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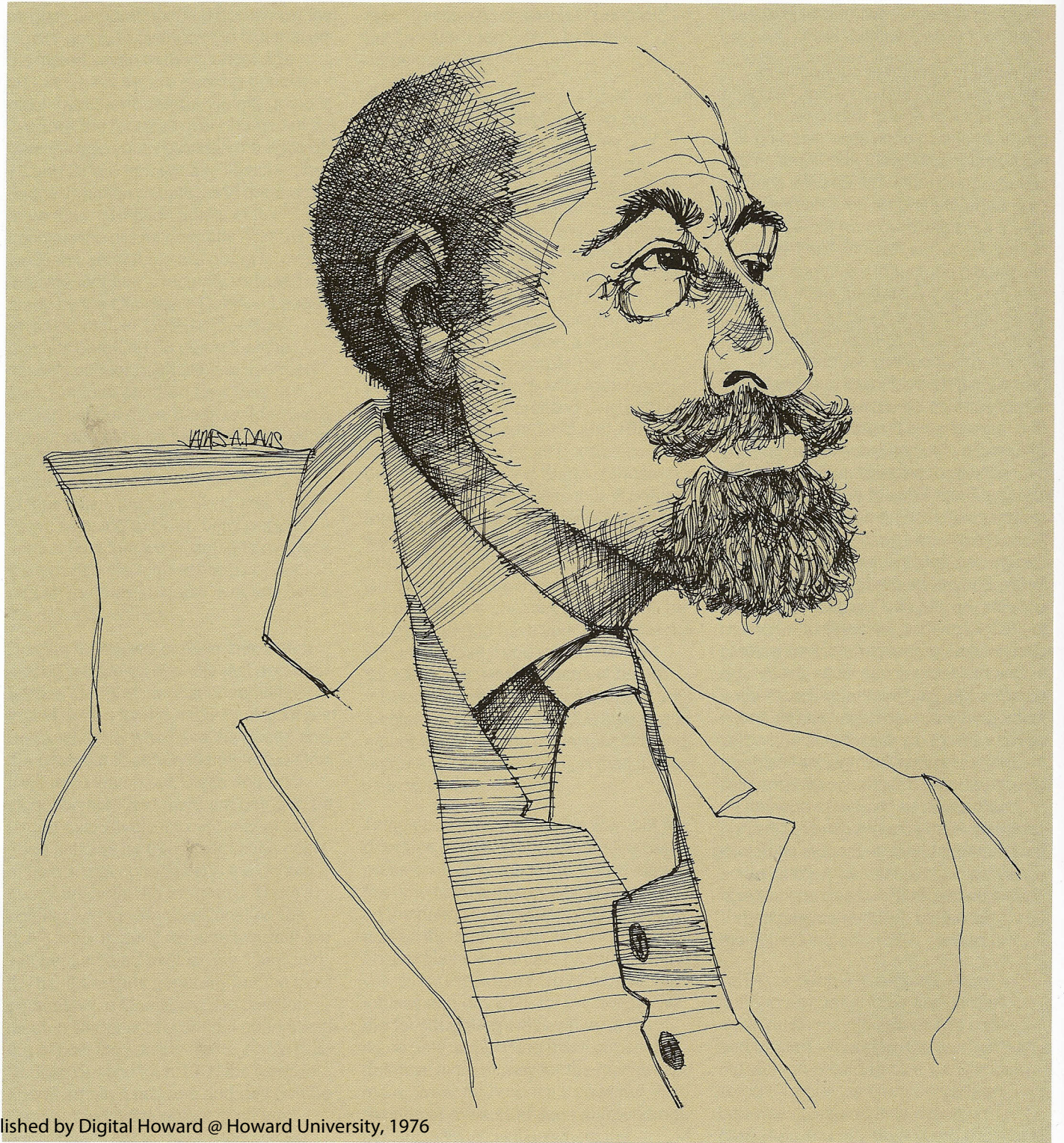
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The Ideological Pilgrimage Of Du Bois

An Analytical Essay

By Clarence G. Contee

In his classic autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940 when he was 72, Dr. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois wrote: "My leadership was a leadership solely of ideas. . . . But of course, no idea is perfect and forever valid. Always to be living and apposite and timely, it must be modified and adapted to changing facts." Du Bois knew how to make a major interpretation of one of the key meanings in his own life. He knew also what a social scientist could do with ideas.

