THE PROBLEM OF THE 20TH CENTURY IS THE PROBLEM OF THE COLOR LINE

W.E.B. DU BOIS (1868-1963)

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Race and ethnicity

KEY DATES

1857 US Chief Justice Roger B. Taney rules against a petition for freedom from enslaved Dred Scott, saying that blacks cannot be granted citizenship and therefore equal protection under the law because they are inferior to whites.

1906 Max Weber says that shared perceptions and common customs, not biological traits, distinguish ethnic groups from each other.

1954 The legal case of "Brown vs Board of Education" rules that establishing "separate but equal" schools for black and white children is unconstitutional.

1964 The Civil Rights Act outlaws public segregation and ends discrimination based on race, color, religion, or sex.

The US Civil War freed slaves in the South.

The government introduced schools, home ownership, a banking system, and legal redress for freed slaves....

...but this increased the enmity of white people.

Black people were legally free, but racial prejudice made them "slaves of society."

Prejudice cannot be legislated away: the continuing problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.

oward the end of the 19th century, the US social reformer and freed slave Frederick Douglass drew attention to the continuing prejudice against black people in the US. He claimed that although blacks had ceased to belong to individuals, they had nevertheless become slaves of society. Out of the depths of slavery, he said, "has come this prejudice and this color line," through which white dominion was asserted in the workplace, the ballot box, the legal courts, and everyday life.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois investigated the idea of the color line in The Souls of Black Folk. A literary, sociological, and political landmark, it examines the changing position of African-Americans from the US Civil War and its aftermath to the early 1900s, in terms of the physical, economic, and political relations of black and white people in the South. It concludes that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line" the continuing division between the opportunities and perspectives of blacks and whites. Du Bois

begins his study by pointing out that no white person is willing to talk about race explicitly, choosing instead to act out prejudice in various ways. But what they really want to know is this: "How does it feel to be a problem?"

Du Bois finds the question unanswerable, because it only makes sense from a white perspective—black people do not see themselves as "a problem." He then examines how this duali of perspective has occurred and gives the example of his first encounter with racism. While

See also: Harriet Martineau 26-27 = Paul Gilroy 75 = Edward Said 80-81 = Elijah Anderson 82-83 = bell hooks 90-95 = Stuart Hall 200-01

at primary school, a new pupil refused to accept a greeting card from Du Bois, at which point "it dawned on me that I was different from the others."

He felt like them in his heart, he says, but realized that he was "shut out from their world by a vast veil." Initially undaunted, he says that he felt no need to tear down the veil until he grew up and saw that all the most dazzling opportunities in the world were for white people, not black people. There was a color line, and he was standing on the side that was denied power, opportunity, dignity, and respect.

Identity crisis

Du Bois suggests that the color line is internal too. Black people, according to him, see themselves in two ways simultaneously:



That central paradox of the South—the social separation of the races.

W.E.B. Du Bois



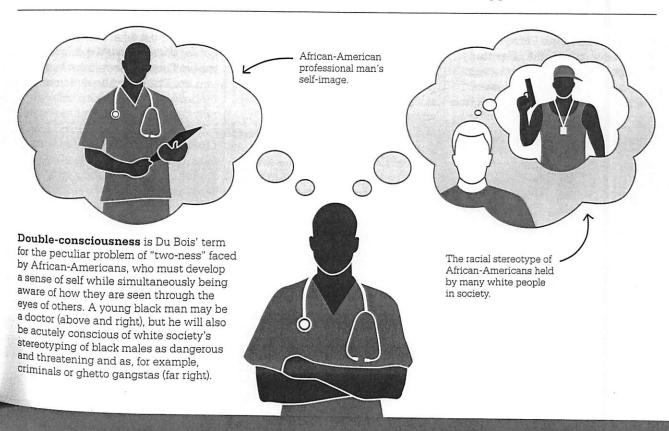
through the reflection of the white world, which views them with amused contempt and pity, and through their own sense of self, which is more fluid and less well defined. These combine to form what Du Bois calls a double-consciousness: "...two souls.

two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."

The unfolding history of the black person in the US is, Du Bois claims, the history of this inner conflict, which itself is a result of the external, worldly battle between black and white people. He suggests that a black person wants to merge the double-consciousness into one state, and find a true African-American spirit that does not Africanize America, nor "bleach his African soul in a flood of white Americanism."

The Freedmen's Bureau

How had black people become the "problem"? To try to explain this issue, Du Bois looks to the history of slavery in the US and the turning point of the Civil War. »



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Ulysses S. Grant and his generals advance on horseback in the Civil War. In 1868 the votes of a new black electorate were vital to Grant's election as Republican president.

According to him, slavery was the real cause of the war, which started in 1861. As the Union army of the northern states marched into the South, slaves fled to join it. At first, slaves were returned to their owners, but the policy changed and they were kept as military labor.

