The Black Atlantic stands in a peculiar relation to certain currents of recent postcolonial thinking. The history of slavery as a founding matrix for modern capitalism, imperialism, and racism has certainly been a crucial reference point for the postcolonial critique of Euro-American modernity and its forms of knowledge. Similarly, this critique has also been deeply informed by the insights of towering Black Atlantic intellectuals, many of whom have become canonized within postcolonial theory. Yet the actual content of much Black Atlantic history and criticism—irreducibly creole, translocal, intersectional—does not easily align with the territorialist and culturalist assumptions that continue to underlie broad currents of postcolonial scholarship. Insofar as the latter seeks to demonstrate the existence of singular lifeworlds or epistemologies that are incommensurable with a putatively Western modernity, it has reproduced the very civilizational thinking that postcolonial theory itself initially emerged to contest, and which broad currents of Black Atlantic history, experience, art, and critical reflection have consistently called into question (whether explicitly or implicitly).

This uncomfortable fit between postcolonial critique and Black Atlantic criticism may be recognized in the figure of W. E. B. Du Bois. In many ways, of course, Du Bois is an exemplary postcolonial thinker. He spent his life exploring the deep structural relations between Atlantic slavery and capitalist modernity, the color line and liberal democracy, colonial imperialism and global instability. No one has thought more deeply about the actual and possible meanings of freedom and democracy in social worlds structured by racism, about racialization and subject formation, and, to use Nahum Chandler’s felicitous
phrase, about “the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought.” Anticipating one
strong impetus of postcolonial scholarship, Du Bois also attended directly to the distinc-
tive lived experiences, forms of life, cultural expressions, and history-making practices of
black diasporic and African peoples. But despite such evident affinities, Du Bois’s writ-
ings also unsettle many of the binary oppositions on which postcolonial theory continues
to depend: universalism versus particularism, integration versus separation, liberalism
versus radicalism, Marxism versus anti-imperialism, the West versus the non-West. Moreover, Du Bois regularly employed concepts and affirmed values that postcolonial criticism has often regarded as irredeemably bourgeois, liberal, or Western, such as truth, beauty, love, justice, and humanity.

In this essay, I would like to attend to the current of radical humanism that informed
Du Bois’s critique of historical conditions, his conception of the good life, and his vision
of a more human (because self-managed, shared, and just) world for all peoples. This hu-
anist investment, I will argue, was integral to the democratic, socialist, and internationalist
synthesis that he developed during the period surrounding his 1934 resignation from
the NAACP, and on which his reputation as a signal black radical thinker is rightly based.
I will suggest that Du Bois’s challenging thought illuminates some of the limitations of
current postcolonial scholarship, whose frameworks cannot easily grasp the radical charge
of his humanism or the humanist substrate of his radicalism. Conversely, I will suggest
that Du Bois’s radical humanism offers a valuable resource that may usefully transcend
some of the lacunae and impasses of current postcolonial thinking and thereby help us
think politically about the (global) historical present. The legacy of Du Bois reminds us
that the Black Atlantic critical tradition may be a crucial component of any attempt to
engage “the postcolonial contemporary.”

**Du Bois’s Revelation**

On June 8, 1938, Du Bois delivered the commencement speech at Fisk University, his alma
mater, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his own graduation. Scholars have paid
little attention to this seemingly anomalous discourse, titled “The Revelation of Saint Or-
gne the Damned.” David Levering Lewis, Du Bois’s biographer, called it “a lengthy, rhetorically ornate, and metaphorically exuberant sermon” that was “an unforgettable example of the *sui generis:*’ Lewis refers to this supposedly unclassifiable speech as an extension of
the “autobiographical indulgence” that had accompanied his recent seventieth birthday
celebration at Atlanta University where he was then a sociology professor. Lewis sum-
marizes it in three sentences as being primarily about the failures of Negro education.

But Fisk was clearly an important venue for Du Bois. It was the scene of his undergradu-
ate education in the humanities. There he was immersed for the first time in a black major-
ity social milieu and, as a summer school teacher, he first encountered black Southern
poverty and culture. In June 1888 he had delivered the Fisk graduation speech on “the
fearful power” of Otto von Bismarck as nation builder. He was invited back ten years
later, on June 15, 1898, to deliver a commencement address in which he spoke of the re-
Anticipating one directly to the distinct-making practices ofies, Du Bois’s wri-er trial theory continues separation, liberalism vs the non-West. that postcolonial cri-ster, such as truth,anism that informed t of life, and his vision all peoples. This hu-ist, and internation-34 resignation from nker is rightly based. of the limitations of up the radical charge ersely, I will suggest y usefully transcend and thereby help us Du Bois reminds us. of any attempt to

stricted career opportunities and special difficulties facing “college-bred Negroes” in America. He exhorted them, when challenged by the toils and sorrows of the working life in a racist society, to protect the high-cultural liberal arts ethos that they discovered during their university studies. He expressed his wish that their acts be guided by a commitment to work, sacrifice, and service beyond mere material improvement. This pursuit of meaningful work according to a higher vision of life, he explained, would simultaneously “serve humanity” and contribute directly to the “striving” of the Negro people. By this time, Du Bois had a PhD in history from Harvard, had studied sociology at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, and had published The Suppression of the African Slave Trade, The Philadelphia Negro, and several of his most important essays, some of which would be integrated into The Souls of Black Folk. When, forty years later, Du Bois again addressed a cohort of Fisk graduates, both he and the world had changed in significant ways.

He composed his 1938 address after having spent the previous eight years engaging with Marx’s writings, developing a new program for black self-segregation and economic self-management in response to the Great Depression, and distancing himself the NAACP’s long-term legal strategy to challenge racial segregation and obtain full citizenship for black Americans. He had also recently returned from an extended trip through Europe (including five months in Nazi Germany), the Soviet Union, China, Japan, and Hawaii. “The Revelation of Saint Orgne the Damned” therefore warrants our attention as an important and innovative expression of the particular form of black Marxism that Du Bois developed during the 1930s. It should be read as exemplary of the radically humanist vision of socialism and democracy, and the radically democratic and socialist vision of humanism, that Du Bois spent his life developing.

Offered as a literary fable, Du Bois purports to relay “The Revelation,” as he himself heard it, of this fictional Saint Orgne (an anagram of “Negro”) regarding family, church, school, work, art, race, economics, and politics. The speech’s aim, as he informed Fisk President, Thomas E. Jones, was to indicate “the path which young American Negroes today must follow if they are going to attain a secure place in modern culture.” On one level, the literary presentation assumes a tongue-in-cheek tone that works to undo the sober pretentions usually associated with commencement speakers, elder statesmen, stuffy professors, and philosophers—the parodic trace of Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” is unmistakable. It seems also to be addressed widely to parents, educators, and pastors, to all manner of sermonizers and clerics, secular or religious, who pretend to propagate ethical maxims and orthodox dogma. At the same time, Du Bois’s “Revelation” is a serious critique of black families, schools, churches, and political leaders for failing to confront directly the real ethical and political dilemmas created by what Cedric Robinson would later call “rational capitalism.” His “Revelation” seems also to model without irony what it means to reflect truthfully on the predicament of black youth in American society. Moreover, like Nietzsche, Du Bois may be read as offering a secular vision of the good life for modern humans; this speech is a resounding “Yes!” to life itself.

“The Revelation” is structured as an account of Saint Orgne’s long and arduous journey toward enlightenment regarding the situation of the Negro in America. It unfolds as a fictional biography of trial and tribulation punctuated by saintly sermons, or “revelations”
on various topics whose insights emerged through a series of difficult experiences of oppression and disillusionment. This form allows Du Bois to braid elements of his own life trajectory with the collective history of blacks in America as each moved through various ways of understanding and responding to their racial predicament. He thus implies that “revelation” is less a matter of divinely revealed truth than the ongoing discovery of social truths (about race, poverty, sociality, and democracy) through everyday practices and lived experiences. It is a story about coming to terms with the truth of what blacks were up against in America.

His address begins with the black saint asking himself whether “the dark damnation of color” is real. After “looking full at life as it is and not as it might be or haply as he would have it,” he responds, yes, as an American Negro, “in truth thou art damned, and may not escape by vain imagining nor fruitless repining.” His prophecy quickly reveals that this is a double damnation in which racial exclusion and enforced poverty sustain one another. He relays that without money it is impossible to support a family, improve education, or reform churches. “How,” he asks, “shall we have time for real knowledge; and freedom of art; and effort toward world-wide democracy, until we have the opportunity to work decently and the resources to spend, which shall enable us to be civilized human beings?”

Saint Orgne reveals how this double damnation is compounded by a corrupt and complicit black elite. He recounts, for example, how a group of poor black cotton farmers owned a common piece of land on which they worked collectively and whose fruits they divided evenly. But after seven years of toil they discovered that “the preacher” had mortgaged their land “behind the backs of the trusting flock and had run away with the money.”

