‘Race’ as a Function of Capitalism and Imperialism: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Appropriation of Marxian Ideas in The Black Flame

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ABSTRACT

The extent to which the African American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois was a Marxist is a highly controversial issue in Du Boisian scholarship. The following paper argues that he seriously grappled with Marxism and socialism throughout his life. This article’s focus is on the much-neglected trilogy of historical novels, The Black Flame, written in the 1950s. Designed as a sequel to his renowned Marxist revisionist study Black Reconstruction (1935), Du Bois’s ambitious narrative project covers the eight decades of American history between 1876 and the mid-1950s. Using “the method of historical fiction,” Du Bois creates highly complex texts that combine various literary subgenres and styles with essayistic and scientific prose to offer a non-orthodox Marxian economic perspective on U.S. and international history. The three novels, The Ordeal of Mansart (1957), Mansart Builds a School (1959), and Worlds of Color (1961), tell the life story of the black educator Manuel Mansart and his extended family. In a wide-ranging educational process meant to be shared by the reader, the protagonist eventually overcomes his provincial view of the “Negro problem” and gains a clear understanding of the role of the colored peoples of the world in global capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism.

Du Bois and Marx(ism)

The question of whether the renowned African American scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) can be considered a Marxist has been debated fervently. He certainly was not an orthodox Marxist in the sense that he never strictly followed any party dogma or dogmatic interpretation of Marx. Yet there are not only many statements that attest to his admiration of Karl Marx, whom he called “one of the greatest men of modern times” (Dusk 151), but also abundant proof that he critically engaged with socialist and Marxian ideas. Du Bois was fully aware of the fact that American intellectuals risked their reputation if they dared to draw on Marxian theory. As he wrote in 1946, “I have also made bold to repeat the testimony of Karl Marx, whom I regard as the greatest of modern philosophers, and I have not been deterred by the witch-hunting which always follows mention of his name” (The World and Africa xxxii). Moreover, he was neither intimidated nor silenced when a few years later he suffered from the type of witch-hunting typical of the McCarthy era: As an officer of the Peace Information Center, an organization fighting for the abolition of nuclear weapons, he was indicted for being unregistered as an agent of a foreign principal, namely the Soviet Union.1 Apart

1 Du Bois devotes two chapters of his Autobiography (233-55) to his indictment and to the trial, which ended in the acquittal of himself and the other four defendants; see also an extended account in his book In Battle for Peace (1952).
from his personal experiences, which also involved his brief membership in the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of the USA.\(^2\) His writings offer ample evidence that he seriously grappled with the theories both of socialism and Marxism throughout his life.\(^3\) According to a common notion among Du Bois scholars, his intellectual and political development shows a moderate phase and a radical one, with the latter, his so-called Marxist phase, allegedly beginning during the Cold War.\(^4\) As Bill V. Mullen warns, the assumption of discontinuity bears the risk of misconstruing Du Bois’s intellectual life as a whole:

Too commonly, the ‘late Du Bois’ is configured by scholars as a veering or departure from a life lived in general disciplined dedication to humanist ideals. At times, this departure is described as a crude embrace of communism or of decrepit alienation from earlier commitments. This mechanical and stagist view of Du Bois carries with it an attempt to rescue Du Bois’s radicalism from serious scrutiny. It shuns and censors that which it implicitly condemns. (13)\(^5\)

Critics of Du Bois’s Marxian proclivities usually focus on his unwavering admiration for the Soviet Union, in particular his defense of Stalin. It certainly is puzzling

\(^2\) In 1911, Du Bois joined the Socialist Party; yet, disappointed by the party’s subordination of the ‘Negro problem’ to the labor problem, he already resigned in 1912; cf. Lewis, *Du Bois* 421; Van Wienen 138-39; Mullen 60-61. In 1961, he became a member of the Communist Party of the USA; for a discussion of his attitude toward the CPUSA and his motivation to join the party, see, for example, Horne, who maintains in the chapter “Du Bois and the Communists”: “Du Bois’ joining the Communist party in 1961 was—contrary to the opinion of many—not a radical departure from his past praxis and, in actuality, a logical continuation” (289).

\(^3\) See Adolph Reed for a detailed survey of studies on the influence of socialism in Du Bois’s thinking (*W. E. B. Du Bois* 83-84). Given the “mercurial content that the term socialism had in the United States in the early twentieth century,” Reed—drawing on James Gilbert’s study on collectivism—proposes to concentrate on Du Bois’s interest in collectivist ideas that encompass socialism and Marxism (“perhaps the apotheosis of collectivism” [84; emphasis in original]), rather than trying to decide “when or whether he actually became a revolutionary Marxist” (22). As appropriate as the encompassing category of “collectivism” may be, we must not forget that Du Bois himself would distinguish between socialism and Marxism from early on; see e.g. Van Wienen: “But it is possible to identify Du Bois’s early links to socialism and to characterize his early socialist philosophy, because Du Bois both wrote extensively about socialism and used specifically socialist categories of critical analysis throughout his intellectual work” (130; emphasis in original). In his essay on “The Socialism of German Socialists, 1895,” for example, Du Bois looks at the contemporary success of the German Socialist Party from the point of view of the sociologist and characterizes “seven classes of socialists” (189) in Germany juxtaposed to followers of “Marx, La Salle [sic], or the Fabians” (191). It is interesting to note that he draws special attention to the political economist Gustav Schmoller, with whom he studied at the University of Berlin, as a leading figure of the sixth group, the “Kathedrer Socialists” (195). See Barkin for Du Bois’s encounters with German socialists and for a discussion of the essay on German Socialists as well as an earlier one titled “The Present Condition of German Politics, 1893.”