In 1863, slaves were declared free, and the government set up the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (also called the Freedmen's Bureau) to issue food. clothing, and abandoned property to the "flood" of destitute fugitive former slaves (men, women, and children). However, the Bureau was run by military staff ill-equipped to deal with social reorganization. The Bureau was also hampered by the sheer size of the task: the promise of handing over slave-driven plantations to former slaves "melted away" when it became clear that over 800,000 acres were affected.

One of the great successes of the Bureau was the provision of free schools for all children in the South.



Slavery is gone, but its shadow still lingers... and poisons... the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic.

Frederick Douglass
US social reformer (c.1818–1895)





Du Bois points out that this was seen as a problem, because "the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro." The opposition to black education in the South "showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood."

At the same time, the Bureau sowed division in legal matters. According to Du Bois, it used its courts to "put the bottom rail on top"—in other words, it favored black litigants. Meanwhile, the civil courts often aided the former slavemasters. Du Bois describes white people as being "ordered about, seized, imprisoned, and punished over and over again" by the Bureau courts, while black people were intimidated, beaten, raped, and butchered by angry and revengeful (white) men.

The Bureau also opened a Freedman's Bank in 1865 to handle the deposits of former slave men and women. This initiative was hampered by incompetency, and the bank eventually crashed, taking the dollars of the freedmen with it. Du Bois says that this was the least of the loss, because "all the faith in saving went too, and much of the faith in men; and that was a loss

that a nation which today sneers at Negro shiftlessness has never yet made good."

The Bureau had set up a system of free (non-slave) labor and ex-slave proprietorship, secured the recognition of black people as free people in courts of law, and founded common schools. The greatest failing of the Bureau was that it did not establish goodwill between the former masters and the ex-slaves; in fact, it increased enmity. The color line remained, but instead of being explicit it now operated in more subtle ways.

Compromise or agitation?

Following the post-war period known as the Reconstruction, some of the newly won black rights started to slip away. A ruling in a US legal case (Plessy vs Ferguson, 1896) made segregation in public places permissible and set a pattern of racial separation in the South that lasted until Brown vs Board of Education, 1954. Anxiety caused by modernity also fueled a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and its nativist white supremacism, accompanied by a rise in racist violence, including lynchings.



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In 1895 the African-American politican Booker T. Washington had given a speech now known as "the Atlanta Compromise." He suggested that black people should be patient, adopt white middleclass standards, and seek selfadvancement by self-improvement and education to show their worth. By foregoing political rights in return for economic rights and legal justice, Washington argued that social change would be more likely in the longer term. This accommodating stance became the dominant ideology of the time.

Du Bois disagreed strongly, and in *The Souls of Black Folk* he said that while black people did not expect full civic rights immediately, they were certain that the way for a people to gain their rights "is not by voluntarily throwing them away." Du Bois had hoped to eliminate racism and segregation through social science, but he came to believe that political agitation was the only effective strategy.

Stretching the color line

In 1949, Du Bois visited the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, where two-thirds of the population had been killed

during the Nazi occupation, and 85 percent of the city lay in ruins. He was shocked by the experience, which he said gave him a "more complete understanding of the Negro problem." Faced with such absolute devastation and destruction, and knowing that it was a direct consequence of racist segregation and violence. Du Bois reassessed his analysis of the color line and declared it a phenomenon that can occur to any cultural or ethnic group. In his 1952 essay for the magazine Jewish Life, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," he writes: "The race problem... cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of... human hate and prejudice." It is therefore not color that matters so much as the "line." which can be drawn to articulate difference and hatred in any group or society.

Activist and scholar

Du Bois became one of the founder members of the civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). His ideas were concerned with people

William Edward Burghardt
Du Bois was a sociologist,
historian, philosopher, and
political leader. He was born in
Massachusetts three years after
the end of the Civil War.

After graduating from high school, Du Bois studied at Fisk University, Nashville, and the university of Berlin, Germany, where he met Max Weber. In 1895 he became the first African American to receive a PhD when he gained a doctorate in history at Harvard University. From 1897 to 1910 he was professor of economics and history at

of African descent everywhere, and during the 1920s he helped found the Pan-African Association in Paris, France, and organized a series of pan-African congresses around the world. However, at the time of writing about the African soul, in the early 1900s, he said that the conditions that were necessary to achieve a true and unified African-American spirit had not yet been reached.

Du Bois applied systematic methods of fieldwork to previously neglected areas of study. The use of empirical data to catalog the details of black people's lives enabled him to dispel widely held stereotypes. For example, he produced a wealth of data on the effects of urban life on African-Americans in The Philadelphia Negro (1899), which suggests that rather than being caused by anything innate, crime is a product of the environment. His pioneering sociological research and thinking was a huge influence on later prominent civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Du Bois is recognized as one of the most important sociologists of the 20th century.

Atlanta University, and from 1934 to 1944 he was chairman of the department of sociology. In 1961 Du Bois moved to Ghana, Africa, to work on the *Encyclopedia Africana*, but died two years later. He wrote numerous books, articles, and essays, and founded and edited four journals.

Key works

1903 The Souls of Black Folks 1920 Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil 1939 Black Folk, Then and Now

W.E.B. Du Bois