But Du Bois is clear: Corrupt practices by the black elite were conditioned by the systemic problem of industrial capitalism. Saint Orgne explains that there exists sufficient wealth and economic capacity to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate the world. “If sharing of wealth were based not on owning but only on effort, and if all who are able did their share of the world’s work . . . and limited their consumption to reasonable wants, we could abolish poverty.” Yet, he continues, in the United States workers are left “as poor as possible in order further to increase the wealth of a few.” Worse, “we . . . not only . . . produce primarily for the profit of owners and not for use of the mass of people, but we have grown to think that this is the only way in which we can produce.” On the one hand, he recounts, “We organize industry for private wealth and not for public weal and we argue . . . that no human planning can change the essentials of this process.” On the other, “The process has failed so many times . . . that we are bound to change or starve in the midst of plenty.” The only sane alternative, Saint Orgne preaches, is to “produce for the satisfaction of human needs and distribute according to human want.” He exhorts his listeners “to work not simply for individual profit but for group weal; not simply for one group but for all groups,” and to enjoy “the freedom to dream and plan.” It will thereby be possible “to think of the time when poverty approaches abolition.”

Yet the Saint also decries the fact that black laborers cannot simply participate in this general struggle for economic justice and social transformation because they are “cut off from the main effort by the lesions of race; by the segregation of color; by the domination
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of caste." As a result, "black folk of America are faced with the most difficult problem of realizing and knowing the part which we have got to play in this economic revolution."
Saint Orgne explains that the white labor movement in America and Europe excluded and deceived black workers. Its object "was not the uplift of all labor; it was to join capital in sharing the loot from exploited color labor. So we too, only half emancipated, hurled ourselves forward, too willing, if it had been possible, to climb up to a bourgeois heaven on the prone bodies of our fellows." On one level, the challenge was how to align in a common struggle with racist white workers who did not recognize both groups' common interests. On another level, the challenge was to specify what a multiracial working class should be fighting for. Du Bois indicates that the white labor movement and the striving black bourgeoisie deceived themselves. This collective deception then made it difficult for most American blacks to "conceive of [a] future world which is not dominated by present white nations and thoroughly shot through with their ideals, their method of government, their economic organization, their literature, and their art; or in other words, their throttling of democracy, their exploitation of labor, their industrial imperialism, and their color hate." Du Bois relays that this combination of forces—institutional racism, economic exploitation, social degradation, discrimination by the white labor movement, the failure of black leaders, and the need for black masses to support a global economic revolution—led Saint Orgne to try to create an autonomous community founded on the principles of black self-management. Accordingly, he

organized a church with a cooperative store in the Sunday school room; with physician, dentist, nurse and lawyer to help, serve, and defend the congregation; with library, nursery school and a regular succession of paid and trained lecturers and discussion; they had radio and moving pictures and out beyond the city a farm with house and lake. They had a credit union, group insurance and building and loan association. The members paid for this not by contributions but by ten dollars a month each of regular dues and those who would join this church must do more than profess to love God.

Underscoring the "irreparable harm slavery had done to the [black] family group," the saint also relates this program for community self-management and economic autonomy to the issue of gender inequality.

In "The Damnation of Women" (1920) Du Bois had argued that American racism had the paradoxical effect of making black women more economically independent with regard to black men than white women were with regard to white men. But he also indicates that the price of this relative independence was family disintegration. He concluded that black women's freedom was incompatible with what he called "married motherhood." In his 1938 address, he revisits this dilemma. On the one hand, the saint regards marriage within bourgeois society as a form of domination, which he calls "martyrdom," and motherhood as a kind of trap that would obstruct women from realizing their full social and human potential. On the other hand, he identifies the family as an invaluable locus for social training, cultural education, and subject formation. He insisted that black mothers did, and should, play a crucial role in cultivating habits related to comportment, ethics, and
values. How then could he criticize racial capitalism from the standpoint of the normative family while also being committed to women's emancipation? The Saint does so by calling on his audience to "create a new family group...a cultural group" that is not "subordinate" to the "merely biological" and "blood relationship of families." He thereby attempts to resolve this contradiction between gender equality and family life by separating kinship from biology and making parenting a public matter for which the cooperative community would take collective responsibility.

"The Revelation" suggests that the path to a radically different social order would be mediated by black cooperative associations. These would serve simultaneously to ensure the community's economic survival, enact a different set of social arrangements, and create a form of dis-alienated life to which self-managing blacks, now with the prospect of better realizing their human potential, could offer a whole-hearted "yes." This vision of black mutualism exceeded narrowly defined economic matters and had implications far beyond the black community. Saint Orgne explicitly links this plan for "economic revolution" to what he called "our salvation and...the salvation of the world." He thus "preached the word of life from Jeremiah, Shakespeare and Jesus, Confucius, Buddha, and John Brown." This remarkable constellation indicates the planetary scope of this attempt to relate radical reflections from diverse cultural traditions about what it means to live a human life in a just world. It pointed beyond the divisions between religious and secular revelation in order to link ethical insights, beautiful literature, insurgent politics, and exemplary practices. In order to more fully understand how this "word of life" indexed what I am calling a radical humanism we need first to understand the speech as a further iteration of the critical position and political program that Du Bois had been elaborating through the 1930s.

The Black Radical Predicament

Most accounts of Du Bois's life understandably trace an arc of increasing political radicalization from the moment he left Great Barrington to attend college at Fisk University in 1885 to his 1901 decision to join the Communist Party and then exile himself to Ghana shortly before his death two years later. His professional life is frequently divided into steps along this path. A first period (1894–1910) encompasses his early career as an academic sociologist and liberal idealist who employed rational scholarship to challenge the illogic of racial discrimination. A second period (1910–34) corresponded to his tenure as a social democratic public intellectual with the NAACP and the Crisis, marked by his participation in legal struggles against institutional segregation. During this time, his politics continually shifted leftward; he came to understand World War I as an inter-imperial struggle, and he confronted the refusal of Northern white liberals in government, public opinion, or labor unions to embrace full citizenship for black Americans. A third period, the focus of this essay, opened in 1934 after Du Bois resigned from the NAACP and the Crisis. It was marked by his increasingly militant anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, internationalist, and Pan-African commitments and interventions.
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The Saint does so by 'al group' that is not...ilies. He thereby family life by separa...which the cooperative social order would be simultaneously to o...rangingments, and create the prospect of better...This vision of black aplications far beyond economic revolution..." He thus "preached is, Buddha, and John...poe of this attempt to that it means to live a religious and secular urgent politics, and ex...of life" indexed what such as a further iter...had been elaborating

In Dusk of Dawn, Du Bois recounts how in the early 1930s he began "to pause and take stock" of the NAACP civil rights struggle to which he had devoted himself since 1910.36 He recalls his "basic theory had been that race prejudice was primarily a matter of ignorance on the part of the mass of men" and that "when the truth was properly presented, the monstrous wrong of race hate must melt... before it. All human action to me in those days was conscious and rational."37 Yet despite the NAACP's legal victories and advances in black education, leadership, and literature, he explained, "The barriers of race prejudice were certainly as strong in 1930 as in 1910 the world over, and in certain aspects... even stronger."38 He thus came to identify the deep psychic and material substrate within which American racism was rooted. On the one hand, "we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge."39 On the other, white "race prejudice was built and increasingly built on the basis of income which they enjoyed and their anti-Negro bias conscious or unconsciously formulated in order to protect their wealth and power."40 In response, Du Bois recalibrated his expectations about how long the struggle against race discrimination was likely to last and on what terrain it would have to be fought. Accordingly, he shifted strategy to focus more directly on "the economic rehabilitation and defense of the American Negro."41

Du Bois recalls that the Russian Revolution "first illuminated and made clear this change in my basic thought"42 by providing an example of a large nation deciding to confront poverty directly and orient state action to improve mass welfare by placing governing power in the hands of workers.43 He also recalls his 1926 visit to the Soviet Union as a revelation: "Mentally I came to know Karl Marx and Lenin,... Since that trip my mental outlook... will never be the same."44 But he also knew that in Jim Crow America, the task of creating a multiculural workers' democracy would confront a specific set of obstacles that orthodox Marxism did not foresee.