\(^4\) For a critique of this categorization, see, e.g., Marable xiii-xv; Horne 3.

\(^5\) Cf. also Mullen 201. Mullen claims that this polarizing view—rooted in the ideology of the Cold War—“lingers in major scholarship” and cites the example of the “otherwise extraordinary biography” of Levering Lewis, who “dedicates a mere sixteen of his 1,400 pages to the last eight years of Du Bois’s life, which included the final travels to the Soviet Union, China, and Ghana; his decision to join the Communist Party; publication of the autobiography; and the publication of numerous other essays in the Soviet and Chinese press” (213n31).
that this impassioned advocate of justice would choose to downplay the atrocities committed under Stalin.⁶ In his introduction to The Autobiography, Werner Sollors argues convincingly that “Du Bois clearly saw the Soviet Union as the strongest opponent to color prejudice and the strongest guarantor of world peace, and he believed that Communist China—not Taiwan or Hong Kong—was on the road to the future” (xxvi). The hopes Du Bois pinned on communism must be correlated with his growing disillusionment with the American model of democracy.⁷ In his earlier autobiography Dusk of Dawn (1940), for example, Du Bois mentions the insights he had gained through the Russian Revolution: “despite its failures […] and the difficulties which [Bolshevik Russia] faced,” it was dealing with “a set of problems which no nation was at the time willing to face, and which many nations including our own are unwilling fully to face even to this day” (142). The problems to which he refers are above all the poverty and lack of education of the masses. Du Bois juxtaposes the political program of post-revolutionary Russia with the ideas he had been taught to believe in America: “I had been brought up with the democratic idea that this general welfare was the object of democratic action in the state, allowing the governed a voice in government.” “But,” he continues, “I realized that […] we did not have democracy; we had oligarchy, and oligarchy based on monopoly and income” (142).

Rather than assuming a radical turn in his later life, more recent scholarship tends to emphasize Du Bois’s long-standing critique of capitalist colonialism and imperialism on the basis of socialism and Marxism.⁸ There is no doubt that Du Bois’s belief “in the ultimate triumph of some form of Socialism the world over” based on socialist concepts of “common ownership and control of the means of production and equality of income,” as he defined it in Dusk of Dawn (160),⁹ was ignited early in his life. Although he points out that “Karl Marx was hardly mentioned” in the social sciences at Harvard (20), he knew enough of Marx’s wage

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⁷ For Du Bois’s growing disillusionment with American liberalism in the 1930s, see Douglass.
⁸ Van Wienen, for example, stresses Du Bois’s involvement with socialist ideas—even before the founding of the NAACP—that brought him into contact with numerous socialists. Likewise, Barkin underlines Du Bois’s early encounters with socialism, e.g., the significance of German political economy as taught by the professors Adolf Wagner and Gustav Schmoller, with whom Du Bois took courses in Berlin between 1892 and 1894. In contrast to Schmoller, Wagner supported the more radical economic program of the Marxist Social Democrats; the reading list of one of the Wagner research seminars, in which Du Bois enrolled, included Marx (Barkin 89). Besides Mullen, see Eric Porter and Yuichiro Onishi for recent attempts to integrate Du Bois’s late work into his oeuvre by situating him in an international revolutionary context. See also Reiland Rabaka’s extensive writings on Du Bois’s continuous and critical engagement with Marxian thought. Among earlier scholarship arguing for the continuity of Du Bois’s radical thinking, see, above all, Robinson, Horne, Marable, and Reed (W. E. B. Du Bois).
⁹ As Mullen points out, this “eleven-point manifesto,” published first in the Pittsburgh Courier in 1936, is remarkable for Du Bois’s “invocation of black ‘soviets’ (worker’s councils)—the Bolshevik heart of the 1905 and the 1917 revolution, of Chinese industrial strikes of 1926 and 1927, and of Spanish workers in the 1936 uprisings he cited in Black Reconstruction in America—[…]” (77).
theory to use it in an essay submitted for the Toppan Prize at Harvard as early as 1891. 10 Commenting on his ambitious program of sociological studies of black life that he had initiated at Atlanta University, he later admits that “I was not at the time [around 1906] sufficiently Freudian to understand how little human action is based on reason; nor did I know Karl Marx well enough to appreciate the economic foundations of human history” (Autobiography 145). Although a “more thorough reading of the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin would have to be deferred several years” (Lewis, Fight 203), Du Bois wrote extensively on issues of ‘race’ and socialism in the first decades of the twentieth century. 11 By 1920, in the essay “Of Work and Wealth” published in Darkwater, he unequivocally refuted the capitalist concept of private ownership:

Private ownership of land, tools, and raw materials […] becomes a monopoly, which easily makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. Today, therefore, we are challenging this ownership […]. We are rapidly approaching the day when we shall repudiate all private property in raw materials and tools and demand that distribution hinge, not on the power of those who monopolize the materials, but on the needs of the mass of men. (48-49)

Traveling in Europe in 1926, “Du Bois had seen enough in two months of the theory of scientific socialism being put into practice to venture an informed opinion in ‘Russia, 1926;’ and he confessed that if what he had witnessed in Russia was Bolshevism, ‘I am a Bolshevik’” (Lewis, Fight 203). Then, in the 1930s, in reaction to the economic crisis and, more specifically, in the preparation of his much acclaimed historical analysis Black Reconstruction in America (1935), he undertook a more systematic study of the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. 12 “Not surprisingly,” writes Mullen, “the stock market crash of 1929 and global depression that followed were catalysts that forced his reinvention as a student of Marx, Marxist theory, and the history of human emancipation struggles” (71). 13

10 “A Constructive Critique of Wage-Theory: An Essay on the Present State of Economic Theory in Regard to Wages”; see Lewis, Du Bois, 606n88, where Lewis also mentions the essay “Value” (5 Dec. 1890); cf. also Lewis, Du Bois 606n89. On the significance of German economists’ theory of social ethics, see Schäfer; on Du Bois’s education in economics at Harvard and Berlin, and especially on the importance of Schmoller’s methodology, see Oliver.

