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## Paradoxes of the South in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*

### I. Introduction

THROUGH THE POWERFUL AND RESONATING WORDS OF *THE SOULS OF Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois humanized African Americans of the US South, rendering their experiences a witness to the spirit's perseverance amidst brutal treatment and prejudice (Gates & Oliver; Lewis). *Souls* was also a work melding both political and personal themes. Seemingly intended for both white and black readers (Lemert 79), Du Bois set forth a political message of social change, especially with his critique of Booker T. Washington's positions on racial uplift (Rampersad; Reed). As a treatise on self-development *Souls* spoke of the existential and practical struggles needed to reunite the African American identity, an identity torn and ragged from the machinations of a racist color line and the Veil, its epistemological expression (Brodwin; Gilroy; Zamir).

A veil distorts and obscures one's view on the opposite side, even as it also offers intentional seclusion from prying eyes (Gates & Oliver xxv-xxvi). In *Souls*, both whites and blacks were affected by the Veil: their knowledge about the races, including their own, was mediated by the distortions induced by the official and unofficial barriers of racial discrimination (Winant 25-38). In his role as social analyst and prophetic narrator, however, Du Bois himself seemed scarcely affected by the illusions of the Veil—for, in his words, he dwelled above the Veil (*Souls* 74), thus with a perspective enabled presumably by the systematic methods and critical mode of his sociological and historical research.

With such distortions created by the presence of the Veil, how might Du Bois make the reality of racial oppression clear to the readers, especially the implicit white audience addressed throughout the book? How might Du Bois convince white readers of the imperative for racial justice? And what goals might be plausibly promoted within the predominantly white, often white supremacist, social and political world of the US South? Crucially, Du Bois analyzed the South in *The Souls of Black Folk* in terms of what he called its paradoxes. He wrote of the "central paradox of the South" by which the races were segregated

socially and politically but worked together in economically integrated ways. Among the several paradoxes was the paradox of white Christianity: some Christians, while professing their faith in the Bible with its fundamental tenets of divinely rendered equality, were nonetheless in practice racially prejudiced, even malevolent. Although scholars over the years have mentioned a paradox or two when citing *Souls*, they do not accord thematic or analytical significance to them. Du Bois's idea of the paradoxes of the South hence needs more scrutiny.

Paradoxes are more than abstractions of thought which convey a seeming incongruity between two ideas or phenomena. Paradoxes provide new areas where one can collect new data or else emphasize the need for new ways to explain a novel phenomenon. Also, to label something as a paradox has an interrogatory effect: it can call into question views and relationships taken for granted. Du Bois employed the term both as a justification for further social analysis and as a rhetorical device to persuade the (white) readers.

This paper addresses one main question about *Souls*. What do the "central paradox of the South" and the other three paradoxes tell us about Du Bois' strategic goals of social change in the early twentieth century? The book does not provide a manual for social change but does offer several goals which Du Bois explicitly or implicitly deemed necessary for racial progress. I will offer one possible interpretation of the strategic goals in terms of their particular tenets advanced within the book. After outlining the various paradoxes specified in *Souls*, I will discuss the significance of white Southern planters for Du Bois and then enumerate the strategic goals for social change which are implicated in the paradoxes. Finally, I will briefly assess the constraints on the success of his strategic goals by sketching various historical factors as well as an important presupposition that underpins the goals.

## II. The South's Central Paradox

Du Bois specified one "central paradox of the South" in *Souls*: "the social separation of the races." He discussed this primary paradox in the context of the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction when public schools were being created in the South (see Curry *Education*):

The white teachers who flocked South went to establish such a common-school system. Few held the idea of founding colleges; most of them at first would have laughed at the idea. But they faced, as all men since them have faced, that central

paradox of the South,—the social separation of the races. At that time it was the sudden volcanic rupture of nearly all relations between black and white, in work and government and family life. Since then a new adjustment of relations in economic and political affairs has grown up,—an adjustment subtle and difficult to grasp, yet singularly ingenious, which leaves still that frightful chasm at the color-line across which men pass at their peril. Thus, then and now, there stand in the South two separate worlds; and separate not simply in the higher realms of social intercourse, but also in church and school, on railway and street-car, in hotels and theatres, in streets and city sections, in books and newspapers, in asylums and jails, in hospitals and graveyards. There is still enough of contact for large economic and group cooperation, but the separation is so thorough and deep that it absolutely precludes for the present between the races anything like that sympathetic and effective group-training and leadership of the one by the other, such as the American Negro and all backward peoples must have for effectual progress. (*Souls* 66)

What constituted the central paradox? Du Bois's view must be gleaned from the entire passage. Indeed, the quotation tells us much about Du Bois's understanding of social interactions and about what he considered *should be* the societal consequences of that—interracial—interaction.

