

W. E. B. Du Bois and the Articulation of the Black American Double Consciousness: Social Fact or Fiction?

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Emile Durkheim wrote extensively on the implications of sociology in our society in *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. More specifically, he coined the term “social facts,” which consist of “manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (Durkheim 51). This phenomenon should not be confused with organic phenomena (physical responses to outside stimuli, such as recoiling from injury) because those are internal to the individual, nor with psychological phenomena (such as emotions) for the same reason. Social facts are interactional obligations that coerce mannerisms from individuals due to moral standards that are upheld by groups of people to keep a cohesive community. These obligations may include roles such as father, citizen, teacher, and believer. Social facts have been one of the main perpetrators of slavery in American history (1619-1865). As explained in *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois, social facts continue *even today* to wreak havoc on the development of African Americans in a largely white society, and the significance of this problematic development cannot be downplayed. Upon reading Du Bois’s work, “interpretation was made all the more inviting by the lack of a precise terminology in *The Souls of Black Folk*, where literary flourishes tend to overwhelm clear, analytical distinctions” (Allen 56). With the specific elucidation of social facts given to us by Emile Durkheim, we can begin to understand the momentous development of African Americans in the post-13th Amendment era leading up to the present moment. In this paper, I argue that we can use Durkheim’s conceptualization of social facts to understand the African American experience of double-consciousness as described by Du Bois. The social facts in relation to race at the time were: (1) Du Bois’s concept of African American double-consciousness and duality in the form of the problem of the “color line”; (2) the internalization of anti-black sentiment by black Americans; (3) Du

Bois’s concept of the Veil and the separation of the white race from the black; and (4) Du Bois’s concept of “the Negro,” which was seen as a “problem” by the white society surrounding him. I will argue that Durkheim helps us understand not only the concepts that Du Bois introduces but also the nature of these concepts and how they affect both races, regardless of skin color. A comprehensive examination requires a deeper look at the four main social facts as well as an analysis of their effect on both races.

Double Consciousness: The Duality of the African American

Foremost, as W. E. B. Du Bois so aptly put it, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men...” (10). This first social fact with respect to race is crucial, as Du Bois says in *The Souls*, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (3). When one person looks at himself as if mirrored in the eyes of another individual, there arise problems of a social and psychological nature; this creates a sort of war in the soul, where two equal but opposite sides of a person are battling each other, and only sheer strength keeps the soul from ripping itself apart at the very seams of sociological existence. Du Bois terms this “double-consciousness.” Arnold Rampersad, in his *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, reveals his theory on the origin of this idea:

The black possesses ‘no true self-consciousness’ but a ‘double consciousness,’ seeing himself only as perceived by whites through the veil. For this insight Du Bois drew from the psychology of his time. The term ‘soul’ was used synonymously with consciousness both by idealistic psychologists and by the religiously orthodox

James McCosh, whose philosophy Du Bois has studied at Fisk. His favorite professor, William James, posited in 1890 that the structure of the brain allowed 'one system [to] give rise to one consciousness, and those of another system to another *simultaneously* existing consciousness.' The psychologist Oswald Kulpe wrote in 1893 of 'the phenomenon of double consciousness or the divided self... characterized by the existence of a more or less complete separation of two aggregates of conscious process... oftentimes of entirely opposite character. (74)

The psychological component of this concept is important mainly as an illustration of the permanence of this social fact, showing that this has concrete repercussions for the human brain, a lasting impact on the psychological schematic of the people. Du Bois later explicates the problem that lies behind the double consciousness, pointing out that duality ineluctably leads to not only possessing two sides, but also two ideals, which "tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism" (148-149). Du Bois remembers from his childhood, observing other black boys as "their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" (2). He feels pity for these boys, whose strivings were not nearly as optimistic as his were. The abhorrent social fact of this duality, which is somehow unofficially required for the African American, "demands that blacks veil or mask their cultural selves whenever they cross or enter into the larger public discourse, engaging in a shared ethnic or cultural schizophrenia" (Gates 15). Du Bois also uses the double consciousness concept to point out that there is a contradiction between America's constitutional ideals and the reality of a "society that is fundamentally structured by racism" (Owen 112). Examples include "the original justifications for chattel slavery, to the so-called Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention of 1789, Jim Crow laws, federally endorsed housing segregation, and the reversals of affirmative action policies in the past three decades" (Owen 112). This use of the concept throws light on the disparity between the ideals