11 As Rabaka notes, “most Du Bois scholars pass over roughly thirty years of his critical writings on socialism and Marxism to quickly get to the tried and true example of his employment of Marxist methodology [Black Reconstruction].” Rabaka lists 28 essays “on socialism, Marxism, and radical thought (including his labor studies)” that Du Bois wrote before the publication of Black Reconstruction (Africana Critical Theory 54-55; 81n18). Rabaka also insists that at the same time “Du Bois was a consistent critic of Marxism” (54).

12 In “The Field and Function of the Negro College,” Du Bois states that his 1933 college alumni address at Fisk “was the beginning of a new line of thought […]. [F]rom that day I began to read and study Karl Marx. I began to understand my recent visit to Russia” (133). For a remarkable discussion of Du Bois’s anti-imperialist essay “The African Roots of War” (1915), which “anticipates, as scholars have also noted, Lenin’s ‘Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism’ (1917),” cf. Mullen 20-23.

13 When in 1933 Du Bois returned to Atlanta University, his contract included teaching graduate students. “I laid out two or three courses, one of which was on communism [‘Karl Marx and the Negro;’ see Lewis, Fight 302]. My text was The Communist Manifesto and I gathered a good classroom library on socialism and communism, probably at the time the best in
Reconstruction frequently “is asserted to represent the completion of his conversion to Marxism” (Rabaka, Du Bois 107). Yet even after the publication of what has been recognized as a “masterpiece of revisionary historiography” (Edwards xxvi), Du Bois continued to explore the theoretical and political possibilities of socialism and Marxism for the socio-political advancement of African Americans, Africans, and other people of color. In 1936, for example, in an extended essay titled “The Negro and Social Reconstruction,” he formulated the following credo:

Suppose, now, that the Negro turns to the promise of socialism whither I have long looked for salvation. I was once a member of the celebrated Local No. 1 in New York. I am convinced of the essential truth of the Marxian philosophy and believe that eventually land, machines and materials must belong to the state; that private profit must be abolished, that the system of exploiting labor must disappear [...]. (141)

Yet, from the very beginning of his engagement in socialist and Marxist thought, Du Bois had critically asked what role the American Negro was assigned in the respective theories. Thus, while Du Bois makes use of the insights of Marxist theory, he at the same time transcends orthodox Marxism by inscribing into its theoretical framework the systemic function of the capitalist exploitation of people of color. According to Lily Phillips, “Although Du Bois clearly believed that racism was rooted in economics, he also saw it as a problem in its own right. These views illustrate the gap that existed between Marxist discussions of race and Du Bois’s own formulations” (856). Whereas the economist and Marxist Abram Harris argued, in reaction to Du Bois’s article “Karl Marx and the Negro” in The Souls of Black Folk, “I had no thought of propaganda. […] But I saw the growth of socialism and believed in the possibility of communism. I was convinced that no course of education could ignore this great world movement” (Autobiography 196). However, as Mullen points out, at the time Du Bois still favored the notion of cooperative economics for nonwhite workers. George Streator, a labor organizer, Crisis managing editor, and critic of Du Bois, argued that Du Bois was thereby misreading Lenin’s self-determination thesis and adopting ideas that would prevent an international class struggle (Mullen 74-77). On Du Bois’s ideas on a “co-operative commonwealth,” see Dusk 108-09.

14 For a thorough Marxist reading of Black Reconstruction, see Robinson; for its publication history and reception, see Aptheker, Legacy 211-56. See also the enlightening comparison between Black Reconstruction and C. L. R. James’s The Black Jacobins with regard to both writers’ unorthodox Marxist interpretations of history by Anthony Bogues whose concept of “heretical practices” draws on Pierre Bourdieu (Black Heretics, Black Prophets 69-93; 90).

15 See Rabaka’s pertinent summary: “As early as his 1907 essay, ‘The Negro and Socialism,’ Du Bois detected and detailed deficiencies in the Marxist tradition which included, among other things, a silence on and/or an inattention to race, racism, and anti-racist struggle; racial colonialism and anti-colonial struggle […]. Du Bois, therefore, laboring long and critically with Marxian theory and methodology, deconstructed it and developed his own original democratic socialist theory […]” (Du Bois’s Dialectics xxviii). See also the chapter on “Du Bois’s Critique of Capitalism, Critical Marxism, and Discourse on Democratic Socialism,” in Rabaka, W. E. B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century.