Du Bois had already been a member of the Socialist Party from 1910 to 1912. After quitting, he criticized American socialists for relegating black workers' struggles against the color line to a secondary concern. He warned them that in practice, socialism in America could not succeed without the support of black labor and that in principle, socialism could not move forward as a project if any social group were to be excluded from its organizations, victories, and future improvements.45 Following World War I, he continued to grapple with the actual and possible relationship between the black freedom struggle and the American labor movement. He stated clearly that most black Americans belonged to "an exploited class of cheap laborers" who shared with white workers an interest in fighting for more "democratic control" of capital in the service of a new "industrial democracy."46 Yet, he explained, "Practically we are not part of the white proletariat and are not recognized by that proletariat to any great extent. We are the victims of their physical oppression, social ostracism, economic exclusion and personal hatred."47 As a result, he observed, "the Negro radical" is caught "between this devil and deep sea": capital, on the one hand, and white working-class racism, on the other.48

Throughout the interwar period, Du Bois continued to criticize socialists for eliminating black workers from their calculations, the American Federation of Labor for accepting
unions that excluded black workers, and communists for recruiting black workers without addressing the deep racism of the mass of white workers into whose ranks they were thrown and with whom they were expected to collaborate. He also rebuked each of these groups for demonizing black workers on the grounds that they did not recognize their common interests with the white labor movement and therefore join the anticapitalist struggle. Black workers were also accused by leftist organizations of accepting various compromises with capitalism and petit bourgeois black leaders.93 Regarding such orthodoxy, Du Bois held to his 1921 insight: “Under these circumstances how silly it would be for us to try to apply the doctrine of class struggle without modification or thought.”94

Du Bois recognized that the Depression had made the situation of black workers especially precarious and the imperative for socialist transformation even more urgent. But it also sharpened the dilemma facing black radicals. In 1931 he was unequivocal:

Present organization of industry for private profit and control of government by concentrated wealth is doomed to disaster. It must change and fall if civilization survives. The foundation of its present world-wide power is the slavery and semi-slavery of the colored world including the American Negroes. Until the colored man, yellow, red, brown, and black, becomes free, articulate, intelligent and the receiver of decent income, white capital will use the profit derived from his degradation to keep white labor in chains. There is no doubt then, as to the future, or as to where the true interests of American Negroes lie.95

But as long as white workers resented black competition, American unions excluded black members, and working-class “mobs” “demand the right to kill ‘niggers’ whenever their passions . . . are inflamed by propaganda,” black militants could not simply accept the fiction of a preconstituted or unified working class.96 Du Bois believed both that black workers were positioned to act as a revolutionary vanguard and that white masses would never follow their revolutionary initiative:

Negroes know perfectly well that whenever they try to lead a revolution in America, the nation will unite as one fist to crush them alone. . . . Negroes perceive clearly that the real interests of the white worker are identical with the interests of the black worker, but until the white worker recognizes this, the black worker is compelled in sheer self-defense to refuse to be made the sacrificial goat.97

In the early 1930s Du Bois immersed himself in the writings of Marx in order to think through the contradictions of American capitalism, the limitations of actually existing socialism, communism, and trade unionism, and the predicament confronting black radicals. Although in 1926, Du Bois stated: “I stand in astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia that has come to me . . . if what I have seen with my eyes and heard with my ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik,”99 nonetheless, he never simply applied Marxist dogma to the (black) American context. He both used Marx to challenge the orthodox Left and used the (black) American historical situation to rethink orthodox Marxism.

In the spring of 1933 Du Bois taught a sociology seminar at Atlanta University on “Karl Marx and the Negro Problem.”100 In May he published an article in the Crisis that attempted
g black workers who, to reconsider Marx's nineteenth-century insights in relation to the changing character of twentieth-century capitalism, the peculiar conditions of the U.S. racial formation, the political conjuncture of the Great Depression, and the black freedom struggle. He begins by describing Marx as "a colossal genius of infinite sacrifice and monumental industry" and placing Capital alongside the Bible, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Darwin's *Origin of Species* as "books in the world which every searcher of truth must know." Yet Du Bois suggests that recent history, defined by the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression, made Marx's writings newly relevant. Capitalism's cycles of war and economic crisis were "forcing the world to contemplate the possibilities of fundamental change in our economic methods." More and more people began to believe that "whether violently or peacefully, revolution seems bound to come."58

Yet he also insisted that Marx's analysis needed to be rethought in relation to the changing character of capitalism itself. Here Du Bois emphasized the "world-wide organization" of the market, the acceleration of mass production on larger scales, and the emergence of a new "working-class aristocracy" of "technical engineers and managers" that occupied a position "between the older proletariat and the absentee owners of capital." He notes that banks and financiers assumed a more prominent role as intermediaries between employers and workers. Additionally, "common labor in America and white Europe, far from being motivated by any vision of the possibility of revolt against capitalism, has been blinded by the American vision of the possibility of layer after layer of the workers escaping into the wealthy class and becoming managers and employers of labor."60

One result of these transformations, Du Bois explains, was that competition among groups had fractured the working class, "leaving the Negro at the bottom chained to helplessness ... by the Color Bar."61 Du Bois contends that global capitalism had come to rely ever more on imperialism and racism. By creating "a world-wide new proletariat of colored workers ... furnishing by the lowest paid wages in modern history a mass of raw material for industry ... capitalists have consolidated their power ... and bribed the white workers by higher wages, visions of wealth and the opportunity to drive 'niggers.'"62 Moreover, he contends, "the bulk of American white labor is neither ignorant nor fanatical. It knows exactly what it is doing and it means to do it."63

Du Bois thus indicates how the color bar was a structural and functional feature of capitalist accumulation and social regulation. On the one hand, white working-class racism was fueled by the existence of this new labor aristocracy. On the other, racism under capitalism created a strong affinity between black workers and a new group of black petit bourgeois clergyman, teachers, farm owners, professionals, and small businessmen who did not exploit labor. It followed, for Du Bois, that "the revolt of any black proletariat could not, therefore, be logically directed against this class, nor could this class join either white capital, white engineers, or white workers to strengthen the color bar."64 In short, he believed that such conditions challenged orthodox Marxist conceptions of class as the primary axis of social differentiation and antagonism. He concluded that "there is not at present the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution based on a united class-conscious proletariat is anywhere on the American far horizon. Rather race antagonism and labor group rivalry are still undisturbed by world catastrophe."65
Du Bois's analysis thereby returned him to the predicament facing black radicals whose exclusion from the white labor movement was unfairly attributed to ignorance or conservatism. "In the hearts of black laborers alone ... lie those ideals of democracy in politics and industry which may in time make the workers of the world effective dictators of civilization." Yet under existing conditions "his only defense is such internal organization as will protect him from both parties [white capitalists and white workers], and ... preveni in the race group any large development of capitalist exploitation." It was this historical crisis and strategic impasse, along with his reconsideration of Marx in relation to twentieth-century racism and capitalism, that informed Du Bois's new program for black self-segregation. He recognized that the freedom struggle had to move beyond demanding legal rights and that it needed to ally with the white labor movement to create a democratic socialist society. The challenge was to know how to be an antiracist leftist and a black anticapitalist in Depression-era America. What kind of movement, tactics, and strategy might best allow black Americans to pursue these transformative aims? Such questions about the relationship between the black freedom struggle and the white labor movement, as well as between Marxist theory, socialist or communist politics, and racial emancipation were the site of intense debates among a wide range of black radicals in and beyond the United States during the 1930s.

*Cooperative Commonwealth*

Du Bois's proposed solution to the black radical predicament was a program for cooperative self-management. He observed that the Great Depression had struck black Americans with special force, intensifying their poverty and leaving them even more vulnerable to resurgent institutional racism. Yet he also suggested that the crisis may have created a historical opening that could upend bourgeois common sense (which he called "the American assumption"), radicalize American workers, and create opportunities for a multiracial movement that could radically transform social relations. This, in other words, could be a second chance to realize the revolutionary possibility that had been briefly opened by post-Civil War Reconstruction in the 1870s.

Under such conditions, Du Bois insisted, the black freedom struggle had to address poverty and economic inequality directly. He also argued that racial emancipation would require large-scale societal transformation. This meant that black radicals would have to align with the U.S. Left in a broader anticapitalist struggle despite the entrenched racism of white workers, trade unions, and socialist and communist parties. He insisted that any response to this predicament must start with a clear-sighted understanding of the actual historical situation facing black communities: the failure to abolish the color line through court cases, the entanglement of economic and racial domination, the fact of institutional and social segregation, the reality of white working-class racism, and the limitations of Marxist theory to grasp this situation. This meant that he refused to proceed from either the liberal fiction of civic sameness or the communist fantasy of class unity. But neither did he think that a circumscribed black nationalism could achieve the wholesale trans-
formation, the reconstruction of American democracy, that he believed was necessary. Du Bois looked for immanent possibilities within the existing situation. He believed that real change would require patience, endurance, and a long-term struggle on multiple fronts. Learning his lesson from the 1870s, he concluded that black communities would have to assume a leading role in this process. They could not look to the U.S. government, to white liberals, or to revolutionary leftists for resources or leadership.

He later recalled concluding that “the attack upon these hidden and partially concealed causes of race hate, must be led by Negroes in a program which was not merely negative in the sense of calling on white folk to desist from certain practices and give up certain beliefs: but in the sense that Negroes must proceed constructively in a new and comprehensive plan of their own.” Given the unconscious substrate of the color line, the catastrophic economic conditions precipitated by the global economic crisis, and the race prejudice of the American labor movement, Du Bois explained, “Deliberate, and purposeful segregation for economic defense” had become an immediate imperative. To this effect, he proposed “to use the power of the Negro as a consumer,” which would serve as “a new instrument of democratic control over industry.”