Economic functions necessitated some degree of human cooperation, as Du Bois indicated throughout *Souls*. Nevertheless, the cross-racial dimension of the economy neither generated respect nor yielded equal opportunity for African Americans. Instead, a Jim Crow world had been created and perpetuated. Du Bois explicitly challenged Booker T. Washington's position that economic usefulness and cooperation provided the chief means by which blacks would both gain respect from whites and achieve fiscal success (see, e.g., Washington, *Up from Slavery* ch. XIII). The passage quoted above presented one of the many criticisms of Washington for which *Souls* has become known.

For Du Bois, the central paradox of the South must be explained and a strategy must be devised to combat the segregation. The formal means by which social separation was implemented occurred in laws, such as the so-called black codes, and could be tackled, he believed, by political means like the franchise. He was following the earlier lead of voting advocates like Frederick Douglass, who had long sought the vote as an essential way to protect African Americans. As regards the various informal means of segregation, correcting them might take longer because they were linked to habits and "folkways." But Du Bois seemed optimistic at the turn of the century that at least some attitudinal changes could be made: "The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it

was knowledge based on scientific investigation” (Du Bois, *Autobiography* 197).

In *Souls* Du Bois offered a multi-dimensional analysis as to why racial segregation arose from the otherwise cooperative aspects of economic functions in the South: an economic factor which focused on the conditions faced by African Americans in a postbellum South; a demographic factor which related racial prejudice to various population groups of white Southerners; and a physical-proximity factor which stressed the ways that cross-racial interactions could lead to misunderstandings between the races.

First, the economy for Du Bois was not a simple abstraction of buyers and sellers, of renters and landlords. Using short pieces of dialogue and extended descriptions in *Souls*, he conveyed the experiences of real people, not the impersonal laws of supply and demand. He argued that blacks in the South were kept in a new form of debt slavery by a system of agricultural tenancy (both sharecropping and tenant farming) wielded by greedy whites to exploit them. Some merchants and some landlords sought maximum profits via high rents and interests under conditions of an “all-cotton scheme of agriculture” (*Souls* 95-96):

[The African American] has been made in law and custom the victim of the worst and most unscrupulous men in each community. The crop-lien system which is depopulating the fields of the South is not simply the result of shiftlessness on the part of Negroes, but is also the result of cunningly devised laws. . . . (*Souls* 109)

Du Bois very clearly stated that such a system was harmful in terms of its human consequences (*Souls* 98-99, and H. Thompson, ch. IV, who criticized such personalistic accounts of the causes of black exploitation).

Second, Du Bois identified a demographic factor in the central Southern paradox. White racial prejudice and discrimination, as Du Bois analyzed these interconnected phenomena, arose from several cross-cutting white demographic groups which were implicated in perpetuating the discrimination against blacks in the postbellum South:

To-day even the attitude of the Southern whites toward the blacks is not, as so many assume, in all cases the same; the ignorant Southerner hates the Negro, the workingmen fear his competition, the money-makers wish to use him as a laborer, some of the educated see a menace in his upward development, while others—usually the sons of the masters—wish to help him to rise. National opinion has enabled this last class to maintain the Negro common schools, and to protect the

Negro partially in property, life, and limb. Through the pressure of the money-makers, the Negro is in danger of being reduced to semi-slavery, especially in the country districts; the workingmen, and those of the educated who fear the Negro, have united to disfranchise him, and some have urged his deportation; while the passions of the ignorant are easily aroused to lynch and abuse any black man. (*Souls* 43-44)

Hence, for Du Bois, white racism was associated in general with whites who possessed little or no knowledge of African Americans, Southern working-class whites who feared job competition, and greedy “money-makers” (in other places, some merchants and land-lords) who exploited blacks, as well as some of the better educated white Southerners who deemed African American “upward development” to be dangerous (but Du Bois gave no clue in the passage as to just how it was dangerous).

The demographic factor accorded well with Du Bois’s description of those whites potentially willing to help, if he were only able to appeal to the mutual interests that underlay elite white and black cooperation. Du Bois wrote:

[I]t is the duty of black men to judge the South discriminatingly. The present generation of [white] Southerners are not responsible for the past, and they should not be blindly hated or blamed for it. Furthermore, to no class is the indiscriminate endorsement of the recent course of the South toward Negroes more nauseating than to the best thought of the South. The South is not “solid”. . . . (*Souls* 43)

Because of the generational and elite differences in the South, Du Bois considered that some of the “sons of the [former slave] masters” might be amenable to assisting African Americans. This consideration leads to Du Bois’s third factor.