16 For a seminal discussion on Marxism and ‘race,’ see Robert Carter, who points out that Du Bois “became a powerful critic of imperialism, arguing that a necessary condition for proletarian revolution was the uprising of the exploited classes in Africa, South America and the Far East. For Du Bois, the problem of what he called the ‘color line’ remained the greatest obstacle
**Crisis** of March 1933, that the statement “labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself without emancipating labor in a black skin” was proof that Marx had sufficiently addressed the race problem (Lewis, *Fight* 309-10), Du Bois did not believe that there could be a united white and black working class in the United States. In “Marxism and the Negro Problem” (1933) he argued: “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” (108). He was convinced that there was “no automatic power in socialism to override and suppress race prejudice” (“The Negro and Social Reconstruction” 141), and yet he saw a better chance to fight racism within a non-capitalist system. In an address given at a symposium entitled “Toward a Socialist America” in 1958, Du Bois claimed that “no system of reform offers the American Negro such real emancipation as socialism. The capitalism which so long ruled Europe and North America was founded on Negro slavery in America, and that slavery will never completely disappear so long as private capitalism continues to survive” (“The Negro and Socialism” 188). However, Du Bois insists on practical and intellectual independence from the existing models when he demands that the “question of the method by which the socialist state can be achieved must be worked out by experiment and reason and not by dogma. Whether or not methods which were right and clear in Russia and China fit our circumstances is for our intelligence to decide” (191). Finally, in a manifesto published in his *Autobiography*, Du Bois commits himself unambiguously to “communism” and offers the following definition:

I have studied socialism and communism long and carefully in lands where they are practiced and in conversation with their adherents, and with wide reading. I now state my conclusion frankly and clearly: 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. I believe that all men should be employed according to their ability and that wealth and services should be distributed to need. Once I thought that these ends could be attained under capitalism, means of production privately owned, and used in accord with free individual initiative. After earnest observation I now believe that private ownership of capital and free enterprise are leading the world to disaster. (35)

**The method of historical fiction**

Given Du Bois’s life-long intellectual and political wrestling with the concepts of socialism and Marxism, the question arises to what extent he integrated “the truth of the Marxian philosophy” in the challenging project he undertook in the last decade of his life, when he decided to write a sequel to *Black Reconstruction* in the form of a trilogy of three historical novels—*The Ordeal of Mansart* facing the world Communist movement” (432-33). See also Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism.”

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17 On the essay “Karl Marx and the Negro” and its sequel, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” in *The Crisis* issue of May 1933, see Lewis, *Fight* 307-11; Mullen 73.
(1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959), and *Worlds of Color* (1961)\(^{18}\)—that cover the period from the end of Reconstruction in 1876 to the author’s present in the mid-fifties. As Du Bois states in the methodological “Postscript” of *The Ordeal of Mansart*, “If I had had time and money, I would have continued this pure historical research [of *Black Reconstruction*]. But this opportunity failed and Time is running out. [...] and thus I am trying by the method of historical fiction to complete the cycle of history which has for a half century engaged my thought, research and action” (*Ordeal* 229-30).

Whereas the historiographical approach of *Black Reconstruction* allowed Du Bois to discuss economic, social, and political developments and their effects on the lives of African Americans straightforwardly, “the method of historical fiction” required different techniques of representation. In fact, Du Bois modified some of the common features of the genre for his own, mainly didactic, purposes. At the same time, he retained the major characteristics of the historical novel: the trilogy narrates history as family history. It centers on the life of the main protagonist, Manuel Mansart, which is emphasized structurally: Mansart is born at the beginning of the first volume and the third volume ends with his death. We follow him as he goes to school, studies, marries a fellow student, raises four children, travels, eventually becomes the president of a Negro college, marries again after the death of his first wife, and travels extensively abroad. The plot is largely built upon the experiences of three generations of the Mansart family and the other families with whom their fate is interwoven. Nevertheless, the focus is very much on the protagonist himself. But while the genre of the *Bildungsroman* traditionally stresses the hero’s growing maturity of character, Du Bois is more interested in the specific contents of Mansart’s historical, political, and cultural education. Mansart undergoes a continuous learning process as he tries to understand the world around him, which, as a consequence, fulfills the purpose of educating the reader. Aspiring to write history, Du Bois expresses the hope that his work proves to be “more history than fiction, more fact than assumption, much truth and no falsehood” (*Ordeal* 230). Not surprisingly, then, as Arnold Rampersad comments, “Mansart stands at the center of the book yet paradoxically is almost peripheral to its historical action” (qtd. in Edwards xxvii).

Du Bois was never able to convince literary scholars of the aesthetic quality of his novels. There is, after all, too much didacticism and too little aesthetic condensation. Du Bois propagated the concept of political art. His conviction that “all Art is propaganda” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 1000) stemmed from the experience of a scholar who had planned on staying in the ivory tower of science but had

\(^{18}\) According to Herbert Aptheker, the Marxist historian to whom Du Bois entrusted his papers, it was in the early 1950s that Du Bois “turned [...] to producing the trilogy he called the Black Flame,” and by the spring of 1955 Du Bois asked Aptheker to read the manuscript of 1,200 pages (Aptheker, *Literary Legacy* 324). As Brent Hayes Edwards writes in the introduction to *The Ordeal of Mansart*, the trilogy “must be considered the most unjustly neglected of his most ambitious works” (xxv). Since then, *The Black Flame* has received more attention; see, e.g., Christian, Oliver, Simpson. Most relevant for my own reading have been the contributions by Phillips, especially her pioneering article of 1995 about *The Black Flame* as social realism, whose thesis she recently modified in “The Black Flame Revisited.”
been transformed into an activist when in 1899 he was suddenly confronted with the gruesome public display of the knuckles of Sam Hose, the victim of a brutal lynching, which were “on exhibition at a grocery store” in Atlanta: “one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved” (*Dusk* 34). Thus, in his view, art should be accessible: intricate formal experiments would prevent an art work from reaching a broader audience.\(^{19}\) As Marc A. Sanders argues, due to his lack of money Du Bois “relied on less expensive forms of communication and entertainment—demonstrations, community theater, and pageantry, for example—in order to bring his message to the masses. In this sense, *The Black Flame* is a low-budget mass-media broadcast, delivering an essential yet neglected history to the people who need it most” (239).

