

W.E.B. Du Bois and the Fight over His U.S. Memorial

An Anarchist Contribution to African-American History Month

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There was a controversy in the late 60s and the 70s about the establishment of a memorial to W.E.B. Du Bois. In terms of the struggles which shook the U.S. in this period (“the sixties”), it was peripheral, but it shines some light on the central issues of African-American liberation and the Cold War, of white supremacy and anti-communism. In the town of Great Barrington, in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts, it was proposed to establish a memorial to the Black scholar and activist, William Edward Burghhardt Du Bois (pronounced doo-boyz). Cornel West goes so far as to describe him as “*an American intellectual of African descent, the greatest one produced in this country...*” (1989; 138) He was certainly internationally famous and the most influential person to ever have been born in Great Barrington. But severe resistance developed to the memorial project. It took eight years of effort until a national memorial was established at his birth site, in 1979, and longer still for an official marker to be set up. (In covering this controversy I am relying primarily on Bass, 2009. However my viewpoint is more radical than hers, from the perspective of anarchism and libertarian socialism.)

Who Was W.E.B. Du Bois?

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington in 1868, five years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. He died in 1963, at 95, just on the eve of the March on Washington for Jobs and Justice. (West, 1989; Wikipedia) There was a small African-American community within the small town of Great Barrington. There Du Bois lived a peaceful childhood, with only a few instances in which race intruded into his experience (as he remembered it). He stood out for his intelligence in school and was given financial help from local (mostly white) churches and individuals in going to college. He spent a year at the Southern Black college, Fisk, where for the first time he encountered racial segregation and African-American popular culture. He studied in Berlin and went to Harvard, where he became the first African-American to receive a Ph.D.

Yet he retained ties to Great Barrington. Revisiting the town in 1930 to give a speech to fellow high school alumni, he discussed the local ecology, especially the Housatonic River. He decried its pollution and called for it to be cleaned up, “*to restore its ancient beauty, making it the center of a town, of a valley, and, who knows? of a new measure of civilized life.*” (Bass, 2009; 144) His first wife, and his son and daughter, are buried in Great Barrington.

Du Bois abandoned conventional religion as a young man, looking rather to naturalistic philosophies such as William James’ pragmatism or Marxism (West, 1989). However, a number of scholars have placed him in the African-American prophetic tradition (cited in Hobson, 2012); West (1989) puts him in the context of “prophetic pragmatism.” Through his long life, he condemned the evils of the U.S. and the West, especially (but not only) racism and colonialism. He spoke for a vision of a better, more equal, world. He warned European-Americans to abandon their oppressive behavior. He challenged Black people to assert themselves. “[Jonathon] Kahn believes that Du Bois’s jeremiads...demand ‘that America become a type of nation not yet imagined by the American consensus.’” (Hobson, 2012; 15)

In 1903, at the age of 35, he published *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it he wrote the famous sentence: “*The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.*” (Du Bois, 1994; 9) Surely this statement remains profoundly true, even if it is not the whole of the truth. He wrote other highly influential books. Another one (in 1935) was *Black Reconstruction*,

which became the basis for modern understanding of the Reconstruction era and its aftermath. At the time, he showed the influence of Marxist theory without being a Marxist.

Booker T. Washington was the most influential African-American of Du Bois' youth. Washington preached Black adaptation to segregation. He argued that Blacks would get along better with whites by focusing on manual labor, farming, and crafts. In opposition to Washington, Du Bois argued for a struggle against discrimination. He proclaimed the need for those African-Americans who could to get education and provide independent leadership to the whole Black community. This was a more militant approach than Washington's program, although Du Bois' reliance on the "talented tenth," as he called them, had an element of elitism (indeed elitism was often to show up in his work, even as he changed his approach over the years).

He formed the Niagara Movement in 1905 to fight for his program and was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP) in 1909. At first, he was the only Black person on its executive board. He became the editor of its periodical, *The Crisis*. For 25 years he continued to edit it, becoming one of the most prominent voices for African-American liberation. He was also a key organizer of the Pan-Africanist movement. Du Bois attended almost every international Pan-Africanist conference, meeting with activists from Africa, Europe, and elsewhere in the African diaspora.