The third factor Du Bois examined in *Souls* involves proximity: in general, the consequences of physical proximity of whites to African Americans and, in particular, the proximity of those whom Du Bois called the “worst classes” of both races with the “best classes.” Misunderstandings arose because those “best classes” of blacks and whites often based their negative views of the other race as a whole on observation and interaction with the “worst” of the other race (*Souls* 107). Both sets of elites thereby failed to distinguish the exemplary from the rest when evaluating the other race. Despite such a common basis for misunderstandings, Du Bois remained very aware that whites and African Americans differed in societal terms: whites could use their

numerical strength and social power to enforce their prejudices with discriminatory acts of segregation.

For Du Bois, personal/physical proximity was significant because one race learned about duty and civilization from the other. In the chapter “Of the Sons of Masters and Man,” Du Bois indicated that blacks could be guided by whites: “I freely acknowledge that it is possible, and sometimes best, that a partially undeveloped people should be ruled by the best of their stronger and better neighbors for their own good, until such time as they can start and fight the world’s battles alone” (*Souls* 112). Du Bois was not alone among African Americans in thinking this (Gaines 206-07). Arnold Rampersad held that there was some measure of accommodationism in *Souls* (87-88) which involved accepting that some elite whites and elite blacks, such as Du Bois himself, shared certain core values—a point reinforced by Du Bois’s educational background and the literary allusions which he employed throughout the book itself.

The educative relationship between blacks and whites, however, was not solely to be one-sided. In a well-known passage in *Souls*, Du Bois indicated that blacks had something to teach both whites and America as a whole:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. (11)

It is reasonable to assert that Du Bois, while accepting the worth of the European heritage of the US, did not flinch when boldly stating the African American role in the molding of the country. In *Souls* as well as in other writings, Du Bois reiterated the black contributions to the history and vitality of the United States (e.g., *Gift of Black Folk*, “The Black Man Brings His Gifts,” and *Black Folk Then and Now*).

The races interacted economically but instead of such interactions leading to the self-development of whites and blacks and to an improved society, the prevailing laws and social codes obstructed mutually beneficial results. For Du Bois the color line remained and the Veil hung grimly in place, perpetuating the distortions and nescience underpinning racial oppression.

### III. The Other Paradoxes in and of the South

Du Bois mentioned other paradoxes in *The Souls of Black Folk*: the paradox of education, the “ethical paradox” (as Du Bois himself called the paradox of African American religious faith), and the paradox faced by white Christians in a segregated South.

During the Reconstruction Era public education for both white and black children was implemented, even if not always accepted by all. The “paradox of education,” as it can be called, was sketched in this passage:

The greatest success of the Freedmen’s Bureau lay in the planting of the free school among Negroes, and the idea of free elementary education among all classes in the South. . . . The opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men strive to know. Perhaps some inkling of this paradox, even in the unquiet days of the Bureau, helped the bayonets allay an opposition to human training which still to-day lies smouldering in the South, but not flaming. (*Souls* 28-29)

Du Bois mentions here one of the arguments often heard in America at that time, that anything more than functional literacy for African Americans provided ideas (for example, social or political equality) which were unacceptable to a white supremacist society. Du Bois reinforces that allegation in the only fictional piece in *Souls*: in “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois graphically depicts the white attitude about the so-called danger of black education, and the story’s outcome involved no happy ending for the young, educated, African American male protagonist.

Du Bois confronted various arguments wielded by whites who wanted to limit or foreclose education of blacks at some level: namely, that education can make African Americans unfit for the jobs available, and/or might lead educated blacks to commit more crimes (e.g., Straton).

Du Bois, however, justified education for African Americans by grounding his argument in human nature. Humans want to learn and formal education was one way to pursue knowledge. Indeed, African Americans would pursue education regardless of the efforts to thwart or limit their goals. The multitude of published first-person narratives by African Americans, some of whom had been former slaves, provide witness to the unquenchable desire for education (e.g., Johnson 12, 38; J. Thompson 103-07; Washington, *Story* 115-16). For Du Bois, knowledge-seeking blacks were potentially capable of inflaming social unrest only to the degree that equal opportunities and freedoms were denied them. Education in and of itself was not dangerous.

If the South wished to defuse a potentially explosive situation—educated blacks attacking the repressive social and political system—then, Du Bois implied, it could make a conscious choice to avoid the dangers. Here, he was sketching the societally dangerous consequences arising from unequal treatment that had previously been identified by earlier black organizations like the Afro-American League and the National Afro-American Council (Adams; Meier 70-71, 128-30). From the overall political message of *Souls* we can infer that the choices for Southern whites entailed securing rights and opportunities for African Americans: specifically, the political rights granted by the US Constitution, while simultaneously social and business opportunities should not be hindered. Should those rights and opportunities be safeguarded, dissent and the possibility of social disorder might be avoided or otherwise minimized.