In presenting history in fictional garb in his *Black Flame* trilogy, Du Bois focuses on economic history with an additional emphasis on the interrelation of ‘race’ and class, thus highlighting the interdependence of black people’s struggles for voting rights and the labor struggles in the South. He reveals the connections between the economic interests of “Big Business” and racial politics on state, national, and international levels. Accordingly, he sees the interdependence of the rise of corporate power and the simultaneous rise of racism: At the time of the industrial revolution, with its growing demand for cheap labor, Big Business instrumentalizes the competition between white and black labor with the goal of keeping wages low. Du Bois also draws attention to the increasing influence of corporations on political decisions and elections, which he considers to be so high as to severely undermine democracy in America and abroad. In short, his interpretation of the eight decades the trilogy covers is a sharp critique of the American political system as the vanguard of Western capitalism and imperialism, juxtaposed with repeated expressions of the hope for a society based on socialist principles.

But how does Du Bois connect the personal with the political, the fictional with the factual? What fictional devices and narrative techniques does he employ, and to what effect? First of all, most of the fictional characters are types rather than well-developed, rounded individuals. They are representatives of their class. This is particularly obvious at the very beginning of the first novel, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, which starts with the sentence: “It was October, 1876.” Elections are coming up in Charleston, South Carolina, and the novel highlights the question of what alliances will be formed among the different social groups. There is the landed gentry of the rich lowlands, whose representative is Colonel John Breckenridge (whose wife, a Du Bignon of Louisiana, is a genuine Old South aristocrat); there are the “up-state white farmers who were trying to annex and submerge the landed aristocracy of the rich lowlands” (*Ordeal* 1); there is the “new group […] composed of city artisans and small farmers” led by “the most powerful of the

\(^{19}\) Aptheker quotes from a review by Truman Nelson, himself an author of historical novels, who justifies the trilogy’s aesthetics: “Like the rest of Du Bois’s work, its essential character is the expression of the great emancipatory ideas of this century, and when they come in conflict with some question of form, the form gives way to the content, as it should” (*Literary Legacy* 327-28).
new white labor leaders, Scroggs’ (1); and then there are organized black workers whose leader is Tom Mansart, a member of the legislature of South Carolina. Du Bois portrays the personal encounters of these representatives, which allows him to dramatize the diverse interests of the groups involved and the different instruments of power at their disposal. At the same time, he employs fiction to show how irrational forces, such as prejudice and fears, interfere and political decisions are by no means made on the basis of reason alone. He uses “creative imagination” and enters the minds of his characters in the form of narrated monologue, for example (Ordeal 229). This allows him to illustrate that as members of their class, the individuals are shaped by the past and present economic conditions of society, in this case the history of slavery and its aftermath. For example, Colonel Breckenridge’s contemplation of the situation in 1876 reflects the strong desire of his class to restore the social order of the Old South:

To most [white aristocrats], such uprooting was unthinkable. Work must go on as before […]. Land must be cultivated, crops raised and sold […]. Men must live as men had lived in the South for centuries; nothing else was conceivable. Therefore slavery must be restored in all but name, with perhaps disappearance of human sale, which after all, had nothing to do with the essence of the system. […] Negroes must think of themselves as always workers and never as thinkers or owners; nor as men in the sense that whites were men. Shot across this obvious fact came a system of Negro schools, lugged in by the white Northern Carpet-baggers, who ignorantly insisted that Negroes were men. They should have seen […] that their own popular education in the North was leading only to crime, poverty and a travesty of democracy. This might work out in time, since the laborers were, after all, white. But it was worse than than stupid to think that the African could be educated. It was criminal misleading of a simple people born to be servants of men. (Ordeal 34)

While in general the narration follows the conventions of literary realism, Du Bois does not hesitate to highlight climactic moments of action by adding the surreal and the symbolic. For example, the death of Manuel Mansart’s father by lynching and the birth of his son converge in time and space and must be read symbolically: the historical shift—the break with the politics of Reconstruction—is embodied in the generational shift. This interpretation is confirmed when Mansart’s grandmother—a cultural type rooted in a legendary past—enters Emmanuel Church, where a thousand blacks have taken refuge before the lynching mob raging in the streets of Charleston, and in a moment of great fear and danger prophetically presents the new-born baby in a bloody baptizing ritual associated with the African past:

The old woman came in, naked from neck to loin, marching with one thin arm aloft. In her vast hand lay a bloodstained child. Slowly she swayed and danced through the church. The Bishop, standing still behind the altar, saw a thousand years of the African Dance of Death gliding out of the past. Snake-wise, the throng followed the dancer, moaning to her cries: ‘Curse God! Ride, Devils of Hell, with the blood-bought baby! Burn! Kill! Burn! Crawl with the Snake! Creep and Crawl! Behold the Black Flame!’ Shriek rose on shriek […] Slower the sibyl moved, almost whispering: ‘His name is Manuel,’ she cried. ‘He is Called!’ She disappeared into the night. (Ordeal 46)

The protagonist’s name, Emmanuel, is programmatic. Its Hebrew meaning, “God is with us,” seems on the one hand to be an ironical comment on the experience of violence in the present, but on the other hand, as the boy is offered to the
community as “the Black Flame,” his name may also signify hope for a better future. With regard to the personality of the protagonist, “Manuel” also suggests the meaning of “manual work” (Edwards xxx), evoking someone more pragmatic than prophetic in character. At the end of the first novel, Manuel Mansart, referring to the scene of his baptism, offers his family an interpretation of the metaphor of the black flame that at the same time provides the reason for his decision to turn down an attractive job offer in the North:

> When my father was lynched and I was born, my old Granny took me to the church. She baptized me in my father’s blood and called me ‘the Black Flame.’ For a long time I did not understand what she meant. Today I think I do. I burn, I almost consume myself. I burn slow and dark but always, always. [...] I am that black flame in which my grandmother believed and on whose blood-stained body she swore. I am the Black Flame, but I burn for cleaning, not destroying. Therefore I burn slow.” (*Ordeal* 227-28)

Obviously, Manuel Mansart is not a revolutionary Black hero, nor is he a political or intellectual leader of his people; in other words, he is neither an outstanding representative of the Talented Tenth, nor can he be considered a full-fledged persona of Du Bois. But he is not mediocre either. He is a modest, rather cautious, sometimes fearful man; or, as his grandson Adelbert characterizes him, he is “a nice old man, perhaps a bit too anxious to be accommodating to the world, shrewd but honest” (*Worlds of Color* 204). At the same time, he is open-minded, always eager (though sometimes rather slow) to learn, and principally ready to grow by increasing his knowledge and his experience. In this respect he does indeed represent an alter ego of Du Bois, who would never stop studying and never cease self-critically conceding his ignorance. And thus he is the ideal protagonist for Du Bois’s purpose. Du Bois retraces Mansart’s opinions and attitudes and, above all, follows step by step the gradual widening of his horizon from a rather provincial view of the Negro problem (not surprisingly, he starts out as a loyal follower of Booker T. Washington’s educational concepts) to a clear understanding of the role of African Americans and other peoples of color in the global capitalist economy. Obviously, it was Du Bois’s intention that his readers, by traversing the same ground and being exposed to the same arguments as the protagonist, would undergo the very same education and transformation. Yet in order to reach his

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20 Du Bois creates several partial impersonations of himself, the most obvious being James Burghardt, a “young Negro [who] had finished high school and college and actually earned a Ph.D. in history at Yale” (*Ordeal* 166). Du Bois turns Mansart into a student of Burghardt who reflects sceptically upon his teacher: “While he [Mansart] would have been the last to admit prejudice, he could not honestly believe that a colored person, with his necessarily limited opportunity, could give him the guidance he wanted. The fact that Burghardt had been trained in the North and spoke New England English was in his favor; but on the other hand no one in the student body liked his stiff, unsympathetic manners, his strict methods and impossibly high standards of work” (*Ordeal* 167). The figure that comes closest to embodying Du Bois is the character of Jean Du Bignon, who plays a central role in the third novel, *Worlds of Color*. The relationship between Mansart and his much younger colleague Jean, whom he marries after the death of his first wife, reflects Du Bois’s long friendship and marriage to his second wife Shirley Graham (who also appears in the novel; at the founding convention of the Progressive Party [1948]), Jean “heard Shirley Graham bring them [the enthusiastic throng] to their feet with the cry: ‘Jim Crow must go!’” (*Worlds of Color* 168).
didactic goal the author makes sure that readers are not limited to merely sharing Mansart’s personal learning process; in addition, he offers further lessons in Marxian economy and political theory.

“The Corporation was the Frankenstein of the 20th Century”

There is, for example, an episode in the first novel that illustrates the existence of a powerful international elite that tries to shape global politics outside democratic institutions. The Southern ‘aristocrat’ Breckenridge attends a secret meeting of representatives of the Western higher classes who convene to deliberate the course of future politics with the plan of securing white supremacy and erecting “World Government” (Ordeal 55). There are members of the aristocracy, including delegates of the order of the British Garter and the French Grand Cross of the Legion. There are also members of the military establishment and a few business leaders, among them a New York banker. The location of the site is not revealed to the participants; they travel on a boat by night and at the end of the trip find themselves in a luxurious palace where perfectly trained (white) servants attend to their needs and where the most exquisite meals are being served. The agenda is laid down in a four-point program: “1. Show Northern leaders the truth about the world. 2. Beat the Negroes back to their kennels. 3. Cajole and control white labor. 4. Consolidate capital into imperial control of the world; guide world trade and monopolize gold and credit” (59). At the end of the meeting a “World Commander of the new international order” is nominated; his name “was unknown to the Colonel: Cecil Rhodes” (59). This is one of the narrative scenes in which Du Bois creates an interaction between fictional characters and an historical figure, in this case the British financier who was known as a zealous proponent of white (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) supremacy and British imperialism and became one of the richest men of his time by investing in South African diamond mines. It is at the same time an example of Du Bois’s method of transposing one of his theorems of economic history into a concrete fictional episode. The theoretical basis of the nomination of Cecil Rhodes in the novel can be found in the pamphlet “The Negro and Socialism”:

Industry realized that, unless industrial organization largely controlled government, it could not control land and labor, monopolize materials, set prices in the world market, and regulate credit and currency. For this purpose new and integrated world industry arose called ‘Big Business’—a misleading misnomer. Its significance lay not merely in its size. [...] It was an organized super-government of mankind in matters of work and wages, directed with science and skill for the private profit of individuals. It could not be controlled by popular vote.” (181)

21 In this case, Du Bois’s mouthpiece is a minor character, John Pierce, who continues as follows: “The Corporation was the Frankenstein of the 20th Century, contrived by the lawyers of the 19th. By 1950 it would be the Robot ruler of Man. It had ‘neither Body to be kicked nor Soul to be damned’; but in the present century, it owned the Earth and enslaved Mankind. It could not be controlled in a world where the greatest force was control of Wealth and the weakest the sense of Right” (Ordeal 189).
In the novel, Du Bois stages the organization of such a “super-government of mankind” as the very moment of the transition of power from the old to the new elite, namely, “Big Business,” represented by Rhodes. Colonel Breckenridge and many other conservative aristocrats thought the “election of Rhodes was rushed forward almost too precipitously [...]. It smacked of deliberate prearrangement” (Ordeal 60). The following sentence—making use of free indirect speech—offers insight into the conservative mindset that prefers trust to suspicion: “But of course the Colonel knew that all this had to be planned ahead. So the vote went through” (60). When Breckenridge is on his way back to the South, he “could almost have persuaded himself that he had passed through some fantastic dream, had not the clear program and results been burned so vividly on his mind” (60).