and reality of our social order. Du Bois notes that African Americans are simultaneously welcomed into society, as reflected in Constitutional law, and alienated insofar as white supremacy does not let whites completely include African Americans in their society in both law and practice. Even though the legal system officially permits the inclusion of African Americans, they are still marginalized and feel alienated as a result of white supremacy, as "the tension between being black and being 'American' is always present and deeply affects the self-consciousness of black Americans" (Owen 112). Other scholars argue that instead of the black American self-consciousness being defined by the white American self-consciousness, the black American lacks a genuine self-consciousness. One such scholar is Ernest Allen Jr., who in his essay, "Ever Feeling One's Twoness: 'Double Ideals' and 'Double Consciousness' in *The Souls of Black Folk*," argues that:

What Du Bois strictly meant by the phrase was the *absence* of true self-consciousness on the part of black Americans, the inability to recognize one's black self other than through the mediated veil of the unacknowledging white gaze. In this instance, Du Bois's frame of reference can be traced ultimately to Hegel's phenomenology, where true self-consciousness—supposedly lacking in the Negro—was dependent upon the mutual recognition of human beings by one another. (52)

Allen mainly argues that genuine self-consciousness can arise only from mutual recognition, and since black Americans are not on equal terms with whites, there is no mutual recognition and, consequently, no possibility of black true self-consciousness as well as no possibility of a separate and independent identity. He bases his argument on Hegel's philosophy of reciprocal consciousness, or the idea that one consciousness defines the other and vice versa. These two consciousnesses are at sociological war with each other, and yet one consciousness's metaphorical death will not solve the problem, as the "death" of the black consciousness does no good to white or black Americans, since "both master [dominant consciousness] and slave [submissive consciousness]

come to realize that each is dependent (though in different ways) upon the other” (Owen 114-115). In juxtaposition, if one consciousness accepts defeat, the other will reign. This elucidation is exactly what Du Bois had meant to say, and Allen’s analysis fully aligns with Du Bois’s own message of the impossibility of a black true self-consciousness. As Du Bois describes this concept, Durkheim points out that social facts are coercive in nature, and avoidance of them is taken at one’s own risk of societal punishment.

The Historic Coercion of Social Facts and Anti-Black Sentiment

It is, therefore, of utmost importance to point out that social facts are in and of themselves not voluntary “...for it is not I who have prescribed these duties, I have received them through education” (Durkheim 50). Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that slavery was prevalent only because individual people chose to own slaves, and it just happened to be a large number of people who *individually* decided to do so, since “no social fact can exist except where there is a well-defined social organisation” (Durkheim 52). Durkheim goes on to say that social facts do not have the individual as their substratum and therefore are external and collective; furthermore, social facts do not exclude anyone of any race, religion, or gender from their coercive power. It is also important to note that even religious leaders—people whom we hold to the highest moral example—helped perpetuate the social fact of African American duality at the time. Du Bois demonstrates this idea in relaying the story of Alexander Crummell, who in seeking to become a priest, received the response that “it is all very natural—it is even commendable; but the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church cannot admit a Negro...sometime, we trust—sincerely trust—all such distinctions will fade away; but now the world is as it is” (162). This inopportune event further illustrates the impotence one felt at the absolute hegemony of the social fact of African American duality, where nobody was excluded from the coercion of social fact, not even a priest.