When he wrote these words, he was at work for a second time as a professor of sociology at Atlanta University. These words pointed out two aspects of the type of leadership Du Bois gave. One was that of a Du Boisian series of ideologies of liberation, which began in the 1890s and ended with his open advocacy of Communism in 1961—two years before his death in his adopted country of Ghana. The second was his constant use of the tenets of pragmatism and of the functions of the knowledge of the social sciences of Afro-Americans. Both, as he interpreted them, demanded a modification of ideologies and truths, if these did not affect the desired changes.

What is the function of a leader? For one like Du Bois, a leader performs as an ideologue. In the course of his 70 years of active writing and editing as a spokesman for his people, Africans all over the world, he created a variety of programs of action based upon the ultimate aim of Black liberation and equality through the use of peaceful means and the acceptance of the values of the American way of life. One might say that Du Bois was an example of a literary revolutionary.

Born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a small town nestled in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, Du Bois was the only child of parents free for almost a century in that area. He was reared in the tradi-

tions of New England, especially in the love of learning.

The informal and formal education Du Bois received as a student in Great Barrington, and in universities, inculcated in him the traditions and values of the American social system. He was a precocious youth in learning traditions pertinent to his future causes. He learned of the racist attitudes toward Blacks as a newspaper correspondent for a Black newspaper, *The New York Globe* (later *Age*), and from personal experiences in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, he continued to accept the myth that excellence in performance received its due merit, regardless of race. His high school education was in the best American liberal and classical traditions in the mid-1880s.

His experiences as a university student in Nashville, in Cambridge, and in Europe presented him examples of the best traditions Western education had to offer. These experiences also made him realize more deeply than before the great necessity of adherence to the traditions found in the Declaration of Independence and in the Constitution, as well as in the basic human rights.

At Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, from which Du Bois earned the A. B. degree in 1888, he was rudely awakened to the deep problems of racism in the South. He left Fisk with a major in philosophy, intending to pursue that vocation as a way of life. He had also started his career as an editor while at Fisk. When Du Bois arrived in Cambridge to attend Harvard University, he was still interested in philosophy. But when he completed his studies at Harvard, he had obtained the first Ph.D. in history given an Afro-American in the United States. He had also grown closer to his own community, calling it a "nation." He had become a close friend of William James, the philosopher-psychologist and developer of pragmatism, and of Albert Bushnell Hart, the historian who taught him the techniques of the social sciences, both of whom were influential teachers of his at Harvard.

Pragmatism contained in its tenets support for individual creative efforts to reform society and the precepts of philosophical truths.

While he was a graduate student at Harvard, Du Bois travelled to Europe and attended for two years (1892-1894) the famed University of Berlin. It was here, when he celebrated his 25th birthday, that he began his sincere search for an ideology. He wrote in his diary in 1893 on his birthday that: "I therefore take the world that the Unknown lay in my hands and work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world . . . These are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race." He was groping at this point, but he had settled on his life's work. He was planning to use literature as a liberation device, using the scientific method as a means to aid these ends. Already he was prophetic.

Thus as a very well-educated and well-travelled member of the elite, Du Bois watched sadly in the late 1890s from his vantages as a student of race relations and as a professor, mainly at Atlanta University, the decline in the status of the Black man in the world. In Africa, as the Europeans conquered, they crushed mercilessly African rebellions and resistances. In the Caribbean, whites maintained their minority control over huge majorities, who found few opportunities for political and social advancements. In the United States, discrimination and segregation increased precipitously as the promises made during Reconstruction were subverted by white racists. Another Black leader, Booker T. Washington, arose to champion the acceptance of these deteriorating conditions, asking only for a chance for the masses of Blacks to earn a dollar.

Just before Du Bois went to teach history and sociology at Atlanta University in 1897, he joined an elitist Black bourgeoisie group—limited to 40—the Ameri-

22 can Negro Academy, which planned to work for the cultural uplift of the race. He stated his views in *The Conservation of Races* (1897), a pamphlet he wrote as a policy statement for the Academy. Blacks must not be absorbed, he wrote, into the white race, "if they are to take their just place in the van of Pan-Negroism." Blacks possessed the skills to develop leaders like Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian revolutionary, and to make contributions to world civilization that only Blacks could make.

