SPECIAL FEATURE

W. E. B. DU BOIS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER

A Symposium on New Books by Robert Gooding-Williams and Lawrie Balfour

Jack Turner
Symposium Guest Editor
Department of Political Science, University of Washington

Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, 368 pages, ISBN 978-0-674-03526-3. Hardcover, $35.00.

Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 216 pages, ISBN 978-0-195-37729-3. Hardcover, $39.95.

Du Bois Review, 8:2 (2011) 377.
© 2011 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/11 $15.00

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SHADOWS OF DU BOIS

Jack Turner
Department of Political Science, University of Washington

Political theory is catching up to Du Bois. More than a century after the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1997), political theorists have begun to realize that "the problem of the color-line" (pp. 45, 61) is constitutive of modernity. That it has taken this long for political theorists to recognize what Du Bois saw so clearly more than a century ago reflects the field's all-too-frequent parochialism. At the same time, the field is home to dissenting voices which insist that we cannot understand modern politics without confronting the White supremacist character of the modern West.

Robert Gooding-Williams and Lawrie Balfour are two of these voices. Their work reconfigures political theory by bringing its critical resources to bear on racial injustice in its peculiar post-civil-rights incarnations, and by insisting that "Afro-modern" political thinkers belong at the center of political theory and demand, in the words of Gooding-Williams (2009), "just the sort of attentive reading and probing analysis that we have been accustomed to give works like Aristotle's *Politics*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*" (p. 7; Balfour 2001; Gooding-Williams 2006). Gooding-Williams and Balfour are the authors of two recent and long-awaited books on the political thought of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose publication provides an occasion to consider how Du Bois's work as historian, sociologist, religion scholar, fiction writer, and political activist does the work of a political theorist. To what extent and in what ways can Du Bois help us think through the political present? This question lies at the center of this symposium on Gooding-Williams' (2009) *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* and Balfour's (2011) *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois*.

Gooding-Williams' *In the Shadow of Du Bois* reconstructs the philosophical argument of *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois [1903] 1997), and critically evaluates its deep and often unacknowledged influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American political thought. In *Souls*, Gooding-Williams finds an answer to the question "What kind of politics should African Americans conduct to counter white supremacy?" (Gooding-Williams 2009, p. 1). Du Bois's answer is a "politics of expressive self-realization." Gooding-Williams distills its three mains claims:

Du Bois Review, 8:2 (2011) 379–382.
© 2011 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/11 $15.00
doi:10.1017/S1742058X11000294

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(1) That African American politics is a practice of group leadership—and thus a practice of group rule or governance, for Du Bois interprets leadership as a form of group rule or governance.
(2) That African American politics should take the form of political expressivism, such that it expresses the spiritual identity of the black folk.
(3) That African American struggles to counter white supremacy are best understood as struggles against social exclusion (Gooding-Williams 2009, p. 4).

Though Gooding-Williams admires the philosophical ingenuity of Du Bois's argument, he insists that it enjoys outsized authority in contemporary African American political thought and unduly constrains contemporary imaginings of what Black politics could be. Contemporary theorists and practitioners of Black politics, in this sense, linger "in the shadow of Du Bois." As an alternative to Du Bois's conception of Black politics, Gooding-Williams upholds that of Frederick Douglass, especially as expressed in his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* ([1855] 2003). Douglass envisions Black politics not as a relation of rule between leaders and followers, but as a practice of concerted action among equals. Following Douglass, Gooding-Williams argues that contemporary Black politics should originate in the concerted action of Black citizens. Black citizens themselves should define Black interests through the hard work of democratic deliberation, rather than passively accept accredited elites' definitions of those interests.

Lawrie Balfour's (2011) *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* mines works beyond *The Souls of Black Folk*—including *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* ([1896] 1986), *John Brown* ([1909] 2001), "The Damnation of Women" ([1920] 1986), *Black Reconstruction in America* ([1935] 1995), and *Dusk of Dawn* ([1940] 1986)—for insights that can help contemporary democratic citizens make sense of race's continuing significance. Though always staying true to the letter and spirit of Du Bois's words, Balfour seeks to discover how those words can productively reorient us to our own time. Over six interlocking chapters, three themes emerge: (1) the critical power of Du Bois's idea of a "present-past," (2) the revisionary power of his treatment of Black experience as exemplary of democratic possibility, and (3) his globalization of political imagination and positioning of U.S. history within the larger story of Atlantic slavery and the violence of Western colonialism. Du Bois, according to Balfour (2011), helps us meet a central task of political theory—that of "facing the worst" (pp. 5–6). The worst in this case consists of a 500-year history of White domination of Black, Brown, Yellow, and Red peoples, which far too many political theorists bracket in the pursuit of ideal theory or bury in a teleology of progressive Enlightenment. Particularly provocative is Balfour's reading of *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois 1995) as a work that can illuminate the contemporary democratic potential of reparations for slavery:

> [R]eparations could respond to . . . Du Bois's claims about the economic requirements of a genuinely reconstructed democracy. Conceived as a massive investment in black communities, rather than a per capita payment, and targeted primarily at the poorest of those communities, reparations could create a basis for attacking the deep economic inequality Du Bois understood to be incompatible with democracy (Balfour 2011, p. 39).

The critical assessments by Cristina Beltrán, Rogers Smith, and Tommie Shelby of Gooding-Williams' and Balfour's books—together with the authors' responses—

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

further illuminate how Du Bois can enrich contemporary political philosophy. Beltrán explores a tension between the two works: while Balfour discloses the value to democratic politics of confronting the "present-past," Gooding-Williams worries that the historical authority of Du Bois has too great a hold on the present, and recommends that present-day practitioners of Black politics imagine political possibilities less dependent on leadership and more responsive to present needs. Beltrán thus emphasizes how history constitutes both a resource and a challenge for Black politics: the historical sense can clarify our perception of the present, and at the same time inhibit our imagining of transformative political action.

While Rogers Smith admires both Gooding-Williams' and Balfour's interpretations of Du Bois, he takes issue with some of the political prescriptions they derive from those interpretations. Against Gooding-Williams, Smith insists that democratic politics cannot dispense with strong leadership, that foundationalist accounts of Black identity have a place in the creation of Black solidarity, and that discourses of "good character" should be democratically reconstituted rather than rejected wholesale. Against Balfour, Smith argues that the language of "reparations" is a political nonstarter in the effort to create awareness of racial injustice and its roots in the history of slavery and Jim Crow.

Tommie Shelby also objects to Balfour's politics of "reparations." He worries it collapses the distinction between compensatory and distributive justice, two concepts that ought to remain distinct. As for Gooding-Williams, Shelby suggests that he errs in equating Du Bois's model of political leadership with Weberian political rule. Whereas rule essentially involves relations of command and obedience, command and obedience do *not* characterize Du Bois's model of political leadership. Shelby writes: "[T]he talented tenth is not supposed to be issuing any orders and commands. According to Du Bois, they are to lead by persuasion and through example, and have no power to 'rule' beyond this."

Both Gooding-Williams and Balfour offer spirited responses to their critics, and indicate how further research on Du Bois and the Afro-modern tradition can enrich both political theory and the study of race politics. The hope of the symposium is to chart new paths for philosophical and social scientific engagement of "the problem of the color-line" in the twenty-first century.

Corresponding author: Jack Turner, Department of Political Science, Box 353530, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 98195-3530. Email: jturner3@uw.edu

REFERENCES

Balfour, Lawrie (2001). *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Balfour, Lawrie (2011). *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Douglass, Frederick ([1855] 2003). *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Edited with an introduction by John David Smith. New York: Penguin.

Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1896] 1986). The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870. In Nathan Huggins (Ed.), *W. E. B. DuBois: Writings*, pp. 1–356. New York: Library of America.

Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1903] 1997). *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited with an introduction by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams. Boston, MA: Bedford Books.

Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1909] 2001). *John Brown*. Edited with an introduction by David Roediger. New York: Modern Library.

Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1920] 1986). The Damnation of Women. In Nathan Huggins (Ed.), *W. E. B. DuBois: Writings*, pp. 952–968. New York: Library of America.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1935] 1995). *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Touchstone.
Du Bois, W. E. B. ([1940] 1986). Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept. In Nathan Huggins (Ed.), *W. E. B. DuBois: Writings*, pp. 549–802. New York: Library of America.
Gooding-Williams, Robert (2006). *Look, A Negro!: Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Routledge.
Gooding-Williams, Robert (2009). *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000294 Published online by Cambridge University Press