In the course of his long life, he was constantly engaged with, and trying out, various political programs which might advance the Black struggle. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, while advocating militant opposition to racial discrimination, he criticized "*the radicalism of the Negro*" as an unfortunate "*tendency...to excess*" (1994; 124), although an understandable one. He condemned "*a cheap and dangerous socialism*" (92) and "*the hideousness of the anarchist assassin*." (123) Yet, since 1907, he came to regard himself as a "democratic socialist." During World War I, he opposed it at first, then swung to support it, a decision he later came to regret. As a leader of the NAACP, he was involved in a bitter political controversy with the Communist Party in the 30s, over the best way to defend the Scottsboro Boys. For a brief time, he even supported "separate but equal" as a strategy. (I am not going into the history of his personal and political conflicts within the NAACP.)

Du Bois opposed US intervention into World War II, especially in the Pacific, where it was clearest that this was an inter-imperialist rivalry. This was quite a different position from that of the Communist Party, once the Soviet Union was in the war. The US CP gave super-patriotic support to the war, for the sake of the USSR. During the war, it opposed any Black struggle against discrimination in the military or the arms industry, such as A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement (see Price 2013). The CP opposed the popular Black slogan, "Double V for Victory" (Victory against Fascism Abroad and Racism at Home). This was contrary to Du Bois' approach at the time.

After the war, Du Bois continued to agitate for peace. He especially opposed the militarism and imperialism of the white Western powers, with their domination over the big majority of humanity. This led to increasing sympathy for the "Communist" countries. In 1940, he had expressed disdain for the "tyrant Stalin;" in 1946 he had been critical of the USSR's dictatorship. (Wikipedia) But in the post-war period, he decided that the Soviet Union was "socialist" and that the "Communist" states were on the side of the oppressed nations and races. He declared this publicly and repeatedly in speeches and written statements.

In his Autobiography, he wrote, "*I believe in communism. I mean by communism a planned way of life in the production of wealth and work designed for building a state whose object is the*

highest welfare of its people and not merely the profit of a part...” (quoted in Bass, 2009; 42) This is a typical statist definition of “communism” (or “socialism”) of the time, or even now. While it opposes capitalist rule (in my view, correctly), the definition makes no mention of freedom or self-management by the workers, Black or otherwise. It has little to do with the authentic libertarian-democratic meaning of “communism” as used by either Marx or the anarchist-communists (see Price 2007).

In the period after World War II, most U.S. workers and intellectuals, including most African-Americans, supported the U.S. in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. They feared aggression by the USSR—even though, really, it was much weaker, militarily and economically, than the U.S. They were whipped up to hysterically fear the U.S. Communist Party—even though the CP had lost virtually all the influence it had gained in the 30s and was far from any kind of threat to the US establishment (and it advocated a generally reformist program). They were impressed by the relative prosperity of the U.S. (at least for some white workers, but to a degree for U.S. Black people). They were aware of the greater political freedom and relative democracy in the U.S. as compared with the “Communist” countries, which were totalitarian dictatorships.

These views ignored the poverty and dictatorship throughout the oppressed nations (colonies and neo-colonies), imposed by the U.S. and other imperial countries. They ignored the terroristic oppression and poverty under which African-Americans lived, South and North. And they ignored the basic fact that, for all the apparent democracy, there was a minority layer of very rich people which really dominated the economy and the government.

The widely-used term was “anti-communism.” This only said what its advocates were against (Stalinist totalitarianism) and not what they were for (really, supporting capitalism, the McCarthyite witch hunt, and all sorts of undemocratic or semi-democratic capitalist states).

A minority of activists and theorists chose to support the “Communist” side, including Du Bois as well as Communist Party members, orthodox Trotskyists, and various “progressives.” This was based on their (wholly justified) opposition to Western imperialism, militarism, racism, and capitalism. But such support for the Soviet Union required ignoring its single-party police state, its oppression of non-Russian countries and peoples (Poland, Manchuria, Ukraine, etc.), and its exploitative state capitalist economy.

Only a tiny minority were in revolutionary opposition to both sides of the Cold War, for the sake of the world’s working class and the oppressed of all nations. “*By ‘we’ and ‘they’ we cannot mean NATO vs. the Soviet bloc, but the peoples of the world against the sovereigns and their corporate and state economies.*” (Goodman, 1962; 65) This revolutionary minority included anarchists, unorthodox Trotskyists, libertarian Marxists, and radical pacifists. C.L.R. James was one of a very few such Black activists and theorists. (McLemee & Le Blanc, 1994) Unfortunately, W.E.B. Du Bois was not.