*The Souls of Black Folk* depicted a related paradox confronting the South, what Du Bois called an “ethical paradox.” It directly engaged African Americans but also had serious implications for the social order of the South. In Chapter X, “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” Du Bois discussed the significance of religion for the slaves and for the freedwomen and freedmen. For them, religion made the world meaningful. Through religion they expressed both their sorrows and their hopes. Yet, as Du Bois wrote:

In some such doubtful words and phrases can one perhaps most clearly picture the peculiar ethical paradox that faces the Negro of to-day and is tingeing and changing his religious life. Feeling that his rights and his dearest ideals are being trampled upon, that the public conscience is ever more deaf to his righteous appeal, and that all the reactionary forces of prejudice, greed, and revenge are daily gaining new strength and fresh allies, the Negro faces no enviable dilemma. Conscious of his



impotence, and pessimistic, he often becomes bitter and vindictive; and his religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith. On the other hand, another type of mind, shrewder and keener and more tortuous too, sees in the very strength of the anti-Negro movement its patent weaknesses, and with Jesuitic casuistry is deterred by no ethical considerations in the endeavor to turn this weakness to the black man's strength. Thus we have two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings; the danger of the one lies in anarchy, that of the other in hypocrisy. The one type of Negro stands almost ready to curse God and die, and the other is too often found a traitor to right and a coward before force; the one is wedded to ideals remote, whimsical, perhaps impossible of realization; the other forgets that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment. But, after all, is not this simply the writhing of the age translated into black,—the triumph of the Lie which today, with its false culture, faces the hideousness of the anarchist assassin? (*Souls* 127)

As with the paradox of education, the racially repressive South was at a crossroads—it must decide.

Du Bois asked his readers including, quite pointedly, whites: when confronted with political powerlessness, what will become of the faith of the black fathers (and mothers), a faith which was a vibrant quest for the truth and for guideposts by which to live a good and “manly” (human?) life? What social and individual consequences might follow from the religious ferment brewing from racial oppression? Will it be the radicalism of anarchy or will it be the life of a hypocrite, someone not true to himself or to God?

Du Bois indicates in Chapter X that Northern blacks were tending towards “radicalism” (would he have included himself in his claim?). That Southern blacks were tending towards “hypocritical compromise” was probably his allusion to, and an attack directed at, Booker T. Washington. Du Bois's implicit message probably would have been obvious to his readers: social changes would be required so as to forestall the spiritually divisive consequences of the ethical paradox and also to defuse vindictiveness and any potential social chaos. According to Du Bois, by working to end racial discrimination, whites could bear witness to Christian faith and could protect Southern society at the same time. They would find willing partners within African American communities to assist them.

The third paradox specified in *Souls* also involves religion; it can be called the paradox of Southern white Christianity, particularly the contradiction between the religious beliefs and the religious practices of some Southern whites:

Nor does the paradox and danger of this situation fail to interest and perplex the best conscience of the South. Deeply religious and intensely democratic as are the mass of the whites, they feel acutely the false position in which the Negro problems place them. Such an essentially honest-hearted and generous people cannot cite the caste-levelling precepts of Christianity, or believe in equality of opportunity for all men, without coming to feel more and more with each generation that the present drawing of the color-line is a flat contradiction to their beliefs and professions. But just as often as they come to this point, the present social condition of the Negro stands as a menace and a portent before even the most open-minded: if there were nothing to charge against the Negro but his blackness or other physical peculiarities, they argue, the problem would be comparatively simple; but what can we say to his ignorance, shiftlessness, poverty, and crime? can a self-respecting group hold anything but the least possible fellowship with such persons and survive? and shall we let a mawkish sentiment sweep away the culture of our fathers or the hope of our children? The argument so put is of great strength, but it is not a whit stronger than the argument of thinking Negroes: granted, they reply, that the condition of our masses is bad; there is certainly on the one hand adequate historical cause for this, and unmistakable evidence that no small number have, in spite of tremendous disadvantages, risen to the level of American civilization. And when, by proscription and prejudice, these same Negroes are classed with and treated like the lowest of their people, simply *because* they are Negroes, such a policy not only discourages thrift and intelligence among black men, but puts a direct premium on the very things you complain of,—inefficiency and crime. Draw lines of crime, of incompetency, of vice, as tightly and uncompromisingly as you will, for these things must be proscribed; but a color-line not only does not accomplish this purpose, but thwarts it. (*Souls* 117-18)

Du Bois's much-commented-on elitism (Lewis 216, 441) became evident in this passage: there were better classes of blacks who had advanced to the level of "American civilization." Two significant messages here are worth noting.

