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Remembering W.E.B. Du Bois: A Towering Figure Who Died 50 Years Ago

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Overshadowed by the recent celebration of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was another half-century milestone -- the death of W.E.B. Du Bois.

On August 28, 1963, as more than 200,000 Americans assembled at the Lincoln Memorial, Roy Wilkins, the longtime head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), addressed the crowd. Toward the end of his remarks, Wilkins announced that Du Bois, who had helped found the NAACP in 1909, had died the day before in Ghana at age 95. Wilkins explained:

"Now, regardless of the fact that in his later years Dr. Du Bois chose another path, it is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the twentieth century his was the voice that was calling to you to gather here today in this cause. If you want to read something that applies to 1963 go back and get a volume of *The Souls of Black Folk* by DuBois published in 1903."

Few at the march had heard of Du Bois, whose writings were mostly forgotten. He had not been actively involved in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The "another path" that Du Bois had chosen late in his life was black nationalism and communism, which most civil rights leaders, including King and Wilkins, rejected in favor of racial integration and social democracy.

Today, however, Du Bois is recognized as one of the monumental intellectual and political figures of the 20th century and certainly its most influential African American thinker. Author of eighteen books, Du Bois' writings challenged America's ideas about race and helped lead the early crusade for civil rights. In the almost half century since the March on Washington, his reputation as a brilliant sociologist, historian, polemicist, novelist, and editor has been restored, his writings reprinted, and his life reported in several prize-winning biographies. Once his life and ideas were rediscovered in the late 1960s, Du Bois became a major influence among both academics and activists.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in 1868, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a town with about 50 African Americans out of 5,000 inhabitants. The valedictorian of his high school class, Du Bois attended Fisk University, a black liberal arts college in Nashville, and spent the summer teaching in a rural school. These were his first encounters with southern segregation, about which he would later write prolifically. After two years at Fisk, he transferred to Harvard and graduated cum laude in

1890. Five years later he earned his doctorate in history, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard. His dissertation was published in 1896 as *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, in the Harvard Historical Series.

While working as an instructor in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, Du Bois wrote *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), the first case study of an American black community, as well as reports on black farmers and businessmen and on black life in southern communities. These works established Du Bois as the first great scholar of black life in America at a time when lynching and other forms violence against blacks were intensifying and southern states were enacting Jim Crow laws to strengthen white supremacy.

In an 1897 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Strivings of the Negro People," Du Bois first outlined his concept of blacks' "double consciousness" -- the tricky balancing act of reconciling the pursuit of assimilation into the American mainstream with the maintenance of pride in one's black identity. That essay became the basis for his most enduring book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a collection of penetrating essays on African American culture, religion, history, and politics. It was there that Du Bois wrote the statement for which he is probably most famous: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line--the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." (Most Americans only know the first half of the statement.)

Du Bois hoped his research would bring about change by exposing whites to the brutal realities of segregation. But he soon realized that political agitation was also needed to change attitudes and to dismantle America's racial system. He hoped that well-educated African Americans--a group he called the "talented tenth" -- would develop the leadership capacity to carry out that political effort.

To further that goal, Du Bois and other scholars and professionals met secretly in Buffalo, New York, in 1905 and founded the Niagara Movement to demand full equality for African Americans. "We want full manhood suffrage and we want it now," its manifesto said. "We are men! We want to be treated as men. And we shall win." The Niagara Movement challenged the views of the nation's most prominent African American educator, Booker T. Washington. In his famed "Atlanta Compromise" speech 10 years earlier Washington had argued that black advancement would come primarily through accommodation and vocational education.

From 1897 to 1910, Du Bois was professor of economics and history at Atlanta University. He founded and edited the journals *Moon* (1906) and *The Horizon* (1907-1910) as outlets for the Niagara Movement. The movement attracted some black socialists, and Du Bois--influenced by the writings of Henry George, Jack London, and others--described socialism as "the one great hope of the Negro in America" in a 1907 article in *The Horizon*. He joined the Socialist Party in 1911 but left the next year to support Democrat Woodrow Wilson's campaign for president. He continued to consider himself a Socialist but was rarely in sync with the party's activities or satisfied with its commitment to racial equality. In turn, some black Socialists, such as A. Philip Randolph, criticized Du Bois for concentrating on the elite, with his focus on the "talented tenth," rather than building a mass movement that included black workers and farmers.

A labor organizer and powerful street agitator, Randolph understandably considered Du Bois to be an elitist. Du Bois contributed to this image by his reserve, his formal dress, his walking stick, and his well-groomed mustache and goatee. But despite his remarkable scholarly track record, Du Bois was not an Ivory Tower academic. Much of his writings reached a broad public audience and throughout his life he remained an activist.