Du Bois became a leader of the Peace Information Center, formed in 1950 to support the Stockholm Peace Appeal. It advocated nuclear disarmament. The PIC put the balance of blame for the Cold War solely on the US state. (The truth was that both sides threatened humanity with extermination by nuclear bombs, but the Soviet Union, being economically weaker, was less militarily aggressive than the U.S., and therefore seemed more “peaceful.”) The US government demanded that the PIC register as “*an agent of a foreign principal,*” namely the Soviet Union. The PIC responded by disbanding, but apparently this was not enough. In 1951, Du Bois and other officers were indicted and arrested (he was 83). The case was eventually overturned.

The State Department took away Du Bois' passport, as it did the passport of his friend Paul Robeson. His writings were purged from public libraries. He continued to oppose the Korean War and NATO, and to defend the Rosenbergs. He backed Henry Wallace as a third-party candidate for president against Truman. He signed the petition, "*We Charge Genocide*," which attempted to take the situation of African-Americans to the UN.

Du Bois won back his passport in 1958 by a decision of the Supreme Court. Kwame Nkrumah, president of the new nation of Ghana and an old friend from Pan-Africanist meetings, invited Du Bois to come to his country. He was offered the editorship of an Encyclopedia Africana. With his second wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois (an activist and scholar herself), he moved to Ghana in 1961, taking Ghanaian citizenship in 1963. (In the fight over his U.S. memorial, enemies charged that he had renounced his US citizenship. This was not true; he had dual citizenship.)

In 1961, not long before leaving the US, Du Bois took out a membership card in the Communist Party USA; he was 93. This was purely nominal; he never acted under CP discipline nor did he agree with all its politics. It was an expression of his deep disappointment in US politics and a desire for a radical alternative. He died in 1963, leaving unfinished his Encyclopedia. In 1985, Ghana established the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Center for Pan-African Culture.

The Struggle for a U.S. Memorial

With his death at 95, there were many declarations of respect for his life work. At the next day's March on Washington, the executive secretary of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins, asked for a moment of silence. Wilkins declared, "*Regardless of the fact that, in his later years, Dr. Du Bois chose another path, it is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the twentieth century, his was the voice calling you to gather here today in this cause.*" (quoted in Bass, 2009; 47) At a later time, Dr. M. L. King, Jr. referred to Du Bois "*as a model of militant manhood and integrity. He defied them, and though they heaped venom and scorn on him, his powerful voice was never still.*" (same; 62) His demise was responded to by telegrams from all over the world, from politicians, leaders of movements, and scholars of international significance.

The Communist Party launched a new youth organization in 1966, which it named the Du Bois Clubs. Not yet president, Richard Nixon denounced them for imitating the name of the Boys Clubs of America (of which he was national board chairman)! It was, he declared, "*an almost classic example of Communist deception and duplicity.*" (Robinson, 1966)

In 1967, Walter Wilson bought the land that had been the homestead where Du Bois had grown up and where his family had lived for generations. Wilson was a white Berkshire real estate broker with a background as a "progressive." In his youth, he had worked for the American Civil Liberties Union on civil rights in the South. With an African-American scholar and activist, Edmund W. Gordon, he started the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Committee. They aimed to turn the site into a memorial park—state or national. They did not expect much difficulty. They built up a group of whites and African-Americans, although the committee was heavy with liberals of both races who used the Berkshires for their vacation homes. It was limited in local people, especially local Black residents, for various reasons. A regional paper was in support.

To their surprise, they ran into strong opposition to the memorial. It was opposed by two local newspapers, members of the American Legion, chapters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the semi-fascist John Birch Society. These groups

wrote editorials and letters-to-the-editor, and held mass meetings to fight the plans for a memorial.

The opposition was never openly about race. In this Northern town, with a history which included abolitionism, explicit racism would not have been possible. But racial attitudes were implicit. A New York Times article wrote, *“Although no one talks about it openly, some residents are said to fear an influx of Negro visitors to the [proposed memorial] park.”* (quoted in Bass, 2009; 75) One anti-memorial letter-to-the editor stated, *“We as a country have been slow in rectifying the wrongs done to the Negro people, but wrongs cannot be rectified overnight or by laws made by politicians.... Everyone must earn the right to take his proper place in society....”* And so on. (same, 2009; 74) Other letters denounced Du Bois as the political ancestor of the more radical and militant African-Americans, such as advocates of Black Power, instead of being like the moderate and “responsible” Black leaders, supposedly like Dr. King.