Black economic cooperatives had a long history in the United States. Du Bois had promoted them as early as 1908 when he wrote editorials about them in the Crisis and participated in a preliminary meeting to establish a Negro Co-Operative Guild. Now, in the early 1920s, Du Bois again called for the creation of self-managing associations that would largely withdraw from the existing economy in order to establish autonomous systems of cooperative production and distribution without labor exploitation. These would require “careful planning” in order to “eliminate unemployment, risk, and profit. . . . This would be a realization of democracy in industry led by consumers’ organizations and extending to planned production.” Further, Du Bois suggested that these cooperatives could “socialize most of [their] professional activities.” Banking, insurance, law, and medicine could “change from a private profit to a mutual basis.” Likewise, schools, colleges, publishers, and literature could be reorganized along cooperative lines. “Today we work for others at wages pressed down to the limit of subsistence. Tomorrow we may work for ourselves, exchanging services, producing an increasing proportion of the goods which we consume and being rewarded by a living wage and by work under civilized conditions.” In this way, he stated, “Negroes can develop in the United States an economic nation within a nation, able to work through inner cooperation, to found its own institutions, to educate its genius, and . . . to keep in helpful touch and cooperate with the mass of the nation.”

Most immediately, this was a realist response to the existing situation and meant to secure blacks’ immediate survival during the Depression. This proposal, of course, went against the NAACP’s long-term rejection of all policy that consented to any form of segregation. But in a 1933 Crisis article, Du Bois explained, “There is no other way; let us not be deceived. American Negroes will be beaten into submission and degradation if they merely wait unorganized to find some place voluntarily given them in the new reconstruction of the economic world.” And again in 1934: “The only effective defense that the segregated and despised group has against complete spiritual and physical disaster, is internal self-organization for self-respect and self-defense.”
Importantly, Du Bois distinguished between immediate strategies and ultimate aims, writing,

Doubtless, and in the long run, the greatest human development is going to take place under experiences of widest individual contact. Nevertheless, today such . . . contact is made difficult and almost impossible by petty prejudice . . . It is impossible, therefore, to wait for the millennium of free and normal intercourse before we unite . . . to accomplish his economic emancipation through voluntary determined cooperative effort.83

He underscored that “this plan did not . . . advocate segregation as the final solution of the race problem; exactly the contrary; but it did face the facts . . . with thoughtfully mapped effort.”84 As he said to Fisk University students in 1933, this new approach, which included a plan to promote what he called “autonomous Negro universities,” simply accepts the bald fact that we are segregated, apart, hammered into a separate unity by spiritual intolerance and legal sanction backed by mob law, and that this separation is growing in strength and fixation. . . . Recognizing this brute fact . . . What are we going to do about it? . . . How far and in what way can we consciously and scientifically guide our future so as to ensure our physical survival, our spiritual freedom, and our social growth? Either we do this or we die. There is no alternative.85

Here we can clearly see that Du Bois did not regard this program as a mere economic expedient, for he added the following: “Let us not bear futile wings in impotent frenzy, but carefully plan and guide our segregated life, organize in industry and politics to protect it and expand it and above all to give it unhampered spiritual expression in art and literature.”86 He thus underscored its far-reaching social, political, cultural, and spiritual implications. He explicitly linked the creation of “self-governed” communities through “economic solidarity” to “the building of a full humanity.”87 He wrote,

Rail if you will against the race segregation here involved and condoned, but take advantage of it by planning secure centers of Negro co-operative effort and particularly of economic power to make us spiritually free for initiative and creation in other and wider fields, and for eventually breaking down all segregation based on color.88

He also argued that this cooperative movement would be a crucial weapon in the ongoing struggle for full citizenship.89 Through “voluntary and increased segregation, by careful autonomy and planned economic organization,” he argued, black Americans could “build so strong and efficient a unit that 11,000,000 men can no longer be refused fellowship and equality in the United States.”90

Even more expansively, he suggested that these cooperatives could establish a new mode of democratic self-government and form the backbone of an inclusive and transformative national network.

The Negro group in the United States can establish, for a large proportion of its members, a co-operative commonwealth, finding its authority in the consensus of the group [and its intelligent choice of inner leadership]. It can see to it that not only no section of this inner group is opposed to the real interests of the nation, but that it works for and in
ies and ultimate aims, selfishness, and to take place with "contact is faceable, therefore, to accomplish the effort." As the final solution of a thoughtfully mapped approach, which included a separate unity, this separation is what are we going artificially guide and our social m as a mere economic issues in impotent frenzy, and politics to protect in art and literature. Spiritual implications. through "economic ed, but take it and particularly in other and in color." A weapon in the ongoing segregation, by careful Americans could "build refused fellowship and rd establish a new mode of a new and transformative portion of its mem-
is of the group and no action of this works for and in conjunction with the best interests of the nation. It need draw no line of exclusion so long as the outsiders join in the consensus.\textsuperscript{91}

Self-segregation would thus be the means through which black Americans could lead the effort to establish this multiracial "co-operative commonwealth" composed of self-managing collectives practicing consensus politics.\textsuperscript{92} Du Bois called this "a special chance for a new trial of democratic development without force among some of the worst victims of force... I can conceive of no more magnificent nor promising crusade in modern times. We have a chance to teach industrial and cultural democracy to a world that bitterly needs it."\textsuperscript{93}

The aim then was not simply to withdraw and survive, nor was this merely a tactic to obtain civic equality, nor only a dream for black Americans to flourish spiritually as fully recognized humans (though it certainly was that). It was a far-reaching strategy through which to abolish the color bar, transform economic relations, and reconstruct American democracy. The program was motivated by historic opportunity and moral responsibility to demonstrate to the world what democracy could be. It would do so by founding black social cooperatives that could then be emulated and instituted on national and international scales. These mutualist practices and autonomous institutions would serve as "the economic ladder by which the American Negro, achieving new social institutions, can move \textit{past} with the modern world into a new heaven and a new earth."\textsuperscript{94}

In sum, economic self-management would allow besieged blacks to survive the long-term struggle against economic depression and racial segregation and would better allow them to achieve their long-standing political demand of full citizenship within the republic. At the same time, it would help to fundamentally transform American economic, social, and political arrangements. It would produce alternative institutions and subjects, with new habits and values, around which a postcapitalist multiracial democracy could be organized. And these self-managing cooperative communities would serve as allies and examples for other peoples and nations. In this way black radicals could anticipate—by modeling and enacting, calling for and calling forth—the kind of human emancipation that Du Bois envisioned for all peoples. These social cooperatives would not only allow black radicals to move \textit{with} the modern world; they would allow them to move the world itself closer to a new heaven and a new earth.

Scholarly discussion of Du Bois's radical turn in the 1930s, and this plan specifically, seems to revolve around the axes of assimilation versus separation, nationalism versus Marxism, race versus class, or reformism versus revolution. But his initiative sought to transcend just such false oppositions. I would argue that the key terms for his program were self-management, cooperation, and democracy. It was neither about assimilating into nor separating from the existing national society—but about radically transforming it, and through it, the world. Du Bois's focus on economic self-organization distinguished his program from the NAACP's legal and electoral orientation. His mutualist critique of private property and profit distinguished it from both Booker T. Washington's vocational accommodation with capitalism and from Marcus Garvey's entrepreneurial nationalism. And his emphasis on democratic consensus distinguished it from the centralized and hierarchical tendencies within U.S. labor unions and the American Communist Party.
Radical Humanism

If the aim of economic self-segregation was a cooperative commonwealth, what would be the aim of this commonwealth? To begin to answer this question, I suggest we return to the 1938 "Revelation" where Saint Orgne "preached the word of life." We saw that he offers a series of unambiguous socialist propositions about abolishing poverty, limiting consumption, and sharing wealth. These he linked to an equitable and interdependent form of life based on nonexploitative ways of being together. It is important to note that the Saint's call for collective arrangements, his vision of something like a cooperative commonwealth, posits material welfare as a means, not an end in itself.

The Saint relays that

when men no longer fear starvation and unemployment . . . in such a world living begins; in such a world we will have freedom of thought and expression and just as much freedom of action as maintenance of the necessary economic basis of life permits; that is, given three or six hours of work . . . we ought to be sure of at least eighteen hours of recreation, joy, and creation with a minimum of compulsion for anybody.95

"Life is more than meat. . . . Living is not for earning, earning is for living. The man that spends his life earning a living, has never lived."96 Rather, he affirms,

Life is the fullest, most complete enjoyment of all the possibilities of human existence. . . . It is the free enjoyment of every normal appetite. It is giving rein to the creative impulse, in thought and imagination. Here roots the rise of the Joy of Living, of music, painting, drawing, sculpture and building; hence come literature with romance, poetry, and essay; hence rise Love, Friendship, emulation, and ambition.97

Against vulgar materialists, whether bourgeois or Marxist, who insisted on the imperative to produce and consume, he declares, the "realm of the physical need be only the smaller part of life and above it, planning, emotion and dream; in the exercising of creative power, in building, painting, and literature there is a chance for the free exercise of the human spirit."98 Indeed the Saint identifies "the rock foundations of Democracy" as "the freedom to create within the limits of natural law, the freedom to love without limit; the freedom to dream of the utter marriage of beauty and art."99

Just as Du Bois's vision of humanism explodes its bourgeois integuments, his vision of democracy exceeds its degraded liberal form, which was "confined to . . . electing certain persons to power . . . [and] minor matters of administration" and excluded ordinary people from "determining what goods shall be produced, what services shall be rendered, and how goods and services shall be shared by all."100 In contrast, Saint Orgne advocates "a broad conception of democracy" that that does not only allow "the complaints of all" to "be heard, or the hurts of the humblest heeled; it is for the vastly larger object of loosing the possibilities of mankind for the development of a higher and broader and more varied human culture."101 "Democracy . . . forms not merely a reservoir of complaint but of ability, hidden otherwise in poverty and ignorance. . . . Democracy means the opening of opportunity to the disinherit to contribute to civilization and the happiness of men."102 Economic
To identify Du Bois as a radical humanist is not to suggest that he was an abstract universalist, whose politics were based on liberal assumptions about the fundamental dignity and worth of all human beings. His theories were rooted in the social, economic, and political realities of black life in America. As he writes in "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), "The lives of black people are deeply entwined with the history of the nation, and it is impossible to understand one without understanding the other."