Du Bois's first message would have been clear to those open to it: not only was there danger of social disorder, but blacks would be living a lie and would not be true to themselves because they were not true to their innermost—here religious—convictions. In words similar to those of Frederick Douglass ("What to the Slave" 199-202) and Anna Julia Cooper (*A Voice* 41-42), Du Bois declared that Christian whites would be living a lie if they oppressed African Americans and they would not be true, he implied, to the Christian ideals of love and charity.

The second message lies in Du Bois's implication that it is un-Christian to blame something on those whose reactions were in part a just response to social oppression. Du Bois supports this argument in

another passage. As he wrote in “Of the Faith of the Fathers” (ch. X), the color line of Southern discrimination in fact caused the supposedly negative behaviors against which whites instituted the color line to protect themselves:

It is no idle regret with which the white South mourns the loss of the old-time Negro,—the frank, honest, simple old servant who stood for the earlier religious age of submission and humility. . . . To-day he is gone, but who is to blame for his going? Is it not those very persons who mourn for him? Is it not the tendency, born of Reconstruction and Reaction, to found a society on lawlessness and deception, to tamper with the moral fibre of a naturally honest and straightforward people until the whites threaten to become ungovernable tyrants and the blacks criminals and hypocrites? Deception is the natural defence of the weak against the strong, and the South used it for many years against its conquerors; to-day it must be prepared to see its black proletariat turn that same two-edged weapon against itself. (*Souls* 128)

In this reciprocal cause-and-effect a dialectical process operated, for Southern oppression contributed to or otherwise reinforced the behaviors which Southern whites disliked as well as increased the possibility for a dangerous African American response to that oppression.

From the seeds of oppression might grow a movement to topple the oppressors, Du Bois strongly suggested. The ultimate consequences of such paradoxes were inimical to a better South for both white and black. Elites must understand what caused “negative” behaviors, so as to create a cross-racial alliance (more on this below). Taken as an ensemble, the paradoxes contained in *Souls* pointed to problems that undercut human aspiration, both white and black. But the paradoxes also might affect whites’—at least some whites’—moral sensibilities. If morality were not sufficient to attract those whites to racial justice, then appealing to their interest in an orderly, prosperous South might be successful.

#### **IV. Du Bois on the Sons of the Masters**

In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois intended the various paradoxes to resonate not only with blacks but with whites as well, or at least with some of the older families of the Southern white planter class. As a targeted audience of *Souls*, whites might understand his arguments in very personal terms: “Discriminating and broad-minded criticism is what the South needs,—needs it for the sake of her own white sons and daughters, and for the insurance of robust, healthy mental and moral development” (*Souls* 43). The socially and personally destructive

consequences of the paradoxes might be minimized or even negated if the Veil were lifted—lifted so that the sons of the former masters might understand the commonality between black and white elites and thereby help to promote a future prosperity benefitting all.

For Du Bois, the landed gentry of the South were those who inherited the appreciation of truth, beauty, and the good; who could understand the moral hypocrisy arising from segregation and political disenfranchisement; and who could understand the merit of educating African Americans through schools and—quite importantly—through higher education. Hoping to outline the bases for a cross-racial elite alliance, he consequently pointed to issues and values of ostensible concern to the former slave-owning sector of the Southern whites and their heirs.

The South in the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction was in turmoil economically, socially, and politically. Blacks and whites, including the older planter-class faction, faced new challenges: “The South . . . is a land in the ferment of social change, wherein forces of all kinds are fighting for supremacy . . .” (*Souls* 43). In addition to the destruction of plantation infrastructures during the war, the falling price of cotton and the weakening agricultural sector after the war further exacerbated problems for the planters. Thus, the bases of the social power of the old planter group, as Du Bois indicated in several chapters in *Souls*, were threatened. In his later *Black Reconstruction in America*, he provided more details on the devastation which sapped the vitality from the planters, and which seemingly would have limited their effectiveness as a coalition partner with the African American “Talented Tenth” (54). Nevertheless, in *Souls* he maintained some measure of hope for the cooperation of that particular group of Southern whites.