Du Bois’s vision reveals the social composition of the power elite at the end of the nineteenth century and characterizes its ideological center, namely the supremacy of the white “race” over the darker “races” for the purpose of “exploiting all labor, white, yellow and black!” (Ordeal 56). At this point in history, Du Bois argues, aristocracy seemingly still dominates over the financial elite. In the corresponding scene in Worlds of Color it is the old Manuel Mansart who is invited to attend a similar meeting, a fact that in itself signifies a structural change in the organization as well as the goals of the power elite. Whereas the first meeting of world leaders was aristocratic in spirit and manner and all the participants were white, the second one, which takes place “in the Rainbow Room of the Rockefeller Center” in Manhattan “at midnight September twenty, 1954,” is organized by the financial elite (Worlds of Color 230). In the first conference Breckenridge observes the “calm, cool grip of British aristocracy on the world” and learns at the same time about “methods of combating socialism and anarchism and the communism of Marx” (Ordeal 60). In contrast, the second meeting focuses on the fight against the spreading of communism among people of color. The scene dramatizes two basic assumptions held by Du Bois, namely that wealth dominates the United States and that the ruling elite tends to operate in the shadows: “The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth, and the persons who exercise the power of wealth are not necessarily its owners, but those who direct its use, and the truth about this direction is so far as possible kept a secret” (Autobiography 273). In the Rockefeller Center, there is a clear division between the invisible powers behind the event and the people invited. According to the official host, “Her Highness, the Princess, Zegue de Laurinberg,” the guests are “African rulers, West Indian officials and leaders of the Negroes of the United States” (230). Mansart is ushered into “an impressive hall, lofty, and richly decorated. Opposite the entrance was a huge mirror in an elaborate gilt frame, covering nearly the whole wall. On a low platform, in the center of this mirrored wall stood a highly ornamented gilt armchair, like a low throne” (230). The “so-called princess” (230)—as Rabbi Dr. Blumenschweig, a German Jew Mansart had first met during his visit to Berlin in 1936, calls her while telling his friend that she recently married a Southern millionaire—enters and as she sits down “into her gilded armchair,” she points to the mirror behind her and explains: “I am not here alone [...] nor am I your host. Some of the sixty men who own America and are the real rulers of one world are behind me, sitting back of this great mirror and
seeing you clearly although you do not see them” (232). By the mid-1950s, aristocracy no longer holds powerful positions, but aristocratic taste is still evoked. As Blumenschweig remarks cynically, “this is the idea of white American business aimed to dazzle Africans; and their ideas have been dramatized by what czarist Russian exiles still regard as the airs of High Society” (230). The princess introduces her condescending message by arrogantly expressing the creed of white supremacy: “We are masters, because masters we were born and masters we will remain by the will of almighty God!” (Worlds of Color 232). She continues:

The point I bring you is this—they are the powerful of the earth. They rule. What I want you to do in the time that you are with us is to think of your own future under them. Will you join with the white European race to help crush and beat back the crazy Chinese and Russian Communists, help bring that world back to its normal procedures; or will you join this rebellion against established authority—this revolt against civilization? (232-33)

Whereas Breckenridge repeatedly expresses amazement and admiration at the splendor of the conference he attends, Mansart—as a result of having successfully undergone a prolonged and thorough educational process—is neither bedazzled by the spectacle nor by the address; by now, he recognizes domination when he sees it. Thus he interrupts the speech of “an American Negro, a business man evidently chosen for the task” who first responds to “Your Highness” assuring her “that we Negroes are loyal Americans. We hate communism […]. We believe in property and private profit.” Against this blunt avowal of capitalism, Mansart, “without premeditation, without design” speaks up in protest (Worlds of Color 233). His final credo summarizes the convictions to which Du Bois has led his protagonist. These beliefs are expressed in part in the rhetoric of utopian socialism, when, for example, Mansart assures his audience that “in time the overwhelming mass of men will achieve understanding and wealth enough for all their needs, all their yearnings, for every wish, every desire. Mankind, all of mankind, will be strong and healthy, free of the corrupting power of greed and envy” (233). Mansart’s faith in the future is based on Marxian crisis theory: “Every industrial merger you make, every integration of monopoly power, every new penetration and enlargement of market, or seizure of new sources of raw materials, is just a step to the social ownership and conduct of industry by all for all” (233). In refutation of the princess’s blatant assertion of white supremacy, Mansart admonishes his black brothers no longer

to ape white folk, whose wealth and power is based on taking from workers most of what the workers earn, and using it to amass untold power and luxury for parasites who have no right to it. Socialism is the effort to render the worker owner of what he creates, and it is this which the Soviet Union, China and the other Communist nations are trying—despite enormous difficulties and opposition—to accomplish. (233-34)

He juxtaposes the Communist nations’ attempts at “educating, healing, strengthening, encouraging the masses of the people” with the reality of the living conditions of the poor under capitalism in the United States:

Today, we Americans, black and white, whether we work by hand or brain, suffer from recurrent unemployment with its toll of insecurity. We fear sickness and disease, and gamble to escape it. We fear old age and steal to avert its sufferings. […] Education is so
bad and so costly that many of our children sink to crime. Prices are so high, most of us cannot live decently—yet are forced to waste the little we have. (234)

And he ends with an emphatic exclamation that draws on the tradition of the black preacher: “Black Brothers, let us never sell our high heritage for a mess of such white Folks’ pottage!” (234).