Such statements indicated a proud belief in Negritude and Black cultural nationalism. Blacks must conserve their physical powers, intellectual endowments, spiritual ideals. These values were to be preserved by race unity, race organization, race solidarity, Black capitalism, Black arts and literature. With these means the ends of conservation of the race were possible of achievement. Du Bois made no mention of the use of violence. His principal weapon at that time was the use of the techniques of the social sciences to present favorably data from his Atlanta University Studies on the Problems of the Negro. These facts, Du Bois ardently believed then, would demonstrate that science was the handmaiden of racial uplift.

Yet, the more Du Bois watched the marked deterioration of race relations and the status of the Afro-American and the African in the world of white power, the more he was dissatisfied with the alleged and assumed truths of the accommodation philosophy of Washington. His attendance in 1900 at the Pan-African Conference in London helped Du Bois see the efforts of other Blacks trying to practice self-help in order to protest white oppression and even seemingly genocide in Africa, and in America. It was in the "Address to the Nations of the World," before the delegates to the Conference, that he penned his famous prophesy: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line . . ." He repeated

Black Folk (1903), in which he made his first trenchant public attack on the ideology of Booker T. Washington. He offered instead a more militant set of means to accomplish the same ends since the compromise philosophy of Washington brought retreat. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he emphasized that the time for retreat had ended. He demanded, by recalling the principles of equality found in the Declaration of Independence, that the vote was necessary to secure the ends found in that great document. Open opposition erupted between the two leaders. Du Bois formed his own protest elitist Black group, mostly college-educated northerners, the Niagara Movement. These men represented the Talented Tenth, said Du Bois; in them he found the class of men to lead Blacks to liberation. In 1906, at the Harper's Ferry meeting of the Niagara Movement, he wrote to protest discrimination and segregation: "Against this the Niagara Movement eternally protests. We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. . . . It is a fight for ideals by the weapons of the vote, the law, and education for thinking and aspiring." The members vowed never to stop their protestations and assailing the ears of America. Du Bois in his means clearly anticipated the appeals the late Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., made to the conscience of white America and their American Creed.

The facile mind of Du Bois was not limited to only one road to Paradise, full equality for Blacks in America and elsewhere. There was no really significant road block to the use of several paths at the same time; the blocks were only mental, mused Du Bois. In 1907, in *The Horizon*, a magazine he founded as the voice of the Niagara Movement, Du Bois announced that he was a "Socialist-of-the-Path." His socialism did not include the complete nationalization of property; he was not prepared to part with some of the concepts which underlined consensus among Americans and other Westerners. He was mainly concerned with the uplift-

ing of the Black poor via a more equitable distribution of wealth. He did see socialism as the means for the attainment of the ideals of human brotherhood, equality of opportunity, and the best hope for the progress of Afro-Americans. In 1911, he joined the Socialist Party. Yet he withdrew in 1912, because the socialists had not conquered their own brand of white racism. He supported Woodrow Wilson, the next President, because Wilson offered a chance for racial justice, a promise Wilson promptly forgot in 1913.

Growing open opposition to the ideology of Du Bois by Washington and his followers curtailed the financial support of his work and his school; most white philanthropists simply did not countenance criticism of Washington. Fortunately, for Du Bois, an organization of white liberals, some socialists, and Blacks—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP—was founded in 1909 with views similar to his. Du Bois was one of the founding members, and he became the only Black official in the national office in his capacity as editor and founder of *The Crisis*, the herald of the organization. Du Bois, through the use of *The Crisis* as a major propaganda instrument, persuaded many Blacks and whites to support his solutions; he brought the last few members of the Niagara Movement into the rolls of the NAACP. Du Bois knew that ideas expressed in the periodical were witness to the concept that the pen is mightier than the sword, sometimes.

When Booker T. Washington died in 1915 (Washington's ideological death had occurred in 1910), Du Bois became the major spokesman for the protest philosophy as the main means toward the ends. It was in the year 1915, in *The Crisis*, that Du Bois published one of his most famous statements of his search for ideologies of Black Liberation. He demonstrated in the statement, "The Immediate Program of the American Negro," that his concept of an ideology then was both within and without the confines of the

philosophy of the NAACP. Du Bois noted that: "The immediate program of the American Negro means nothing unless it is immediate to his great ideal and the ultimate ends of his development." These ends were the same as before, full equality, and these were needed for "self-defense," and the ultimate survival of the darker races on earth. Du Bois had retained his concept of Pan-Negroism. To achieve these ends, he was in general agreement with the strategy and tactics of the interracial, white-dominated NAACP.