Although Du Bois never completely abandoned his "talented tenth" views, he devoted many of his most productive years to building the NAACP, which eventually became the largest grassroots organization among African Americans. Echoing the focus of the Niagara Movement, the NAACP's goal was to secure the rights guaranteed in the US Constitution's Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which promised an end to slavery, the equal protection of the law, and universal adult male suffrage, respectively.

From 1910 to 1934 Du Bois abandoned academia and served as the NAACP's director of publicity and research and as a member of its board of directors. He also served as editor of the *Crisis*, a magazine that became a highly visible and often controversial forum for criticism of white racism, lynching, and segregation. He opened the magazine to contributions from leading progressives (such as Jane Addams, Ida Wells, and Oswald Garrison Villard) and gave exposure to young African American writers, poets, academics, and agitators, including Langston Hughes. In 1911, he devoted an entire issue of the magazine to the issue of women's suffrage, informing readers that "every argument for Negro suffrage is an argument for women's suffrage."

In 1934 Du Bois resigned from the NAACP board and from the *Crisis* because of his support for African American-controlled institutions, schools and economic cooperatives, which challenged the NAACP's commitment to integration.

From 1934 to 1944 Du Bois was chairman of the Department of Sociology at Atlanta University, where he continued writing about the history and condition of black Americans, producing, among other works, *Black Reconstruction* (1935). In 1940 he founded *Phylon*, a social science quarterly. He returned to the NAACP as director of special research from 1944 to 1948.

Du Bois was long an advocate of international human rights and of Pan-Africanism, which addressed the condition of people of African descent around the world. He attended the first Pan-African Congress in England in 1900, and in 1919, 1921, 1923, and 1927 he organized a series of Pan-African congresses condemning colonialism, with delegations made up of intellectuals from Africa, the West Indies, and the United States.

In 1945 Du Bois served as a consultant to the newly formed United Nations. As the Cold War escalated, the US government increasingly harassed Du Bois for his left-wing activism and his attacks on US imperialism and European colonialism. In 1948 the NAACP, fearful of being identified with radicals, fired Du Bois. That year, he supported former Vice President Henry Wallace's Progressive Party campaign for president.

From 1949 to 1955 Du Bois headed the Council on African Affairs, an anticolonialist group. In 1949 he was chairman of the Peace Information Center in New York, which promoted the Stockholm Peace Petition to ban nuclear weapons, a movement that the US government characterized as communist-inspired. Du Bois and other officers of the center were indicted by a federal grand jury on a charge of failing to register as foreign agents.

They were acquitted after a trial in which the chief defense counsel was Congressman Vito Marcantonio of Manhattan. In 1950 Du Bois ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate on the left-wing American Labor Party ticket. In 1953 the US State Department revoked Du Bois's passport.

Increasingly disillusioned with the United States, Du Bois officially joined the Communist Party in 1961 at the height of the Cold War. The following year, the Communist Party renamed its youth wing the DuBois Clubs. This clever ploy was not only meant to honor Du Bois, but was also clearly intended to rattle the establishment by misleading people into confusing it with the Boys Club. (Du Bois pronounced his name DooBOYS, rather than the French-sounding DooBWA). In 1966, former Vice President (and later President) Richard Nixon, who was the national board chairman of the Boys Club of America, [complained](#) that the name was "an almost classic example of Communist deception and duplicity." Edward J. Stapleton, the Boys Club's public information director, said that his organization had received poison-pen letters and threatening phone calls as a result of the confusion. "This can badly hurt us financially unless this thing is headed off at the pass," he said.

By the time the CP made the name change, however, Du Bois had already moved to Ghana. In 1961, at the invitation of President, Kwame Nkrumah, Du Bois took up residence in the African nation to serve as director of the *Encyclopedia Africana*, a project that Du Bois had been working on for many years. After the U.S. refused to restore his passport, Du Bois renounced his American citizenship and became a citizen of Ghana.

As a result of being attacked as a subversive by the U.S. government, his affiliation with left-wing organizations, and his eventual move to Africa at age 93, Du Bois was not active in the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1950s. But his writings eventually had enormous influence on civil rights activists, on the emerging field of black studies, and on the growing understanding of the anti-colonial views and independence movements among people in the world's poor nations.

For someone who had been largely forgotten at the time of his death 50 years ago, Du Bois' reputation has since been restored and his legacy secured. In 1976, the site of the house where he grew up in Great Barrington was designated a National Historic Landmark. In 1992 the U.S. Postal Service honored him with his portrait on a postage stamp. In 1972 the University of Pennsylvania named a dormitory for its former faculty member, in 1975 Harvard established the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, and in 1994 the University of Massachusetts at Amherst named its main library after Du Bois.

Du Bois was one of the towering intellectual figures of the 20th century. Fifty years after his death, his ideas -- and his activism for economic and social justice -- remain an important influence on American culture.

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