Du Bois believed that the true meaning of democracy was to promote the well-being of all people, not just a select few. He argued that the exercise of democratic rights and the protection of human dignity were essential for the advancement of society. "Democracy," he wrote, "is not the right to govern, but to live, the right to the highest development in one's own way."

The idea that black people were not included in the American experience was a fundamental injustice. "Negroes," he declared, "are not a people, but a problem."

Du Bois was a critic of the ways in which the American Dream failed to include black people. He was a voice for social justice and a champion of the cause of civil rights. His ideas continue to inspire activists and scholars today. The fight for equality and justice is far from over, and Du Bois's legacy reminds us of the importance of standing up for what is right.
perspective from which we might understand the saint’s invocation of “the democracy of race,” not just a place where individuals of all races are equally included but where all racial communities may develop their singular cultural capacities. This commitment to “universal democracy” did not imply black self-negation. On the contrary, it pointed beyond the false opposition between universality and particularity. Note that Saint Orgne concludes his “philosophy of life” by declaring:

Through cooperation, education and understanding the cultural race unit may be the pipe line through which human civilization may extend to wider and wider areas to the fertilization of mankind. It is to this use of our racial unity and loyalty that the United States impels us. We cannot escape it. Only through racial effort today can we achieve economic stability, cultural growth and human understanding. The way to democracy lies through race loyalty. ... Selah and Amen.

This was a situated universalism that sought to articulate black singularity with a “more abundant” life for all humans.

Political Legibility

Should we really read “The Revelation of Saint Orgne” as a sui generis text? Similar attempts to relate black autonomy to human emancipation are braided through most of Du Bois’s major texts. The appearance of “The Revelation” between two of Du Bois’s avowedly radical texts, Black Reconstruction (1935) and Dusk of Dawn (1940), certainly invites us to treat it as a further iteration of, rather than a deviation from, his Depression-era radicalism. I have tried to suggest that it both echoes and extends the radical humanist orientation that subtended his political reorientation during the 1930s. But the vision expressed in this speech and concurrent writings has been largely illegible to Du Bois’s allies and interlocutors, then and since.

The fact that Du Bois’s radicalism and his humanism were two sides of the same coin has not been the focus of sustained scholarly attention. The lack of critical attention to “The Revelation” seems to suggest that scholars have found it difficult to incorporate into their interpretations of his radicalization. From a liberal perspective, Arnold Rampersad provides an indispensably illuminating account of the peculiar mix of New England Puritanism, Southern Congregationalism, Harvard pragmatism, and European social reformism that informed Du Bois’s morally grounded, spiritually elevated, and politically engaged scholarship and criticism. He argues that by the interwar period, Du Bois consistently attempted to triangulate “socialism, black nationalism, and liberal idealism” as interdependent concepts, “which he attempted to unify in his version of the pragmatic method.” But Rampersad also insists on “their tendency toward separation into competing forces” in the (more explicitly Marxist) works following Darkwater (1920). In particular, he emphasizes the tensions between Du Bois’s commitments to black cultural specificity and Marxist theory, ultimately regarding the latter as an intrusive aberration that, in the mid-1930s, temporarily diverted him from his deeper and more abiding con-
cerns with black culture and civil rights. These are curious claims given the powerful way that Du Bois synthesizes antiracism, anticapitalism, anti-utilitarianism in his integrated vision of cooperative self-management.

From a Left perspective, Cedric Robinson finds it equally difficult to account for the kind of position that Du Bois develops in “The Revelation.” For he reads Du Bois as demonstrating that being a “Black radical thinker” and “a sympathetic critic of Marx” were “irreconcilable roles.” Instead of focusing on Du Bois’s original synthesis, Robinson tells a linear story about his intellectual evolution from bourgeois liberalism, through Western radicalism, to finally discover the black radical tradition. Robinson defines the latter as rooted in African metaphysics, embodied by a transhistorical will “to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality,” and expressed in an enduring African identity that was not fundamentally shaped by New World conditions. Robinson certainly recognizes the importance of Marxism to Du Bois’s thinking during the 1930s but treats his embrace of the black radical tradition in Black Reconstruction as a sudden illumination that allowed Du Bois finally to overcome his “Westernized eyes.” Robinson also identifies Du Bois’s Marxism in that text primarily with his account of the spontaneous revolt and self-emancipation of the enslaved black masses during the Civil War. But, as I suggest below, Black Reconstruction, like the rest of his writings during the thirties, were together strands of what Robinson would call black nationalism, Western radicalism, and petit bourgeois ideology.

Neither of these approaches can account for a discourse like “The Revelation of Saint Orgne” in which the celebration of the singularity of black life is inseparable from a heterodox Marxism that advocates cooperative socialism, popular democracy, and a radical humanist commitment to life as “more than meat.” Both approaches reify what were actually distinct facets of Du Bois’s integrated approach and then treat their supposedly surprising encounter in his work as a problem to be solved or an anomaly to be explained. Instead, we should attend to how Du Bois’s thinking called into question the very categorical assumptions and binary oppositions on which these interpretations are based.

The confounding character of Du Bois’s radically humanist vision of a black led cooperative commonwealth also attended its inception. In a letter to President Jones of Fisk, Du Bois explained that he regarded his program for black self-management as “a method of realizing a world wide humanity.” But among the New Deal establishment, neither black leaders nor white liberals supported Du Bois’s new orientation. His emphasis on economic restructuring, his invocation of “self-segregation,” and his frank endorsement of socialist objectives were anathema to the NAACP’s self-understanding and its longstanding civil rights policy. In May 1934, after several years of internal discord during which he wrote editorials criticizing the association, Du Bois finally resigned from the Crisis and the NAACP. Immediately thereafter he accepted a regular position in sociology at Atlanta University. Back in an academic setting, he immersed himself in Marx’s writings and completed Black Reconstruction in America, on which he had been working since 1931.

Given that Du Bois wrote this magnum opus precisely during the period that he reoriented his political strategy, it is useful to read Black Reconstruction in America and his
Depression-era writings about black self-management through economic cooperatives in relation to each other. In both cases he was preoccupied with the historical conditions of the possibility of a black-led alliance to reconstitute American society along multiracial, socialist, and democratic lines. In both, he demonstrates that there can be no racial emancipation under capitalist arrangements and no real socialism as long as a color bar exists. Black Reconstruction echoes Du Bois's contemporaneous reflections on a cooperative commonwealth by examining not only the fact of formal emancipation but the deeper meaning of human freedom; not only the self-liberation of the black masses but their historical opportunity to lead a multiracial movement to reconstitute American democracy; not only the opportunity to institute a noncapitalist labor regime but the purpose of a new socialist democracy; not only the prospect of realizing black citizenship but the possibility of furthering human unity.

I suggest we read Black Reconstruction as implicitly triangulating post–Civil War history, Marxist theory, and Du Bois's historical present. It is as much a genealogy of the Jim Crow legacy of (the missed opportunity of) Reconstruction as it is a history of emancipation and its immediate aftermath. In it, Du Bois's conjunctural analysis of what might have been possible during Reconstruction is shaped by his immediate engagement with the black radical predicament in the mid-1930s. His analysis of the latter, conversely, was informed precisely by what had been both possible and foreclosed in 1876. If the specter of Reconstruction animates Du Bois's interwar plan for cooperative self-segregation, this book might offer clues for reading interventions like "The Revelation of Saint Orgne" rather than stand as a point of (presumably more Marxist) contrast to them.

As a serious engagement with Marxism and socialism in relation to the peculiar conditions of (black) American history, Black Reconstruction was of a piece with the other work Du Bois began producing in the thirties. Pace Robinson, it neither simply marked a conversion to European Marxism nor a movement through a Marxist or socialist transitional phase in order to discover a non-Western black radical tradition. Pace Rampersad, Du Bois did not simply return, after a Marxist interlude, to a "liberal idealist" concern with racial uplift, black cultural experience, and citizenship rights. From this time on, he continually engaged and revised conventional understandings of Marxism, socialism, democracy, and humanism in relation to the fact of the color line in twentieth-century capitalism, which also meant in relation to black history, experience, culture, and consciousness. In doing so he certainly reframed capitalist domination in relation to the color line and anticapitalist struggle in relation to the lived experience of enslaved people and the historical agency of black masses. But like other Western Marxists, he also rejected economistic, utilitarian, and authoritarian conceptions of socialist society and human freedom. He envisioned forms of multiracial democratic socialism that would allow all humans to live more fully human lives.