"What now are the practical steps which must be taken to accomplish these aims?", Du Bois asked rhetorically. They were the use of courts, lobbying, legislation and interracial contact. He was already aware of the dangers of polarization as a prevention of advancement. Du Bois put much personal faith in the dissemination of the printed word in *The Crisis*, and a Negro encyclopedia. He even deviated from the white-dominated NAACP stance and called for an early form of Black power and Black nationalism. He recommended that the means of race organizations, controlled and guided into "our objects, our aims, and our ideals . . ." must be utilized. Thus, there were grounds upon which Du Bois was both respected and feared by the NAACP hierarchy. Yet it is apparent that Du Bois truthfully stated that he shaped the ideology of the early years of the organization.

A partial and major victory of the ideology of Du Bois over that of Washington came the next year at a conference of Black leaders which was held in the home of NAACP official Joel E. Spingarn, with the guidance of Du Bois. About 200 Blacks made peace, and the terms of the treaty meant that Du Bois had won. The resolutions stressed the vote, all forms of education, and the right to advocate all means of liberation in all regions. According to Du Bois, who published the report of 1925, the race "has learned to understand and respect the good faith, methods and ideals of those who are

working for the solution to this problem in various sections of the country."

Thus, during World War I, and for some time after, Du Bois was a leader with a large following. He may well have been the most respected Black leader at that time. In the course of the war, he came to identify closely with the established order. He supported the Allies against the Central Powers. He made, in a famous editorial in *The Crisis* in 1918, a request that Blacks "Close Ranks" around the efforts of Woodrow Wilson. He was criticized by some people for the stand he took. Du Bois, at one time, tried to get a commission in the Army after upholding the practice of creating Black army officers in a segregated camp. Yet he remained the principal leader, since most Blacks hoped that the war to make the world safe for Democracy would bring them some democratic gains.

Ironically, it was not for work within the United States for his people that Du Bois won a coveted recognition from the NAACP, the Spingarn Medal. It was for his efforts to create organized Pan-Africanism, the unity and liberation of Blacks all over the world. Like Du Bois, many Blacks around the world thought through Pan-Africanism they could gain advantages from the concepts of self-determination, anti-colonialism, democracy, and anti-imperialism circulating in the war atmosphere. The greatest hope for African liberation was the internationalization of the former German colonies there. With pressure, these colonies might even have some semblance of self-determination.

With financial and spiritual help from the NAACP, and adroit maneuverings, Du Bois was able to gather 57 liberal whites and members of the Black elite from Africa, the West Indies and America and convene the Pan-African Congress of 1919 to apply racial and political pressure on the decisions of the Paris Peace Conference meeting then. It was dominated by Afro-Americans and by Du Bois, who was the architect of the ideology. In

two documents, both by the hand of Du Bois, a memorandum of 1918 to the NAACP, and the Resolutions of the Congress, the eventual liberation of Africans was through the expedient of the internationalization of the former German colonies in Africa as a step toward self-determination and nationalism. Advised as means toward the modernization of Africa in preparation for that day were education, the preservation of key elements of the African way of life, the use of native administrators, judicious investment of capital to benefit the natives, and the right of Africans, as soon as they become ready, to participate in the political affairs of their areas. Du Bois became known as the "father of Pan-Africanism" for these efforts. He knew also that the freedom of Africans would affect the nature of the treatments of Africans elsewhere. The efficacy of the meeting is still a matter of dispute, though Du Bois made great claims for its accomplishments.

Another irony was that in the 1920s the dominant ideology was the back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey, a West Indian who set up in Harlem a Pan-African organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). He produced two amazing feats. He made the greatest mass movement among Africans and Afro-Americans, and he made this movement into one for the emigration of Afro-Americans to Africa. These acts indicated that Afro-Americans had gained little from the democratic rhetoric and the shallow prosperity of the times. Garvey planned to conquer Africa and install an Afro-American imperialism. It was in Africa that Blacks could have presidents, admirals, generals, factories, captains of industries, and distinguished professors; these were the symbols of a great nationality. To accomplish these aims, denied them in their diaspora, Garvey and his followers set up an abortive steamship line, the Black Star Line, factories in the cities of America, a uniformed army of liberation, and nurses to minister to the wounded in the struggle ahead. He cham-

pioned Black pride, Black beauty, and Black history. Garvey promised much, delivered very few tangibles, but the intangible legacy of a race pride that has blossomed in the second half of the 20th century.