The duality is also displayed by Du Bois in the context of African American history. Du Bois says that the history of the African American is the longing of the two selves to finally unite in a way so as not to lose either of the selves (3). The black American does

not wish to Africanize America or Americanize the African part of his soul. He simply wishes for it to be possible for a man to at once be both a “Negro” and an American without outright social helotry, without being deprived of equal opportunities and without suffering for the act of demanding the rights of a free man. The twoness of being both black and American is only problematic when taken in relation to white supremacy, and getting rid of white supremacy does not dismantle the categories “black” and “American” or their cultural connotation; however, “what becomes possible is a sociocultural pluralism that does not embody the norms of whiteness as dominant” (Owen 117). Du Bois adds that historically the labors and achievements of single black men have come and disappeared before they were ever appreciated fully, and even here we come face-to-face with duality. A black artisan will struggle against the white-appointed lower wage jobs, but in the end will have no choice but to work for very low wages to support his family (Du Bois 4). The artisan is conflicted between wanting to produce something that reflects his unique personality and life experience, but also being forced to produce something that is also marketable to the primarily white society in which he lives (“Understanding W. E. B. Du Bois”).

Furthermore, Du Bois also talks extensively about often being two steps behind the white man in terms of the knowledge needed for the thriving of his race. H. L. Mencken wrote capaciously about his views on this subject, alluding to the fact that even if the white race and the black race were to (from this point on) have the same education and to inhabit the same environment, the black race would always be somewhat behind in the sense of knowledge and civilization:

I admit freely enough that, by careful breeding, supervision of environment and education, extending over many generations, it might be possible to make an appreciable improvement in the stock of the American negro, for example, but I must maintain that this enterprise would be a ridiculous waste of energy, for there is a high-caste white stock ready at hand, and it is inconceivable that the negro stock, however carefully it might be nurtured, could ever even

remotely approach it. The educated negro of today is a failure, not because he meets insuperable difficulties in life, but because he is a negro. He is, in brief, a low-caste man, to the manner born, and he will remain inert and inefficient until fifty generations of him have lived in civilization. And even then, the superior white race will be fifty generations ahead of him. (Mencken 116)

Although Mencken's word choice hints at derogation, and Du Bois's voice is that of regret, they nonetheless relate a similar message. Moreover, this is not restricted to the whites' view of black Americans, as there is another social fact in effect here: the internalization of anti-black sentiment from the outside world. There have been numerous studies conducted by the American Psychological Association showing that African Americans tend to fall victim to a concept known as "Stereotype Threat." In the context of their study, this concept is described by APA as occurring when "negative stereotypes raise inhibiting doubts and high-pressure anxieties in a test-taker's mind" (2006). This can be projected to the overall relations between African Americans and education, showing at least one of the major reasons why we don't see as many African American achievers as Caucasian achievers.¹ As APA notes, "At the very least, the findings undercut the tendency to lay the blame on unsupported genetic and cultural factors, such as whether African Americans 'value' education or girls can't do math." As Owen describes it, "how racial others see them—plays a significant role in the formation of black self-understanding. How the Other sees me shapes in central ways how I see myself" (116). This internalization of anti-black sentiment is monumentally detrimental to the already complicated problem of double consciousness.

The Use of a Veil

The problem of double consciousness is also explained in the aforementioned metaphorical

¹ SAT Scores (1986-2014), National Center for Education Statistics. This, of course, assumes that SAT scores are indicative of a person's abilities and later success; other studies have shown that there is indeed a correlation between SAT scores and average salary in later adult life, salary being the determination of success, specifically for this argument.

concept of the Veil. The Veil is used by Du Bois mainly for the establishment of the white audience as described by David S. Owen in his essay, "Whiteness in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*." He explains that by labeling the white race as the "other," Du Bois reverses the typical perspective on matters of race:

This contrasts starkly with previous articulations of the black experience for white consumption in which authors such as Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington adopted what is called 'assimilationist' strategy in the sense that they sought to convince white readers that blacks had all of the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experiences that whites do, and hence ought to be included in the (white) social world as full persons. Thus, in the dominant cultural discourse of the time (and of today), the Other would represent blacks and the self-same would represent whites, with the consequence that the perspective, interests, needs, and values of whites are normed. Du Bois, however, reverses this usual structure in order to create in his readers (and most especially in his white readers) a kind of cognitive dissonance, this generating the necessary discursive space for the credible expression of the black experience. (110)