So too in Black Reconstruction, Du Bois's radicalism and his humanism—his attention to black self-management and human solidarity, to cultural singularity and human potentiality, to democratic socialism and human flourishing—are inseparably entwined. He concludes his study by observing that the establishment of "a new dictatorship of property in the South through the color line" was "a triumph of men who in their effort to replace
economic cooperatives in the social and economic conditions of the existing multiracial, social and racial emancipation is a color bar exists. Black cooperative common is the deeper meaning of a but their historical a democracy; not only the pose of a new social but the possibility of post-Civil War his-genealogy of the Jim history of emancipatio-sis of what might have gement with the black verse, was informed the specter of Reconstruction, this book "Saint Organe" rather to the peculiar condi- condition with the other work simply marked a con-socialist transitional Rampersad, Du Bois "concern with racial me on, he continually lism, democracy, and ary capitalism, which consciousness. In doing rine and anticapita-the historical agency economistic, utilitarian-edom. He envisioned ans to live more fully

equality with caste and to build inordinate wealth on a foundation of abject poverty have succeeded in killing democracy, art, and religion." Even more forebodingly, "Whatever the South gained through its victory in the revolution of 1876 has been paid for at a price that literally staggered humanity." Note the multiple valences of this claim: Not only blacks seeking substantive emancipation, but all humans seeking substantive democracy were effectively disenfranchised (however asymmetrically). At stake in this defeat were not only the hope for material self-preservation and formal liberty, but for democracy, art, and religion, humans' higher selves, fuller potentialities, and spiritual lives—the good, the true, and the beautiful—that freedom and democracy are meant to serve; that which makes human lives meaningfully human were destroyed.

As in his other work at this time, this radical humanism does not imply the erasure of differences. In one of the last passages of Black Reconstruction, Du Bois writes, "Humanity is one and its vast variety is its glory and not its condemnation. If all men make the best of themselves, if all men have the chance to meet and know each other, the result is the love born of knowledge and not the hate based on ignorance." He is referring to a differential unity composed of culturally distinct groups who serve humanity by making the best of themselves and have the opportunity to make the best of themselves under conditions of real freedom, universal democracy, socialist property relations, and relations of translocal solidarity.

Du Bois's attempt to think human freedom in terms that point beyond the false opposition between universality and particularity, by confounding rather than confirming categorical cultural distinctions, is evident in Black Reconstruction's lyrical description of emancipation. Du Bois writes, "The mass of slaves... were in religious and hysterical fervor. This was the coming of the Lord. This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend... It was everything miraculous and perfect and promising." He emphasizes the creole matrix in relation to which these scenes of ecstatic redemption are intelligible: "To these black folk it was the Apocalypse. The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars." Here we can glimpse the thoroughly mixed and irredicably New World or Black Atlantic character of enslaved peoples' political subjectivity. The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture oddly transmuted into a strange new gospel of freedom subverted by and saturated with beauty, love, and truth. Religious. Humanist? Judeo-Christian? African? African American? American? Particular? Universal? Yes. No. All. Not exactly.

Consider also Du Bois's analysis of the peculiar "song" that these suddenly freed people addressed to God, nature, history, humanity, and, surely, themselves:

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throbb and best of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America—never from so pale and hard and thin a thing. . . . Not the Indies nor the hot South, the cold East or heavy West made that music. It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal waited, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by
man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, promised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought.  

Clearly Du Bois is referring not only to black music but also, through such cultural expressions, to a more profound ethical and political sensibility born of an unimaginable historical predicament that compromised a black Atlantic gift and message to the world. White Americans, he explained, neither heard nor understood this freedom song. "Yet it lived and grew; always it grew and swelled and lived, and it sits today at the right hand of God, as America's one real gift to beauty: as slavery's true redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung." We can see that human freedom for Du Bois was never only the absence of slavery, the enjoyment of full citizenship, or the ability to make a living. Formal liberty was a point of departure, not arrival, that allowed free blacks to express a promise and message about human flourishing, through a sublime expression of human beauty distilled from the "dross and dung" of the New World black experience, one composed of densely interwoven cultural and historical strands.

Politically, Du Bois was concerned with analyzing the emancipatory vision that was distilled from this historical situation, experience, and praxis. He did not attempt to truncate the elemental agents that may have composed it. He was less interested in the cultural origins of slaves' actions than in their historical conditions of possibility, their political potentiality, and the different worlds that they postulated and enacted. Moreover, for Du Bois, these practices and visions, from flight and emancipation through citizenship and Reconstruction, unfolded in, and could be fully realized only through multiracial alliance with other progressive forces. Their aim, he underscores, extended beyond black freedom to include the realization of real democracy and human solidarity in and beyond America.

Throughout the 1930s Du Bois reclaimed and reworked categories that had been instrumentalized and degraded by existing liberal democratic and bourgeois capitalist social orders: freedom, democracy, justice; friendship, brotherhood, culture; art, beauty, love. Throughout this period he produced densely layered and braided works that were inseparably Marxist, socialist, democratic, and humanist and were refracted through the violent experiences and sustaining forms of sociability, solidarity, cultural expression, and resistance developed by New World blacks. These writings crystallized, in a radical form, the kind of synthesis Du Bois had long pursued.

Already in Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois endorses "Work-Culture-Liberty" as an integrated vision of freedom in which material security, educational equality, and full citizenship each entail one another. Social, cultural, and political aims, he explains, cannot be dissociated but must be "welded into one." Neither material well-being, nor training, nor civil rights should be pursued as ends in themselves; they are indivisible aspects of an expansive "freedom to work and think... to love and aspire." The aim is to promote fully developed minds, spirits, and souls free to cultivate love, imagination, and creativity. At the outset Du Bois writes, "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."
In this landmark work, Du Bois suggests that black Americans in the 1890s continued to pursue this trinity of Work-Culture-Liberty. Moreover, they did so not only in order to secure their full citizenship, freedom, and humanity as emancipated Americans. By doing so through their community’s distinctive set of experiences, practices, and values they would emancipate America itself from spirit-crushing racism, materialism, rationalism, and utilitarianism:

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... All in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smarts.

The objective was not merely that blacks be included in America on a basis of economic, social, or political equality. It was to create the conditions for a different set of social arrangements through which the black community and the American nation as a whole might be elevated. In this vision, the aims of race unity, civilizational reciprocity, and human solidarity are inseparable. Du Bois was not arguing that black victims needed recognition by white oppressors or inclusion in the U.S. state, but that America (and the modern world) desperately needed the “pure human spirit” that initially informed its democratic experiment but which, in the present “dusty desert of dollars and smarts,” only survived in the black community’s social practices, spiritual values, and expressive culture.

Far from merely affirming liberal democracy or formal liberty, this was a critique of capitalist materialism and soulless utilitarianism from the standpoint of black sociality, economic solidarity, radical republicanism, human interconnection, and “higher culture.” Du Bois thus speaks of a democratic republic founded on justice, mercy, and truth—of free blacks “longing toward a truer world.” Similarly, in Darkwater Du Bois did not only demand that socialism and democracy include all racial groups, that socialism be founded on democratic principles, and that democracy address itself to the economic sphere in order to truly pursue justice for all people. He also insisted that the aim of socialist democracy was to create a more fully human form of life for all people, one in which one works to live rather than lives to work:

What a world this will be when human possibilities are freed, when we discover each other... All humanity must share in the future industrial democracy of the world. For this it must be trained in intelligence and in appreciation of the good and the beautiful... There must, for instance, persist in this future economics a certain minimum of machine-like work and prompt obedience and submission... Its routine need not demand twelve hours a day or even eight. With World for All and All at Work probably from three to six hours would suffice and leave abundant time for leisure, exercise, study, and avocations. But what shall we say of work where spiritual and social distinctions enter? Who shall be Artists and who shall be Servants in the world to come? Or shall we all be artists and all serve?