In such a situation of economic need, the post-Civil War era required the South’s “industrial revolution” to prosper. Du Bois asserted approvingly: “Work and wealth are the mighty levers to lift this old new land; thrift and toil and saving are the highways to new hopes and new possibilities” (*Souls* 56). Nonetheless, and with a nod to the planters and their supposed gentility, there was a threat to those older genteel values in the new South’s industrial development and its rising, white, industrially based elite. Du Bois personified the new Southern industrialization through the city of Atlanta. As he lamented in Chapter V, “Of the Wings of Atlanta,” the new South “forgot the old ideal of the

Southern gentleman,—that new-world heir of the grace and courtliness of patrician, knight, and noble; forgot his honor with his foibles, his kindness with his carelessness, and stooped to apples of gold,—to men busier and sharper, thriftier and more unscrupulous” (*Souls*56). Indeed, not only did the increase of industrial development in South bring jobs and business opportunities but it also heralded the increase in what Du Bois called “mammonism,” a focus on wealth to the exclusion of the pursuit of the Noble.

Du Bois indicated that this “mammonism” was becoming more rampant in the new South city of Atlanta:

Atlanta must not lead the South to dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success; already the fatal might of this idea is beginning to spread; it is replacing the finer type of Southerner with vulgar money-getters; it is burying the sweeter beauties of Southern life beneath pretence and ostentation. For every social ill the panacea of Wealth has been urged,—wealth to overthrow the remains of the slave feudalism; wealth to raise the “cracker” Third Estate; wealth to employ the black serfs, and the prospect of wealth to keep them working; wealth as the end and aim of politics, and as the legal tender for law and order; and, finally, instead of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, wealth as the ideal of the Public School. (*Souls*56)

Here Du Bois not only criticized the excess of white support for newer forms of industry but also linked them to the excesses which Booker T. Washington’s ideas might encourage: a newer South with an over-emphasis on money-making.

While making money in itself was acceptable to Du Bois, he asserted that there were limits (*Souls* 45), holding that Booker T. Washington’s industrial program was so heavily concentrated on earning a living that it would not cultivate the whole person and the (ostensibly) civilizing and higher ideals of truth, beauty, and the good. Both Du Bois and Washington looked to elite whites as allies (Rampersad 84). Perhaps Du Bois hoped his criticisms in *Souls* would drive a wedge between some of the supporters of Washington by arguing that the genteel beliefs of the white planters were under attack by “mammonism.” Maybe some white readers could be persuaded that black workers and farmers could aid in the protection of the interests of the sons and daughters of former masters.

Du Bois seemed to believe that the sons of the former masters still possessed some of the Southern gentility supposedly characteristic of antebellum times. Indeed, some of his descriptions of the planters—but

certainly not all such descriptions found in *Souls*—might sound similar to those in works like Thomas Nelson Page’s *Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War* (1897), or James Battle Avirett’s *The Old Plantation* (1901), or Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry’s “The South in the Olden Time” (1901). Such authors depicted an idyllic pre-war South in which white men were noble, white women virtuous, and slaves happy (see also Dodd, and Wilson). However, it should be emphasized that Du Bois did not hesitate to criticize the slave system and the planters themselves in various places in *Souls*. He did not forget that prejudices existed: “There was the inevitable tendency of war to underestimate the prejudices of the master . . .” (*Souls* 64). Du Bois certainly did not ignore the fact that slave masters had mercilessly treated their slaves (*Souls* 82).

Nevertheless, Du Bois seemed to believe that he could tap into the positive dimensions of the older South in an era of a dawning new South shorn of slavery. He implied that there could be a commonality of interest among at least some blacks—the Talented Tenth—and some white elites, both groups supposedly being oriented to the higher ideals of beauty and truth and the good. This commonality could be strengthened by understanding that the negative characteristics attributed to blacks were actually not universal, because blacks were not homogenous as a group, and that there was a reciprocal causation at work, because the conditions of oppression reinforced or generated the “negative” behaviors which were often criticized by whites of all classes.

#### V. Du Bois’s Strategic Goals as Expressed in *Souls*

*The Souls of Black Folk* was not a guidebook for social change. Yet from an interpretation of the paradoxes of the South we can discern what Du Bois considered to be the goals of a strategy for social reform. He set forth three discernible goals by which the color line could be erased (at least partially) and the truth-obscuring Veil lifted (at least partially): (a) political rights, especially suffrage, were imperative; (b) interracial elites should cooperate in mutually advantageous ways; and (c) African Americans must have the opportunity to be educated in curricula which promoted “higher learning.”

The first strategic goal involved securing political rights. For Du Bois, social inequality could not be overcome through actions predominantly focused on the economic sphere. As he argued, the inequalities of social and economic status could only be tackled effectively by the political

equality that suffrage would grant. The possibility of “shaping the laws” was necessary so that African Americans could enhance their protection of their physical being, their property, and their livelihood in the midst of the terror of the “night riders” and the greed of some whites (*Souls* 112).

