does DuBois argue for the vote for blacks?

Regarding assistance to poor blacks, he argues that the matter is not “a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity” (134). What does ‘sympathy and cooperation among classes’ require in his view? How does his view contrast with William Graham Sumner’s?

In discussing the development of the black church in America and the “inner life” of black Americans in chapter 10, DuBois points out different “ethical tendencies” among blacks in the North and blacks in the South: the first tending toward radicalism and anarchy, and the second toward “hypocritical compromise” (147). How did these divergent ethical tendencies come about? He further distinguishes between these ethical tendencies and the silent “deep religious feeling of the real Negro heart” (149); what does the latter long for?

While mourning the death of his infant son, DuBois comforts himself with the thought that his son is “...not dead, but escape; not bond, but free” (154). What has his son escaped from?

In “Of the Coming of John” (chapter 13), what do you think DuBois seeks to convey in telling the story of John Jones?