Here too Du Bois is not simply challenging liberal democracy from the standpoint of economic injustice, or existing socialism from the standpoint of racial exclusion. He is neither only demanding full civil rights for African Americans nor a better deal for black
workers. He envisions an altogether different logic of labor and value, sociality and political association, human being and human meaning. He elaborates a radically humanist vision that integrated democracy and socialism, beyond the color bar, for a "truer world" with "abundant time" for leisure, exercise, study, and avocations, founded on justice and mercy, the good and the beautiful, in which all would be artists and all would serve. This is the perspective from which we should read Darkwater's closing poem, "A Hymn to the Peoples," a secular prayer that calls on the "World-Spirit" to "make humanity divine." 131

I am not suggesting that Du Bois's thinking remained unchanged over the years. The shifting historical situation, his immersion in Marx's writings, his attention to economic inequality, and his reflections on mutualist cooperatives led him in the 1930s to reformulate in more radical terms the kind of synthesis he had continually assayed. But one-dimensional accounts about whether, when, or why Du Bois supposedly shifted from integrationism to separatism, liberalism to Marxism, or nationalism to internationalism seem to miss some of the richest, most creative, and challenging aspects of his political thinking. We need to recognize, on the one hand, that Du Bois's increasingly leftist writings between the wars fashioned a radicalism that was irreducibly democratic and humanist, and, on the other, that his earlier "liberal" writings already pointed toward a radical critique of capitalism and an economic understanding of substantive freedom.

Over the arc of his career, Du Bois continually analyzed, in order to abolish, the color line. Likewise, he examined the specific historical experiences, social practices, consciousness, values, and cultural expressions of African and African-descended peoples, especially in the New World. Following World War I, and especially after the Great Depression, he became more convinced than ever that racism could not be overcome under capitalist conditions and that socialism could not be realized as long as a color line existed. During this time, he also became increasingly convinced that the problem of racial capitalism was global (institutionalized through imperialism) and the struggle for black freedom and human emancipation had to be international. Furthermore, he believed that any socialism worthy of its name had to be grounded on popular consensus, mutualist cooperation, and democratic self-management. But to grasp this specific iteration of black radicalism, we need to dispense with narrow understandings of humanism as necessarily bourgeois, universalism as necessarily abstract, democracy as intrinsically liberal, socialism as promoting technocratic administration, Marxism as a synonym for vulgar materialism (or state socialism), and all of them as intrinsically white or European. Here we might usefully recall Sylvia Wynter's demand that bourgeois Man not be reduced to the human as such. 132

_Du Bois's (Postcolonial) Contemporaneity_

I suggest that Du Bois's intellectual and political approach, as I've tried to outline it, has become largely illegible today. Antihumanist critical theory has rightly deconstructed the philosophy of the subject, challenging assumptions about rational, autonomous individuals that have subtended liberal society and its forms of knowledge. Important scholarship has demonstrated how the very concept of a normative "humanity" enabled processes of
differentiation, practices of exclusion, and the perpetration of extreme forms of violence in and by the West. More recent theoretical discussions have rightly demanded that we rethink humanity’s extractive and destructive relationship to nature (including nonhuman animals). The need to challenge Western liberalism’s pernicious fictions about sovereign individuals and abstract humanity has never been more urgent. There is no question that bourgeois humanism must be unconditionally opposed.

But I wonder whether the forms this opposition have taken are sufficient, as the anthropologist David Scott has asked, to meet the demands of our political present. Many currents of recent critical theory restrict themselves to hunting for traces of liberalism, humanism, universalism, or Eurocentrism in our objects of study in order to denounce said objects. This morally gratifying but analytically limited unmasking operation seems implicitly to be guided by an absolutist belief in pure objects, ideal forms, and one-dimensional actors. This practice might allow academics to feel better in dark times, but it does not necessarily help readers grapple with the real predicaments that plague our political present. The latter, I suggest, require us, beyond negative critique, to risk naming the kinds of arrangements, the type of polities, and forms of life for which an antiracist and anti-imperial Left might want to struggle. Recent critics have usefully reminded us that predictions of hopeful or catastrophic futures often function to disable political dissent in the present. But do the real dangers of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism” mean, as she suggests, that we should abandon all future-oriented discussions of the good life as a neoliberal trap?

In contrast, the kind of radical humanism that Du Bois pursued recognizes that categories like freedom, democracy, and justice, not to mention truth, beauty, joy, and love, have authorized all manner of racial, imperial, and capitalist violence. But it treats this insight as the starting point rather than the aim of political reflection. Recognizing that future possibilities can arise only from existing arrangements, Du Bois practiced dialectical thinking and immanent critique. Rather than simply saying no to domination, he said yes to more integrated ways of being, knowing, making and relating, yes to democratic self-management, yes to social production and common property, yes to plural polities and planetary solidarities. His interwar project valued political imagination and utopian anticipation. It insisted that politics also entails the pursuit of a life worth struggling for, in which all people (or peoples) can live fully human lives and from which no humans may be excluded.

Du Bois’s program was radical insofar as the humanism it envisioned could not be realized under existing arrangements. In other words, it was radically opposed to bourgeois humanism, abstract universalism, and Western liberalism. But rather than just reverse or negate these, he elaborated a position that points beyond many of the spurious oppositions that continue to impoverish our political thinking: concrete particular versus abstract universal, singularity versus solidarity, autonomy versus interdependence, community versus humanity, anti-imperialism versus humanism. Yet many readers continue to treat the “humanist” aspects of Du Bois’s thought as signs of a residual liberalism, traces of an elite education, or an unreconstructed identification with the West. They are often automatically regarded as intrinsically incompatible with Marxism, anticolonialism, or Pan-Africanism.
I suggest that such interpretations are symptomatic of a tendency within current critical thinking to reduce the modern to the West, the West to white, and the white West to an all-encompassing liberalism. We are then left with a monocultural West and a one-dimensional modernity that can be criticized only from the standpoint of categorical cultural difference.\textsuperscript{136}

In contrast, Du Bois’s radical humanism begins with the proposition that, for better or worse, all peoples inhabit a common world, that there is no getting around entangled pasts and interdependent futures, that racism may be the defining feature of modern domination, but political conflict is not simply or only organized around self-identical cultural axes. His interventions regularly displaced conventional debates about assimilationism versus separatism, reformism versus revolution, and nationalism versus internationalism. They embraced black culture and criticized Western modernity without becoming preoccupied with whether a figure, concept, or practice was of Western origin. He was more concerned with political possibility than cultural purity.

In short, Du Bois’s critical thinking points beyond the kind of binary civilizational thinking that has reappeared in recent discussions of tradition within some currents of post-colonial thinking.\textsuperscript{137} These approaches have and continue to do indispensable critical work. But they leave little room for the kind of radical humanism that Du Bois developed. The latter might best be situated within a vital, elastic, and heterogeneous political tradition rather than a self-contained cultural tradition. Here we might recall Paul Gilroy’s still timely writings about a black Atlantic “tradition of expression” that integrated politics, ethics, and aesthetics, centered its efforts on questions about “the good life,” and developed a “redemptive critique” based on a “utopian move beyond ethnicity and the establishment of a new basis for community, mutuality, and reciprocity.”\textsuperscript{118}

The black radical tradition did not only will to its heirs precedents for heroic flight and mass refusal. It also left a legacy of deep reflection on the problem of freedom, the meaning of emancipation, and the project of humanizing human life. Du Bois’s radical humanism may be read as a reflection on and contribution to this tradition. From this perspective we might recall that when Walter Benjamin invoked present actors’ responsibility to “the tradition of the oppressed,” he was not simply suggesting that past struggles be commemorated or even imitated. Rather, he opened the possibility that their vital forces might still be accessed and awakened. Benjamin argued that “every historical moment” offers a “revolutionary chance” whereby the existing “political situation” provides “the right of entry” to a “distinct chamber of the past,” which “up to that point had been closed and locked.”\textsuperscript{119}

As I suggested, Du Bois himself engaged with political temporality in a similar fashion, spending his life confronting the grim legacy of an ever unrealized emancipation in the United States. He produced genealogical analyses linking the promise of freedom, the foreclosure of Reconstruction, the consolidation of segregation, and the new conditions, political challenges, and transformative possibilities that opened after World War I. He also constructed a historical constellation between the political situation of the 1870s and that of the 1930s. He sought to pursue the unrealized possibilities of Reconstruction while also recognizing that a new set of constraints would require a new political strategy. His program for black economic autonomy and cooperative self-management called for a set
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of anticipatory practices that would enact, model, and facilitate the future multiracial soci-
ologist democracy for which he called. As I’ve argued elsewhere about Aimé Césaire and
Léopold Senghor, Du Bois should be read as a nonprovincial global thinker whose politi-
sights retain a contemporaneous charge for us now.140 Rather than ask whether or
how he conforms to recent postcolonial thinking, we might better ask whether his politi-
cal interventions indicate pathways beyond current impasses. In a moment when the Left
seems to have ceded the struggle for ideas to reactionary revolutionaries, when fashioning
new forms of translocal solidarity, emancipatory internationalism, and nonliberal universal-
ism are imperative, and when Marxism needs to be rearticulated with postcolonial in-
sights, we should not now leave Du Bois’s radical humanist legacy in the closed chamber
of a lifeless past.

NOTES

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1. For the purposes of this essay I understand postcolonial scholarship to consist of work
written in the wake of the pioneering interventions by a roughly defined cohort of thinkers that
would include, among others, Talal Asad, Edward Said, Bernard S. Cohn, Stuart Hall, Ranajit
Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and
Paul Gilroy.

2. A partial list would include W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon,
Édouard Glissant, Stuart Hall, Sylvia Wynter, Paul Gilroy, but could stretch on.