Thus Du Bois and Garvey contended for leadership; in 1924 the UNIA convention read Du Bois out of the Black race, because he had white support. Yet Du Bois did not oppose the ultimate aims of Garvey, except the concept of Afro-American imperialism in Africa. Du Bois wanted, however, the interests of the poor people safeguarded; he wanted also only skilled Blacks to go to Africa. In the final analysis, said Du Bois, the liberation of Afro-Americans had to be done in America, where most of them would remain. History had proved the impracticality of the back-to-Africa philosophy as a solution to the predicaments of Blacks in the diaspora. Du Bois was gainsaying his pragmatism. He did not give up on the idea of organized Pan-Africanism; he headed meetings of the Pan-African Congress in 1921, 1923, and 1927.

Nor had he turned away from the methods of the NAACP. This was evident in the same period when in 1921, one of his readers suggested to Du Bois that Marxism and Communism were the answers to the problems of the Black proletariat. Du Bois published a very revealing but traditional statement: "The NAACP has been accused of not being a 'revolutionary' body. We do not believe in revolution." But the NAACP expected revolutionary changes in its ends via the traditional liberal American means: reason, human sympathy, the education of the children, and not by murder. "The NAACP is organized to agitate, to investigate, to expose, to defend, to reason, to appeal. This is our program and this is the whole of our program." The tactical use of facts, accurate knowledge, careful distinctions were keys in the overall struggle. The class struggle was not applicable, because the laboring classes were separated

were unsympathetic to the plight of Black labor.

By the end of the 1920s Du Bois was in his 60s. He had fought the valiant fight for racial integration and against racism for three decades. Yet as he viewed these years, he was still not satisfied with the amount of social changes for the benefit of Blacks everywhere. His years of speaking, writing literary agitation, and protesting had not proved effective enough. Another technique was needed; Du Bois reached the conclusion that the economic approach held possibilities for racial liberation.

It was the Depression that began in 1929 that reenforced Du Bois in his economic analysis; hence his change from an ideology based upon the vote and legislation to one based upon the erection of a Black economic commonwealth. The roots of "his latest battle cry" lay in his interests in collectivism and in Black nationalism. By late 1933, Du Bois was ready to publish his next ideology, hoping that as a leader many would follow him. In the pages of *The Crisis*, he called for Blacks to segregate themselves in order to build up their own organizations, especially their financial ones. "It is the race-conscious black man co-operating together in his own institutions and movements who will eventually emancipate the colored race, and the great step ahead today [1934-35] is for the American Negro to accomplish his economic emancipation through voluntary, determined co-operative efforts." After all, Blacks in America, were a "nation within a nation."

Du Bois had come full circle since 1897; he had gone back to the self-help and segregation philosophy of the days and views of Booker T. Washington. But he found himself in 1934 a leader with no followers. Most of his white and Black friends were dismayed and severely critical; he lost his post with the NAACP. He was clearly out of step with the majority Black opinion—racial equality with full integration by constitutional means. Du Bois and himself at the beginning of a

long period of alienation, the degrees varying, from which he never fully recovered. From 1934 to 1944, Du Bois was again a professor of sociology at Atlanta University, where he pursued the themes of segregation and collectivism.

In articles and speeches, Du Bois stressed the uplift of the Black proletariat by economic segregation and the strengthening of the Black school, church, and retail business. Effective planning was essential for the success of the ideology. The theme of collectivism led Du Bois to read more deeply into Marxism. Its impact on Du Bois was noted in his classic Marxist revision of Reconstruction, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. His race pride emphasized the positive benefits of the participation of Blacks in the political and economic affairs of Reconstruction. Yet when in 1944 he wrote, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," Du Bois rightly rejected Communism as a "suicidal" solution for Blacks.

Even though he rejoined the NAACP in 1944, after precipitate dismissal from Atlanta as the powerless director of Special Research, Du Bois proffered no new programs. He searched for answers among the resources of Black unity and the unity of all labor. In the course of his advocacy of Black unity, as the director of Special Research, he helped plan and attend the Pan-African Congress of 1945 in Manchester, England, where he was elected the International President. He was honored there as the "father of Pan-Africanism." Relatively, as a champion of the unity of all labor, especially the labor of colonials, Du Bois was extremely active. He held a conference in New York in 1945 on colonial problems; he attacked as a consultant in San Francisco the colonial planks of the United Nations Charter, and he wrote *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (1945), the thesis of which was an old one of his: free the colonies or else

there will still be imperial wars. He was ever the prophet.