Mansart’s speech is met with “dead silence” and the princess’s helpless expression of anger: “she stamped her foot and arose waving her cigarette holder imperiously” (Worlds of Color 234). Mansart is ushered out by “two tall footmen” followed by the rabbi, who, taking leave of his friend, blesses him. Blumenschweig’s presence at the meeting reminds us of the successful learning process Mansart has undergone since his travels in Europe. Du Bois expresses Mansart’s progress in a reversal of roles. In contrast to the superiority he displays at the meeting in New York a few months before his death, Mansart was still rather very ignorant when he had made the rabbi’s acquaintance in his “dark and uninviting bookshop” in Berlin in 1936, handing Blumenschweig’s employee “a list of several books which he had decided he ought to read, including Marx’ Capital” (33):22 back then it was the German Jew who had opened Mansart’s eyes about the spreading of socialism in Europe:

‘Socialism?’ asked Mansart. ‘Do you think Socialism will win?’

‘Will win?’ replied the rabbi, ‘It has won! We’re all socialists now. Every country has some degree of socialism. Even your own Roosevelt is leading a socialist revolution. The difference you see is difference of leadership, of dictatorship. The ignorant mass cannot lead itself into economic emancipation, requiring scientific technique and capital, with the forces and classes now against it. Here in Germany, this Hitler has made alliance with the great corporations. They are going to give the mass of people as much socialism as will keep them quiet. (34)

Conclusion

In deciding “to interpret historical truth by the use of creative imagination” rather than presenting the results of “pure historical research,” did Du Bois improve or impair his project of “[completing] the cycle of history which has for a half century engaged my thought, research and action” (Ordeal 229; 230)? In contrast to his first novel, The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911), where he had deliberately selected fiction to present his view of the exploitative and corrupt plantation economy,23 it may indeed have been lack of money and time that ini-

22 Du Bois uses the reading of fictional characters for further instruction of his readers in Marxism; for example, Mansart’s second wife Jean Du Bignon reads “[C. L. R.] James’ Black Jacobins” (1938), one of the classics of Marxist historiography, before starting on a trip to the West Indies (Worlds of Color 45). She also reads “Shirley Graham’s beautiful biography of Paul Robeson” (64). The little known historical figure, young black populist leader Sebastian Doyle, “had especially read economics and social reform […]. He had read the ‘Wealth of Nations’ and the ‘Communist Manifesto’” (Ordeal 115). And during the Depression, Mansart’s educational reading also includes the Communist Manifesto (Mansart Builds a School 262). In addition, Du Bois’s columns in The Crisis are read and quoted frequently throughout the trilogy.

23 As Aptheker claims, Du Bois “had hoped that through fiction he might reach more people than through his works in the social sciences” (Literary Legacy 323). This “economic study
tially propelled Du Bois to use “the method of historical fiction” in The Black Flame (230). However, once chosen, Du Bois argued for the advantages of writing fiction in instances “where documented material and personal experience are lacking,” “provided,” the scientist adds, that “the method is acknowledged and clear” (229). The combination of approaches—historical and sociological research are intermingled with essayistic writing and fictional narrative—and the use of multiple, sometimes unreliable, and often diametrically opposed fictional voices in numerous dialogues turns the product of Du Bois’s “creative imagination” into a much more complex text than ordinary historiography. It demands of the reader constant reflection, an effort to make up one’s mind whether to agree or disagree with the political arguments and the historical interpretations presented. The price for the complexity that Du Bois achieves is high. The Black Flame is hardly a “mass-media broadcast” capable of reaching a broader audience. In contrast, and probably against the author’s will, it is quite elitist, because apart from the ideological barriers that it erects for readers who oppose a Marxian interpretation of history, The Black Flame offers intellectual enjoyment only if one is willing to get involved and follow Du Bois’s multi-layered and interdisciplinary presentation of history. This presentation integrates economic, sociological, historical, philosophical, and psychological perspectives and blends them with various literary genres, such as life writing, historical fiction, social realism, and romance, as well as with different literary styles.

In 1968, at the occasion of celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Du Bois’s birth, Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the few black leaders who stood up for the radical Du Bois: “We cannot talk of Dr. Du Bois without recognizing that he was a radical all of his life. [...] Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a communist. Our irrational obsessive anti-communism has led us into too many quagmires to be retained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking” (King 119). In this speech, King also made the illuminating observation that Du Bois “was not only an intellectual giant exploring the frontiers of knowledge, he was in the first place a teacher” (113). And, indeed, Du Bois’s own indefatigable striving for knowledge was always connected to his desire to convey his insights to others. But neither science nor art were ever to be quested after for their own sake. Rather, what the radical Du Bois tried to teach in his writings and political activism throughout his life was the importance of revealing what so often is hidden or misrecognized: the mechanisms of power and oppression. As critical as Du Bois often was of the movements derived from Marx’s theory, he probably would have shared Trotsky’s
“excitement about Marxism” as Cedric Robinson quotes it: “The important thing is [...] to see clearly. One can say of communism, above all, that it gives more clarity. We must liberate man from all that prevents his seeing” (208).

Works Cited


‘Race’ as a Function of Capitalism and Imperialism