Du Bois clarified this point with two criticisms of Booker T. Washington. He deemed Washington’s goals to be contradictory:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run. (*Souls* 41)

In Du Bois’s view, ignoring the voting rights guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment, prevented black men from securing other cherished American rights. In addition, second-class citizenship was psychologically deleterious, rendering difficult the development of African Americans’ sense of self and agency.

Du Bois’s second strategic goal was to seek out the so-called best class of whites and to forge ties of cooperation across the color line:

[T]hroughout the category of means for intellectual communication,—schools, conferences, efforts for social betterment, and the like,—it is usually true that the very representatives of the two races, who for mutual benefit and the welfare of the land ought to be in complete understanding and sympathy, are so far strangers that one side thinks all whites are narrow and prejudiced, and the other thinks educated Negroes dangerous and insolent. (*Souls* 116)

Du Bois was explicit in his view that black and white elites must interact for the uplift of both races and the progress of the South and the USA as a whole. Moreover, Du Bois’s belief in the agency of blacks did not prevent him from justifying leadership roles for anyone, black or white, who he believed could effectively exercise authority in a given situation. As indicated previously, he did not intend white guidance to be uni-directional, for African Americans also contributed to what was good and distinctive about America. Du Bois’s life-long history of working with whites in the struggles for racial and social justice exemplified the importance of this strategic goal for him.

The third strategic goal of *Souls* relates to higher education. For the Talented Tenth of African Americans to be cultivated there must be educational opportunities at universities and colleges to provide what Du Bois called “higher learning,” a liberal-arts style curricula in the mold of that offered by the Northern schools (*Souls* 71). He stressed this point throughout *Souls* and collided with Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on industrial training as the best way to enable people to get jobs available in their immediate environment:

He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates. (*Souls* 41)

For Du Bois industrial education had specific limitations: namely, that an education for earning a livelihood did not specifically educate the “whole person”—a person who would be so broadly educated as to comprehend the pageantry, the pathos, and the progress of human civilization over the millennia (*Souls* 71). Moreover, the determined push for racial uplift would require the teachers of teachers to possess the requisite “higher learning” and not just industrial training.

Du Bois was not against industrial education being available for those interested in it (“Talented Tenth”). Washington was not against the idea that (some) blacks would wish to attend classical liberal arts colleges (Dunn 29; Moses 202-03; Moton 215), but he nonetheless believed, given the socio-economic situation in the South where the majority of blacks lived, that industrial training provided them with the means for a livelihood.

Du Bois’s criticism of Washington was inflected by the politics of education at the time. Both he and Washington included white elites among their intended audiences (*Washington Up from Slavery passim*). Washington, however, enjoyed much more support from whites across the country, including those who controlled the activities of philanthropic organizations (Lewis 270-72, 547; see also Scott & Stowe [ch. 10] on the donations received by Washington for the Tuskegee Institute). Du Bois was concerned that Washington’s educational philosophy would continue to garner the majority of the support, financial and otherwise, and thereby whittle away at the chances of sustaining or enhancing the liberal arts-style schools which taught,



among other subjects, the French derided by Washington as impractical (Lewis 261-63). A glance at a report by the General Education Board—the Congressionally authorized organization to promote education—might not have pleased Du Bois: a majority of funding for African American higher education in the South was channeled to industrial schools like Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute (General Education Board 203, 209). For Du Bois, the consequences of choosing the appropriate plan of education were vital: the South could avoid discord and disorder through literacy for the masses of African Americans and liberal arts education for those who would be among their leaders.

## VI. The Constraints on Achieving Du Bois's Strategic Goals

Historical constraints limited the potential to achieve the strategic goals Du Bois outlined in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the early twentieth century the climate was not conducive, especially in the South, for achieving Du Bois's goals for social change. By word and deed, white supremacy in its various guises still predominated across the United States. Lynchings and race riots continued for decades throughout the country. Many electoral districts placed limits on black voting rights until the mid-1960s. Education was still heavily segregated in most schools—primary, secondary, and tertiary—across the nation. Disparities in occupations and wages persisted, and still exist in some instances. Thus, the civil rights movement of the twentieth century encountered a South, and indeed in many cases an America, which was not heeding calls for racial justice.