The reader should take note of Owen's phrase, "a kind of cognitive dissonance." This is especially important in understanding the separation between the two races. In order to create even the possibility that white society would take his message seriously, he had to establish a distinction between the two, knowing fully that this would not sit well with a lot of individuals in his white audience, to whom he replies that even if they do not agree with him "at the same time some revelation of how the world looks to me cannot easily escape him [i.e. the reader]" (Owen 109). Another large part of the significance of the Veil is its instrumental feat in describing the barrier between black and white experience. The importance is described in the "thought of the older South—the sincere and passionate belief that somewhere between men and cattle, God created a *tertium quid*,² and called it a Negro—clownish, simple creature,

² *Latin*: a third thing that is indefinite and undefined but is related to two definite or known things.

at times even lovable within its limitations, but straightly foreordained to walk within the Veil” (Du Bois 67). The Veil is a metaphorical separation of the higher class (white) from the lower class (black), from which the slave was forced to look at himself through the eyes of another (the recurrent concept of double-consciousness). Du Bois shows us the concept of the Veil through numerous examples in the text. In “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois describes the time he dined at the commissioner’s house of the school he taught at in Tennessee. He says, “but even then, fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I—alone” (47). Even though he had been treated with respect in receiving an invitation to dine at the commissioner’s house, the respect was not meaningful, since there was no substance to it. As Owen describes this incident, “the respect he receives because of his status as a teacher is a hollow form of respect, a respect in form only” (119). The hollowness of the respect has to do with the constraints placed on the situation, mainly the blind following of social facts in respect to race, the construal of a primarily white society’s norms. Du Bois also understands that the incident is an example of how the Veil hangs between black Americans and opportunity, despite all their efforts to better themselves. However, he does not feel contempt for all the people beyond the veil “for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine” (2). The connotational meaning of the Veil should also not escape notice, for when we think about what it means to wear a veil, a different sort of picture appears. A veil, as a material possession, is something used to cover up, whether a bride’s face in a marriage ceremony or, more generally, women in Muslim culture (Owen 120). The Veil is used to hide something from public view or perception and, when understood in this way, the Veil is used as a primary means of covering something up in public or removing a shameful part of our society from view. In this sense, the Veil is *whiteness*, the deciding factor of what should and should not be visible among mankind (dehumanizing those that fit under the Veil); in other words, “the interests, needs and values of blacks are enshrouded and removed from public notice, consideration and valuing” (Owen 120). The Veil is an effect of the long-standing suppression of the black race for means of psychological and material

gain. Lastly, Owen points out that Du Bois uses the concept of the Veil because he cannot outwardly call whiteness by its name or risk the chance of his white audience failing to see the whiteness for what it was, psycho-socially defending their position and status in their own society. However, in a way, the Veil is also detrimental to the *whites*, as the Veil functions to prevent whites from recognizing the norming of their own skin color. Put more blandly, since black Americans are covered up beyond the Veil, the only perspective available to whites is the perspective they have always had: of complete and unconditional white supremacy. As Owen says, “whiteness itself becomes invisible” (121).

“The Negro” as a “Problem”

An additional social fact presented by Du Bois was the view of the black American as a sort of “problem” by the outside world. He begins his monumental work in relaying that

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (1-2)

The anfractuous form of this excerpt points at the very marrow of Du Bois’s message. The “other world” Du Bois mentions is the white society that Du Bois dare not mention outright because of the possible dismissal of his views by the white audience (as discussed previously). By argutely spotlighting the questioner’s perspective as white, he marks the perspective of the *reader* as white, thereby drawing attention to the questioner and not Du Bois (Owen 109). In this manner, Du Bois yet again shows the degree to which white and black Americans have

