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Notes and Commentary on Du Bois

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April 28, 2020

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Something incredibly interesting to me is the interplay that Du Bois has with Nietzsche regarding this, they kinda mirror each other even;

With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to the sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak or blue above.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape off a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconcilable strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *“The Souls of Black Folk”* (1903)

I think Du Bois is a great start to critique some of Nietzsche’s underlying, perhaps racist, biases.

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In Du Bois we find the first articulations, I know of, for a genuine and original African-American Anarchism. I hope this has been a contribution to the general pool of discussion for a Black Anarchism for all to draw from, articulate, and incorporate.

Interplay with Nietzsche

Nietzsche wrote,

One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beasts of prey, the splendid *blond beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness: the Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility, the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings—they all share this feeling.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals* (1887)

That “blond beast” he talks about, which is often, thanks to his sister’s distortion of his works and affiliation with Nazi ideology, is actually a reference to a lion and the lion’s mane and not to the assumed archetypal Aryan of Nazi propaganda.

He values assertiveness and boldness. He explicitly mentions Japanese and Arabic nobility, non-white peoples, as examples of the spirit he sees as potent and worthy alongside Roman, Germanic etc.; to him they are on equal footing, and exemplary. Worth noting that while he exalts the old Teutonic tribes of Germania, he explicitly hated the Germans of his day and saw them as nowhere near close to their ancestors and predecessors essentially saying they had nothing in common and could not be regarded as anything alike. He would’ve hated Nazi ideology so much.

We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will win. But I've come to believe we're integrating into a burning house.

America, and the U.S. as a particular expression of that concept, is a burning house because it is a function of oppression. A real and true achievement for the great social liberty of all, of the sublated synthesis of the individual and the collective Du Bois calls for, is not compatible with the United States —nor any other State for the matter. Not because it is impossible to reconcile the individual with the collective; but because the particular collective embodied in the State in general, and the American State Du Bois referred to in particular, is predicted on class distinctions whose interests are irreconcilable, bound for strife and struggle, and are equal resultants to —and producers of— the *Sturm und Drang* Du Bois perceived in his time, of which we see an intensified, albeit modified, form of today.

This helps explain Davis' telling us that

What the civil rights movement did, it seems to me, was to create a new terrain for asking new questions and moving in New directions. The assumption that the placement of black people like Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice in the heart of government would mean progress for the entire community was clearly fallacious. [...] The challenge of the twenty-first century is not to demand equal opportunity to participate in the machinery of oppression. Rather, it is to identify and dismantle those structures in which racism continues to be embedded. This is the only way the promise of freedom can be extended to masses of people.

[Angela Y. Davis, "Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture"]

Du Bois and Anarchism

I think my biggest reservation towards Du Bois in particular is his view that there's a redeemable part of the United States, that liberty can coexist with the US due to the ideals which it, purportedly, brought about, but you can find enough wiggle room, roomy at that, in his work for an anti-state rephrasing.

Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together; each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying 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. [...] [T]here are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes [...]"

[W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk: Of Our Spiritual Strivings"]

This is not unlike Proudhon, equal parts where he says that,

Anarchy expresses a very reasonable idea, the absence of authority and command, which is the true republican principle. We feign to make this word a synonym of disorder, confusion, chaos: it is in this sense that I myself, speaking in the language of everyone, have used it frequently.

[P. J. Proudhon, "Napoleon III"]

And particularly when we consider that for Proudhon, Republic, *res publica* —public affairs— are the common cause of all, thus "anyone can declare themselves republican", and also if we remember

that, for Proudhon, Anarchy is the realization of the “*Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*” of 1789.

These are now old conceptions, archaic even, which we can look at for their contemporary merit but have since articulated firmer ground to stand on with regards to liberty.

Furthermore, Du Bois is constrained by the dialogues of his day which he constantly alludes to and explicitly demarks the existence of. When he stands against Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner, he does so on what we can call internationalism, calling a self-imposed emigration back to Africa as “hopeless program” since the US at the time was expanding “towards weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines” remarking “for where in the world may we go and be safe from lying and brute force?”.

Equally, he’s against Booker T. Washington for allowing the facilitation of black people into legal second class citizens and notes how this underscores their own development instead of promoting the slow industrial exercise and strength of their own.

He’s encumbered by what he’s lacking.

So he’s very right when he says

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—longing to attain self-conscious manhood. [...] He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to text the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.

And then follows it up with;

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 powers of body and his latent genius.

He very much echoes the Anarchist conception of freedom though individuality; it is not *despite* the color of skin that he deserves attention for freedom, but particularly *because* of it. Through Bakunin (*Man, Society, and Freedom*) this reaches a compatibility with Anarchist Individualism with the collective whole. It is also through Bakunin that this can be extrapolated into a Stirnerite lense (it comes to mind what that one professor remarked about BLM being an Egoist movement; “My blackness is important, my blackness *does* matter, it will *not* be overlooked”).

But when Du Bois remarks that,

The history of the American Negro is. [...] this longing to [...] merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost [...] to be both Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows [...]

And that,

[...] [W]e must strive for the rights which the world accords too men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Father’s would fain forget: “We you these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”

[ibid. et al. “*Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others*”]

we can attribute this to the fact that, at the time, black people in America were second class citizens, that this is in response to Washington’s positions, and then better rely on the sobering reality of Martin Luther King Jr., when he had made great strides in Du Bois’ direction, contra Washington, in regards to civil rights;