3. This despite the fact that postcolonial theory partly established itself through theories of
hybridity and creolization that challenged identitarian thinking and that someone like Said
should be considered a radical humanist.

4. A recent example is Lowe, *Four Continents*.


6. For readings that evaluate Du Bois in terms of such assumed categories rather than using
Du Bois to displace them, see Appiah, *Lines of Descent*; Rabaka, *Problems of the Twenty-First
Century*.

7. This essay is part of a larger project on radical humanism and Black Atlantic criticism that
attempts to trace critical affinities among Anglophone and Francophone Black Atlantic radical
intellectuals in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa, regarding humanism,
socialism, and democracy.


9. Ibid. On February 23, 1938, he had given an extended address titled “A Pageant in Seven
Decades” [Credo] at Atlanta University commemorating his seventieth birthday.

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12. My interpretation aligns in significant respects with Manning Marable’s reading of Du
Bois as a cultural pluralist and radical democrat. Marable, *Black Radical Democrat*.


14. Although Du Bois did not use the term, he addressed precisely this phenomenon. Robinson,
*Black Marxism*. 
16. Ibid., 1054.
17. Ibid., 1057.
18. Ibid., 1055.
19. Ibid., 1056.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 1055.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 1061.
24. Ibid., 1056.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 1067.
27. Ibid., 1067–68.
28. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Du Bois, "Revelation."
33. Ibid., 1050.
34. Ibid., 1056.
35. Ibid., 1059.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 761.
39. Ibid., 771.
40. Ibid., 770.
41. Ibid., 750.
42. Ibid., 761.
43. Here "one of the largest nations of the world made up its mind frankly to face ... the problem of the poverty of the mass of men in an age when an abundance of goods and technical efficiency of work seemed able to provide a sufficiency for all men." He believed that "Russia was trying to accomplish this by eventually putting into the hands of those people who do the world's work the power to guide and rule the state for the best welfare of the masses." Ibid., 762.
44. Ibid., 764. For "in the face of contempt and chicanery and the armed force of the civilized world, this nation was determined to go forward and establish a government of men, such as the world had never seen."
47. Ibid., 555.
48. Ibid., 556.
49. See "The Negro and Radical Thought," originally published in *Crisis* (July 1921); "The American Federation of Labor and the Negro"; and "The Negro and Communism," originally published in *Crisis* (September 1931); all in Lewis, *A Reader*.
50. Du Bois, "The Class Struggle," 556. In response to black radical critics, such as Claude McKay, Du Bois explained, "Socialists, Communists, and trade unionists are advancing the illusory idea that we have only to embrace the working class program to have the working class embrace ours ... and act on the equality of mankind and the abolition of the color line." In fact, he explained, black radicals first had "to convince the working classes of the world that black men,
brown men, and yellow men are human beings and suffer the same discrimination that white workers suffer." Du Bois, "Radical Thought," 533.


52. Moreover, contra Communist accusations that black leaders constitute a "petit bourgeois minority dominating a helpless black proletariat, and surrendering to white profiteers," Du Bois insists that the majority of black civil rights leaders have been poor salary men who have not exploited black labor and "whose foresight and sacrifice . . . have saved the American freedman from annihilation and degradation." Ibid., 588–89.

53. Ibid., 591. This predicament, he explains, accounts for why black leftists like himself continued "fighting doggedly on the old [legal] battleground, led by the N.A.A.C.P.," despite knowing full well that the right to vote "means increasingly less and less to all voters" and that "courts are prostituted to the power of wealth" (592). What may have appeared to be an unthinking expression of liberal bourgeois consciousness or ideology was actually a function of a contradictory historical situation.


55. Readings ranged from his early work on socialism and history in the 1840s to Capital. His notes indicate that the course was divided into one week on "the man," two weeks on "his times," five weeks on "his message," four weeks on "his critics," and four weeks on "the Negro." http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-0064-4544/#page/1/mode/1up.


57. Ibid., 540.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 541.

60. Ibid., 542.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 541.

64. Ibid., 543.

65. Ibid., 543–44.

66. Ibid., 544.

67. Ibid., 545.

68. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn.


70. The political and theoretical affinities between Du Bois and Antonio Gramsci, who were contemporaries, need to be further explored.


72. Ibid., 783.

73. Ibid., 706, 707.


76. Ibid., 709.

77. Ibid., 710.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., 711.

80. Du Bois, "A Nation within a Nation" (June 1935), in Lewis, A Reader, 568.
86. Ibid.; emphasis added.
89. Du Bois later insisted that his strategic shift did not conflict with his long-standing struggle for "political and civic and social equality": "It was clear to me that agitation against race prejudice and a planned economy for bettering the economic condition of the American Negro were not antagonistic ideals but part of one ideal." Ibid., 776–77.
91. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn, 712; emphasis added. Du Bois appropriated and reworked the term "cooperative commonwealth." It had been the title of an 1884 "outline of socialism" for an American audience written by a German Marxist immigrant, Laurence Gronlund. It then became a rallying cry for the agrarian Populist movement in North America during the 1890s. Gronlund, Cooperative Commonwealth; Postel, Populist Vision.
92. Du Bois explained, "In the long run force defeats itself. It is only the consensus of the intelligent men of good will in a community or in a state that really can carry out a great program with absolute and ultimate authority. And by that same token, without the authority of the state, without force of police and army, a group of people who can attain such consensus is able to do anything to which the group agrees." Ibid., 715.
93. Ibid., 714–15.
94. Ibid., 715.
95. Ibid., 1061.
96. Ibid., 1060.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 1061.
100. Ibid., 1065.
101. Ibid., 1063–64.
102. Ibid., 1066.
103. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
109. Ibid., 1069.
110. Rampersad, Art and Imagination, 182.
111. Ibid. For an interpretation that situates Du Bois directly in the tradition of American pragmatism, see West, American Eclosion of Philosophy.
112. Robinson, Black Marxism, 240.
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113. Ibid., 171. Robinson argues that “the Black radical tradition cast doubt on the extent to 
which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life” and contends that “it had been as an 
emergent African people and not as slaves that Black men and women had opposed enslavement” 
(166, 171). But it is not clear that Robinson's abiding concern to separate these forms of resistance 
and consciousness from “Western” epistemologies, ideologies, and traditions aligns with Du 
Bois's immanent and dialectical analyses of the new forms of sociality, idioms of thought and 
action, and visions of political association that emerged precisely from within, and out of the 
materials provided by the historical experience of slavery in the Americas. My reading of Du 
Bois as an irreducibly modern Black Atlantic thinker aligns, rather, with the that of Gilroy in The 
Black Atlantic, who sees Du Bois as attending to “the interconnections between Africa, Europe, 
and the Americas,” demonstrating “a complete familiarity with the cultural legacy of western 
civilization,” claiming “access to it as a right for the race as a whole,” and regarding “this legacy as 
his own personal property” (121).

114. Robinson, Black Marxism, 140.
115. Aptheker, Correspondence, 165.
116. Publicly he attributed this decision to the group's inability “to formulate a positive 
program of construction and inspiration,” its resistance to his attempts realign the organization, 
and the fact that his “program for economic readjustment” was “totally ignored.” Du Bois, 
“Dr. Du Bois Resigns” (August 1934), in Writings, 1260–61.
117. He had previously taught there from 1897 to 1910, during which time he had defined the 
constellation of intellectual and political issues that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life: 
slavery and modernity; the problem of Negro freedom and the prospect of multiracial democracy; 
race prejudice, the institutional color line, and black lived experience; black emancipation, American 
democracy, and world peace. On his resignation and shift to Atlanta, see Lewis, A Reader.
The same semester that he taught “Karl Marx and the Negro Problem,” while working on this 
book, Du Bois also offered a course on “Negro Economic History” (http://credo.library.umass 
edu/view/collection/mums312). Then in August 1933 he convened the second Amenia Conference 
with a younger group of black Marxist intellectuals, including Ralph Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier, 
Sterling Brown, Abram Harris, Charles Houston Harris, and Roy Wilkins. This cohort publicly 
criticized the old NAACP legal strategies for civil rights and called for closer and closer alliance 
between the black community and the American labor movement. Du Bois did not share their 
faith in the prospect of white workers' embracing black allies. But recognizing the quality of their 
scholarship and the importance of their insights as well as the need for a new political orientation 
to the color line, he included them in his conference. See Dusk of Dawn, 772–74; Lewis, W. E. B. 

Du Bois, xx; Singh, Black Is a Country, 70–79.

120. Ibid., 706.
121. Ibid.
122. Ibid., 122.
123. Ibid., 124.
124. Ibid.
125. Ibid., 124–25.
127. Ibid., 370.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid., 359, 528.
130. Du Bois, Darkwater, 50.
131. Ibid., 135.
132. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.”
133. Scott, Refashioning Futures.
134. Edelman, No Future; Adams, Murphy, and Clarke, “Anticipation.”
135. Berlant, Cruel Optimism.
136. This longing for an external standpoint of critique may help explain recent preoccupations with affects, bodies, animals, and objects.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