Instead of adhering closely to the established ideology as an ideologue with the NAACP, Du Bois increasingly became identified with the ideas of the "far left." His articles began appearing with regularity in Marxist periodicals. He was seen often at luncheons and meetings with persons who advocated Socialism. Some made him guilty of radicalism by association. At his last major speech before a NAACP convention in 1947, he showed clearly how he was interested in Socialism and Communism as ideologies of liberation for all the poor, especially the Black poor of the world. Yet his views were not winning adherents; these views made him more of a leader with no disciples. In fact, when he advocated in 1948 that the NAACP support Henry A. Wallace, the Progressive Party presidential candidate accused of being a tool of the communists, the hierarchy of the NAACP forced his resignation. He was becoming more alienated from the majority views of most Blacks and Americans. He was less a pragmatist in his post-World War II days.

Therefore, it was almost natural, when Du Bois saw that most Blacks and the NAACP were not following his leads on Africa and on Socialism, that in 1949 he became an official of the "leftist" Council on African Affairs. In 1950, he ran unsuccessfully for Senator of the United States from New York on the American Labor Party ticket, at the age of 82. His ardent peace campaign during the turbulent times of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisc.) and the Korean War caused him to suffer the pain and indignity of indictment, handcuffs, and acquittal in 1951 as an unregistered agent of a foreign country, the Soviet Union. He was considered so dangerous that his passport was revoked in order to prevent him from attending the inauguration of the new African state of Ghana in 1957; he insisted on consistency of his socialist views.

When Du Bois got his passport in 1958, he promptly went off to visit the Soviet Union. <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol3/iss4/6>

Union and sent to a meeting in Ghana a speech in which he advocated African liberation through African Socialism. On his 91st birthday, Du Bois had a party in Peking, where he was highly praised. Here he said allegedly that all his life he had been nothing but a "nigger" in the United States. Du Bois did not mean to speak in personal terms; as he had often done, he meant that the descendants of Africans had been discriminated, exploited and oppressed as a racial entity. Apparently he had found, after half a century, the ideology of Black liberation.

By the middle of 1961, Du Bois had made two major decisions. "Capitalism cannot reform itself; it is doomed to destruction. No universal selfishness can bring social good to all." With these words, Du Bois had made the first of these two decisions; he joined openly the Communist Party of the United States in October 1961. In his letter to Gus Hall, Du Bois related how, after long deliberation, he had arrived at this conclusion. "After the depression and the Second World War, I was disillusioned." It was plain in his letter that Du Bois had chosen to seek the salvation of the Black race in broad social and economic terms. There was very little in his letter that focused directly on the role of Communism as an ideology of racial uplift. Raise the poor of the world and the Blacks would be improved.

The second major decision Du Bois made in the last few years of his life was his acceptance of Ghanaian citizenship, after his migration there in late 1961 to renew work on the *Encyclopedia Africana*. Ghana was then in the control of Kwame Nkrumah, a Pan-African student of Du Bois. This decision indicated that Du Bois had found a home where the atmosphere was in harmony with his interests in the Marxist analysis of the Black condition. In effect, when Du Bois died in Ghana on August 27, 1963, the eve of the great march on Washington, he had withdrawn in two ways from the American system, in ideology and in nationality.

The numerous ideologies of Black liberation proposed by Du Bois help explain why he has been called "paradoxical." Pragmatists are usually called very complex persons because they do not adhere dogmatically to one or several easily definable doctrinal positions. Yet at the last quarter of his life, Du Bois did maintain some consistency in his desire to have Blacks use Socialism as their ideology. Still, the trail of the life of Du Bois as an intellectual and literary revolutionary has been one of constantly seeking, searching, questioning, hoping to find some means by which the lowly—especially the wretched Blacks of the earth—could be uplifted to dignity, equality and their rightful places in the order of human societies.

The search Du Bois made is symbolically synonymous with that made by other African and Afro-American leaders in their public statements and actions, and by many inarticulate Blacks in their own private and nameless struggles for liberation, equality and dignity. □

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