completely different social orders within society. Du Bois deracinates the notion that the white voice is the dominant one, by defining the actual problem: not the fact that these people are black, but the fact that these people *lack a voice*, a cultural expression. Du Bois does not answer the question posited to him precisely because he rejects the whole presumption of the question: that black people are a problem, for answering the question would mean acceptance of it. By rejecting the assumption, he calls attention to the “normalized racial presuppositions that frame the question” (Owen 110). The problem then becomes not *being* a problem but *being seen* as a problem. Since the statement of the problem emphasizes the white perspective, the black perspective is marginalized and excluded, and “thus, the problem is not of *blacks*, but of *whites*” (Owen 110). Du Bois suggests that only when framed by the norming of whites, does the question make sense, and since we have explored the norming quite fully, the question itself no longer makes sense, “for it is not blacks that are the problem but the norming of whiteness itself that is” (Owen 110). Even so, Du Bois captivates us with the depiction of the forgotten black voice: the Sorrow Songs of African American heritage. The Sorrow Songs are placed strategically at the beginning of every chapter of the *Souls*, and it is only at the denouement that everything comes together as if a chiliarth of threads forming an elegant, adorned abaya. In Chapter XIV, the last chapter, he mourns the loss of the Sorrow Songs, allegorizing them to the disappearance of the black voice, and equates his emotions to homesickness.

Conclusion

Du Bois paints an endless masterpiece of historic movements and strivings attempted by black Americans to find the comforts of the soul they yearned for. Every time a new social current swept society in a new direction, there was a social uprising that made the black man come a little closer to the goal of freedom, for “few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries” (4). Nonetheless, social facts can change due to social currents or “facts which do not present themselves in this already crystallized form, but which also possess the same objectivity and ascendancy over the

individual” (Durkheim 52). As Du Bois describes, every social current was used to gain a small step in the right direction. The 13th Amendment was followed by unspeakable terrors of the KKK, making the country fraught with chaos. The remaining ignorance of white people battling their guilt, albeit unsuccessfully, made the newly freed people hesitant to join a society that had treated them appallingly for so long. The treatment that the white population had subjected the black population to was hard to acquiesce for both races, but especially for black Americans. This was followed by the 15th Amendment, which granted African Americans the right to vote, followed by the Revolution of 1876.³ It is important to note here that Du Bois saw the next movement that arose as somewhat different from the previous ones in that it strove towards “book-learning,” an attempt by a black man to learn the white man’s letters, so to speak. According to Du Bois, it was a toil like no other the race had experienced before, but it was obvious to those around the black man that here was a race greedy for knowledge but in no way precocious due to the history of emotional and intellectual struggle. Du Bois stresses that even though this long journey was dim and overbearing, it gave his people a time for contemplation, and even though the black man saw himself “darkly, as through a veil,” he also “saw in himself a faint revelation of his power, of his mission” (6). He further notes that the black man sees himself as the struggling race he embodies; a struggle not only of the intellect, but of the black family, branded by bastardry, of the social position of the black man within society, for “a people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems” (7). The four social facts are not particularly of help here either, deterring the black man’s progress in a white man’s society. Returning to the original premise of

³ What Du Bois alludes to here is the presidential election of 1876, which controversially resulted in the underdog Rutherford B. Hayes defeating the more popular Samuel F. Tilden, thanks to a congressional compromise referred to as the Compromise of 1877. As part of this compromise, the North would remove federal troops from the South, and Reconstruction would officially end. This meant that the South could go back to discriminating against black Americans (now freedmen and no longer under slavery).

this work, it needs to be stated plainly that the double consciousness that the black American experiences is not fiction, but fact.

Optimistically, Du Bois provides a solution as to how the situation can change: “it is not enough for the Negroes to declare that color-prejudice is the sole cause of their social condition, nor for the white South to reply that their social condition is the main cause of prejudice. They both act as reciprocal cause and effect, and a change in neither alone will bring the desired effect. Both must change, or neither can improve to any great extent” (Du Bois 137-138). In effect, what he says is that it’s not enough to have social currents sway society one way or another, and it is also not enough for one side to change because this will not make a difference. The social facts have to change. It needs to become a priority to have “the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that someday on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (8-9).

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