In the main, we also can say that Du Bois's goal of engaging the white elites of the Old South to effect racial advancement was limited in at least two ways. First, Du Bois remained locked in a personal struggle with Washington until the latter's death in 1915 and even afterwards (Lewis chs. 10-15 *passim*), for the Wizard's followers and advocates continued Hampton- and Tuskegee-style programs (Moton chs. IX, X). Many Southern and Northern whites supported Washington's more gradual approach and its muted public support for the African American male franchise. Second, as Lewis has noted, many of the whites—both those of the landed gentry of the older South and those of the commercial and industrial interests of the newer South—sought to keep African Americans, and often even poorer whites, from exercising the

right to vote (Lewis 259-61). Suppression of the vote was compounded by other forms of oppression. For example, foreign travelers in the early twentieth century observed that Southern whites often kept blacks in servile and dependent positions (Archer *passim*; D'Estournelles de Constant 359-69).

We can also note an added limitation in the chief presupposition that underpinned Du Bois's analyses of the paradoxes of the South. He presupposed a commonality of interest between the Talented Tenth of African Americans and whites in positions of social-political-economic power. Certainly, presupposing a commonality of interest with whites was not the same as presupposing the good will of whites. Good will is based on the presumed personal capacity of some whites (elites or not) to be sympathetic, empathic, and/or to hold progressive views on race. Good will is often based on some sense of humanity which unites all peoples, but it has its limitations as far as movements for social change are concerned. Relying on good will leads to relying on another's sense of fair play. The difficulties—even the bloody set-backs—that arose in the attempts to secure the franchise for African Americans could illustrate to Du Bois the problem with depending on good will within unequal social relationships of power and authority. Indeed, *Souls* offered a cautionary tale about relying on good will in "Of the Coming of John," a story which dramatically illustrates the unchecked power wielded by the white town leader against the African American protagonist.

Accordingly, Du Bois did not wish to rely on good will, but rather sought to "create" an acknowledgment of presumed commonalities between African American elites and the older planters and their children. However, the commonalities he built upon—the genteel values of the good, the beautiful, and the true as well as a Christian sense of equality and love for one's fellow humans—did not necessarily motivate Du Bois's white audience. Therein lay a weakness of his analysis.

Later in life Du Bois offered an implicit critique of his attempt in *Souls* to woo some whites, especially the sons of former masters, through their gentility. In *Black Reconstruction* he noted that genteel values did not prevent the planters from being dissolute, gambling or being otherwise occupied in aristocratic self-indulgence (*Black Reconstruction* 35, 43). Moreover, he argued that the planters were losing social-structural power over postbellum Southern society due to the eclipse of

cotton and large-scale agriculture and to the rise of industrial capitalism. While Du Bois had pointed to signs of the rising industrial-capitalist class in *Souls*, he did not emphasize it in his strategic goals.

Regarding the commonality of Christianity, Du Bois had argued in *Souls* that the Bible preached equality and sister/brotherhood (ch. IX). He of course was not alone in this endeavor. Many African Americans had stressed Biblical support to justify racially progressive views (among the many, see Armistead, Cooper, Crummell, Douglass *Claims*, and Watkins). However, historically this has been only one interpretation of the Bible, for ideals of Christian equality and love have been understood in different ways. Indeed, a white supremacist interpretation of Christianity—as found in works from Carroll, Jones, Ross, and Stringfellow—has been an integral part of the recalcitrant white supremacist power structures.

In later autobiographical pieces Du Bois took a different stance on the idea of a presumed commonality of interest between old South elites and African Americans. In *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) he wrote of the economic gain and social power which he believed served as a major cause of such mistreatment and oppression:

By 1930, . . . I did not believe that a further prolongation of looking for salvation from the whites was feasible. So far as they were ignorant of the results of race prejudice, we taught them; but so far as their race prejudice was built and increasingly built on the basis of their income which they enjoyed and their anti-Negro bias consciously or unconsciously formulated in order to protect their wealth and power, in so far [i.e., then] our whole program must be changed and we must seek to increase the power and particularly the economic organization among Negroes to meet this new situation. (*Dusk* 770)

Du Bois believed that a new analytical framework was necessary, one increasingly informed by his rather unorthodox interpretation of Marxism (Robinson ch. 9). The strategic goals proposed in *Souls* in general—voting rights, interracial cooperation, and higher education—thus had limited opportunities for success because he had failed to analyze the material relations of human interaction. In later years, he advocated different strategies, such as economic nationalism within African American communities (“A Negro Nation”).

Lifting the Veil of the color line by highlighting the stark paradoxes of the South proved an insufficient basis for social change. Although its strategy might have proven historically inadequate, *The Souls of Black*

*Folk* also transcended the contingencies of its time. For many later readers, Du Bois's lyrical, impassioned analysis of African American humanity and agency remain compelling. It is a cogency based not on whether the oppressors were persuaded to change their ways but on insights into the capacity of the oppressed, under conditions of inhumanity, to live humanely and to struggle ceaselessly.

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