The main (explicit) argument was over Du Bois’ officially joining the Communist Party. This was often tied in with his relocation to Ghana, and the (false) claim that he had renounced his U.S. citizenship, as part of his alleged anti-Americanism. One local paper’s editorial did not deny *“the many achievements of Du Bois....However...Du Bois was an out-and-out Communist—a man who worked for many years to downgrade and weaken the United State.”* (same; 65) One of many letters-to-the-editor declared, *“The Communists have vowed to take away [our] freedom....I do not feel that it is fitting or proper to honor with a memorial...a member of any party that is now trying so hard to overthrow our government.”* (same; 61)

This was during the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The question of freedom, lacking in the “Communist” countries, was not discussed in terms of the lack of freedom of African-Americans in the U.S., in their history of slavery, of legal segregation, and of non-legal but continuing discrimination and imposed poverty. Laws against legal Jim Crow in the South had just been passed and were barely being implemented. Black people were still being murdered in the streets, South and North (as they still are). To discuss Du Bois’ turn to “Communism,” mistaken as it was, without seeing it as a frustrated response to U.S. racism, is to misunderstand everything. To refuse to focus on Du Bois’ decades of efforts for African-American rights, to treat it as unimportant, was at best a form of “liberal” racism. The defenders of the memorial project pointed out that judging a person’s long life of distinguished accomplishments by focusing only on his last few years was biased and distorted.

The FBI also got involved in the issue, under COINTELPRO (its counterintelligence program). Agents may have planted anti-memorial articles in local papers, sent in newspaper letters, and given “information” to veteran’s groups. The FBI considered getting more active, but seems to have decided that there was enough local opposition to the memorial that they were no longer needed.

Anti-communism was widely used to attack the civil rights movement. Segregationists always denounced Black activists as “Communists.” But liberals also got involved. The well-known liberal, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. announced that the Communist Party was “sinking tentacles” into the NAACP, with no evidence to speak of. The NAACP, led by Walter White, passed a resolution which expelled Communists from membership. The Kennedy brothers were told by J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the FBI, that there were Communists in Martin Luther King’s organization—even agents directly controlled by Moscow! It was all lies, but the Kennedy administration forced King to get rid of two of his closest advisors. (See Branch, 1989)

I am not going to get into the ins and outs, ups and downs, of the struggle for the memorial park (as detailed in Bass, 2009). Under Walter Wilson's tireless leadership, the memorial committee won support from a wide range of prominent people of both races, locally, nationally, and internationally, such as Julian Bond, Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte. In the Berkshires, this included Norman Rockwell, the famous painter who lived nearby in Stockbridge. (As he was not at all radical, this does him credit.) Meanwhile, the public had turned against the Vietnam war and anti-communism had lost much of its hysterical edge.

In 1979, the Du Bois homestead was declared a National Historic Landmark. The historical building, now essentially a hole in the ground, has been used for archeological excavation by the University of Massachusetts. The information center in town provides visitors with a folded "trail guide" on "W.E.B. Du Bois in Great Barrington." It is part of the "African-American Heritage" trail. The guide describes 17 sites related to Du Bois which may be visited by foot or car. There is a local "W.E.B. Du Bois Center for American History" which is open by appointment. It was founded by Randy Weinstein, who wrote, "*Let there be no mistaking the fact that from the vantage point of the 21st century, Du Bois' politics, at times, appear naive, even wrongheaded. Yet politics aside, his contribution to the 20th century's civil rights movement was righteous, global, and indelible.*" (in Bass, 2009; 157)

Conclusion

Today the Cold War is over, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes in China. The official enemy of the U.S. empire is no longer "Communism" but fanatical Islamism (not to be confused with Islam in general). It is easy to ignore or find excuses for Du Bois' "Communism." It is less popular to say that he was right in his opposition to capitalism, to U.S. racism, militarism, and imperialism—even if he was wrong about the Soviet Union.

Then, as now, it was easy to oppose the evils of other countries, on the other side of the world, which were enemies of our government. It was more difficult to oppose the evils of our own country, supported by our fellow citizens, and done in our name. Yet that is what Du Bois did, fearlessly and persistently. It was important because the U.S. state, and not the Soviet Union, was (and is) the most influential power in the world, dominating the world market and international politics. However, Du Bois' support of the "Communist" side was not just wrong about the Soviet Union as such, but inadequate in its vision of a free, equal, and just society. Yet we honor him, for his extended fight for African-American and colonial freedom, for his deep and wide scholarship, and for his courageous struggle against the evils of capitalism and its repressive state.

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